

5 trends will determine future India



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

I HAVE OBSERVED social and political trends in India for many years. What appears to be a deep-running current may not be so, and may be only a passing cloud. A passing cloud can bring a welcome shower, but that is not an enduring feature of the climate.

1947 was a watershed year. Since Independence, many visible influences and trends were noticed but were short-lived; and many incipient trends that were unnoticed by most people have become enduring. For example, despite Gandhiji's near-divine status and hundreds of dedicated Gandhians, the Gandhian way of life, *ahimsa*, *satyagraha*, the *charkha*, non-violence and civil disobedience did not survive for more than a couple of decades after Gandhiji. On the other hand, few anticipated the rapid urbanisation of India, fewer noticed climate change, and still fewer understood the complex relationship between humans and science and technology.

The saying is, 'Prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future' (Nobel laureate Niels Bohr and legendary baseball player Yogi Berra). Nevertheless, I shall dare to venture into forbidden territory. I have observed five trends that may gain strength and mo-

mentum. Much as I dislike and dread some of them, these trends seem unstoppable:

Decline of Democracy as 'government of the people...'

Democracy is government of the people. People are born free and have the right to many freedoms. A democratic government is a government that respects and upholds the rights of the people, and has established independent institutions that will protect and enforce the rights. *Freedom House*, *V-Dem Institute* and *Reporters Without Borders* (all Research Institutes) classify countries as 'free' or not on the basis of scores under various indicators. More and more countries have a declining score. India's score was 77 in 2005 and has declined to 63-67. India is likely to be a mere 'electoral democracy' and elections will be less free and fair. The Indian people seem to be unperturbed by the declining score in return for welfare measures, better infrastructure and no challenge to an oppressive social structure. China's score has been stuck at 9/100 for many years, but by all reports, the Chinese people are happy. India may take that path.

Monopolies vs Entrepreneurs

Several sectors of the economy are dominated by duopolies or oligopolies — air travel, telecommunications, cement, steel, power, pharmaceuticals, petroleum, defence production, mining, and retail. More sectors may go that way. Small businesses and MSMEs will become near-extinct. NGOs will be stifled. The distribution of economic power will be increasingly skewed in favour of the monopolists. The balance between capital and labour will continue to shift in fa-

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avour of capital. The distribution of income will be skewed in favour of the rich and super-rich. Income inequalities will increase, and we will be less egalitarian.

Farewell to Identities

Most large cities have become cosmopolitan and a medley of languages, religions, cultures and cuisines. Many towns are following suit. Urbanisation and mass transit systems will take the trend deeper into India. No one will 'belong' to a place; 'native place' will, like the joint family, become extinct. Most people one encounters will be strangers. The circle of friends will become smaller, and relationships will be forged through devices. Conversations will be mediated by machines. No (hu)man is an island may be disproved. Transactions, not emotions, will determine relationships between humans. Sexual relations may survive because sex has benefits beyond procreation.

Cultural Nationalism vs Fearful Minorities

The line separating science and pseudo-science will vanish. As Mr Vasudevan Mukunth wrote (*The Hindu*, dated June 23, 2026), educational authorities will institutionalise Puranic science as science, mythology as history, ritual as technology, and an open contempt for verifiability. More IITs may be goaded to do 'research' into mythological stories, reincarnation and Vedic biology. Cultural revival will revolve around the reconstruction of temples and the celebration of Hindu festivals. Meat shops may be banned in several towns. Following West Bengal, other states may remove eggs from the mid-day meal scheme. Uniform civil

codes will be passed in more States. Resistance to the Hindutva agenda will be broken down. More and more children and adults will be able to speak and write in only a single language, Hindi, closing more windows to growing STEM studies and the technology-driven world (until Hindi catches up with English and other languages). Minorities — religious, linguistic, ethnic — will live in fear, wondering whether a historically plural country will have a place for their children.

Super rich vs Mass of Poor

The trends noted above will have enormous consequences for the 144 crore people, who will plateau at 167 crore and begin to decline. India will grow — whether at 5 per cent or more — irrespective of the government, because Indians will grow food, produce goods, and consume or export. The numbers of the rich and the super rich will increase, but many millions will be massed at the bottom of the pyramid. Those millions will experience low demand, low consumption, low standards of life and low growth. Moreover, if millions of people are excluded from participation in the story of India, on one pretext or the other, their lives will be worse. India will be less equal and more divided and angry.

You may dispute the five trends or add to or subtract from them, but you cannot deny that the *direction* of the country, and the *trends* witnessed, will determine India's place in the world.

(Across the Aisle completes 12 years in June 2026. The author wishes to take a long break to pursue other interests. This column will now be an occasional feature in *The Indian Express*)

Double-engine, double trouble



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

THERE COULD not be a more perfect week to talk about corruption. Speaking for myself, I admit that my head has been reeling because of the number of times I have lately heard the word corruption uttered. From the 'cockroaches' protesting in Jantar Mantar to the dirty linen tumbling out of the temple in Ayodhya to the 'double-engine' chief minister caught in nepotistic land deals in Ujjain, corruption has become hard to ignore. On the day that this column's deadline looms, I make it a point to go to the gym and spend at least an hour on the treadmill watching the news. It helps me examine my thoughts and follow the latest events.

This time, as I was gloomily brooding over the way in which corruption has suddenly exploded onto the national political landscape, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh popped up on my screen. It stunned me to hear him smilingly declare that it was because of the 'double-engine' government in Uttar Pradesh that the state has become number one. It has not. But, instead of being a basket case, the state Yogi Adityanath has governed with an iron hand (and many bulldozers) for nearly a decade has improved in some ways.

What struck me about Yogi's speech was that reference to his 'double-engine' government, because it is from these supposedly idyllic states that the biggest corruption stories are coming. The Ram temple in Ayodhya has been built under the direct supervision of Bulldozer Baba, so it is extraordinary that he never got a hint of gold, silver, expensive jewellery and cash being looted from the offerings that devotees made in good faith. It is just as extraordinary that the trustees of the temple's funds did not notice what was going on. They must explain why they disregarded advice, given long ago, to have the temple's offerings counted professionally. What we are beginning to see in all the cases that have surfaced is a criminal lack of accountability.

Last week, yet another young Indian committed suicide because he could not face another NEET examination. This adds to the grim count of around a hundred students committing suicide over NEET in the past five years, with the highest toll last year. The Cockroach Janata Party is right to demand that the education minister resign since he is directly responsible for the mess in the examination system. It is the demand for Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation that made them spend all last week in protest in Jantar Mantar. But, judging by the effusive birthday greetings the Prime Minister posted on Friday, there seems little chance of his resignation.

As citizens of this 'mother of democracy', we have a right to demand accountability from those who are supposed to be servants of us, 'the people'. But somehow, the man who calls himself the Pradhan Sewak (prime servant) has not noted how much his fair image is being damaged by the reckless absence of accountability that his ministers and chief ministers are showing. Does he know that corruption is now so publicly displayed that in Mumbai, when the Vidhan Sabha is in session, ministers stay in the Oberoi Hotel? Who pays for this and why? And who pays for the Range Rovers, Land Cruisers and BMWs that remain parked in the hotel's porch all day? Maharashtra, in case you may have forgotten, is another double-engine government.

Corrupt politicians are now so plentiful that people have stopped expecting that Modi will live up to that promise he made long ago. 'Na khaunga, na khaane doonga'. Loosely translated, because in English eating is the wrong word, what he said was that he would not be lining his own pockets, nor would he allow anyone else to line theirs. Corruption was one of the reasons why the Congress Party lost that Lok Sabha election twelve years ago, so this promise was electorally powerful.

What then has gone wrong? Why do BJP spokespersons when asked about some new tale of corruption respond cynically that the Congress era was much worse and that if the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh should honourably offer his resignation, then so should the Chief Minister of Karnataka, whose wealth is as mysterious. The truth is that there is no easier way to become very rich very quickly than to find a way of entering politics. The reason why so many big political leaders cling to power in their dotage and ensure that their children get into politics as well is because there is so much easy money to be made.

This is not something that has happened only since Hindutva leaders took charge, it has always been this way, but when Modi became prime minister for the first time, there was hope that he would change this very ugly political culture. It is one of his more glaring failures that he has been unable to do this and that the media has become too docile to do the kind of investigative story that appeared in this newspaper last week on the shady land dealings in Ujjain. It was excellent journalism after a very long time, and it made me proud to have a column in *The Indian Express* for nearly forty years now. It is true that we in the media have not been doing our job well and it saddens me to admit that I cannot go into reasons why.



INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

ARMING HIMSELF FOR ALLIANCE

The coup in "coaxing" six Sena MPs from Uddhav Thackeray's camp to switch to Eknath Shinde's side was a six-month operation, culminating in the six being flown in a chartered plane from Pune, Nanded and Mumbai to Delhi, where they stayed at the Leela Palace Hotel. A fascinating figure in the operation was Abhishek Verma, the Chief National Coordinator for NDA Alliance and Elections in the Shinde Sena. Verma, an arms dealer who joined the party last year, was accused of being the middleman in the Rs 18,798-crore Scorpene submarine deal and was investigated in the naval war room leak, though he was later acquitted by the court. The BJP in 2006 held a press conference charging that the Scorpene deal involved the biggest kickback ever and Verma, the son of late Congress MP and poet Shrikant Verma, sued L K Advani for defamation.

NSA EXPANDS TERRITORY

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi met NSA Ajit Doval last week. Tellingly, Wang and his deputy were missing from the BRICS foreign ministers meet in May and China was represented by its ambassador in India. Doval often represents India in key negotiations with certain countries, instead of Foreign Minister S Jaishankar, suggesting the growing domain of the NSA at the cost of the foreign minister's sphere. The 81-year-old former police officer is far more consequential in foreign affairs than his predecessors Brajesh Mishra, M K Narayanan and Shiv Shankar Menon. Doval, who founded the RSS-oriented Vivekananda Foundation after retirement, has cabinet rank. He moved out of the PMO and commanded the entire Sardar Patel Bhavan for the National Security Council. Jaishankar seems content to focus on the US, the Americas and Europe, while Doval has cultivated special relationships with countries ranging from Saudi Arabia and Qatar to China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. In 2021, he revived a flagging Indo-Russian relationship. Even France seems to be Doval's stomping ground. When it comes to domestic issues concerning Islamic institutions and connections with Islamic countries, Doval has a special pipeline.

WHO'S WHO AT WEDDING

The who's who of politics, film and business attended the Mumbai wedding of Sharad Pawar's grand daughter Revati Sule with Sarang Lakhani, son of prominent Nagpur businessman and RSS associate Arun Lakhani. The range of celebrity guests was indicative of Pawar's ties across the spectrum, including CMs from most parties. Bhagwant Mann, Mohan Bhagwat and Rahul Gandhi were among the guests. The noticeable absentees included PM Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. TMC's Mamata Banerjee and Derek O'Brien, who presumably were too engrossed in salvaging the party, were missing as was DMK's M K Stalin. Sharp-eyed guests noticed that the Ambanis and the Adanis avoided eye contact and the affable Anil Ambani acted as practically one of the masters of ceremonies, despite being weighed down in legal tangles.

EVERYBODY'S BUDDY

Businessman Parimal Nathwani has managed to defy the odds and alliance arithmetic and win a Rajya Sabha seat for the fourth time as an Independent from Jharkhand. Nathwani's goodwill across the board is not merely because of his long association with the Ambani family, but because of his friendly nature. His son Dhanraj Nathwani follows in his father's footsteps and is president of the Gujarat Cricket Association and is close to Jay Shah.

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

There was suspense as to whether Omraje Nimbalkar, one of the six defecting Sena UBT MPs, would switch camps. The buzz was that Nimbalkar placed a condition that those responsible for the murder of his father Pawanraje Nimbalkar 20 years ago be booked by the CBI. He even met Amit Shah. One of the accused in the murder case was Padamsinh Patil, 84, the brother of Deputy CM Sunetra Pawar. A fortnight ago, a CBI court exonerated all the accused in the Pawanraje murder. But Nimbalkar did not back out from joining the Eknath Shinde camp.

Of late, CM Devendra Fadnavis has become the unquestioned ruler of the state thanks to the weakened status of his formerly troublesome alliance partners, the NCP and Sena. Shinde, with six defectors on his side, commands 13 MPs compared to the BJP's 9 MPs and hopes to be in a position to flex his muscles. Especially since Amit Shah's immediate mission is to secure the magical two-thirds majority in Lok Sabha.

When Court No. 24 became the legal preface to Emergency



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY SHUBHAM KUMAR

BEFORE THE Emergency became a midnight story, it had a courtroom preface. On the night of 25-26 June 1975, Opposition leaders were arrested, the presses were censored, and freedoms began to shrink. But the political chain of events that led to that night had been triggered two weeks earlier through a judge's verdict in Allahabad. The Emergency is remembered through Delhi's darkness. Its legal pre-history unfolded in that daylight.

That daylight can be traced to two rooms of the Allahabad High Court. Justice Jagmohanlal Sinha sat in Court No. 5. When Indira Gandhi came to give evidence in the election petition filed by Raj Narain, challenging the then-PM's Rae Bareilly victory, the proceedings were held in Court No. 24. It stood at one end of the building — easier to secure without disrupting other courts.

The story began in the 1971 general elections. After the Congress split of 1969 and the early dissolution of the Lok Sabha in December 1970, the Opposition tried "Indira Hatao" and she answered with "Garibi Hatao". In Rae Bareilly, Indira Gandhi polled 1,83,309 votes, Raj Narain received 71,499.

For most candidates, that margin would have closed the matter. Raj Narain carried it to court. In April 1971, he filed an election petition under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, alleging misuse of official machinery, campaign expenditure, and the role of Yashpal Kapoor, who had worked in the PM's Secretariat before joining Indira Gandhi's campaign. Over time, the case narrowed around Kapoor and a set of dates. Kapoor had resigned from government service in January 1971. The court had to decide when that resignation took effect, whether



Court No. 24 of the Allahabad High Court is now Court No. 34 SHYAMLAL YADAV

he had begun election work before leaving service, and when Indira Gandhi had begun her Rae Bareilly run. Election law treats assistance from government servants, deployed to advance a candidate's prospects, as a corrupt practice. Officials, police, and public facilities belong to the Republic, not to a ruling party's campaign. In Rae Bareilly, this ordinary rule had become historic because the candidate under scrutiny was also the PM.

For three years, the case moved slowly until Justice Sinha took charge after the 1974 summer vacation and pushed it forward. In March 1975, Indira Gandhi's appearance as a witness enlivened the case. The arrangements outside Court No. 24 were an Emergency-like rehearsal before the Emergency. Police guarded the gates. Entry was restricted to lawyers, reporters, and pass-holders. A metal detector stood in the passage. There, a briefcase incident, involving an allegedly unlicensed country-made pistol, caused a stir in Parliament.

By the time Justice Sinha entered, the courtroom was packed. Raj Narain was present after he assured his counsel Shanti Bhushan that he would remain silent. Bhushan didn't want Raj Narain because he was known to be temperamental and outspoken. Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi were also there. Justice Sinha announced that court convention did not require anyone to rise when a witness

entered. Outside the courtroom, Indira Gandhi was the PM. Inside, she was a witness. When she entered, some still rose, as the habits of power and the discipline of law stood face to face.

The court accommodated the dignity of office. She was not made to stand in the witness box. After consultation with Shanti Bhushan, Justice Sinha allowed her to sit on a chair placed on a raised platform to the right of the judge. Her counsel, S C Khare, examined her first. Then Shanti Bhushan cross-examined her.

On 12 June 1975, Justice Sinha set aside Indira Gandhi's election and found her guilty of corrupt practices on limited grounds, connected with Yashpal Kapoor and official arrangements. The court granted a short stay for appeal. But the political crisis had begun. Congress rallied behind her. The Opposition treated the verdict as a crisis of legitimacy.

On 24 June, Justice V R Krishna Iyer of the Supreme Court allowed her to continue as PM but restricted her rights as an MP. The next day, Jayaprakash Narayan and other leaders demanded her resignation at a Delhi rally. That evening, Indira Gandhi advised the President to proclaim a state of emergency. On the night of 25 June 1975, just before midnight, President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed signed the proclamation.

The Rae Bareilly case still did not disappear. Parliament changed the election law retrospectively. The 39th Amendment attempted to place the election of the PM beyond judicial challenge. In November 1975, a Constitution Bench upheld several election-law changes but struck down the attempt to immunise the PM's election from judicial review, applying the basic structure doctrine articulated in Kesavananda Bharati.

Fifty-one years later, Indira Gandhi v. Raj Narain remains the courtroom preface to the Emergency. Court No. 24 reminds us that constitutional crises do not always begin with a proclamation. Sometimes they begin when ordinary legal rules finally attain extraordinary political power.

The author is a lawyer with a specialisation in public law

The Instagram betrothal experience

THE CREEPIEST part of the death of 26-year-old Ketan Agarwal, allegedly murdered by his fiancée, Siya Goyal, 22, and her paramour, is the tearjerking video she posted on Instagram soon after his death. Agarwal was serenading her with a gigantic sunflower in a car filled with colourful bouquets. The roof opened to reveal gorgeous stems above as well, and the lyrics of *Aankhon mein teri ajab si ajab si adayein hain* played romantically in the background. The footage moves to the (ostensibly) happy couple close dancing, in this carefully orchestrated, made-for-Insta proposal. (In the light of facts emerging, a chilling reminder of the frightening gaps between projection and reality.)

Time will reveal if Siya Goyal really shoved Ketan Agarwal off a cliff. But his sordid end points to the disturbing performative pressure around engagements, driven by the "For-the-Gram" culture, a puzzling phenomenon inexplicable to anyone over 40. Since I am of the age where many of my classmates and friends' adult

children are "settling down", I often see highly staged, embarrassingly cheesy marriage proposals posted online. The setting will involve a pristine beach, the girl in a pale, gauzy dress with the man in smart linens, on one knee, brandishing what else but the predictable solitaire diamond. The hashtag will read #hitched, parents and other family members will gush and repost the congratulations. Weirder still is that many of these matches are completely arranged. The *roka* has already happened, but the families have hired fireworks, professional photographers and drone videographers to portray an entirely fictional, Hollywood-inspired, romcom scene. For what? To brag — on Instagram.

Splashy drama has always been part and parcel of the big fat Indian wedding. There's an ever pressing burden not just to walk down the aisle, but to do so in spectacular fashion. However, it's one thing to dance in a glittering *lehenga* on a Karan Johar film-inspired set, but entirely another to participate in a cinematically

recreated delusion, especially made for Insta. Does honest spontaneity for life's precious moments count for nothing anymore? Today, the Insta-engagement farce is totally legit, that celebrates a future no one has seen, while the present of the freshly betrothed couple is so fragile and new. It sounds almost old school to say there's value in protecting the sanctity of one's private life. To some of us at least, the Insta-brag of intimate details comes across as hopelessly cringe, and shallow.

Somebody needs to drill it into Indian parents' heads — getting married is not an achievement. It's a milestone, yes, but that's about it. Let I be accused of being an unromantic cynic (having myself agreed to marry in a weak moment on a drunken New Year's Eve), I genuinely can't believe an entire generation of affluent Indians need these curated grand gestures to feel validated. The wedding planners are the ones having the last laugh; the "pre-wedding shoot" is an integral part of their package. A beachside proposal in Goa — with props like rose petals

showering down, a make-up artist to doll up the bride and some banal monologue lifted from whichever third-rate romance movie is currently trending — can cost upwards of Rs 5 lakh. Agarwal and Siya Goyal were heading to Bali precisely for this sort of picture-perfect shoot when his passport mysteriously went missing, one of the many red flags preceding this tragedy.

The circumstances surrounding Agarwal's death are a hark-back to sobering Shakespearean wisdom, the famous paradox, fair is foul, and foul is fair. Appearances can be endlessly deceiving. What looks happy and pure may also contain heartbreaking evil. Judging situations based on face value is fraught because we all exist and act out from a headspace of perpetual moral confusion. A modern love triangle serves as a cautionary note to inherent human hypocrisy. It turns out, whatever our decisions, they will come back to haunt us — in this lifetime itself.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

EFFORTS TO SECURE CONCESSION FOR SMALL INDUSTRIES WITH DEVELOPED COUNTRIES DIDN'T WORK

EU carbon tax: Govt to shoulder 90% compliance bill of MSMEs

The impact is likely to be felt the most by the iron and steel sector, where extent of decline in EU imports could be 24%

Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, June 27

THE CENTRE is working on a scheme to absorb 90% of the compliance cost borne by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to help soften the disproportionate impact of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) compliance burden imposed by the European Union, *The Indian Express* has learnt.

India's efforts to secure a concession for its small industries in negotiations with developed countries have not worked, and the industry has been seeking assistance to meet the steep annual compliance costs due to the imposition of the EU's carbon tax since January 1, 2026.

The UK too has plans to impose its version of CBAM from 2027. CBAM is an EU policy designed to put a price on the carbon emitted during the production of carbon-intensive goods that are entering the EU.

Complying with the regulation is seen as a major global challenge, as declarants must track the embedded emissions of their goods, including direct emissions and, for certain sectors such as cement and fertilisers, indirect emissions. Industry sources said that the compliance cost for each

MSME unit to meet the requirement under carbon tax alone is Rs 15 lakh to 20 lakh and that they do not have the wherewithal to report the number of data points sought under the regulation by the EU.

India is the world's second-largest producer of both crude steel and primary aluminium.

Steeper challenge for MSMEs

An Indian exporter is required to submit CBAM certificates that correspond to the total embedded emissions. The regulation becomes a major challenge for MSMEs as the EU says that if exporters are unable to provide actual data, importers must use "default values" provided by the European Commission. The default values for CBAM goods have to be increased by a proportionately designed percentage 'mark-up' in their value.

"These mark-ups are 10% in 2026, 20% in 2027, and 30% from 2028 onwards. Default values, including mark-up, have been determined to ensure that embedded emissions are not underestimated when applying default values," the regulation said.

"For MSMEs, the principal challenge under CBAM is not necessarily the carbon levy



The UK too has plans to impose its version of CBAM from 2027. REUTERS

itself, but the cost of compliance. Unlike large corporations, MSMEs often lack the technical expertise, systems and financial resources to measure, verify and report embedded emissions in accordance with CBAM requirements. They may have to incur significant upfront expenditure on carbon accounting, third-party verification, digital reporting systems and capacity building," Ayush A Mehrotra, Partner, Khaitan & Co said.

"These are largely fixed compliance costs, which means they do not reduce in proportion to the size of the business or export volumes.

"As a result, MSMEs bear a disproportionately higher compliance burden than larger

TAXING CARBON

CARBON BORDER Adjustment Mechanism is an EU policy designed to put a price on the carbon emitted during the production of carbon-intensive goods that are entering the block

COMPLYING WITH the regulation is seen as a major global challenge, as declarants must track the embedded emissions of their goods, including direct emissions and, for certain sectors such as cement and fertilisers, indirect emissions.

COMPLIANCE COST for each MSME unit to meet the requirement under carbon tax is Rs 15 lakh-20 lakh.

NSE, Jio listings could revive India's sluggish IPO market

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, June 27

INDIA'S IPO market has been sluggish so far in 2026 after record deals over the past couple of years, with weak market sentiment and uncertainty due to the ongoing war in West Asia causing companies to delay their fundraising plans.

However, with long-awaited big-ticket IPOs such as the National Stock Exchange and Jio Platforms finally announced over the last week and oil prices subsiding significantly as the US and Iran agreed on a peace deal during the same week, experts now believe that sentiment in the IPO market could turn positive as general market conditions improve with clarity on the geopolitical situation.

With around Rs 3.5 lakh crore to Rs 4 lakh crore of IPOs currently in the pipeline, factors such as geopolitical stability and the return of foreign investors to the Indian capital markets are key for an uptick in IPOs over the second half of the year.

Revival may be in sight

While the IPO announcements of Jio and NSE might bring back foreign investor participation in the primary market due to their established track record and large institutional holdings, the performance of India's IPO markets is heavily dependent on the performance of the secondary market, which in turn depends on the West Asia war ending soon.

"The global environment has improved due to the resolution of the US-Iran conflict, and crude oil prices have come off, thereby leading to ease in concern on inflation, deficit, USD/INR, and earnings growth prospects. This is the biggest sentiment booster for equity market sentiments and hence the rest of the year can witness revival in primary market activity," a head of research at a domestic broking firm said. The benchmark Nifty 50 and Sensex indices have gained around 1% since the interim peace agreement between the US and Iran last week, signaling a positive trend in the secondary market. Both indices, which had fallen over 11% at their lowest, are currently down just around 4% from their pre-war levels.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

CAUTIOUS STEPS

AS MANY as 22 companies have completed their mainboard IPOs so far this year, raising over Rs 20,663 crore in total, while another couple of public issues are currently live.

THE LARGEST IPO this year was the Rs 3,100-crore public issue of renewable energy producer Clean Max Enviro Energy Solutions in February.

IN COMPARISON around 103 companies had raised a record Rs 1.76 lakh crore through IPOs in



2025, breaking the record of around Rs 1.59 lakh crore raised by 90 companies in 2024.

"It (the NSE and Jio IPOs) could also revive FII participation. FIIs have been a large contributor in the IPO space. I am reasonable that these IPOs could revive the overall sentiment in the broad market itself," according to A Balasubramanian, MD and Chief Executive at Aditya Birla Sun Life AMC.

Foreign investors have dumped \$28.4 billion of equities since the war started but have been net buyers over the past few sessions. The strong existing IPO pipeline also remains a big positive for the industry.

"As of May 2026, a total of 236 mainboard IPOs amounting to Rs 3,49,304.32 crore are in the pipeline. This strong pipeline signals an acceleration in investment banking activity,

though actual launch windows remain subject to geopolitical tensions," said Sumeet Lath, co-head of equity capital market execution at

Anand Rathi Advisors. "This positive outlook is backed by a lineup of mega-IPOs like Reliance Jio, NSE, SBI Mutual Fund, Zepto, PhonePe, and Flipkart, which are set to raise over Rs 1 lakh crore from just six issues. This massive pipeline positions CY2026 as a watershed year for the primary market, though realistic valuations will play a major role in determining the final success of these issues," he added. But a section of experts have also sounded caution.

"The issue is not on the supply side. Issuers are in a wait-and-watch mode to see how things progress. For IPOs to happen, you need at least a stable, if not buoyant, second-

ary market," said Pranav Haldea, MD at Prime Database. Many of the companies filing their IPO papers aim to get the regulatory approvals so that they are in a ready-to-launch stage when market conditions improve, he added.

Muted IPO market in 2026 so far

Data from the NSE shows 22 companies have so far completed their mainboard IPOs this year, raising over Rs 20,663 crore in total, while another couple of public issues are currently live. The largest so far this year was the Rs 3,100-crore public issue of renewable energy producer Clean Max Enviro Energy Solutions in February. AI and analytics solutions provider Fractal Analytics' Rs 2,834-crore public issue ranks second. In comparison, around 103 companies had raised a record Rs 1.76 lakh crore through IPOs in 2025, breaking the record of around Rs 1.59 lakh crore raised by 90 companies in the previous year. For a like-to-like comparison, 16 companies had completed their IPOs last year till June 22, raising over Rs 26,000 crore in total.

This included big-ticket IPOs such as Hexaware Technologies' Rs 8,750 crore and Schloss Bangalore's (which operates The Leela brand of hotels) Rs 3,500 crore public issues. Weak market sentiment and geopolitical uncertainty have been key factors for this slowdown. The companies that have completed their public issues have also seen a weak listing-day performance, highlighting the damp market sentiment. FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

HDFC Bank ex-chair: Board 'ignored' queries on legal review after resignation

ENS Economic Bureau
Mumbai, June 27

FORMER HDFC Bank chairman Atanu Chakraborty on Saturday said he had repeatedly sought clarity from the bank's board on the scope and legal basis of the independent review initiated after his resignation in March but got no response from the lender.

According to CNBC-TV18, Chakraborty also inquired about the legal provisions under which the review was being conducted, but said those queries too went unanswered. Giving a "clean chit" to the bank, the law firms — Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, PC and Wadia Ghandy & Co — said the contemporaneous evidence reviewed was inconsistent with Chakraborty's statement, and law firms' review did not identify any basis for the statement.

Chakraborty did not interact with the law firms which were appointed by the bank's board. On March 18, Chakraborty resigned as chairman of the bank with immediate effect, saying that "certain happenings and practices within the bank are not in congruence with my personal values and ethics".

Six days later, HDFC Bank said that the board of directors

have appointed external law firms to review the points highlighted by Chakraborty.

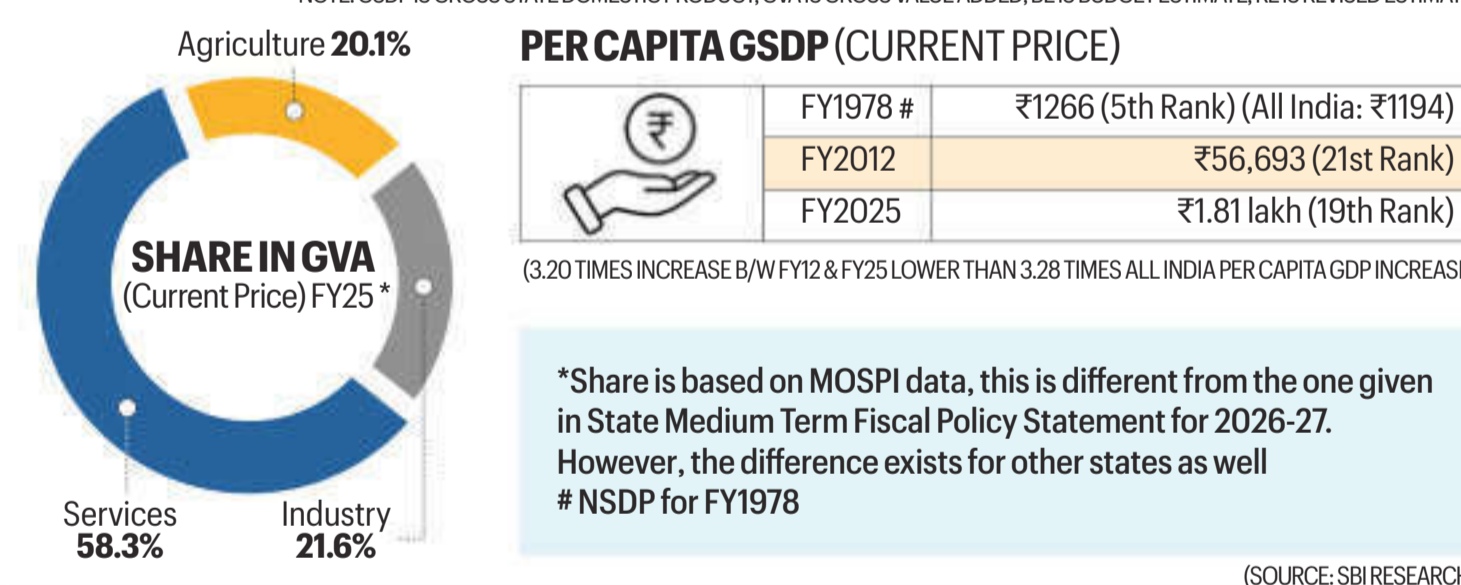
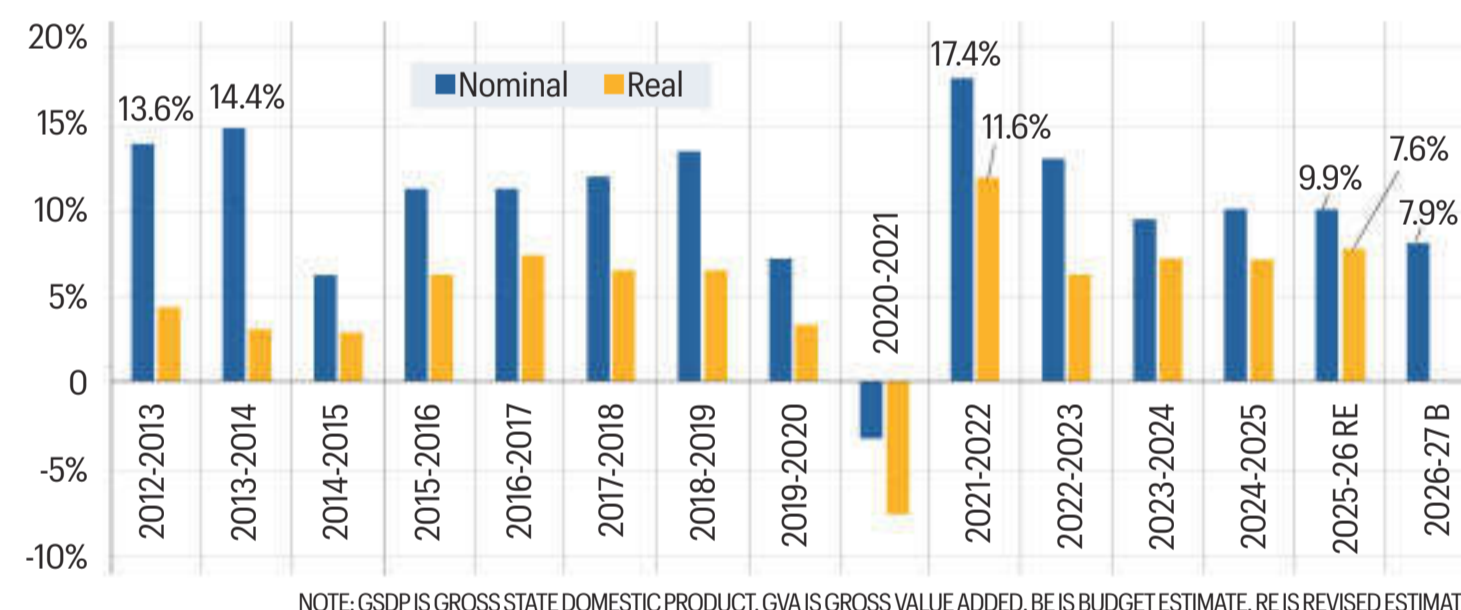
Chakraborty said that he had hoped his resignation would prompt the board to reflect on the concerns he had raised, rather than treat the matter as what he described as a "compliance exercise."

The law firms said the legal review was conducted over a three-month period and involved the review of thousands of documents and interviews of the independent directors and members of management.

"The bank and external law firms repeatedly requested that Chakraborty speak with them as part of the legal review, but ultimately the interview with Chakraborty did not occur," the law firms said. After the probe, law firms found that Chakraborty's statement and its implications were not substantiated by the record and witness interviews, they said. "Specifically, the minutes of the meetings Chakraborty attended were a product of a comprehensive drafting, review and approval process that afforded Chakraborty an opportunity to record any 'happenings and practices' that purportedly were not in congruence with his personal values and ethics," they said.

A steady slide: GDP growth of West Bengal

The newly-formed BJP government in West Bengal tabled the state budget for 2026-27 last Monday. It made a host of announcements to boost the economy of the state, whose per capita income in 1977-78 was ₹1,266 — higher than the country average of ₹1,194. It ranked at fifth spot then, and now it has slipped to 19th position.



Vaswani to step down as Kotak Bank CEO

Mumbai: Ashok Vaswani, Managing Director & CEO of Kotak Mahindra Bank, has decided not to seek reappointment upon completion of his current term on December 31, 2026.

The bank said the decision to step down after the current tenure is due to personal reasons. "The board has, at its meeting held today, respected his decision and has initiated

the process for the appointment of a new Managing Director & CEO.

The process will be completed within applicable regulatory timelines," the bank said in an exchange filing.

The bank's board appointed him as MD & CEO for a three-year term, effective January 1, 2024. Uday Kotak, founder of Kotak Mahindra Bank, stepped

down as MD and CEO in September 2023. Kotak Mahindra Bank is the fourth largest private sector bank with a market capitalisation of Rs 4.06 lakh crore. With over 35 years of global banking experience, Vaswani held leadership roles at Citigroup, Barclays and Pagaya Technologies. ENS

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

US allows Anthropic to release Mythos AI to 'trusted' US firms

Reuters
Washington, June 27

ANTHROPIC SAID on Friday that the US government has allowed it to release its powerful Claude Mythos 5 artificial intelligence model to some "trusted" US organisations, partially reversing an order two weeks ago to suspend access over national security risks.

More than 100 companies and institutions will now have access to Mythos 5, including many Fortune 500 companies, a source familiar with the new directive said, declining to be identified due to the sensitivity of the matter.

Concern that powerful AI systems could be misused by military intelligence users in

China, Russia or other countries of concern has prompted President Donald Trump's administration to take an aggressive approach to oversight of releases of Anthropic's and rival OpenAI's frontier models.

OpenAI said earlier in the day that it was delaying a full public launch of GPT-5.6 at the US government's request, limiting its access to a small group of vetted partners whose details were shared with the authorities. Anthropic had abruptly disabled its most advanced AI models — Mythos 5 and Fable 5 — for all users after the government's June 12 export control order. "Today, the government notified us that Mythos 5, our strongest cybersecurity model, can be redeployed to a

set of US organizations that operate and defend critical infrastructure," Anthropic said in a statement on Friday.

"We're restoring access for these organisations quickly, and we're continuing to work with the government to expand access to Mythos 5 and make Fable 5 available for general use again," it added.

But, the US' vetting of which companies can gain access to Mythos has drawn much criticism. "No one knows how these companies are picked and why everyone else is excluded," said John Coleman, legislative counsel for the Philadelphia-based nonpartisan free speech organization, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.

SIERRA'S ICE VARIANTS HAVE LAGGED BEHIND IN SALES OF ITS CLOSEST COMPETITOR, THE ALL-NEW KIA SELTOS

ICE didn't roll, can electric version jumpstart Tata Sierra's sales volumes

Vikram Chaudhary
New Delhi, June 27

Sierra may not have been able to match the sales of its closest competitor, the all-new Kia Seltos, so far, but experts said Tata Motors expects to close the gap once the Sierra EV, which launches on June 30, gives the brand incremental sales numbers (the Seltos isn't available as an EV model yet), and the auto major clears its backlog around the festive season.

Last five months' sales data shows that Sierra's ICE variants have lagged behind in sales of its closest competitor, the all-new Kia Seltos. Both these mid-size SUV heavyweights were

launched around the same time, but data from the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) shows that the Seltos (53,151 units) has sold almost 1.5 times the Sierra (37,319 units). Industry experts, however, argued that it isn't about slowing demand for the Sierra, but more about Tata facing production constraints.

When prices of the Sierra were announced in November last year, the SUV recorded a massive 70,000 bookings within 24 hours, which increased to more than 100,000 by February this year.

Customer deliveries, however, were muted — 291 units in December, 7,003 in January,

and 7,100 in February. The Seltos, on the other hand, took off the day deliveries started (January 2), and it sold 10,639 units in January, 10,308 in February, and 11,041 units in March.

In the next two months, Seltos maintained its sales trajectory (10,566 units in April, and 10,597 units in May), while the Sierra cooled off at 7,316 units in April, and 6,606 units in May.

A spokesperson from Tata Motors Passenger Vehicles, however, shared that the demand for the Sierra hasn't cooled off. "The current volume trajectory of the Sierra is primarily a function of supply-side constraints rather than demand. Since launch, we have



Industry experts, however, attributed the slow pick up to production constraints. REUTERS

faced limitations in the availability of certain supplier components, which have impacted

our ability to fully meet demand," he said. "Customer response to the Sierra continues

to be very robust, and we are actively working with our supplier partners to address the bottlenecks and progressively ramp up production in the near term." He added that the waiting period for the Sierra is up to 12 weeks, depending on the variant, colour, and location, and as supplies improve, Tata Motors expects growth in volumes, accelerated deliveries, and reduced waiting period.

Agreeing with this, Gaurav Vangaal, associate director, Light Vehicle Forecasting, S&P Global Mobility, said that when the Sierra was launched, it triggered an unprecedented surge in demand that far exceeded initial expectations.

"While a production ramp-up followed, it has lagged behind because bookings simply kept pouring in. But we expect that, by the upcoming festive season, Tata Motors will have scaled production sufficiently to substantially reduce waiting periods, driving much higher sales volumes for the Sierra in the months ahead."

Even as Tata clears its backlog, Kia India has leveraged its supply chain to keep its dealerships fully stocked. "Seltos has maintained consistent volume of over 10,500 units monthly, proving the strength of its long-term brand equity," an industry analyst said. But the strong performance of Seltos isn't just due

to consistent monthly dispatches, but also due to the trust that the brand has cultivated since 2019 when it was first launched.

Commenting on the SUV's sustained appeal, Atul Sood, senior vice-president, marketing & sales, Kia India, said that Seltos has the highest resale value among all midsize SUVs, pointing to a recent study that noted Seltos retains 79% of its value after one year, 67% after three years, and 57% after five years of ownership. "The findings affirm the enduring appeal of Seltos and reflect the confidence customers continue to place in its quality, performance and technology," he said. FE

PROFILES

The story of a shipwrecked hegemon

War on Iran

The war the U.S. and Israel launched has come to a fragile pause with a preliminary agreement between Washington and Tehran, but it has already diminished America's presence in the region, prompting Gulf countries to seek a new *modus vivendi* with Tehran, while Israel, isolated and angry, is clinging on to its Lebanon card

Stanly Johny

“When we are finished, take over your government. It will be yours to take. This will be probably your only chance for generations,” President Donald Trump told Iranians on February 28, after the U.S. and Israel launched an all-out war on their country. He asked the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), armed forces and police to “lay down” weapons. “You will be treated fairly with total immunity, or you will face certain death,” warned Mr. Trump.

The initial blow was devastating for Iran. More than 40 senior officials were killed, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, IRGC commander Mohammad Pakpour and Defence Council chief Ali Shamkhani. Senior Israeli officials had likened the June 12, 2025 strike on Iran, which killed a host of military officers, to the ‘Red Wedding’, the infamous massacre of House Stark members in *Game of Thrones*. But that attack paled in comparison with the February 28 strikes. This was Iran’s true ‘Red Wedding’ moment.

The U.S. and Israel expected the decapitation strike to trigger the collapse of the Iranian state or plunge the country, already rocked by January’s violent protests, into chaos, paving the way for a more amenable leadership to emerge. Mr. Trump wanted a quick, Venezuela-like solution. This confidence was reflected in his conversation with allies during the early hours of the war. According to Israel’s *Ynet News*, Mr. Trump told British Prime Minister Keir Starmer that the war would be over “in three days”. When he urged Mr. Starmer to deploy aircraft carriers to West Asia, the British PM said he would first consult his team the following week. “But the war has already started. Next week, the war is going to be over... in three days,” said Mr. Trump.

But he was wrong. Iran’s response rested on three pillars. One, preserving the state and preventing regime collapse; two, retaliating by regionalising the war; three, enhancing the global economic cost by wielding its most potent strategic lever – the Strait of Hormuz. The state recovered quickly from the initial shock. Ali Larjani, secretary of the National Security Council, was already in charge of critical decision-making. President Masoud Pezeshkian focused on managing the war-time economy and civil administration. Within days of the U.S. attack, Ahmad Vahidi, the ‘ghost general’ of the IRGC, took command of the war effort. (Larjani was later killed in an Israeli strike and was swiftly replaced by Mohammed Bagher Zolqadr, another IRGC commander).

Iran also started striking U.S. bases in Persian Gulf countries and Jordan, besides directly attacking Israel. Among the six Gulf kingdoms, all but Oman have permanent U.S. military bases. Bases, missile defence batteries and sites of American economic presence were all targeted. Russia reportedly shared intelligence with Iran. On March 1, the second day of the war, the IRGC Navy announced that the Strait of Hormuz, through which one fifth of the world’s seaborne oil passed before the war, was closed to all traffic. Shipping companies halted transits, commercial traffic collapsed, insurance costs rocketed and the price of crude oil soared, pushing the global economy to a cliff.

Mr. Trump, having failed to meet his objectives quickly, doubled down on his rhetoric. On March 6, he demanded Iran’s “unconditional surrender” and ruled out any deal with Tehran. Two days later, Iran’s Assembly of Experts chose Mojtaba Khamenei, son of the former leader Ali Khamenei, as the new ‘Leader of the Revolution’. In his first message as the leader, Mojtaba termed the war an “existential struggle”, and said the fighting would continue and that the Strait of Hormuz would remain shut. He delivered a clear message: Iran, despite the punishing American, Israeli attacks, preferred war over surrender.

“Iran was trying to avoid this war from the very beginning. A political solution was available [before the war started]. But Trump and [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu were not interested in an agreement. They wanted to change Iran’s government and take over Iran’s oil, creating Israel’s hegemony in this part of the



Troubled waters: Vessels at the Strait of Hormuz, as seen from Musandam, Oman, on June 16. REUTERS

world,” Foad Izadi, professor of world studies at the University of Tehran, told *The Hindu*. “Of course, they have inflicted huge damage on Iran’s infrastructure and killed a lot of people. But they have failed [to meet their objectives]. And when they realised that they have failed, they entered negotiations,” he added.

Stubborn realities

In Mr. Trump’s view, the U.S. secured a decisive victory over Iran. He said Iran’s navy, air force, air defences and much of its attack capability had been destroyed, and that Tehran was begging for a deal. Yet, he faced a series of stubborn realities. The swift victory he had anticipated remained elusive; Iran’s state survived the bombing; there was no viable military option to reopen the Strait of Hormuz; and Iran’s nuclear programme remained unaddressed and unresolved. “The war has deeply scarred the entire region. Iran suffered heavy blows. Its Supreme Leader was killed, key military and nuclear sites were destroyed, yet it survived and proved it could strike back asymmetrically,” Mohammed Soliman, author of *West Asia: A New American Grand Strategy in the Middle East*, and a senior fellow at The Middle East Institute, told *The Hindu*.

Mr. Trump had two options: press ahead with the air campaign, further depleting America’s offensive and defensive stockpiles; or engage Iran diplomatically. If continuing the strikes did not produce a desirable outcome, prolonging the campaign would become futile. He chose the diplomatic alternative. It was at this point Pakistan, a nuclear power with good ties to both Washington and Tehran, stepped in to offer mediation. On April 8, just hours after threatening to erase Iran’s civilisation, Mr. Trump announced a “double-sided ceasefire”.

But the ceasefire did not mean an end to the conflict. Mr. Trump declared that the Strait of Hormuz would be open. Both Iran and Pakistan said the ceasefire covered Lebanon as well. Israel had seized parts of southern Lebanon after the war broke out. Israel continued its strikes, which strained the U.S.-Iran ceasefire. Tehran did not reopen the strait. After direct talks between the U.S. and Iran in Islamabad on April 11-12 failed to make any breakthrough, Mr. Trump announced a blockade of Iranian ports aimed at choking the country’s already broken economy further. He did not want to return to active war, but he wanted to make Iran concede on his critical demands. Iran’s closure of the strait and the American blockade led to repeated skirmishes between the two sides. But despite the tensions, they stayed engaged in talks, exchanging drafts through Pakistan. Iran took a phased approach towards the conflict. It wanted to negotiate a preliminary deal first to bring the war to an end and remove the bottlenecks for shipping in and out of the Persian Gulf, and then, in phase two, hold discussions on the nuclear question. The Trump administration, despite its public protests, accepted this line.

On June 15, U.S. and Iran announced the memorandum of understanding, extending the ceasefire by 60 more days and paving the way for more substantive talks on critical issues such as Iran’s nuclear programme and western sanctions. The memorandum also said the ceasefire should come into force on all fronts, including

Lebanon; the U.S. blockade would be lifted; Tehran would get access to its frozen funds and the U.S. would help create a development plan for Iran, involving \$300 billion. On the other side, Iran promised never to make a nuclear bomb (Iran’s official position has always been that it is not seeking to build a bomb, a position which it put on record in the 2015 deal signed with the Obama administration). Iran also promised to ensure safe passage of ships through the Strait of Hormuz without any charge for 60 days.

Mr. Trump’s claims of victory do not align with the text of the MoU. The U.S., which started the war seeking regime change, ultimately offered substantial concessions to the same government, in exchange for commitments not to pursue a nuclear bomb, and to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, which had been open before the war. “It is both a strategic and a military defeat. No strategic or military goals were attained. The region will now have to recalibrate its relation to the U.S. and abandon unrealistic expectations about American power,” Bruno Macaes, a Portuguese political scientist and author, told *The Hindu*.

A new security order

Before the war began, West Asia looked like a different region. Israel, after regionalising its post-October 7 wars, looked confident of meeting its final objective – bring down the Islamic Republic and build a unipolar West Asia where it would act as the principal security player. The Abraham Accords, which saw the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco sign normalisation agreements with Israel, built the foundation for this ‘new Middle East’. Gulf countries were worried about Iran but felt protected by American military presence. America’s promise for security had been the bedrock of the U.S.-Gulf partnership for decades. As Jimmy Carter said in January 1980, “Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain

control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States...” Iran upended not just the Carter doctrine but also the Trumpian effort to reshape West Asia around Israel as its core and Arab states as its pillars.

The U.S. could do little as Iran unleashed its drones and missiles at American bases across the region. Rather than providing security, the bases became magnets for Iranian projectiles. “The idea before the war was that the U.S. would provide security to the Gulf countries. But what happened was that the Gulf countries were burning through their defensive weapons to protect U.S. bases on their soil,” said an Emirati official, requesting anonymity.

At least 13 American bases in the Gulf, including the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, the Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait, the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain and the Al Sader and Al Ruwais facilities in the UAE, were damaged. According to a *Wall Street Journal* visual investigation based on satellite imagery, Iranian attacks devastated the U.S. Navy’s base in Bahrain. The U.S. could do little when Qatar’s Ras Laffan Industrial City, the world’s largest LNG export complex, was hit on March 18. Gulf countries watched with pain and shock as Iran drilled holes into the U.S.-led security architecture.

“Stability will have to come from within since the U.S. proved incapable of providing it. As for U.S. policy, it will become almost entirely mercantile: focus on deals in energy, AI and, of course, weapons,” said Mr. Macaes. Mr. Soliman of the Middle East Institute agreed: “Gulf Arab states will now accelerate their security self-reliance, diversify their defence relationships in addition to the U.S., and seek more pragmatic ways to manage relations with Tehran.”

Gulf states have already begun moving in this direction. They seem to have recognised that the Islamic

Republic is not going anywhere, and for their own security and for the safe passage of shipping through Hormuz, they will need to work with Tehran on the basis of peaceful co-existence. What they require is regional stability, and for that stability, as Mr. Macaes put it, they would have to bring “Iran back from the cold”.

“Part of what we are doing now, as regional countries, is to create this regional security framework between us and Iran,” Qatar’s Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed Al Thani said recently in an interview. “That will hopefully have economic cooperation in the future between all of us,” he added. Saudi Arabia reportedly reached out to Iran to reach an understanding so that the kingdom would be spared if war resumed. U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance recently said the UAE, which has very close ties with Israel, “is having conversations with Iran that have never happened before, including with the IRGC, about economic incentives.” Oman has always kept the diplomatic channels open with Tehran despite the war.

The pre-October 7 push by the U.S. to bring Gulf monarchies and Israel, the two pillars of America’s West Asia policy, closer to build a joint front against Iran appears to have been shattered by this war. “The Abraham Accords and the effort to create a Sunni-Zionist alliance against Iran are dead,” Trita Parsi, executive vice president of Quincy Institute, told *The Hindu*. “The war proved that the containment of Iran only leads to war, instability, and the defeat of such an alliance. The Arab side sees Israel as a greater threat than needs to be contained, and Iran as a state that they – from a security standpoint – need to integrate with economically, because containment and war failed.”

Israel, left alone

One country that had long sought this war, and was among the most affected by it, was Israel. It was the principal architect of the campaign. Yet, as the conflict went against the initial expectations, Mr. Trump sidelined Israel and chose talks with Iran, ultimately reaching the MoU. With Iran now rewriting the regional security order and engaging in direct talks with the U.S., Mr. Netanyahu’s big push to remap West Asia appears to have backfired. “The end result (of the war) may be the decontainment of Iran and the recontainment of Israel – perhaps going back to the pre-1991 era in which Israel was the regional and international outcast,” said Mr. Parsi.

Israel stands increasingly isolated on the world stage. Without the U.S., its ability to shape security and geopolitical outcomes is limited. Many in Israel see the U.S.-Iran deal as a major strategic setback. “Israel is going to regret this war because nothing was achieved and Israel lost Trump,” Gideon Levy, Israeli journalist and author, told *The Hindu*. “Israel should learn now that not everything can be achieved by force, but unfortunately Israel will not draw this lesson.”

At this point, Mr. Netanyahu’s focus is on the trump card he possesses – Lebanon. On June 26, Israel and Lebanon, under U.S. mediation, agreed to a deal under which Israeli troops would stay in southern Lebanon. Iran and Hezbollah have demanded a complete Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. The first article of the MoU calls for respecting Lebanon’s “territorial integrity and sovereignty” – an indirect call for Israeli troop withdrawal. If Israel doesn’t withdraw, clashes with Hezbollah will persist, meaning a ceasefire in Lebanon would remain out of reach. Tensions have already spilled over into the Strait of Hormuz, where Iran insists that ships should follow its designated route. It attacked a vessel transiting an “unauthorised” route last week, and the U.S. struck Iran on Saturday and Tehran retaliated by attacking U.S. bases in the region. But the U.S. strikes are unlikely to force Iran to give up its newly asserted control over the strait.

“We have to wait and see whether the U.S. and Israel are done with the war or this is just a pause,” said Mr. Izadi, the Iranian professor. “Iran wants these attacks to stop; to get its money back; sanctions to be lifted and its authority over Hormuz recognised. The strait is in Iran’s territory, in its contiguous waters. These are our red lines,” he said. “The U.S. can accept these reasonable demands or they can start the war again. It’s a decision they have to make.”

THE GIST

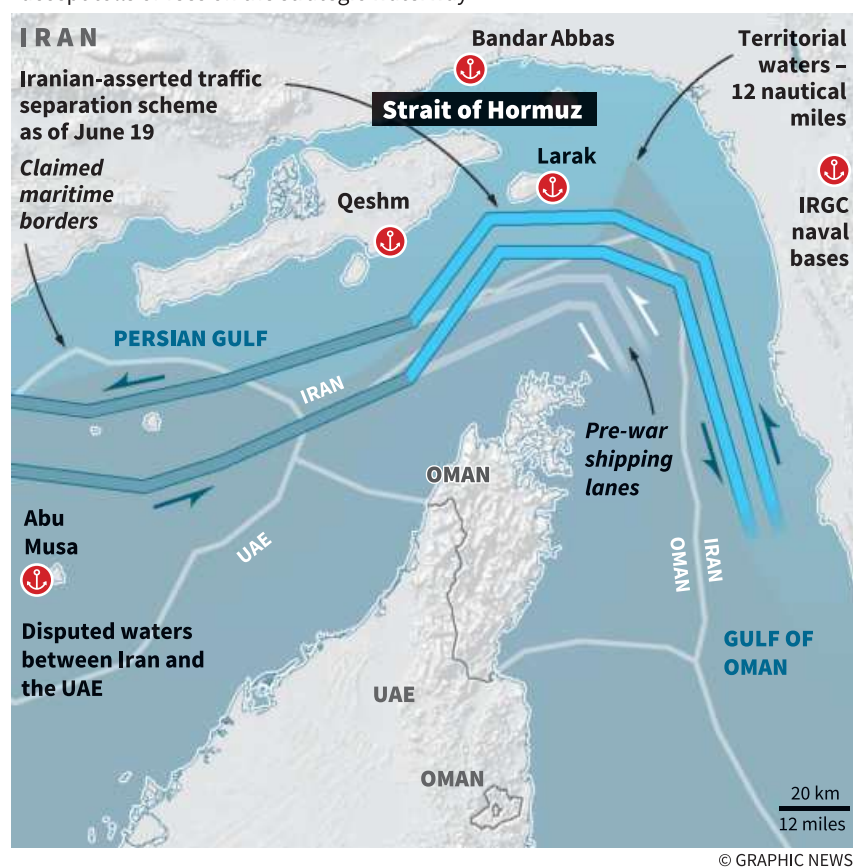
▼ The U.S.-Iran MoU says the ceasefire should come into force on all fronts, including Lebanon, and that Lebanon’s sovereignty should be respected

▼ Tehran would get access to its frozen funds and the U.S. would help create a development plan for Iran, involving \$300 billion

▼ Iran has promised never to make a nuclear bomb and to ensure safe passage of ships through the Strait of Hormuz without any charge for 60 days

Iran reasserts control over Hormuz

Iran and Oman are to discuss a future joint administration for the Strait of Hormuz, including maritime services and associated costs. The U.S. has said it would not accept tolls or fees on the strategic waterway



© GRAPHIC NEWS

Cracker of a Battle

The newly minted Vijay government in Tamil Nadu wants Sivakasi to take on China and become a global fireworks powerhouse. That will require far more than political ambition

Dia Rekhi

Sivakasi is synonymous with pattaasu (Tamil for firecrackers). Firecrackers from this city in Virudhunagar district in Tamil Nadu add sparkle and cheer to festivities across India. Apart from being the premier pyrotechnics hub, Sivakasi is curiously called "Kutty Japan" or Mini Japan, a moniker India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru reportedly coined for the enterprise and enthusiasm it demonstrated in economic growth in the 1960s.

This zest for entrepreneurship is exactly what the new Tamil Nadu government, under Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay, is banking on as it seeks to transform Sivakasi into a global hub for fireworks, capable of taking on even China, which rules the world market.

Tamil Nadu Industries Minister S. Keerthana, who is also Sivakasi MLA, told ET: "For too long, this remarkable cluster has been allowed to operate below its potential. Our government intends to change that." The transformation will be based on innovation, safety and sustainability. "Our vision is a town known not only as India's fireworks capital but as a global benchmark for how this industry can work safely, cleanly and fairly. We invite the world's buyers, partners and investors to be part of it."

Sivakasi manufactures nearly 90% of India's fireworks. There are over 1,200 factories and the industry is estimated to be valued at around ₹6,000 crore. But China supplies close to 90% of the world's pyrotechnics. And just one city—Liuyang—accounts for about 70% of its fireworks exports.

Before Sivakasi can attempt to scale the Great Wall, manufacturers say they must overcome a maze of regulatory, logistical and safety challenges. Their global ambitions hinge on policy reforms, easier exports and safer working conditions.

CHEMICAL BANS

That Sivakasi is the Liuyang of India is clear: P. Ganesan, president of the Tamil Nadu Fireworks and Amores Manufacturers Association and director of the Vinayaga Sony Fireworks Group, says that of the 1,200 factories in Sivakasi, around 400 have licences issued by the district magistrate, which means they can manufacture and store only 15 kg of fireworks at a time. "The remaining units function under the supervision of the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation (PESO)," he says. Some of these big factories can produce up to 500 kg of explosives and others can go even beyond that.

Ganesan says around 300,000 workers are directly employed in the fireworks factories, while another 500,000 are employed in allied industries and support services across Virudhunagar. "Women form nearly 55% of the workforce, making the sector one of the largest rural employment generators in southern Tamil Nadu," he says.

One of the biggest pain points that have come through in ET's conversations with firecracker manufacturers in Sivakasi is the Supreme Court's interim ban on barium nitrate, a key chemical used in the manufacturing of firecrackers. It was banned to curb air and noise pollution.

"Restrictions on certain chemicals and products have significantly impacted the industry's production capabilities," says Ganesan. "Barium nitrate, an oxidiser, constituted nearly 60% of the products manufactured here. Joined crackers, which accounted for 20% of our production, also face restrictions."

A joined cracker is a garland of firecrackers linked by a single continuous fuse. Designed to detonate in rapid succession, it is also banned by SC. "Nearly 80% of our product portfolio is therefore impacted. Any positive decision by SC or the Centre will provide a major relief to the industry," says Ganesan.

He says permit for another chemical, potassium perchlorate, which is necessary for fireworks in colder countries, is granted only to a few large-scale units with specialised safety infrastructure. Industry representatives have conveyed their concerns on chemicals and exports to the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade and PESO.

SAFETY PROBLEM

Export ambitions are overshadowed by another challenge: worker safety. While the potential for expansion is undeniable, over the years, the industry has been plagued by issues like illegal firecracker units, child labour, inhuman working conditions and tragic

SIVAKASI'S FIREWORKS INDUSTRY

Manufactures 90% of India's fireworks

No. of Factories: 1,220

Estimated Value: ₹6,000 cr

*No. of Workers: 800,000

*Direct and indirect workers
Source: Tamil Nadu Fireworks and Amores Manufacturers Association

IMAGE: AI-GENERATED

Industries Minister S. Keerthana says, "We want to make Sivakasi a global benchmark for how this industry can work safely, cleanly and fairly"

global shipping networks are dominated by Chinese exports," says Ganesan. Sivakasi has another request: reclassify firecrackers as a "white category" industry. Manufacturing and storage facilities of firecrackers are categorised under the "red category" by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB). Industrial sectors in this category are required to obtain consent to establish (CTE) and consent to operate (CTO) from the concerned state PCB. Industry leaders argue that green crackers manufactured in Sivakasi comply with environmental standards and should not be classified alongside highly polluting industries.

"Representations have also been made to alter the categorisation of fireworks in the Explosives Act. The industry has proposed that fireworks be recognised as 'Low-Risk Pyrotechnic Devices' instead of 'Low-Hazard Explosives'. Fireworks are consumer products used for celebrations, cultural events and entertainment by millions of people. The classification should reflect their actual end use and risk profile," Ganesan says.

He says representations on these issues have been submitted to the Centre, and discussions

with various ministries and regulatory authorities are on.

While there is potential for expansion, Sivakasi is plagued by issues like illegal firecracker units, child labour, inhuman working conditions and tragic accidents

ic accidents that have killed workers whose subsistence depends almost entirely on the hazardous occupation.

Most recently, on April 19, a devastating explosion took place at a firecracker manufacturing unit at Kattanarpatti village near Sivakasi that claimed 25 lives. The explosion was the worst since the 2012 Mudalipatti incident in which 40 workers died.

On April 13, one worker in a cracker unit was killed in an explosion at Thalaypatti in the same region. All those who were killed in the explosions belonged to poor families, with women constituting a majority of the victims. Earlier, on March 27, one worker was killed and two women injured in a fire accident reported at Natesh Fireworks at Viswanatham near Sivakasi.

The accidents paint a worrying picture about the lack of safe working conditions in this industry which relies on the use of hazardous chemicals. But in Virudhunagar district, where agriculture is not viable owing to topography, the fireworks sector ends up being the only practical choice for thousands who are willing to gamble their safety to put food on the table for their families.

"Accidents are becoming frequent and hundreds die every year. About 644 people have lost their lives over the past decade," says A Vijayakumar, social activist and director of

Human Resource Foundation, a Sivakasi-based non-profit. "If the firecracker industry were to collapse, transitioning workers to a different industry would not be easy. We need to protect the firecracker industry while ensuring that safety measures are strictly followed."

He says the key is to crack down on illegal units. Even if such activity has decreased, he highlights the need for stringent checks. This too, he adds, is a challenge as a single official is expected to oversee 450 factories, when inspecting even one or two a day is a task.

"When a worker dies, they just stuff the body into a sack," he alleges. "The victim isn't even treated with dignity. There are companies that run as many as 27 entities and don't have a single doctor on call, no ambulance on site, or adequate safety measures. Illegal practices are going on. Recently, 26 people died and only ₹1 lakh was given to them. Nothing else was done."

In this environment, he says, it is important for Sivakasi's firecracker enterprises to step up and draw from the culture that exists in industrial hubs like Coimbatore and Tiruppur where companies provide a lot of services and benefits to workers.

As he poignantly says, "There is no Sivakasi without the firecracker industry," and that's all the more reason for the Tamil Nadu government to see what it can do to enable this segment to move from being "Kutty Japan" to a challenger for China.

ISSUES GALORE

Export challenges are a major concern. The industry, which once exported substantial quantities of fireworks to several countries, has witnessed a sharp decline in overseas shipments over the past two decades.

"About 18 years ago, India's fireworks exports were significant. Today, it is increasingly difficult to get shipping containers and cargo space. Small consignments from India often struggle to find transportation while

with various ministries and regulatory authorities are on.

THE BIG BANG

Sivakasi came into the spotlight earlier this month when minister Keerthana proposed a policy reform to formalise the sector, address worker safety and tackle structural gaps.

"Health and safety, here and in every country our products reach, must always come first," Keerthana told ET. "We will not take any shortcuts. Our answer is innovation rather than compromise. Our government plans to invest seriously in research."

She says progress will not just be measured by export figures: "To upgrade the industry while leaving women at the lowest rung would be no progress at all." So success will be measured by a different parameter as well: "It will be when the light Sivakasi sends across the world finally returns as dignity, safety and fair wages to the women whose hands have been making it all along. That is the promise, and our government intends to keep it," says Keerthana.

The future of Sivakasi's fireworks industry and its workers will ultimately depend on whether the government can walk the talk.

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Where are the Unicorns of 2021?

Apoorva Mittal

In 2021, a year after Covid upended the world, 39 Indian startups became unicorns, valued at \$1 billion or more. These included Cred, Meesho, Groww, Cult.fit and many others that have become household names.

Five years ago, a zero-interest-rate policy and a flood of venture capital changed India's startup landscape.

Now, in the middle of geopolitical shocks, pullback of major investors and the rapid rise of generative AI, where are the unicorns of 2021?

Cred has famously raised a \$900 million investment from Meta. Some others have listed or are preparing for an IPO, a few have reset their ambitions and others are still grappling with the excesses of that boom year.

Here's a look at some of the startups from the batch of 2021:

COMPANY	CURRENT STATUS
CREG , Credit card repayment app	Has raised a \$900 mn investment from Meta at a \$4.5 bn valuation; founder Kunal Shah is global CEO of WhatsApp
INFRA.MARKET , Online marketplace for construction materials	Preparing for a pre-IPO round after a Sebi nod for a ₹5,000 cr IPO in Jan
MEESHO Ecommerce platform	Listed in Dec 2025; marked with a strong presence in small towns and a zero-commission model
DIGIT Digital insurance provider	Listed in May 2024 at a premium of 5% at ₹286, it is trading at ₹312.5 as of June 25, 2026
API HOLDINGS , Parent of online pharmacy Pharmeasy	Valuations plummeted by 90% in 2024 from a high of \$5.6 bn in 2021; most of the founders have left
GROWW Broking firm	Listed in Nov last year, it is trading nearly 75% above its listing price
MOHALLA TECH , Parent company of Sharechat and short-video platform Moj	Moj and Mx Takatak merged in 2022; the parent company's revenue was almost flat in FY25 and FY24
GUPSHUP Conversational messaging platform	Fidelity Investments has marked down the value of its investment in the startup by over 80%. In FY25, its India unit reported a 5% drop in revenue and a 52% fall in net profit
URBAN COMPANY On-demand home services provider	Listed in 2025. Reported a 57-fold jump in net loss in FY26Q4 as it ramped up spending on the on-demand domestic help segment
OFBUSINESS , B2B ecommerce platform	Preparing for a public listing. Valuation jumped from \$1.5 bn to \$5 bn in 2021. FY25 profit: ₹597 cr
BHARATPE , Online payment and credit	Faced multiple controversies, including allegations against founder. None of the three founders are with the company
UPGRAD , Upskilling platform	Has filed an application for its acquisition of Unacademy; FY25 losses were ₹273.7 cr
COINDCX , crypto exchange	Profit of its India arm Neblio Technologies was ₹17.2 cr in FY25
COINSWITCH Crypto exchange	Parent company launched Lemonn in 2024 and ventured into stock broking
GROFERS (Now Blinkit), Quick commerce	Acquired by Zomato for ₹4,477 cr in 2022. Blinkit is the market leader in qcommerce and a key growth engine for Eternal
ZETWERK , Contract manufacturer	Has filed draft IPO papers FY25 losses: ₹370.7 cr
ACKO , Insurance company	Preparing for listing this year; FY25 losses: ₹424.4 cr
CULT.FIT Wellness platform	Preparing for IPO
BRND.ME , Consumer brand aggregator	Preparing for IPO, FY25 losses: ₹255.8 cr
THE GOOD GLAMM GROUP House of brands	Restructuring attempts failed in 2025, lenders enforced their charge, leading to a brand-by-brand sale
MOBILE PREMIER LEAGUE , Mobile gaming company	After the ban on paid games in 2025, it halted all money-based games in India, which accounted for 50% of its revenue
APNA.CO , Networking and job search platform	Launched BlueMachines.ai, an enterprise voice AI platform. FY25 losses were ₹50.2 cr; revenue was nearly flat at ₹144 cr
VEDANTU , Tutor for K-12 students	Is expanding offline and is preparing for an IPO. Its losses fell and revenue climbed in FY25
LICIOUS , Retailer of meat products	Has expanded to offline retail and is scaling its 30-minute delivery. Net loss in FY25: ₹218.3 cr
ERUDITUS , Online executive education provider	Its losses doubled to \$171 mn in FY25. Is expanding partnerships to bring foreign universities to India
REBEL FOODS , Chain of internet restaurants	Shut down its quick delivery venture; is preparing for public listing. FY25 losses: ₹336.6 cr
SLICE , Small finance bank	Expanding banking operations after merger with North East SFB. Renamed Slice SFB, swung to a net profit of ₹48.4 cr in FY26 from a ₹216.7 cr net loss in FY25. In talks to raise \$50-100 mn
SPINNY , Used car marketplace	Reported to have hired banks for an IPO this year. FY25 losses: ₹423.8 cr
PRISTYN CARE , Healthtech company	Has faced allegations like promoting unnecessary surgeries and medical negligence. Loss of parent company in FY24: ₹381.1 cr

Note: Financials sourced through Tracxn; Source: Tracxn, ET, news reports

THE MORNING BRIEF PODCAST

CAN SIVAKASI GO GLOBAL?

The Vijay gov't wants Sivakasi to challenge China in the global fireworks market, but there are huge hurdles

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

Art of Coming Together

A host of new art collectives have sprung up, tapping into roots and identities—from Yusmarg Collective that was formed in Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370, to artists archiving the Eastern Himalayas, to a group of indigenous artists who want to claim their rightful space, to a collaboration of female visual artists. They are not just making art but building solidarities and knowledge networks

Nupur Amarnath

Praveen Chettri, a Kalimpong-based photographer, has been rifling through old family albums and institutional archives to create a visual history of his region. He is a founding member of The Confluence Collective (TCC), which is digitising photographs from the Eastern Himalayas. “We have collected and digitised around 20,000 images sourced from families, schools and local collections,” says Chettri. “We are building it for the people in the region who want to understand and work with their histories.” TCC is a group of seven artists and researchers, spread across Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim, who got together in the middle of the pandemic in 2020.

Collectives have transformed Indian art—from the Bengal School of Art to Progressive Artists’ Group to the Cholamandal Artists’ Village. The well-known ones were mostly collaborations of male artists who came together around a shared aesthetic or vision. And they often sprang up in major cities or around art schools.

However, some of the new collectives such as TCC are emerging from geographical margins—Kashmir, Kalimpong, Assam. Even the groupings in metros like Mumbai and Bengaluru are bringing together the marginalised—from artists practising indigenous art forms to female and queer artists. Their concerns do not begin and end with the production of art. They function as archives, support systems, advocacy platforms and even communities of care in broken lands.

DRAWING ON COLLECTIVE POWER

Yusmarg Collective Kashmir in Charar-e-Sharief is a support system for local talent, while Srinagar’s Her Pixel Story is a women-led photography collective. Sandbox Collective in Bengaluru works with women and gender and sexual minorities while Maraa in the city examines questions of caste, gender, migration and labour.

Anga Art Collective is an artist-led initiative run from a bamboo structure called The Granary in the Rani Reserve Forest near Guwahati. Kadak Collective brings together South Asian women and non-binary and queer folk who are working with graphic storytelling. In Mumbai, Indian Arts Collective (IAC) seeks to reposition traditional and indigenous practitioners as artists rather than craftspeople. And nine women working with the visual medium, who bonded over an 8:30

INDIAN ARTS COLLECTIVE

MUMBAI
It has traditional and indigenous artists who work in art forms such as Gond, Pattachitra, Phad and Mata ni Pachedi. It seeks to reposition them as artists rather than craftspeople

One of our biggest challenges is getting people to see these practitioners as artists. We want to present their work in a gallery, with the same seriousness as contemporary art”
ANU CHOWDHURY-SORABJEE, founding partner



For years, we have played with the meaning of AI: many call it artificial intelligence, some say it is augmented intelligence or alternative intelligence. A few have stretched it further, comparing it with animal intelligence, especially the mysterious distributed intelligence of octopuses. But perhaps the most revealing phrase is an older one: ambient intelligence.

That term can be traced to the late 1990s, when Eli Zelkha and his colleagues at Palo Alto Ventures used it in work linked to Philips Research. The vision was of technology so embedded in daily life that it would almost disappear into the environment like air or oxygen. It would be responsive, context-aware, adaptive and quietly present.

At the time, it sounded like a future of smart homes, connected appliances and ubiquitous sensors. Today, however, with generative AI, smart glasses, rings, cameras, microphones, wearables and agents, that old dream has returned with a more powerful brain.

A few weeks ago, at the Google I/O developer conference, ambient intelligence stopped being a research phrase and became

India has always had collectives. What we are seeing today are new concerns—gender, ecology, sustainability and community. The role of collectives today is not simply to create art. They sensitise the public, build awareness and create communities around issues that matter”
Dr ALKA PANDE, art historian and curator

pm Zoom call every week during the pandemic, have turned their friendship into a collective called just that—8:30.

Alka Pande, art historian, author and curator, says collectives have always been part of the Indian artscape, dating back to the pre-modern era when weavers, jewellers and ironsmiths worked within community-based systems. “With modernity and the rise of the individual artist, those collective ways of working began to fade. The signature became important. What we are seeing today is, in some ways, a return to collective thinking,” she says. What has changed are the concerns—gender, identity, ecology, community—issues that cannot be tackled alone. “The scope of the collectives now is not simply to create art. Their most important function is to sensitise the public,” she adds.

Jaya Asokan, fair director of India Art Fair, sees a broader shift in how artists want to work today. “Increasingly, artists are looking beyond individual practice towards models built around collaboration, shared resources and collective forms of knowledge-making. This is partly a response to the realities of our time—economic pressures, the need for interdisciplinary exchange and a desire to engage more meaningfully with communities and place,” she says.

SPACE FOR DIALOGUE

A case in point is the Yusmarg Collective Kashmir. It was conceived in 2019, after the abrogation of Article 370, and came of age during the pandemic. For visual practitioner and founder Salman Bashir Baba, the circumstances created a need for artists to find each other. “There was a void. People didn’t have any space for dialogue,” he says. What emerged was not a conventional collective. It held workshops and exhibitions, but its greatest achievement is less tangible. “A collective is a space for artists to come together, share concerns and anxieties and support one another. In difficult times, when people feel isolated or depressed, community itself becomes a source of hope,” he says. “A collective creates a circle of care and comfort.”

They also help students from the Valley navigate art courses and opportunities. “The art scene can be very intimidating for a young artist, especially from Kashmir,” says Baba. In July, Yusmarg starts a residency pilot. A physical arts space with a library is also in the works.

Asokan says residency programmes, grant-making bodies and cultural organisations are increasingly recognising collective practice. “Collaborative practices once had limited institutional visibility. But now there is a greater willingness to support artist-led collectives. This has encouraged more artists to build shared platforms,” she says.

In Assam, Anga Art Collective engages with local knowledge systems, ecology and the social realities of the Northeast through research, exhibitions and public programmes. “Our inspiration to work as a collective comes from the society we grew up in,” says founding member, artist and filmmaker Dhruvajit Sarma. “This is not just a platform for exhibiting art, but a space for learning, questioning existing knowledge systems and developing practices that emerge from the place we inhabit.”

A similar impulse drives Maraa, founded by people dis-

OMNISCIENT MACHINE

Thus far, the internet waited for your intention. You opened a browser; typed a query, clicked a link, opened an app, made a choice. AI is shifting from intention to anticipation: it wants to see what you see, hear what you hear, remember useful context, understand your calendar; read your email, watch your screen, know your location and act before you have fully formed the question. This is what makes it ambient.

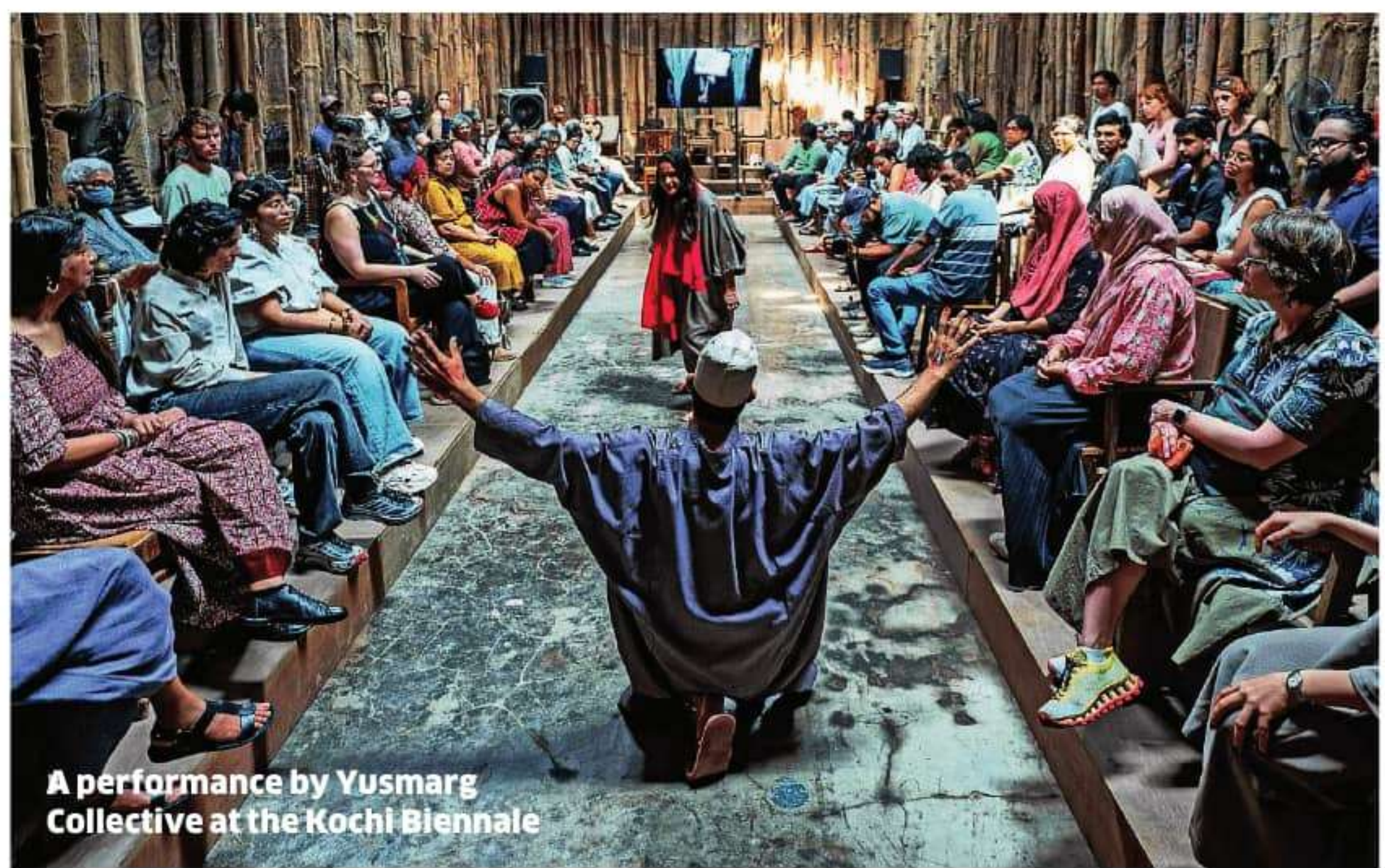
AI will not merely live inside a chatbot tab, but lurk in the spectacles on your face, the ring on your finger, the phone in your pocket, the camera at your door, the speaker in your living room, the dashboard in your car and the search bar through which you un-



8:30 COLLECTIVE

During Covid, nine women working with the visual medium would have a weekly 8:30 pm Zoom call. That has now become a collective that just held their first exhibition

What really binds us is showing up for each other. We share work, opportunities and resources, but we also talk about life”
ZAHRA AMIRUDDIN, member



YUSMARG COLLECTIVE KASHMIR

CHARAR-E-SHARIEF, J&K
Formed after the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, it is a space for artists and cultural practitioners to gather, exchange ideas and build networks of dialogue and artistic solidarity

It is a circle of care and comfort. It gives artists a space to come together, share concerns and support one another. When people feel isolated, community becomes a source of hope”
SALMAN BASHIR BABA, founder

lusioned with the hierarchies in the development sector. For nearly two decades, it has used storytelling to challenge narratives. It hosts an arts festival, October Jam, in Bengaluru and has co-founded an inter-generational theatre troupe, Freeda, in Madhya Pradesh. Says member Angarika: “Art and storytelling are ways for people to speak in their own voices, challenge dominant narratives and imagine alternatives.”

If earlier generations of artists’ groups were united by manifestos, today’s collectives are just as likely to be united by emotional solidarity. Like 8:30 Collective. They had got together to produce a zine, which didn’t happen. What emerged instead was far more enduring—friendship. In March, they held their first exhibition, “Interior Weather,” at Dilip Piramal Art Gallery, NCPA, Mumbai.

Photographer and writer Zahra Amiruddin says 8:30 is a space where they share work, resources, opportunities and life itself. The collective has organised fundraisers, exhibitions, and residencies with photographer Dayanita Singh. “The art world can often be an isolated and competitive space. A collective helps as we aren’t afraid to share our resources and advice. Over time we almost serve as one another’s agents,” says Amiruddin. “Competition is the antithesis of a collective.”

Photography can be a lonely profession—and that is why collectives matter, says Tejal Pandey, head, Dilip Piramal Art Gallery. “Artists need a creative space for conversations where ideas find root and take flight.” She points to 8:30 as a resonant example—artists who organically sought out each other when isolation and loneliness were peaking. “What they created was a safe space to nurture their art, while also nurturing friendship, sisterhood and companionship.” Her gallery has lined up shows by collectives in the coming months.

Collectives now have a very defined purpose, says Anu Chowdhury-Sorabjee, art historian and founding partner of IAC. Founded in 2017, IAC brings together practitioners working in traditional and indigenous art forms like Gond, Pattachitra, Phad and Mata ni Pachedi. It challenges the longstanding distinction between art and craft. “The objective is to bring traditional artists into a gallery space through an annual exhibition where they are appreciated and viewed at par with contemporary artists,” she says.

MANY CHALLENGES

Yet, for all their idealism, collectives face real challenges. Funding is the most persistent. Many are self-funded, others rely on grants, crowdfunding, teaching, or contributions. Members routinely juggle multiple jobs.

Kulture Shop, a Mumbai-based platform that championed graphic artists, ran for 10 years before taking its last order in July 2024. Arjun Charanjiva had built it to create an affordable art movement, but there were many challenges, the biggest being that there was no established market for graphic art. “We had to help create the art, build collections, explain it to customers and build an audience. That was the price of being early.” The store-led model was working but Covid disrupted it.

He says, “An art collective cannot rely only on cultural energy. It needs a resilient economic model, multiple revenue streams and enough capital to survive shocks.” He adds, “Protect the artists but also protect the business model. If the platform is not sustainable, it cannot support anyone for long.” Pande agrees: “The work is extraordinary, but these are not always market-friendly subjects. Meaningful work alone cannot sustain a

ANGA ART COLLECTIVE

ASSAM
It creates spaces where artists, researchers and communities can think together and generate alternatives to metropolitan and institution-driven models of art practice

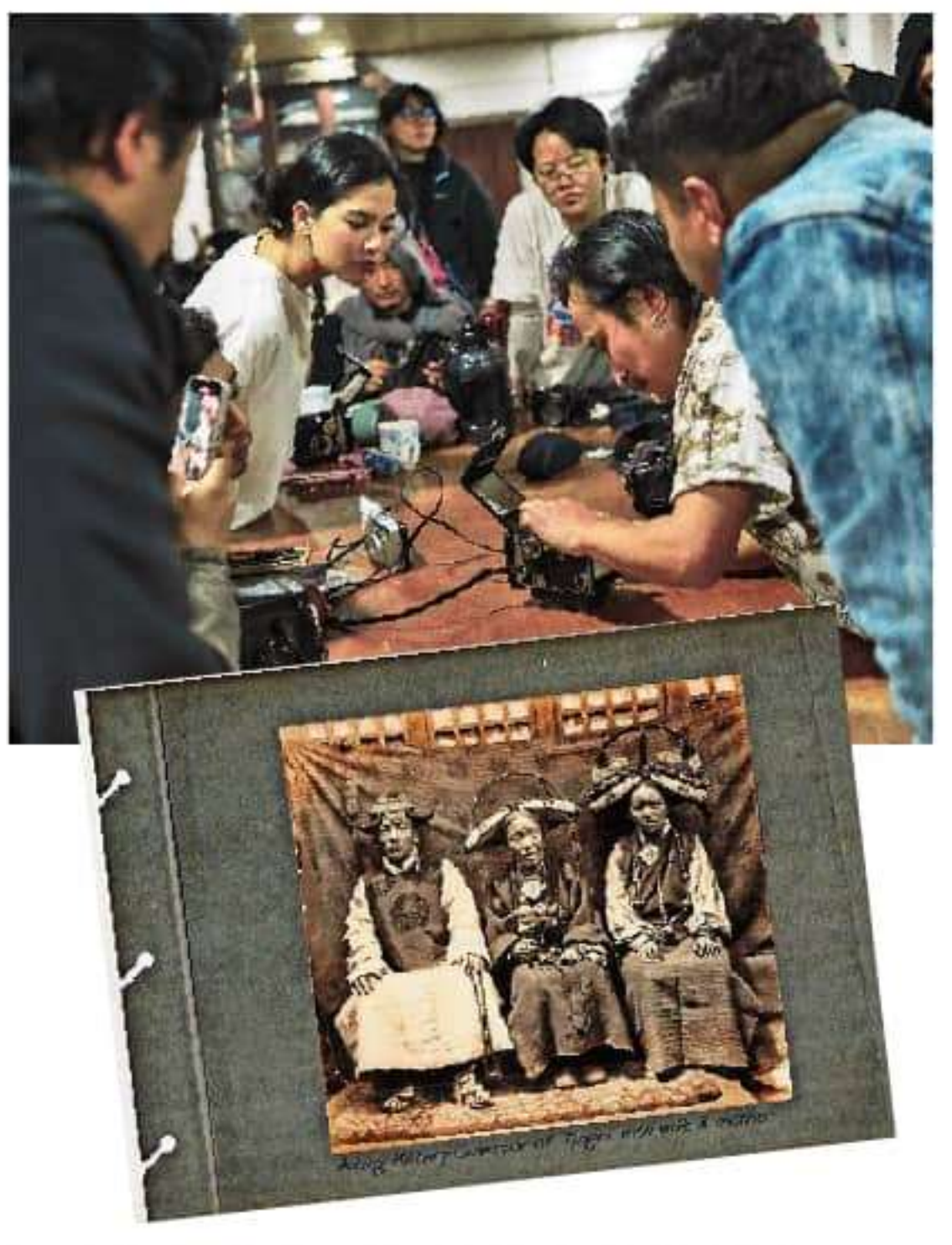
We want to understand how indigenous philosophies and community practices can guide us at a time when everything seems to be collapsing”
DHRUVAJIT SARMA, founding member



MARAA

BENGALURU
Uses art, media and storytelling to examine questions of caste, gender, migration, labour and representation

Art is a way for people to speak in their own voices, challenge dominant narratives and imagine alternatives”
ANGARIKA, member



THE CONFLUENCE COLLECTIVE

DARJEELING-KALIMPONG-SIKKIM
It documents the visual histories of the Eastern Himalayan region. Through archiving, digitisation and research, it reclaims local narratives and creates resources

We are building an archive for the region—one that helps people understand their histories, identities and place in the world”
PRAVEEN CHETTRI, founding member

collective forever.” Asokan underlines a significant development in recent years—the growing visibility of artistic communities outside the metros. “As collectives rooted in specific regions respond directly to local histories, languages, ecologies and social contexts, this geographic decentralisation is making the Indian art ecosystem richer and more representative,” she says. Even IAF launched IAF EDI+IONS last year to expand beyond Delhi.

Angarika says collectives are needed to democratise access and create safe spaces: “The political climate today is increasingly pushing towards homogenisation. Our work is really about finding ways to pluralise those narratives.” For Sarma, working from Assam is about remaining accountable to the context in which the collective is rooted. “Our practice grows from interactions with people, histories and ecologies here, rather than responding to expectations of the mainstream art world,” he says.

Back in Kalimpong, Chettri remains unconcerned by conventional measures of impact. “For many people, an outcome has to be a book or an exhibition. For us, the act of archiving is itself an outcome.” Researchers use it. Communities engage with it.

He says: “We often assume that a collective has to look and function a certain way, probably inspired by a western model. In reality, your context should define your collective.”

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The Revolt Against AI

As AI becomes ambient, pervasive, people’s resistance to it will also intensify



a consumer product strategy. Google announced an AI-heavy overhaul of Search, deeper Gemini integration, information agents and intelligent eyewear through partnerships, including with Samsung, Warby Parker and Gentle Monster. Its new glasses promise directions, messaging, photos and Gemini-powered assistance. Search itself is changing from a box you type into, to a system that can plan, research and act.

understand the world. In some sense, we have been traipsing toward this for years. Nest tried to make the home responsive. Alexa and Google Assistant brought voice into the living room. Ring doorbells and home cameras turned neighbourhoods into semi-private surveillance grids.

Fitness trackers, smartwatches and health rings began collecting the body’s signals, as we aspired to become our “quantified self”. Humane’s AI Pin tried, unsuccessfully, to turn AI into a wearable companion. Many others are walking that path, and a successful one has been Meta’s Ray-Ban glasses where they smuggled intelligence into a familiar social object. The device looks like eyewear, but the function is ambient capture.

What generative AI changes is that all this ambient data becomes intelligible. Earlier, a microphone heard sound, a camera saw

pixels, a watch counted steps. Now the model can use these signals to interpret the world around you. It can summarise a meeting, name an object, translate a sign, recognise a face, infer a mood, remember a preference and suggest an action. This ambient data of your surroundings becomes the fuel for intelligence.

AI & ANXIETY

This is both magical and unsettling. Magical because ambient AI could be genuinely useful: A visually impaired person could navigate a street, an elderly parent could receive unobtrusive help, a student could have a tutor that understands the page in front of her, or a traveller in Tokyo could read signs and hear translations. Like Sanjaya in the Mahabharata, AI could become the seer who narrates the distant battlefield in real time.

But Sanjaya was a trusted retainer of Dhritrashtra. The same cannot be said of our ambient AI.

It will be built by Big Tech like Google or Meta, trained on our data, monetised through business models we barely understand, and governed by flimsy guardrails that substantially lag the technology.

The camera on someone’s glasses does not ask for permission before it sees a person nor does a meeting recorder always know who has consented. Amazon’s Ring cameras already raised questions about neighbourhood surveillance and non-consensual recording. Ambient AI will only

magnify those anxieties. This is why resistance to AI will intensify. In the early days of Google Glass, people wearing them were called “glassholes”, with some humour, and a lot of derision.

WHAT HAPPENS TO HUMAN AGENCY?

We are already seeing resistance to data centres—their energy use, water consumption, land demands and environmental footprint. Those data centres are the visible temples of AI. So will be the symbols of ambient intelligence—the rings, glasses and pendants. People may accept AI that answers a question, but will resist AI that hovers around them.

It won’t be as much about privacy, but a deeper issue: of agency.

When an AI answers a prompt, the human remains the initiator. When ambient AI anticipates, nudges and recommends, the balance shifts to the technology. It shapes not only my attention, but my intention. So the fear will not merely be that AI will take away human faculties, but that it may quietly take away human agency. Ambient AI may begin to resemble a technological god. Omnipresent, always around us; omniscient, remembering and knowing everything; and seemingly omnipotent, able to act across our digital lives. But gods inspire devotion and fear in equal measure and they demand rituals, sacrifices and surrender.

The smartphone demanded our attention; ambient AI might demand surrender.


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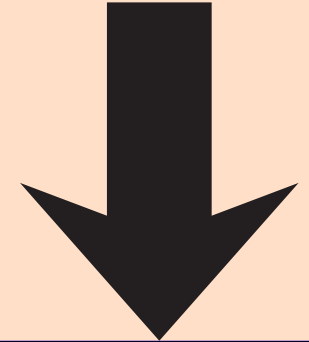
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REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

The Manika Batra dispute is not only about her

The point isn't necessarily that Batra has been wronged in being left out of India's squad for the Asian Games in Japan. The point is that the federation's history has made such suspicions entirely predictable

Institutions, like individuals, acquire reputations. Some earn trust through consistency and transparency. Others spend years accumulating controversy. The Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI) has struggled to escape the latter characterisation. Across administrations, personalities and factions, the federation has repeatedly found itself in courtrooms, embroiled in internal disputes, subject to inquiries and, at one recent point, placed under a Committee of Administrators. The details have varied, but the public reading of the institution has remained remarkably consistent. It is against this backdrop that the latest controversy involving player Manika Batra must be understood.

The immediate issue concerns Batra's exclusion from India's table tennis squad (though she is in the reserve list) for the 2026 Asian Games to be held in Aichi and Nagoya, Japan, from September 19 to October 4. Initially, she wanted to seek judicial intervention, but has now decided "put the sword down" after being left "mentally exhausted" by the fight; Batra, though, has alleged violation of the federation's constitution which threatens to turn what would have been a routine selection dispute into a wider con-

versation about credibility and trust.

On paper, the matter appears straightforward. The selection criteria relied on a weighted combination of domestic and international performances translated into points. By that metric, Batra reportedly fell short of the qualifying threshold by three points. Ordinarily, that would have settled the matter. But then, normalcy has rarely been the defining characteristic of Indian table tennis administration.

The reason this controversy refuses to disappear is that Batra is not merely another player seeking selection. She is India's most accomplished international table tennis player of the modern era, the face of the sport for an entire generation and arguably the country's strongest medal prospect in major international competitions. Her victories over highly ranked Chinese players, her performances at the Commonwealth Games and continental events, and her ability to deliver under pressure have earned her a reputation beyond rankings and spreadsheets. Several former players who I spoke with and close observers of the sport continue to regard her as India's best medal hope despite the outcome of the selection process. One may agree or disagree with that assessment, but it cannot simply be dismissed.

Naturally, therefore, the debate is not about whether Batra is good enough to represent India. She clearly is. Nor is it about whether a points-based system should exist. Objective criteria are necessary in any selection process. The real question is whether a rigid interpretation of those criteria serves the broader purpose for which they were created. This brings us to the role of the selec-

tion committee. If selection were a purely mechanical exercise, there would be little need for selectors. A spreadsheet or, in today's world, an Artificial Intelligence programme could calculate the rankings, assign the points, and announce the squad. However, every serious sporting system continues to rely on selectors, many of them former players. Why? Because sport cannot be reduced to arithmetic. Form, experience, fitness, temperament, opposition and context, all matter. The very existence of a selection committee acknowledges that judgement has a role to play alongside measurable performance.

But here lies the catch. Judgement inevitably involves discretion and discretion inevitably requires trust. The issue, therefore, is not whether discretion exists. The issue is whether those entrusted with exercising it command sufficient confidence for their decisions to be accepted without controversy.

The answer, in my humble view, lies not in Batra's present but in the federation's past. To fully grasp the current controversy, one must get a glimpse of the history of Indian table tennis administration. For decades, the sport has been burdened by controversies that have little to do with table tennis and everything to do with administration. The problem is not opacity alone. It is also institutional imagination. *Chak De! India* captured this brilliantly through an administrator who could not conceive of the women's hockey national team as a contender and, therefore, saw little reason to think seriously about its prospects. Institutions that stop believing in excellence are more likely to be preoccupied with procedure and internal politics. The player ceases to be the purpose



Rajat Kathuria



The debate is not about whether Batra is good enough to represent India. She clearly is. The real question is whether a rigid interpretation of those criteria serves the broader purpose for which they were created.

GETTY IMAGES

and, unfortunately, I feel this has haunted more than one Indian sports federation.

The nadir for TTFI came in 2022 when the Delhi High Court appointed a Committee of Administrators under Justice Gita Mittal to oversee the federation's affairs. Such intervention is usually a sign of serious problems. The episode naturally colours how players and observers alike interpret the federation's decisions even today.

No one disputes the federation's right to establish selection criteria. Nor does anyone dispute the importance of objective standards. The question is whether, in this particular case, the rules have merely been applied or whether they have become a convenient instrument through which a predetermined outcome has been achieved.

Batra's own history with the federation is also worth recalling. In 2021, she publicly challenged the federation and the national coaching establishment, raising questions about coaching arrangements and governance practices. The dispute escalated into a legal battle, attracted national attention and became part of the sequence of events that eventually brought greater judicial scrutiny

upon the federation itself. Whether one agreed with her position or not, the episode established that Batra was willing to challenge authority when she believed something was amiss. Thus, her relationship with TTFI had become strained long before the present selection controversy emerged.

It is, therefore, relevant to conduct a simple thought experiment. Had Batra enjoyed a warm relationship with the federation, in other words, had she not challenged authority, not approached the courts and never publicly questioned administrative decisions, would the same outcome have followed? Stated differently, had she been subservient would the same outcome have occurred? No one can answer that question with certainty. But the fact that so many informed observers are asking it speaks volumes about the credibility of the institution itself.

The point isn't necessarily that Batra has been wronged. The point is that the federation's history has made such suspicions entirely predictable. Institutions spend years building trust and only a few moments squandering it. When institutions enjoy

credibility, discretion is accepted even when outcomes are unpopular. When institutions suffer from a credibility deficit, every exercise of discretion becomes suspect, generating allegations of favouritism.

The Batra controversy is, therefore, not about three ranking points. It is about three ranking points being asked to carry the weight of years of institutional baggage. Until that baggage is confronted rather than merely managed, controversies will come and go along with office bearers and court cases. The names will change as might the headlines. The questions, unfortunately, might remain the same. As maestro Mirza Ghalib noted, "*Bazicha-e-atfal hai duniya mire aage, Hota hai shab-o-roz tamasha mire aage.*" (The world before me is but a children's playground; day and night the same spectacle unfolds before my eyes.)

Kathuria is pro-VC and dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and professor of economics at Shiv Nadar University. He represented India in table tennis and has been a national selector. The views expressed are personal.

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Windfall for Pakistan from the peace deal

I was asked an intriguing question the other day that set me thinking. To be honest, I'm not sure if it wasn't intended as a joke or, perhaps, to provoke. But it raised an issue that I had not up till then considered. Could Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and, possibly, the country's chief of defence forces, Field Marshal Asim Munir, be serious contenders for this year's Nobel Peace Prize?

At the moment, I would question the word "serious", but contenders they could well be. It all depends on whether the Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding holds and, more critically, leads to a credible and lasting peace deal.

If either were to happen, they would be serious contenders. Of that, I have little doubt. Whether they get the prize is, of course, another matter.

We in India tend to dismiss Sharif and Munir as messengers, not mediators. That's unfair. The understanding that's been reached between Iran and the US, though

fragile and tenuous, would not have been possible without their intervention. They explained, encouraged and, perhaps even, cajoled. They also put a lot of effort into it. They weren't simply carriers of messages and information.

Let's, therefore, at this point, focus on the Memorandum of Understanding. The initial key concern is Lebanon. The 60-day ceasefire clearly covers the country. But Israel and Hezbollah continue to strike each other even though a ceasefire has been announced between them. Iran's foreign minister Abbas Araghchi said this is a clear breach of the deal and there is speculation that US-Iran talks failed to start on time because of the continuing fighting in Lebanon. So, could the deal still collapse? You can't really rule that out.

The second key issue is the Strait of Hormuz. Both America and Iran have lifted their respective blockades but this simply takes us back to the *status quo ante* of February 27. So, what sort of achievement is

that? It's more repair of the damage the war created than anything else. Second, after 60 days, Iran could start imposing fees. And, remember, Hormuz is now a weapon Iran can use again. It may.

Iran has no doubt pledged never to produce or acquire nuclear weapons, but that has been its established position for decades. More importantly, will it forego its right to enrich? I doubt it. And certainly, the memorandum does not insist that Iran must send its enriched uranium out of the country. Instead, it settles for down-blending within the country under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency. So, has Trump failed to get what he wants? It certainly looks like it.

That's also true of two other points. The memorandum doesn't mention Iran's ballistic missile capacity even though, in his February 28 speech, Trump insisted that it must be eliminated. Nor does it talk about Iran's support for what's called its proxies, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis don't feature in the memorandum. Once again, these are minus points for Donald Trump.

And don't even mention regime change. The Ayatollah-led government is intact and has survived. Which is why Trump is dealing with it. The memorandum is proof he's accepted that.

Yet, Iran has already been given sanction waivers to sell its oil and its possible source of its assets could be unfrozen during the negotiation period. There's also a \$300-billion reconstruction fund. Altogether, that's a lot of money for Iran. Trump's MAGA supporters don't like any of this.

WE IN INDIA TEND TO DISMISS SHARIF AND MUNIR AS MESSENGERS, NOT MEDIATORS. THAT'S UNFAIR. THE UNDERSTANDING THAT'S BEEN REACHED BETWEEN IRAN AND THE US, THOUGH FRAGILE AND TENUOUS, WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT THEIR INTERCESSION

They're already complaining.

America may object but, oddly enough, this could ensure that the memorandum sticks and some sort of deal could follow. If the Lebanon issue is adequately addressed, Iran has a vested interest in ensuring the memorandum succeeds. It gains substantially. And as for Trump's threat to restart bombing, it's not serious.

Sharif and Munir clearly did not intend this. But that's how it's worked out. If I were them, I wouldn't keep my fingers crossed. That would be premature. But they are entitled to a smile of satisfaction. In these circumstances to even be nominated — but fail to win — would be a feather in their topi.

Karan Thapar is the author of *Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story*. The views expressed are personal.

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



Iron injection boost to maternal health in UP

Reducing maternal mortality is the one area of women's health where the government has consistently done well. The latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data showed significant improvements, especially in states such as Uttar Pradesh. But maternal anaemia remains a challenge — one of the most significant threats to safe pregnancy and childbirth. This is why the government has strengthened its Anaemia Mukh Bharat initiative by expanding access to advanced intravenous iron therapies, including ferric carboxymaltose (FCM). The foundation of anaemia prevention has been iron-folic acid supplementation, but the ministry of health and family welfare now supports the use of intravenous iron preparations for pregnant women requiring rapid correction of haemoglobin levels. FCM allows a large dose to be administered safely in a single sitting.

According to NFHS-5, nearly 57% of women aged 15-49 years in India are anaemic, while in Uttar Pradesh, more than half the women of reproductive age continue to suffer from the condition which is taken lightly as there are no visible symptoms. During pregnancy, severe anaemia significantly increases the risk of postpartum haemorrhage (PPH), one of the leading causes of maternal deaths in India.

John Anthony, senior project director and lead, UP-Technical Support Unit says: "The government of Uttar Pradesh has demonstrated remarkable commitment and leadership in addressing maternal anaemia. The rollout of FCM has been particularly noteworthy, not only because of the speed with which it was implemented across districts, but also because of the meticulous planning and attention to detail at every stage."

Reinforcing this, Dr Shalu Gupta, joint director, DGFW explains, "Strengthening Hb testing, ensuring timely management of anaemia and systematically tracking high-risk pregnancies through the FCM approach

are helping the health system move from crisis response to early intervention. By identifying vulnerable women early and connecting them to appropriate care, it is helping save mothers from life-threatening complications before they reach the labour room."

Through mentorship, capacity-building and strengthened clinical protocols, health care providers are increasingly being equipped to identify women with moderate to severe anaemia and initiate timely treatment. The efficacy of this policy can be seen in Sitapur district, where decentralised FCM services were launched on April 28, 2026. The district expanded FCM availability beyond the District Women's Hospital and operationalised services across six First Referral Units (FRUs). The impact was immediate. Within just two months of rollout, more than 550 pregnant women diagnosed with moderate to severe anaemia received FCM therapy across these facilities.

For 22-year-old Kashmiri from Noorpur village of Sitapur, the intervention proved transformative. "My haemoglobin level was only 7 (g/dL). I often felt dizzy, and many times everything would go dark before my eyes. One month after receiving the FCM injection, my haemoglobin increased to 11.1 (g/dL). I feel much better." She went on to encourage other women like her to opt for this course of treatment.

Kashmi's experience reflects the potential of timely intervention and how empowered mothers can become advocates for healthier pregnancies within their own communities.

Through early detection, timely treatment and decentralised access to FCM, Uttar Pradesh is strengthening maternal health care. This offers a powerful example of how timely intervention can protect mothers, strengthen communities and bring India closer to its goal of ensuring safe motherhood for every woman.

The views expressed are personal

If only Afghan women were men, we'd care more

In an essay written years ago, I rhetorically claimed that certain illnesses do not get enough resources because they are gender-specific — women dying or ailing, because of endometriosis for example, do not matter; sexually insecure men do. In a different setting, this still stands true. If the Taliban behaved with men the way they do with women, all eyes would be on Afghanistan. Today, they stand normalised. The story has moved on.

The wreckage of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 keeps washing ashore, shards that refuse to settle in the depths of anonymity and indifference. They continue to prick. Like, a desolate email from an Afghan student to her professors in India. Or the video of a burqa-clad woman being whipped by a man for the crime of teaching girls in her house. Rising on the promise of peace, the Taliban has systematically erased women from the book of what-the-world-cares-for-and-acts-against.

A UK-based journalist of Afghan origin, Yalda Hakim, has been keeping a count of days on her X timeline. As of today, "Day 1,743 of Afghan women being denied the right to an education. 2.2 million women and girls have been affected and the world remains silent." As a matter of fact, the world, specifically the 'enlightened' West, is actively trying to send refugees back. It knows what awaits

them yet chooses not to care.

The latest EU-Taliban closed-door talks in Brussels is just another demonstration in the long history of apathy towards the victims of the Taliban. Domestic politics in Europe has succeeded in normalising the woman-hating Afghan government with this maiden invitation to Taliban officials. With a rising tide of hostilities against immigrants, European countries are keen to push them back into contexts that led to their immigration in the first place.

It has become *de rigueur* to accuse immigrants of seeking greener pastures in the West after allegedly destroying their own yard. Such criticism falls flat in the face of facts. In case of Afghanistan, the largest number of refugees — almost 90% of the total — are there in the neighbouring countries Iran and Pakistan. Under constant threat of violence and deportation, these refugees live under pitiable conditions, braving everyday insults as the necessary price to pay for displacement. Cusswords are better than public hangings. Iran alone deported about 1.5 million Afghans in 2025. So, if greener pastures mean bare survival, Afghan refugees are guilty.

But, let us talk about women. The US waged a war against Iran this year on the pretext of ensuring women's rights by overthrowing the Ayatollah government. It is only when the heat became too much



By treating the Taliban as the true sons of the Afghan soil, most countries, including India, have condemned the daughters of the same soil.

to bear for Europe that it started critiquing the US-Israeli adventurism. A similar war was waged by the US against Afghanistan decades ago. It has ended up condemning Afghan women further by rendering them vulnerable to an empowered, emboldened, and now accepted Taliban. In the past five years, women have been punished for asking not to be treated as chattels. Taliban's crackdown on women's education, health, and any other marker of agency has evidenced a kind of vengeance that's not uncommon but rarely unresisted.

Establishing relations with a government in the name of pragmatism may be a necessity that will weigh heavy on any establishment's conscience. By treating

the Taliban as the true sons of the Afghan soil, most countries, including India, have condemned the daughters of the same soil to torture and hopelessness. Internal matters of a country are best left to the people of that country. But what happens when an apartheid regime doesn't allow half the population to even breathe? Modern diplomacy doesn't care, nor should it, for moral absolutism. What, then, is the way forward for at least three generations of women languishing under the oppressive and discriminatory rule of the Taliban?

At this moment, Europe has a lot of soul searching to do. And so does everyone who has moved on from the story.

The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

The streets of flavours & essence

This is with reference to "Street food as theatre stages its own reality" by Abhishek Asthana (June 21). Indian street food exceeds mere cookery, representing a vibrant union of culinary artistry, and urban ethos. Amid sizzling woks and bustling crowds, cooking evolves into a spectacle that captures today's India.

Aditya Shekhar

Drinking in a democracy

This is with reference to "To drink or not, is the question of choice" by Karan Thapar (June 21). Adults should have the right to consume alcohol responsibly, but locals deserve a say in policies that affect them. In democracies, governance must respect the majority, and not violate basic rights.

Sanjay Chopra

Give homemakers monthly honorarium

This is with reference to "Nation builders? No just, unpaid women workers" by Namita Bhandare (June 21). Giving an acronym to homemakers is Scant. Patriarchal society must change their mindset & make them financially free.

Abhilasha Gupta

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Well Being

SUNDAY, JUNE 28, 2026



GLOBAL GUIDELINES

The World Health Organization released a consolidated guidance and implementation handbook on hepatitis B and C, to provide clear operational guidance in one place to translate normative recommendations into action

How to prevent the transmission of the contagious liver infection amid the rainy season

SREYA DEB

COME MONSOON, AND the risk of catching fever, food poisoning or jaundice rises. While the rainy season is known to bring welcome relief from the scorching summer heat, it is also associated with humidity, stagnant water and unsafe water supplies, all of which can contribute to hepatitis A. Caused by the hepatitis A virus, the highly contagious liver infection is known to spread most commonly through the faeco-oral route. It is, therefore, essential to understand the nature of the virus, and the risks associated with the endemic disease.

Health concern

Hepatitis A remains an important public health problem in India, says Dr Neeraj Saraf, senior director, gastroenterology, hepatology, gastro sciences, and liver transplant at Medanta in Gurugram. "Traditionally, most Indians were exposed during childhood and developed natural immunity. However, India is now transitioning from high to intermediate endemicity, particularly in urban and semi-urban regions," he explains. "Transmission occurs primarily through the faeco-oral route via contaminated food or water and through close person-to-person contact. Poor sanitation, overcrowding, unsafe drinking water, and inadequate sewage disposal continue to facilitate spread."

"As more individuals reach adolescence and adulthood without prior exposure or vaccination, the potential for larger outbreaks may increase," he says. "Hepatitis A remains one of the most common causes of acute viral hepatitis in India," says Dr Jatin Ahuja, consultant, infectious disease, Indraprastha Apollo Hospital, Delhi. "While improvements in sanitation and access to clean drinking water have reduced the burden in many urban areas, outbreaks continue to occur periodically, particularly in regions where water contamination and poor sanitation remain concerns," he adds.

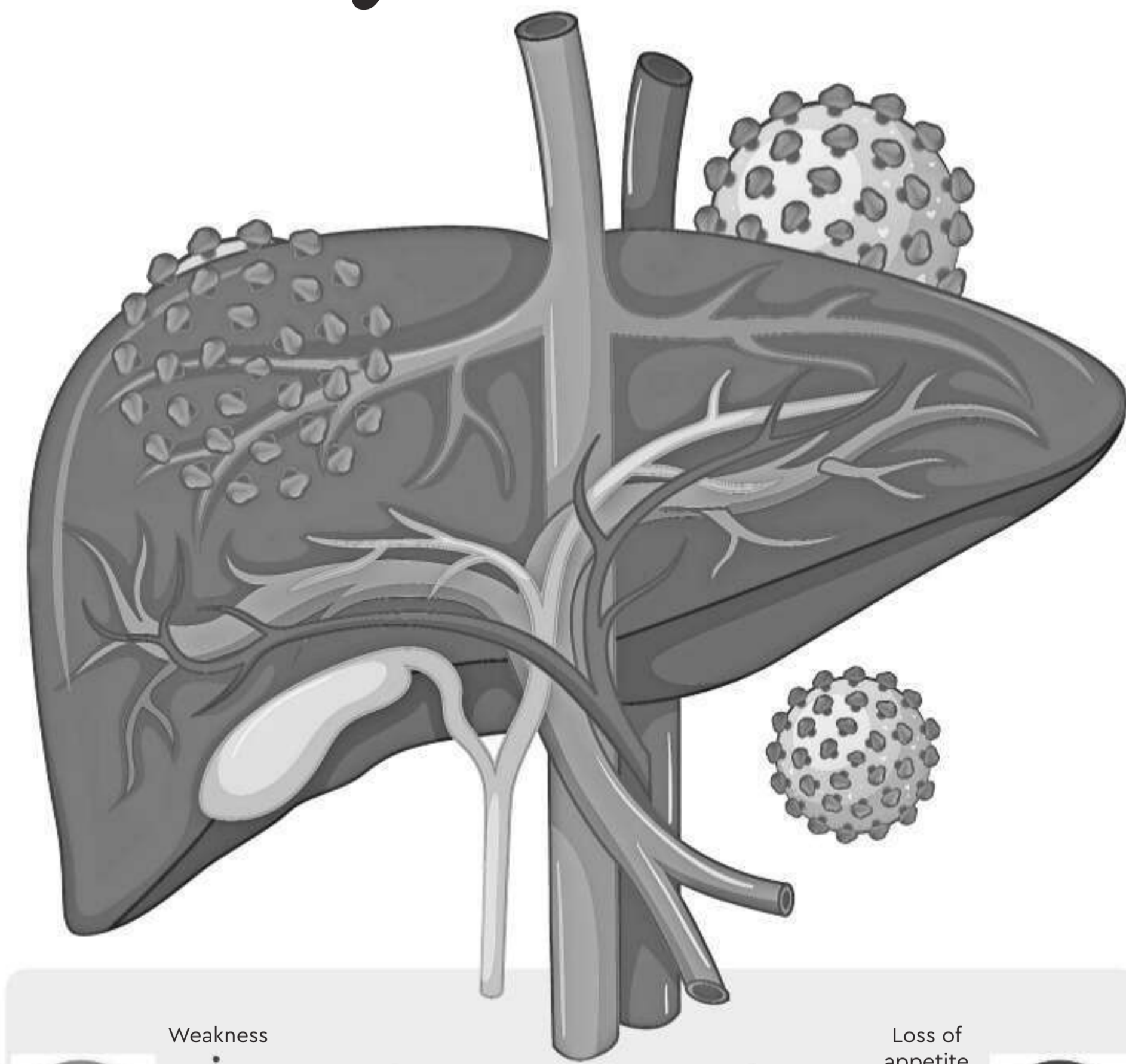
Dr Sarath Gopalan, lead consultant, pediatric hepatologist and gastroenterologist at Madhukar Rainbow Children's Hospital, Delhi, further explains, "Hepatitis A causes the liver to develop inflammation, and as a result, the liver cannot perform its normal functions of metabolism and detoxification while it is inflamed."

"Approximately 1% of children affected by hepatitis A may develop acute liver failure, and in such situations, liver transplantation may be the only life-saving option," says Dr Gopalan. "Although liver transplantation is now available at more centres than before, it remains an expensive and resource-intensive treatment."

Risk indicators

"The degree of severity of hepatitis A is often based on the age of the person infected. While many young children exhibit few symptoms or no symptoms at all, so they often go undetected, teens and adults are at a higher risk of the classic symptoms of fever, tiredness, nausea, abdominal pain, and/or jaundice," says Dr Gopalan. He explains, "Adults will also take a longer time to recover from hepatitis A than young children, as they have a higher risk of severe complications from exposure due to age and/or the presence of pre-existing liver disease. A larger number of teenagers or adults will develop

Keeping hepatitis A at bay this monsoon



NEW DRUG ON ANVIL FOR HEP B

An experimental hepatitis B virus (HBV) drug, given alongside standard antiviral therapy, has achieved a functional cure in about 20% or one in five of participants across two efficacy trials. The research on the drug, bepiroviren, was published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. A cure for chronic hepatitis B has been pursued by scientists and researchers for decades. Hepatitis B is

considered a serious public health concern in India, which has roughly 10-15% of the world's HBV carriers, with an estimated 40 million people chronically infected. If a patient should not get treatment in time, they can develop chronic infections leading to liver failure or even cancer. The manufacturers are awaiting approval to market the drug, with a decision expected this October

symptomatic disease because of fewer children getting the virus due to better sanitation. "Severe complications, although uncommon, are more frequently seen among adults than young children," adds Dr Ahuja. "Anyone who hasn't been vaccinated or hasn't been exposed to hepatitis A before can get the virus," says Dr Saraf. "However, some people are at higher risk. This includes people living in places with bad sanitation and no clean water, those travelling to areas where the virus is widespread, and individuals living in tight quarters. Chronic liver disease sufferers might also have more serious issues if they get infected."

Early symptoms

"Symptoms typically develop two to six weeks after exposure," says Dr Saraf.

"Individuals may experience fever, weakness, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, abdominal discomfort, loss of appetite, and muscle aches. As the infection progresses, more characteristic signs may appear, including dark urine, pale-coloured stools, and yellowing of the skin and eyes, known as jaundice."

Elaborating on short-term and long-term impacts of the disease, Dr Ahuja echoes, "In the short term, hepatitis A can cause fatigue, fever, nausea, jaundice, abdominal pain, and a general feeling of illness that may last for several weeks. Most patients recover completely, although fatigue can sometimes persist for months after the acute infection has resolved." Comparing it with other liver impacting infections, he adds: "Unlike hepatitis B or C, hepatitis A does not lead to chronic infection."

Therefore, long-term health consequences are uncommon. However, severe illness can temporarily affect quality of life, work productivity, and daily functioning. Rarely, fulminant hepatitis can occur, which is a medical emergency requiring intensive care."

Best practices

"Good hygiene and proper sanitation continue to be the best ways to prevent disease infections in conjunction with vaccination," advises Dr Gopalan. "Hand washing, particularly prior to eating and immediately after using the bathroom, should be done properly, as should the consumption of safe drinking water and avoiding food prepared under unsanitary conditions."

"Safe disposal of human waste and safe food preparation and serving

habits are also very important to prevent the transmission of hepatitis A. During outbreak periods, extra caution should be exercised regarding the consumption of street food and untreated water," he says. Further, he says that long-term prevention efforts require improvements in sanitation infrastructure, better access to safe drinking water, and increased knowledge of individuals regarding good hygiene practices. "Community-level interventions are critical for reducing Hepatitis A transmission," he emphasises.

Vaccine & coverage

Vaccination is highly recommended in India by the doctors and the Indian Association of Pediatrics (IAP), but not mandatory under the Universal Immunisation Program (UIP). Havrix and Bio-vac A are the most commonly preferred hepatitis A vaccines in India, and are available widely for purchase, ranging from ₹1,050 to ₹2,500 per dose, with variants for children and adults.

Ideally, as doctors advise, the hepatitis A vaccine must be administered in two doses with a gap of 6 to 18 months between each. A single dose of the hepatitis A vaccine provides protection for 6 to 12 months, with heightened immunity shortly after the shot, while the complete two-dose vaccine suggested by doctors as well as the IAP, provides immunity for up to 20 to 25 years, before a renewal of the vaccine may be required. Referring to the recent hepatitis A outbreak in Kerala and Wales, Dr Ahuja says, "The recent outbreaks highlight the importance of continued surveillance and may provide an opportunity to reassess risk in regions where susceptibility is increasing."

"Outbreaks should always prompt public health authorities to review disease trends, vaccination coverage, population immunity, and preventive measures," he says, referring to the recent outbreaks in Kerala and Wales. "Local emerging disease patterns should be analysed. Future vaccination strategies may need to be guided by regional seroprevalence studies."

He adds that while immediate nationwide inclusion in the UIP may not yet be justified, expanding surveillance and considering vaccination in high-risk regions or populations "deserves serious evaluation considering regional differences in seroprevalence, outbreak frequency, economic burden of hospitalisation, etc," says Dr Vikas Singla, vice-chairman, gastroenterology, hepatology and endoscopy, Max Hospital, Saket.

"Historically, many Indians were exposed to hepatitis A during childhood, often developing natural immunity after a mild or asymptomatic infection. Over the years, significant improvements in sanitation, access to clean water, and public health measures have contributed to changing patterns of exposure in different parts of the country," adds Dr Ahuja.

As of December last year, Kerala reported 31,536 confirmed and probable hepatitis A cases and 82 deaths, the highest numbers recorded in the state to date. This represented a nearly sevenfold increase from 4581 cases and 15 deaths in 2023. Last month, Public Health Wales had shared that at least three households in the seaside town of Barry had been identified as having contracted the same liver infection, and there were worries it was spreading locally.

HEALTH CAPSULES



India takes measures against Ebola spread

The Ministry of Civil Aviation and Delhi International Airport Limited (DIAL) today launched AIR SUVIDHA 2.0, an upgraded contactless Passenger Health Self-Declaration Portal, to strengthen public health surveillance at Points of Entry in response to the ongoing Ebola disease outbreak.



First HIV-to-HIV lung transplant surgery

Surgeons at NYU Langone Health have successfully performed the world's first HIV-positive-to-HIV-positive lung transplant. The breakthrough marks a major step forward in transplant medicine, opening a previously unavailable pool of organ donors for HIV-positive patients suffering from end-stage lung disease.



New molecule to help cells fight Alzheimer's

A newly discovered molecule, OLE, restored the brain's immune cells to a more protective state in Alzheimer's disease models. The treatment reduced the accumulation of toxic plaques and improved memory performance, highlighting its potential as a promising new therapeutic strategy.



Newborn screening for birth defects

A new WHO report, *Strengthening capacity for newborn screening, diagnosis and management of birth defects*, identifies newborn screening as an important opportunity to accelerate progress in child survival, highlighting how early detection and treatment can save lives and reduce lifelong disability for many.

FE FEATURES

NEW RESEARCH INDICATES balance training and exercise may be beneficial over vitamin D and calcium supplements in preventing fractures owing to falls, especially for senior people. How true is that? Dr Rakesh Gupta, senior consultant, internal medicine, Indraprastha Apollo Hospital, Delhi, says, "Falls are a major cause of fractures in older adults, and regular exercise, particularly activities that improve balance, strength, and mobility, can help reduce the risk of falling. However, this should not be seen as a choice between exercise and supplements. While exercise helps prevent falls, vitamin D and calcium support bone health in people who need them. Vitamin D and calcium support bone health, while exercise helps reduce fall risk. Both have different roles, and for many older adults, a combination of maintaining bone strength and preventing falls is the most effective approach."

How can one test for balance and

All about balance

How balance training can help prevent fractures

improve balance if found wanting?

Balance can be assessed through simple clinical tests that evaluate standing stability, gait, coordination, and the ability to rise from a chair or change direction while walking. Individuals who experience unsteadiness, frequent stumbling, dizziness, or a fear of falling should seek medical evaluation. Balance can often be improved through regular exercise, strength training, balance-focused activities, physiotherapy, and addressing underlying issues such as poor vision, medication side effects, or inner-ear



Dr Rakesh Gupta

problems. The earlier balance issues are identified, the better the chances of preventing falls.

Which category of people are vitamin D and calcium supplements indicated for, especially as older people, particularly women, use these supplements often without medical advice?

Vitamin D and calcium supplements are generally recommended for people who have a documented deficiency, osteoporosis, low bone density, inadequate dietary intake, or certain medical conditions that affect bone health. Older adults and postmenopausal women may be at

increased risk of deficiency or bone loss, but supplementation should ideally be based on individual assessment rather than age alone. The need for supplementation should be determined by factors such as dietary habits, health status, risk factors, and, where appropriate, laboratory testing and should only be consumed when prescribed.

What are the general precautions to avoid fractures and falls in older people?

Regular physical activity to maintain strength, balance, and mobility is one of the most effective ways to reduce fall risk. Older adults should also have regular vision and hearing check-ups and review medications that may affect balance.

Simple measures at home, such as ensuring adequate lighting, removing tripping hazards, installing handrails where needed, and wearing appropriate footwear can also help prevent falls. Maintaining good nutrition and attending regular health check-ups are equally important for overall bone and muscle health.



Opinion

SUNDAY, JUNE 28, 2026



Cape Verde goalkeeper Vozinha during the World Cup Group H soccer match between Cape Verde and Saudi Arabia in Houston

Tactical discipline can tide over gulf in skill

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

IT WAS FELT that a 48-team FIFA World Cup would hamper the quality of the contests. Expanding the most-watched sporting event was considered by many to be a political decision rather than a move to make it more inclusive. There were sides whose mention sends several people scurrying to consult atlases to find out where certain countries were located, and how on earth they made it to such a high-profile event.

With the tournament more than halfway through, those fears have been generally found to be unrealistic. While the odd mismatch and big scoreline cannot be avoided even in a field of fewer teams, the underdogs have more than held their own in Canada, Mexico and the United States.

Curacao, a small island in the Caribbean Sea that is not even a sovereign country, was thrashed 7-1 by Germany, but they did have the thrill of levelling for 1-1 against the four-time champions for a few minutes. They bounced back to hold Ecuador — who had an impressive qualifying campaign in South America and subsequently beat the Germans in Group E — to a goalless draw, a more than creditable achievement for a nation of little more than 150,000 people spread over an area of 171 square miles. They had their goalkeeper Eloy Room to thank for a record 15 saves that got them their first World Cup point.

Cabo Verde is an archipelago of 10 volcanic islands in the central Atlantic Ocean, off the western coast of Africa. But that didn't prevent them from capturing the sporting world's imagination by holding 2010 world champions and reigning European champions Spain to a goalless draw and achieving a 2-2 draw with two-time world champions Uruguay. Their tally of three points from the group stage in their debut World Cup was enough for passage to the knockout rounds, a remarkable achievement for a nation that many football fans wouldn't even have heard of a few months ago, considering that they finished second in Group H ahead of a pedigreed team like Uruguay. They will now face defending champions Argentina, helmed by none other than Lionel Messi, in the Round of 32, a sporting fairytale come true.

World Cup debutants Uzbekistan were thrashed 5-0 by Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal, but most of the other big-margin defeats have been suffered by countries that have been coming to the World Cup for several decades now, Sweden being thrashed 1-5 by the Netherlands being a case in point. Iraq, reduced to 10 men against Senegal as early as the 13th minute, kept the score at 0-1 till more than 10 minutes into the second half.

Closer contest

In contrast to a team sport like cricket, where the difference in skill levels can often have a huge impact on the result of the game, discipline, tactics, fighting spirit and one or more players from the underdog having an inspired day can well be enough to get a result. In the way these factors level the field between favourites and commoners, football is well and truly the global game.

But apart from the romance of unfancied teams frustrating 'big' teams, and sometimes giving them a bloody nose, there's the tactical aspect of smaller sides punching above their weight. Some may derisively describe such tactics as 'parking the bus', but there isn't just one way to play this game, and smaller sides are under no obligation to play an expansive style of game, making things easier for the favourites. Often it needs the defence, and specifically the goalkeeper, to have a special day to get a memorable result, and this World Cup has seen several custodians from smaller teams etching their names in history.

When Cape Verde took on the might of Spain, they set up to deny them much space to work with between their midfield and defence. The 4-5-1 formation employed by coach Pedro Leitao Brito, commonly known as Bubista, was designed to keep a clean sheet and was successful, even though hardly anyone would have given them a chance before kickoff.

When Spain, normally a high-possession side, passed the ball among themselves and even backwards, hoping to draw Cape Verde players towards themselves to engineer gaps in their formation, they held their positions and didn't take the bait. It forced the Spaniards to try to work around or over the heads of their opposition, but Cape Verde were good enough to thwart that challenge. Of course, it needed their 40-year-old goalkeeper, Vozinha, to make seven quality saves, six from inside the penalty area, to keep them afloat.

England were similarly kept at bay by Ghana. Jordan Ayew was left high up the pitch, but the other outfield players were set up in two compact lines just outside their penalty area, giving next to no room to Thomas Tuchel's team. They didn't break their formation and were content to let England have possession in areas where they couldn't threaten. The 0-0 draw and the crucial point was well worth it and could even have been better had Ghana got a late penalty, which most observers opine would have been the correct decision.

Keep the shape

The key element in both games was the tactical discipline by the underdogs in not being sucked towards the ball, whether in midfield or on the wings, even when it's switched around the field quickly. The footballing jargon of the low block may be derided in some circles, but when done well could be highly effective and frustrating for a fancied opponent. In essence, it emphasises the important role of good and effective coaching plays in tournament football.

Conversely, when this is not done well, the danger from the low, hard cross to the six-yard box from an unimpeded attacker on the wings could create havoc in the defensive line, as Sweden and Saudi Arabia found to their cost.

Teams that don't possess many creative players and don't have the ball for long also need to offer some kind of danger to fancied opponents. They generally do that through the long ball over the top, which can be particularly effective on the counter when the other team has committed a lot of players to the attack. The sole forward can pressurise the defence in a one-on-one situation, especially when the ball is bouncing.

There's more than one way to skin a cat. The World Cup is a stage for teams of varying strengths to pit their skills, minds and tactics against each other. Seeing an underdog give a fancied side a run for their money is one of the most satisfying experiences in sport.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



The distribution of economic power will be increasingly skewed in favour of the monopolists. The balance between capital and labour will continue to shift in favour of capital

I HAVE OBSERVED social and political trends in India for many years. What appears to be a deep-running current, may not be so, and may be only a passing cloud. A passing cloud can bring a welcome shower but that is not an enduring feature of the climate.

1947 was a watershed year. Since Independence, many visible influences and trends were noticed but were short-lived; and many incipient trends that were unnoticed by most people have become enduring. For example, despite Gandhiji's near-divine status and hundreds of dedicated Gandhians, the Gandhian way of life, *ahimsa*, *satyagraha*, the *charhka*, non-violence and civil disobedience did not survive for more than a couple of decades after Gandhiji. On the other hand, few anticipated the rapid urbanisation of India, fewer noticed climate change, and still fewer understood the complex relationship between humans and science and technology.

The saying is, 'Prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future' (Nobel laureate Niels Bohr and legendary baseball player Yogi Berra). Nevertheless, I shall dare to venture into forbidden territory. I have observed five trends that may gain strength and momentum. Much as I dislike and dread some of them, these trends seem unstoppable:

Decline of Democracy as 'government of the people...'

Democracy is government of the people. People are born free and have rights to many freedoms. A democratic government is a government that respects and upholds the rights of the



India risks becoming a mere 'electoral democracy,' with elections growing less free and fair, even as many citizens seem to be unperturbed by the declining score in return for welfare measures and better infrastructure

5 trends will determine future India

people, and has established independent institutions that will protect and enforce the rights. *Freedom House*, *V-Dem Institute and Reporters Without Borders* (all Research Institutes) classify countries as 'free' or not on the basis of scores under various indicators. More and more countries have a declining score. India's score was 77 in 2005 and has declined to 63-67. India is likely to be a mere 'electoral democracy' and elections will be less free and fair. The Indian people seem to be unperturbed by the declining score in return for welfare measures, better infrastructure and no challenge to an oppressive social structure. China's score is stuck at 9/100 for many years but, by all reports, the Chinese people are happy. India may take that path.

Monopolies vs entrepreneurs

Several sectors of the economy are dominated by duopolies or oligopolies — air travel, telecommunications, cement, steel, power, pharmaceuticals, petroleum, defence production, mining, and retail. More sectors may go that way. Small businesses and MSMEs will become near-extinct. NGOs will be stifled. The distribution of economic power will be increasingly skewed in favour of the monopolists. The balance between capital and labour will continue to shift in favour of capital. The distribution of income will be skewed in favour of the rich and super-rich. Income inequalities will increase and we will be less egalitarian.

Farewell to identities

Most large cities have become cosmopolitan and a medley of languages, religions, cultures and cuisines. Many

towns are following suit. Urbanisation and mass transit systems will take the trend deeper into India. No one will 'belong' to a place; 'native place' will, like the joint family, become extinct. Most people one encounters will be strangers. The circle of friends will become smaller and relationships will be forged through devices.

Conversations will be mediated by machines. No (hu)man is an island may be disproved. Transactions, not emotions, will determine relationships between humans. Sexual relations may survive because sex has benefits beyond procreation.

Cultural nationalism vs fearful minorities

The line separating science and pseudo-science will vanish. As Mr Vasudevan Mukunth wrote (*The Hindu*, dated June 23, 2026), educational authorities will institutionalise Puranic science as science, mythology as history, ritual as technology, and an open contempt for verifiability. More IITs may be goaded to do 'research' into mythological stories, reincarnation and Vedic biology. Cultural revival will revolve around the reconstruction of temples and celebration of Hindu festivals. Meat shops may be banned in several towns. Following West Bengal, other states may remove eggs from the mid-day meal scheme. Uniform civil codes will be passed in more States.

Resistance to the Hindutva agenda will be broken down. More and more children and adults will be able to speak and write in only a single language, Hindi, closing more windows to growing STEM studies and the technology-driven world (until Hindi

catches up with English and other languages). Minorities — religious, linguistic, ethnic — will live in fear wondering whether a historically plural country will have a place for their children.

Super rich vs mass of poor

The trends noted above will have enormous consequences for 144 crore people that will plateau at 167 crore and begin to decline. India will grow whether at 5% or more — irrespective of the government because Indians will grow food, produce goods, and consume or export. The numbers of the rich and the super rich will increase, but many millions will be massed at the bottom of the pyramid. Those millions will experience low demand, low consumption, low standards of life and low growth. Moreover, if millions of people are excluded from participation in the story of India, on one pretext or other, their lives will be worse. India will be less equal and more divided and angry.

You may dispute the five trends or add to or subtract from them, but you cannot deny that the *direction* of the country, and the *trends* witnessed, will determine India's place in the world.

(Across the Aisle completes 12 years in June 2026. The author wishes to take a long break to pursue other interests. This column will now be an occasional feature in *The Indian Express*)

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INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



Arming himself for alliance

The coup in "coaxing" six Sena MPs from Uddhav Thackeray's camp to switch to Eknath Shinde's side was a six-month operation, culminating in the six being flown in a chartered plane from Pune, Nanded and Mumbai to Delhi, where they stayed at the Leela Palace Hotel. A fascinating figure in the operation was Abhishek Verma, the Chief National Coordinator for NDA Alliance and Elections in the Shinde Sena. Verma, an arms dealer who joined the party last year, was accused of being the middleman in the ₹18,798-crore Scorpene submarine deal and was investigated in the naval warroom leak, though he was later acquitted by the court. The BJP in 2006 held a press conference charging that the Scorpene deal involved the biggest kick-back ever and Verma, the son of late Congress MP and poet Shrikant Verma, sued L.K. Advani for defamation.

NSA expands territory

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi met NSA Ajit Doval last week.

Tellingly, Wang and his deputy were missing from the BRICS foreign ministers meet in May and China was represented by its ambassador in India. Doval often represents India in key negotiations with certain countries, instead of Foreign Minister S Jaishankar, suggesting the growing domain of the NSA at the cost of the foreign minister's sphere.

The 81-year-old former police officer is far more consequential in foreign affairs than his predecessors Brajesh Mishra, M K Narayanan and Shiv Shankar Menon. Doval, who founded the RSS oriented Vivekananda Foundation after retirement, has cabinet rank.

He moved out of the PMO and commandeered the entire Sardar Patel Bhavan for the National Security Council.

Jaishankar seems content to focus on the US, the Americas and Europe, while Doval has cultivated special relationships with countries ranging from Saudi Arabia and Qatar to China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

In 2021, he revived a flagging Indo-Russian relationship. Even France seems to be Doval's stomping ground. When it comes to domestic issues concerning Islamic institutions and connections with Islamic countries, Doval has a special pipeline

Who's who at wedding

The who's who of politics, film and business attended the Mumbai wedding of Sharad Pawar's grand daughter Revati Sule with Sarang Lakhani, son of prominent Nagpur businessman and RSS associate Arun Lakhani. The range of celebrity guests was indicative of Pawar's ties across the spectrum, including CMs from most parties. Bhagwant Mann, Mohan Bhagwat and Rahul Gandhi were among the guests. The noticeable absentees included PM Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. T.M.C's Mamata Banerjee and Derek O'Brien, who presumably were too engrossed in salvaging the party, were missing as was DMK's M K Stalin. Sharp-eyed guests noticed that the Ambanis and the Adanis avoided eye contact and the affable Anil Ambani acted as practically one of the masters of ceremonies, despite being weighed down in legal tangles.

Everybody's buddy

Businessman Parimal Nathwani has managed to defy the odds and alliance arithmetic and win a Rajya Sabha seat for the fourth time as an Independent from Jharkhand. Nathwani's goodwill across the board is not merely because of his long association with the Ambani family, but

because of his friendly nature. His son Dhanraj Nathwani follows in his father's footsteps and is president of the Gujarat Cricket Association and is close to Jay Shah.

Wheels within wheels

There was suspense as to whether Omraje Nimbalkar, one of the six defecting Sena UBT MPs, would switch camps. The buzz was that Nimbalkar placed a condition that those responsible for the murder of his father Pawanraje Nimbalkar 20 years ago be booked by the CBI. He even met Amit Shah.

One of the accused in the murder case was Padamsinh Patil, 84, the brother of Deputy CM Sunetra Pawar. A fortnight ago, a CBI court exonerated all the accused in the Pawanraje murder. But Nimbalkar did not back out from joining the Eknath Shinde camp.

Of late, CM Devendra Fadnavis has become the unquestioned ruler of the state thanks to the weakened status of his formerly troublesome alliance partners, the NCP and Sena. Shinde, with six defectors on his side, commands 13 MPs compared to the BJP's 9 MPs and hopes to be in a position to flex his muscles. Especially since Amit Shah's immediate mission is to secure the magical two-thirds majority in Lok Sabha.

A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.
— John C Maxwell

New Delhi
June 28, 2026

The Transformative Global Leader



ANOOP BOSE

as tough as he is a killer...So he gets you by surprise...He's a tough trader."! In an exclusive interview with Axios on June 18, 2026, Trump extolled Modi as a "great leader" and a "very tough cookie". In a turbulent, topsy-turvy world tormented, battered and besieged by unconscionably futile war, strife, violence and bloodshed, Modi heroically stood out as a luminous beacon profoundly championing the cause of peace, understanding, humanity and forbearance, and spearheading India to the truly exemplary status of "Vishwa Shanti Guru" on the world stage!

The archetypal Virgoan Modi was born on Sunday, September 17, 1950, to a frugal family of humble origins and modest means in a diminutive single-storied abode in Vadnagar, Gujarat, archaeologically famous for its pair of 12th-century AD "kirti toranas" (triumphal arched gateways) exquisitely carved in red and yellow sandstone. His father, Damodardas Mulchand Modi, unobtrusively ran a nondescript tea stall on Platform No.1 of the Vadnagar railway station serving hot, steaming tea to tired and weary rail passengers. His mother, Heeraben, also known as Hiraba, was just a humble domestic helper. As a child, Modi used to diligently lend a helping hand to his father by selling tea to passengers directly inside train compartments, dexterously ferrying an aluminium kettle and "kulhads". There is an enthralling story linked to an adventurous eight-year-old Modi who, after finishing his chores at the tea stall, went for a pleasure dip with his friends in the Sharmishtha Talav, a picturesque lake on the outskirts of Vadnagar. He furtively caught a wriggling baby crocodile from the lake and triumphantly brought it home as a prospective pet. Upon beholding the scaly reptile, his mother chided him for severing the child from its mother and prevailed upon him to release it back into its habitat!

Modi was introduced to the Rashtriya

MODI IS ADMIRERD WORLDWIDE BY ONE AND ALL BECAUSE HE REPRESENTS THE CLASSIC "RAGS-TO-RICHES" STORY. HE HAS EMERGED AS THE ULTIMATE EMBODIMENT OF PERSEVERANCE AND UPWARD MOBILITY

Swayamsevaka Sangh (RSS) in 1958 at the tender age of eight by Lakshmanrao Madhavrao Inamdar, popularly known as "Vakil Saheb", who took him under his wing as a "balswayamsevaka" (junior cadet) and became his political guru. In 1972, Modi entered the hallowed portals of Dr. Hedgewar Bhavan in Ahmedabad and became a "pracharak" (full-time worker) under the tutelage of Inamdar. The RSS assigned him to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1985.

Modi formally joined the BJP in 1987 and was sucked into the vortex of mainstream politics. He steadily rose through the party ranks, becoming General Secretary on January 5, 1998. On October 7, 2001, Modi was fortuitously appointed the Chief Minister of Gujarat, replacing the reigning Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel. On February 24, 2002, Modi won his first assembly election from the Rajkot II constituency which earned him a prized seat in the Gujarat Legislative Assembly as an MLA. On October 3, 1995, Modi was made



Narendra Modi is one of the world's most influential and closely followed political leaders. Admired by supporters and fiercely criticised by opponents, he has established an exceptional record of electoral success, earning a reputation as an astute politician, capable administrator, and tireless leader. Known for his discipline, fitness, relentless work ethic, and decisive leadership, Modi has played a central role in elevating India's global profile.

The journey so far...

Narendra Modi has been serving as the Prime Minister of India since May 2014, following a long political career that began as a grassroots organiser

- 2024-PRESENT Third tenure as Prime Minister**
 - Formed a coalition government in June 2024 after the BJP secured 240 seats, relying on NDA allies.
 - Became only the second Indian leader, after Jawaharlal Nehru, to be elected Prime Minister for three consecutive terms.
- 2019-2024 Second tenure as Prime Minister**
 - Led the BJP-led NDA coalition to a larger victory with 303 seats in May 2019.
 - Oversaw the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, removing Jammu and Kashmir's special status.
 - Navigated India through the COVID-19 pandemic with nationwide lockdowns and digital vaccination rollouts.
 - Inaugurated the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya in January 2024.
- 2014-2019 First tenure as Prime Minister**
 - Sworn in as the 15th Prime Minister of India on May 26, 2014.
 - Launched signature national schemes like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Make in India, and Jan Dhan Yojana.
 - Implemented major economic changes, including 2016 Demonetisation and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017.
 - Authorized the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrike following cross-border terror attacks.
- 2013-2014 Shift to National Stage**
 - Sworn in as the 15th Prime Minister of India on May 26, 2014.
 - Launched signature national schemes like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Make in India, and Jan Dhan Yojana.
 - Implemented major economic changes, including 2016 Demonetisation and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017.
 - Authorized the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrike following cross-border terror attacks.
- 2001-2014 Chief Minister of Gujarat**
 - Appointed Chief Minister of Gujarat in October 2001.
 - Won his first legislative assembly seat in a February 2002 by-election.
 - Led the BJP to three consecutive assembly victories in 2002, 2007, and 2012.
 - Pioneered the "Gujarat Model" of development.
- 1990s Rise to National Prominence**
 - Helped organize L.K. Advani's 1990 Ram Rath Yatra and Murlidhar Manohar Joshi's 1991 Ekta Yatra.
 - Promoted to BJP National Secretary in 1995, relocating to New Delhi.
 - Elevated to BJP National General Secretary (Organisation) in 1998 to manage nationwide strategies.
- 1970s-1980s Early Political Life**
 - Joined the RSS as a full-time volunteer in the early 1970s.
 - Managed underground protest networks during the 1975-1977 Emergency.
 - Formally assigned to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) by the RSS in 1987.
 - Organised the 1989 Gujarat State Election campaign, securing a BJP victory.
- 1950 Narendra Modi is born on September 17, 1950 in Vadnagar, Gujarat**

the National Secretary of the BJP and on January 5, 1998 was appointed its General Secretary. And the crowning moment came on May 26, 2014 when he was sworn in as the 14th Prime Minister of India, after BJP's landslide electoral victory on May 16, 2014 that brought into its kitty a rich, bountiful harvest of 282 seats.

The enlightened people of India have wholeheartedly endorsed Modi as their supreme leader for three successive terms and are translating into reality his cherished mantra of "Together, for Everyone's support, everyone's development, everyone's trust". The BJP's sweeping election juggernaut in various states and union territories and recently in Puducherry, Assam and West Bengal, has been powered by the clarion call "Modi Hai To Mumkin Hai" (If Modi is there it's possible)! The "surgical strikes" of September 29, 2016 on terror launch pads inside Pakistan occupied Kashmir in response to the gruesome pre-dawn ambush by Pakistan backed terrorists in Uri on September 18, 2016, the air strikes on February 26, 2019 upon secret terror camps in Balakot deep inside Pakistan, and the launch of "Operation Sindoor" on the night of 7th/8th May, 2025 in retaliation for the horrific, dastardly, spine-chilling attack in Pahalgam deep inside the Kashmir valley, on 22nd April, 2025, by members of the Pakistan based terrorist group "The Resistance Front", that snuffed out the lives of 26 innocent Indians, carried out with extraordinary speed, stealth and ferocity, have demonstrated to the entire world that those who sowed the ill wind against India had to reap the most terrible retributory whirlwind!

Modi has assiduously restored to numerous Indian political heroes like Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Pamulaparthi Venkata Narasimha Rao and

Pranab Mukerjee, their rightful places in Indian society by adopting and dedicating roads, museums, statues (like the 182 metres high "Statue of Unity" at Kevadiya, Gujarat, dedicated to Patel, and the Netaji Statue under the sandstone canopy right behind India Gate in New Delhi), postage stamps, coins, memorials and even islands in their honour. And his faith in and commitment to the lofty ideals, thoughts and musings of Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Syama Prasad Mookerjee remains unassailable!

Modi is a prolific writer. In 2008, he published a Gujarati book titled "Jyotipunj" (Mass of Light), which incisively delved into the lives and contributions of sixteen iconic RSS leaders, including his mentor Inamdar. The longest one was that of Madhav Sadashivrao Golwalkar, the father of the emulsifying concept of "Akhanda Bharat" (Undivided India), whom Modi referred to as "Pujniya Shri Gururji" (Guru worthy of worship). Modi's intention was to explain the workings of the RSS to his readers and to reassure RSS members that he remained ideologically anchored to the RSS.

After becoming the Prime Minister, he also authored a book called Exam Warriors, a fun and interactive guide for children to commendably deal with the stress and strain of examinations, which was published in 2018. Modi has written eight other books, mostly containing short stories for children. Modi has penned the lyrics of two Gujarati garba songs viz. "Garbo" and "Maadi". And through his "Man Ki Baat" (Mind's Talk), the monthly radio programme, Modi has built an indestructible bond between himself and the public-doing much to shape the image of the Prime Minister as the caretaker of the Indian people.

Modi is admired worldwide by one and all because he represents the classic "rags-to-riches" story. Rising from abject poverty to the highest office in the land, he has emerged as the ultimate embodiment of

perseverance and upward mobility.

A man for all time and seasons, Modi's strong principles, timeless rhetoric and resolute leadership have contributed to his status as a globally acclaimed behemoth. Power has never corrupted him, nor has success make him conceited, arrogant or pompous. It would perhaps be virtually impossible to compare Modi with the towering Abraham "Abe" Lincoln, the 16th and, by every measure applied, the greatest American President, and the Father of Modern Democracy, who used to say "I am nothing, truth is everything", but if such comparisons are indeed feasible, Modi will effortlessly qualify to be on an equal footing with Lincoln!

In conclusion, Modi is the grandiose harbinger of a truly earth-shattering, all-consuming religious, cultural and spiritual renaissance in India. The eternal, unflinching devotee of Swami ji, who fervently wanted to join the ranks of the saffron-clad monks of the Ramakrishna Mission, is now steadfastly realising the cherished vision and dreams of his childhood hero and role model. It is the mes-

merising inspiration and nourishment he has unceasingly drawn at every single phase of his illustrious career from Swami ji's life, example, work and teachings that have catapulted him to such unfathomable heights, perhaps never before attained by any individual Indian political leader! And under his valiant and envisioned stewardship, India shall, without the faintest shadow of doubt, gloriously step into Viksit Bharat, Ram Rajya and Amrit Kal (all rolled up into one!) and like the wondrous "Sone Ki Chiriya" majestically unfold its fluttering wings and reach out for the distant sky and far beyond as the dominant, domineering and dominating Vishwa Shanti Guru!

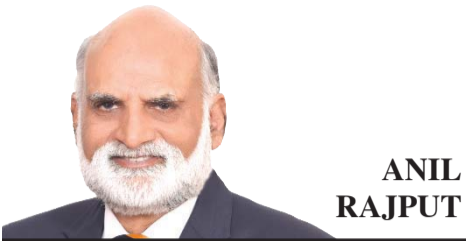
For millions of Indians, he is a mystical personality exuding an aura of mental and physical fitness, whether he is deeply immersed in hardcore politics or transfixed in yogic meditation.

The author is an internationally reputed senior lawyer practising in the Supreme Court of India and various High Courts and Tribunals in India. He is an avid debater, public speaker, writer, broadcaster, telecaster, artist, painter, sculptor, music critic and filmmaker



AKSHAYA TRITIYA

Cuisine of abundance, charity and continuity



ANIL
RAJPUT

Akshaya Tritiya is one of the most auspicious days in the Hindu calendar, celebrated as a symbol of prosperity, renewal and enduring abundance. Observed on Vaishakh Shukla Tritiya, the third lunar day of the bright fortnight of Vaishakh, Akshaya Tritiya this year fell on 19 April. It is associated with sacred beginnings, acts of charity, worship, annadaan and the invocation of lasting well-being. The word akshaya means "that which does not diminish," reflecting the belief that virtuous actions performed on this day generate merit that endures and multiplies. While the festival is often associated with purity of purpose and the commencement of new ventures, its deeper message lies in the cultivation of gratitude, generosity and the responsibility to preserve and share abundance.

Arriving during the height of the Indian summer, when water becomes precious and fruits mature, Akshaya Tritiya also reflects the close alignment between seasonal cycles and cultural practice. The cultural background of Akshaya Tritiya is layered with sacred associations. In many Hindu homes, the day is connected with the worship of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi, invoking preservation, auspiciousness and prosperity. It is also observed as Parashurama Jayanti in several traditions, while popular belief links the day with renewal and righteous beginnings. In Rajasthan and parts of western India, Akha Teej has long been considered auspicious for marriages and family celebrations. In Maharashtra, it is counted among the highly auspicious murtura days, when new work, purchases and household rites are undertaken with faith. In Odisha, the day carries a distinct agrarian and Jagannath tradition, as farmers mark Akhi Muthi Anukula, the ceremonial beginning of agricultural activity, while preparations for the Rath Yatra at Puri begin with chariot construction. In Jain tradition, Varshitap Parna is observed by those who break long austerities with sugarcane juice, recalling Rishabhnantha. Its culinary traditions embody this spirit through foods that are simple, nourishing and suitable for the climate, while also carrying the sanctity of offering and sharing.

The cuisine accordingly adapts to regional variations. Some households prepare elaborate naivedya, food offered to the deity, like cooling summer dishes or sweets while many mark the day through annadaan, the traditional Hindu sacred act of offering food to others. Since the festival falls in Vaishakh, the cuisine naturally leans towards mango, raw mango, curd, cucumber, coconut, soaked pulses, jaggery, ghee, rice, milk and light sattvic preparations. The purpose is not excess for its own sake. It is nourishment made auspicious, reminding the household that prosperity should

spread rather than remain personal.

Maharashtra offers some of the most distinctive Akshaya Tritiya food associations, especially because the day falls in the season of mangoes and tender cashews. A festive meal may begin with Puran Poli, a soft flatbread filled with cooked chana dal and jaggery, flavoured with cardamom or nutmeg and served with ghee. The dal is cooked until tender, sweetened with jaggery and ground into a smooth filling, while the dough is rolled carefully around it. On Akshaya Tritiya, Puran Poli is not only a sweet dish but also as a symbol of plenty, because grain, pulse, jaggery and ghee come together in one generous preparation.

The same kitchen also gives us one of the best ways to make the savory section more specific to Akshaya Tritiya. Katchi Amti is prepared from the strained stock of the cooked chana dal used for the puran filling. Instead of wasting this nourishing liquid, it is transformed into a thin, spiced, tangy amti with goda masala, tamarind, jaggery, mustard, cumin, curry leaves, asafoetida and chilli. This dish carries the spirit of the festival in a subtle way. Akshaya does not mean endless consumption. It also means intelligent use, respect for ingredients and the ability to turn what remains into something complete. Katchi Amti balances the sweetness of Puran Poli, making the meal feel whole rather than heavy.

The Maharashtrian summer table then moves toward more seasonal savory dishes that are even more meaningful. Olya Kajuchi Bhaji, also known in some homes as fresh tender cashew curry, is especially valuable because tender cashews belong to the season and carry festive richness without excess. The cashews are cooked gently with coconut, cumin, green chilli, ginger, coriander and mild spices according to family custom. Ole Kajuchi Usal follows a similar seasonal logic, treating fresh cashews almost like a precious pulse. Raw mango creates another natural bridge between the festival and the climate in which it is observed. Kairichi Dal, also called Ambe Dal, is made with soaked chana dal, grated raw mango, coconut, green chilli, coriander and a light tempering. It is not a dal in the usual cooked sense, but a cooling, grainy, tangy preparation that refreshes the palate. Alongside it, Khamang Kaddi brings cucumber, peanut, coconut and mild seasoning into the meal. It is crisp, cooling and humble, yet festive enough for a thali.

Festive accompaniments reveal how Indian cuisine preserves labour across seasons. Kurdai, a sun-dried wheat preparation later fried or roasted until crisp, reflects the art of summer preservation, when households prepare papads, vadis and dried foods

under the strong sun. Nachanicha Papad, made with ragi, brings a millet-based note to the thali. Gilkyachi Bhaji, made from sponge gourd and served in a crisp or lightly cooked form, brings another seasonal vegetable into the meal. These preparations may appear small, but they carry memory, planning and household economy.

The sweet side of the western Indian table is naturally brightened by mango. Aamras is one of the most fitting dishes for Akshaya Tritiya because it belongs to the same hot season and carries a sense of golden abundance. Ripe mango pulp is extracted, lightly whisked and sometimes flavoured with cardamom or saffron, though many families prefer it plain so that the mango remains central. Shrikhand also fits the mood of the festival, especially in Gujarat and Maharashtra, where strained curd is sweetened and flavoured with saffron, cardamom or mango to make Amrakhand. Since curd cools the body and saffron-gold tones evoke auspiciousness, Shrikhand becomes both festive and seasonally wise. Sanjori, a lesser-known Maharashtrian festive sweet made with semolina, milk, ghee and sugar or jaggery, can also be included for special meals.

In North Indian homes, milk-based sweets are widely used. Kheer, made by slow-cooking rice in milk until it thickens, is one of the most familiar ways to express auspiciousness. On Akshaya Tritiya, it can be enriched with cardamom, saffron, almonds, cashews and raisins, then offered as prasad before being shared. Lapsi, made from broken wheat roasted in ghee and cooked with jaggery or sugar, is another meaningful dish because wheat represents grain, growth and household sustenance. In Rajasthan and Gujarat, where Akha Teej has strong cultural resonance, Lapsi can be framed as a dish of wholesome sweetness. Besan Laddoo or Atta Laddoo may also appear when families prepare sweets that can be distributed, stored and shared with guests.

South Indian traditions offer another way of making the cuisine more rooted in the day's seasonal and devotional character. Payasam is central to many temple and home offerings, whether made with rice, vermicelli, moong dal, chana dal or jaggery. Chana Dal Payasam and Moong Dal Payasam are especially useful in this preparation because pulses carry nourishment and strength, while jaggery and coconut bring sweetness without losing the sattvic character of the dish. The dal is lightly roasted or cooked until soft, then simmered with jaggery syrup, coconut milk or milk, and finished with cardamom, ghee-fried cashews and raisins.



In Karnataka and parts of the South, Kosambari provides the savory counterpoint. Made with soaked moong dal, cucumber, coconut, green chilli, coriander and lemon, it is light, cooling and suitable for offering. Thayir Sadam, or curd rice, may seem simple, but on Akshaya Tritiya its relevance lies in the heat of the season. Rice cooled with curd, tempered gently with mustard, curry leaves and ginger, becomes food that soothes, settles and completes a summer meal.

Odisha gives Akshaya Tritiya a particularly powerful cultural dimension because the day is linked with the beginning of agricultural activity. Accordingly there isn't one fixed menu but dishes shaped by the season and the festival's agrarian character. Dalma, made with dal and vegetables cooked together with mild spices, is one of Odisha's most representative sattvic dishes. It is nourishing, balanced and closely aligned with temple-style and household cooking. On a day that honours the beginning of cultivation, a dish combining pulses and vegetables feels deeply appropriate. Dahi Pakhala, rice soaked in water and curd, often enjoyed with salt, green chilli, roasted cumin, curry leaves or simple accompaniments, reflects the summer intelligence of eastern India. It cools the body and honours rice not as a luxury but as the foundation of life. If Saga Bhaja or Badi Chura appears alongside such a meal, the table becomes both humble and complete.

The beverage tradition of Akshaya Tritiya is just as important as the food because the festival belongs to the heat of Vaishakh, when offering water is itself an act of merit. Panakam, made with jaggery, water, dry ginger, cardamom and sometimes black pepper, is one of the most meaningful drinks to include because it is cooling, energising and devotional. Aam Panna, prepared from roasted or boiled raw mango, cumin, black salt and jaggery, protects the body against heat and celebrates the raw mango season. Chaas and Lassi bring curd into drink-

able form, offering comfort after a festive meal. Sattu Sherbet, made with roasted gram flour, water, lemon, cumin and salt or jaggery, connects nourishment with summer practicality. Nimbu Pani, Bel Sherbet, Kokum Sharbat and tender coconut water can also be a part of cooling hospitality. In Jain communities observing Varshitap Parna, sugarcane juice has a sacred role, reminding us that a beverage too can become a carrier of memory, austerity and grace.

What makes Akshaya Tritiya cuisine beautiful is this balance between offering and enjoyment. A family may begin with puja, offer Puran Poli, Kheer, Payasam, Aamras, Panchamrit or fruit, and then share the meal with relatives, neighbours or guests. In some homes, annadaan becomes the heart of the day, with food, water, fruit, buttermilk or sweets distributed to those in need. Buying gold may be one visible symbol of prosperity, but giving food reveals its deeper meaning. It teaches children that festivals are carefully shaped cultural moments in which the calendar, the kitchen, and the family come together to observe a moral and spiritual lesson that is in harmony with the seasonal cycle.

To carry Akshaya Tritiya forward, therefore, we must preserve not only its rituals but also the traditions of its cuisine and the wisdom that gives these practices its contemporary relevance. Recipes such as Puran Poli, Katchi Amti, Kairichi Dal, Aamras, Kosambari, Dalma, Dahi Pakhala, Payasam and Panakam should not remain only in the memories of elders or in fading notebooks. They should be cooked, explained, tasted and passed on. Children should know why raw mango appears in summer, why water is offered, why annadaan matters, why a festival of prosperity must also be a festival of sharing, and why food prepared with devotion becomes more than consumption. In protecting the cuisine of Akshaya Tritiya, we preserve a civilisational understanding that abundance is sacred only when it nourishes others. The call of this festival is therefore simple and urgent. Let us keep cooking these dishes, keep telling their stories, keep feeding with gratitude and keep teaching future generations that what is truly akshaya is not wealth kept for oneself, but culture, compassion and nourishment shared across time.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

Mediterranean culture on plate



GYANESHWAR DAYAL

A celebration of Cypriot cuisine, *Cyprus on a Plate* by Coração Do Vale, got underway at Roseate House New Delhi, bringing authentic flavours of the Mediterranean island to the capital through a specially curated gastronomic experience.

Organised in association with the High Commission of Cyprus, the festival showcases traditional Cypriot cuisine prepared by Chef Gagandeep alongside visiting Cypriot chef, culinary consultant and food anthropologist Chef Eleni Michael. The dishes are crafted using Coração Do Vale, a premium Portuguese extra virgin olive oil brand presenting the event as part of its culinary initiative.

Cypriot cuisine reflects the island's rich Mediterranean heritage, blending Greek, Middle Eastern and Turkish

influences. Known for its use of fresh herbs, olive oil, cheeses, grains and slow-cooked meats, the cuisine celebrates simplicity and depth of flavour. The festival offers a glimpse into these traditions, introducing diners to recipes passed down through generations.

The opening evening was attended by Evagoras Vryonides, along with hospitality industry representatives, diplomats and food enthusiasts, who sampled a multi-course menu highlighting Cyprus' rich culinary heritage.

The dining experience began with an assortment of traditional cold and warm mezze, including Tsakistes, Tashi, Melitzanosalata, Village Salad, Louvi Hummus, freshly made Cypriot pita, seared halloumi and Sheftalia. The meal continued with Patzarosalata, a beetroot and potato salad, and Ravioles, handmade Cypriot pasta filled with halloumi cheese and

spearmint. The main course featured Tavas Lefkaritikos, a slow-braised lamb preparation cooked with rice, potatoes, tomatoes, cinnamon and cumin, alongside Gemista, roasted vegetables stuffed with rice, herbs and mint, topped with feta cheese. Desserts included Anarokrema, a whipped ricotta cream with filo pastry, honey and walnuts, followed by traditional Cypriot sweets such as Soutzioukkos, Loukoumi and Daktyla. The meal concluded with Cyprus coffee and fresh mint tea. The initiative seeks to promote cultural exchange through food.

The festival also marks the launch of *World on a Plate*, a new culinary series by Coração Do Vale in collaboration with Roseate House New Delhi.

A taste of Gujarat comes alive in Delhi NCR



TEAM AGENDA

Gujarati cuisine is often described as a celebration of balance—where sweetness, spice, tang and warmth coexist on the same plate. This rich culinary tradition is now taking centre stage at Radisson Blu Kaushambi, where a specially curated Gujarati Food Festival invites diners to experience the vibrant flavours and hospitality of India's western state.

From the moment guests step into the restaurant, the ambience sets the tone for an immersive cultural experience. Traditional décor inspired by Gujarat's colourful heritage, vibrant textiles, hand-crafted motifs and soft folk music create a welcoming atmosphere that evokes the warmth of a Gujarati home. The

elegant setting blends seamlessly with the hotel's contemporary interiors, making the festival both authentic and sophisticated.

The menu is a delightful showcase of the state's diverse culinary traditions. Guests can begin with popular farsan such as Khaman Dhokla, Patra, Khandvi, and crispy Fafda, accompanied by an assortment of tangy chutneys and pickles. These light yet flavourful appetisers perfectly capture the essence of Gujarati snacking culture.

The main course offers an equally tempting spread. Signature dishes like

Undhiyu, a slow-cooked medley of seasonal vegetables and spices, Sev Tameta Nu Shaak, Ringan Bateta, Gujarati Dal, and the mildly sweet Kadhi reflect the delicate balance of flavours that defines the cuisine. Freshly prepared Thepla, Bajra Rotla, Phulka, and soft rotis complement the curries, while fragrant steamed rice and traditional khichdi complete the wholesome meal.

No Gujarati feast is complete without desserts, and the festival delivers generously. Diners can indulge in classics such as Shrikhand, Basundi, Mohanthal, and Sukhdi, each offering a comforting finish that highlights

Gujarat's fondness for rich dairy-based sweets.

What makes the festival particularly memorable is the attention to authenticity. Every dish is prepared using traditional recipes and carefully selected ingredients, ensuring that the flavours remain true to their origins while appealing to contemporary palates. The chefs have succeeded in presenting a menu that is both nostalgic for those familiar with Gujarati food and an exciting culinary discovery for first-time diners.

More than just a dining experience, the Gujarati Food Festival at Radisson Blu Kaushambi is a celebration of culture, tradition and the legendary hospitality for which Gujarat is known. Whether one is a connoisseur of regional Indian cuisine or simply looking to explore new flavours, this festival promises a memorable gastronomic journey that lingers long after the last bite.

A WEEK-LONG
CULINARY SHOWCASE
IN DELHI CELEBRATES
AUTHENTIC CYPRIOT
FLAVOURS, BRINGING
MEDITERRANEAN
TRADITIONS, HERITAGE
AND CULTURE ALIVE
THROUGH FOOD



Education for earning and education for living

AMMA (SRI MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI)

Today, communicating through machines has become standard practice. It helps us feel that people who are physically far away are actually very close. However, when there is no heartfelt connection, even those who are physically close feel far away.

It is important to carefully listen to what others are saying. In the world we see and hear a lot of things. However, unnecessarily meddling in other's affairs often ends in disaster. It is essential to ruthlessly discriminate between information we need to know and information we do not need to know. A man was walking along the road when he heard someone repeating: "Thirteen... thirteen... thirteen..." The sound was coming from behind a high wall. Curious to know what was going on, he pressed his ear against a hole in the wall, upon which he was immediately bitten.

The man jerked his head away and screamed in pain. Instantly, from the other side of the wall, he heard the voice begin again: "Fourteen... fourteen... fourteen..." The wall was the outer boundary of an insane asylum. We are like this. We have developed the habit of communicating superficially and meddling unnecessarily. This needs to change. We must cultivate the habit of listening carefully to what others say. Once, there was a computer that could answer any question—science, history, geography, politics, art. People asked it about everything under the sun. In an instant, the correct answer would flash on the screen. Then a clever little boy came forward and asked: "Hello, Super Computer, how's it going? Are you doing well?" That was his question. The computer screen blinked and then went blank. There was no answer. The computer that could answer every question in the world could not answer a simple question about itself. Most of us are like this. We lack aware-



The State University of New York presented Amma with an Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters on May 25, 2010.

ness and knowledge about our own self. Education for earning a living and education for life are two different things. We learn to make a living in order to survive. We want to become an engineer or a doctor, and we go to college to study for that purpose.

But education for life is spirituality. Spirituality is understanding the nature of the mind and the nature of the world and then moving forward. It is not enough for us to master the language of machines. We must learn the language of the heart. For this, a spiritual foundation is essential. It is not enough for parents to give their children only wealth and luxuries. The wealth that they really need to impart to their children is culture and dharma. Even if a person buys the most expensive car and fills its tank with the highest grade petrol, a battery is needed in order to start the engine. Similarly, however much wealth and education children receive, it is the love and moral values learned from their parents that help them handle any cir-

cumstances life brings. The foundation of this is an open heart that is ready to give and receive love.

What the youth of today lack is proper judgment. Merely by dissemination of information, we cannot develop judgment. For this, we must develop faith in the cosmic power, the power beyond our mind and intellect. We should eliminate the egoistic notion that our life will become fruitful through mere human effort alone. We should bow down. Then this cosmic power will flow into us.

If we ask a guitarist or a singer where their music comes from, they will probably say, "From my heart." But, if we surgically open up their heart, will we find any music there? If they say that the music comes from their finger tips or their throat, would we find music if we searched in those places?

Then, from where does the music arise? It arises from a place beyond the body and mind. This place is the abode of Pure Consciousness, God. The younger generation should strive to understand and respect this power. Youth should be made aware of the importance of love, selfless service, humility and the necessity of giving back to society the fruit reaped from their success. For a householder, a CEO of a company or even a political leader, first one should know oneself. This is true strength. One should know and accept one's own faults, shortcomings and limitations, and try to overcome them. That is when a true leader is born.



Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, known simply as Amma, is a spiritual master and humanitarian who has given her darshan 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

Being good is greater than being great

Nothing enriches humanity more than goodness. A kind word, a helping hand, or a simple gesture that brings a smile to someone's face can brighten a day, heal a hurt, and strengthen the bonds that unite us. Great souls inspire us not merely through extraordinary achievements but through their extraordinary humanity



DR SWAMI GYANANANDDAS

On the afternoon of 8 August 2018, at the age of 85, His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj surprised everyone accompanying him on his journey to Bodeli, Gujarat. Instead of proceeding directly to his destination, he asked his driver to turn towards Kothiya village, where a small tribal hut awaited a visitor it had long dreamed of receiving.

What made the visit remarkable was not merely where he went, but why he went. Several years earlier, a poor tribal farmer named Ramjibhai Rathwa had met Mahant Swami Maharaj and made a simple, heartfelt request: "Swami, please visit my village someday." It was the wish of an ordinary devotee with no influence, wealth, or social standing. Time passed. The request was forgotten by many. But it was not forgotten by Mahant Swami Maharaj. Years later, while travelling to Bodeli BAPS Mandir, Swamiji unexpectedly instructed the driver to turn towards Kothiya village. The accompanying sadhus were surprised. There was no scheduled program there, no grand assembly awaiting him, and no prominent dignitary to meet. Yet Swamiji had remembered the humble plea of a poor devotee and was determined to fulfill it.

The home belonged to Ramjibhai Rathwa, a farmer whose dwelling was built of bamboo-strip walls, an aluminum-sheet roof, and a floor covered with dried rice stalks. There were no marble floors, no elaborate decorations, and no signs of material prosperity. Yet, for Mahant Swami Maharaj, none of that mattered. Drawn by love rather than comfort, he entered the humble hut and sat affectionately on a simple cot, treating the family with the same warmth and respect that others might reserve for royalty.

He performed aarti in their tiny hut-



mandir, personally distributed prasad to every family member, and showered sanctified flowers upon their belongings, sanctifying their home. The joy on the faces of the family was beyond words. A request made years ago had not only been remembered, but it had been honored with affection and grace.

The visit did not end there. Swamiji also met the villagers, encouraging them to give up addictions and embrace a life of morality, faith, and harmony. Under the open sky of a remote tribal village, he uplifted hearts and transformed lives.

In a world that often equates greatness with power, wealth, and recognition, this quiet visit revealed a far nobler truth: Being good is greater than being great. The measure of a person is not how many important people he meets, but how much importance he gives to those whom society often overlooks. By remembering the wish of a poor farmer years later and travelling to his humble hut, Mahant Swami Maharaj demonstrated that genuine goodness possesses a greatness of its own.



Of course, titles fade, applause quiets, and positions shift, but the impression of a kind heart endures forever. True greatness is not measured by how high we rise, but by how gently we walk among others. Being good, honest, humble, and selfless creates a legacy that no worldly success can surpass. It is goodness, not greatness, that touches lives, wins hearts, and ultimately defines our worth.

There is a popular saying: "It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice." This saying proves that, while being important holds some value, being good, kind, humble, and virtuous is far greater.

A profound thinker once wrote, "The greatest happiness on this earth is the conviction that we are loved." Indeed, when someone remembers us in our absence without any selfish agenda or expectation, when they long for our presence, and when they respond positively to our every gesture, such love, born of purity and sincerity, brings joy that cannot be measured.

This humility is the hallmark of greatness. Great spiritual masters inspire us not only through their wisdom, but through their extraordinary attention to these simple expressions of humanity. Their lives remind us that goodness is not reserved for grand occasions; it is found in the choices we make every day.

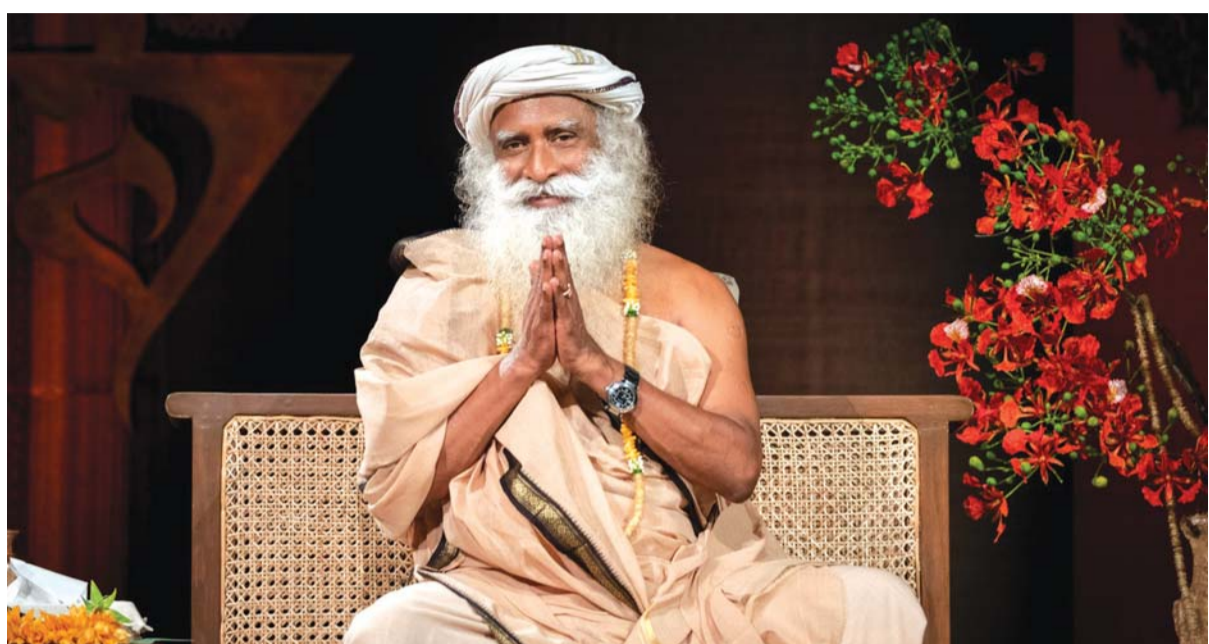
Of course, each day presents countless opportunities to spread goodness. A kind word, a helping hand, a patient ear, or a thoughtful gesture may seem small, yet such acts can leave a lasting impact, bringing a smile to someone's face and making life a little brighter.

The world may remember our achievements for a while, but it remembers our character forever. Those who are truly good do not seek to shine; they become the reason others shine. In the quiet simplicity of humility, kindness, and selflessness lies a strength far greater than any worldly success. Let us strive not just to rise high, but to grow deep, because being good is not only greater than being great, it is the very foundation of what makes greatness meaningful.

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

Producing leaders for India

What do you think is the reason behind us not seeing the kind of leaders we should have — whether in companies or government?



SADHGURU

There is a historic element to this. We need to understand that we have been under occupation for centuries. In an

occupied nation, there is a certain psychology - when you step out, don't raise your head and be seen. Put your head down and just come home. So, wherever there is a problem, you always put your head down and come away. This has been our attitude for centuries. We have such a strong instinct to avoid every problem. But a leader is someone who confronts every problem.

When I was in college, those were the times when all kinds of strikes were happening. I remember how my mother used to be so worried every time. She knew I was a firebrand, and if I stepped out, I may be in trouble. So she would tell me, "Just go to college and come back home. Don't go anywhere else. Something is happening on the street." I would ask her, "Doesn't this issue matter to you? Why shouldn't I go? All the other boys are going. What is your stand on this?" She would reply, "Yes, it matters, but you come home." This is the wisdom of an occupied nation - somehow duck and you will survive. If you stand up, your head may go.

You will see, if something happens on the street, there will only be bystanders staring at something - not one person stands up and does what is needed. It is very rare to find someone jumping into action and doing something. That is not the case with most other nations.

This is deep-rooted in our country. This has to change. Those times are over. It is time - whatever the damn problems in this country, they are our problems. We have to address them. We cannot dodge them.

Today, things are beginning to change. It is only now that people are looking at being leaders. Otherwise, leadership was always in somebody else's hands. Our business was to not get into trouble. It is significant that today, many of our corporate leaders are people born in free India. And for the first time, we have a Prime Minister born in free India. This is significant because we were not in an occupied nation, we do not know what that experience is. This is a new generation of people who are thinking about where the nation should go and have a certain pride about who we are. It is not that the previous generation did not have it, but generally, there was a very natural instinct of "When there is trouble, look away. Don't get into the situation."

India is a tremendous pool of talent. Wherever else we go, Indians do phenomenally well, but we have not done well in our country because of lack of leadership and organization. One of the biggest problems in India has been lack of leadership. When we utter the word "leadership," people always think of the Prime Minister and Chief Ministers. But leadership is not just at the top. We need leadership at every layer of society, which is completely missing.

Today, if a good leader arises, everyone else starts worshipping him. A leader does not need worship. What he needs is a reinforcement of various

levels of leadership so that his leadership finds traction - when he wants to do something, it will find its way to the grassroots. That is not happening right now in the country. At the top, there is an intention and they are trying to do something, but it is not finding traction down the line because there is no such leadership all along to understand and implement what needs to be done.

Leaders don't fall from the sky. Some people make themselves into leaders or sometimes, situations compel them to become leaders. But the rest of the people need a proper system to become leaders. That system to build leadership is largely missing in India.

Isha is in the process of creating a leadership movement in the country and as part of this, we are building the Isha Leadership Academy. Starting from a homemaker, to a grocer, to a panchayat leader, to an MLA, I have identified eleven layers of leadership that we need in our society, and we are preparing courses for them. Besides the regular MBA, a variety of programs - a week-long program, a three-week course, a six-week program and more - will be available. Empowered with insight, inspiration, inner wellbeing, integrity and humility, these graduates will become active, successful entrepreneurs who can fit seamlessly into any organization and shape the society and world we inhabit.

(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)

What Alexander could not conquer

Dispassion is your strength, and the story of Alexander the Great reveals this truth.

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

Before Alexander marched into India, people in his country asked him to bring back, a sanyasi (one who is unshaken by anything is a sanyasi), for they were precious and found only here. When he arrived, he ordered that sanyasis be brought to him. But, strangely, nobody arrived in response to his summons. He then sent a warning: he would chop off the heads of those who refused. Still, nobody responded to the warning. He threatened to take away their books - four Vedas and the ancient scriptures. It is said the pundits secretly made their children memorize every manuscript overnight and handed over the texts the next morning.

Alexander had the manuscripts, but he still wanted a sanyasi. And a sanyasi would not come.

Finally, he was forced to go in search of a sanyasi himself. When he found one, he threatened to behead him on the spot if the sanyasi did not come along. The sanyasi replied that Alexander could do so if he wished. The mighty conqueror could not even look into the eyes of the sanyasi.

What is it that stopped Alexander? He could not stand the power of dispassion he saw in the sanyasi's eyes. For the first time in his life as a conqueror, he stood before a person who did not care about an emperor. Dispassion is not arrogance but centeredness.

When Alexander was in India, some people presented him with golden bread on a plate. He said he was hungry and asked for real bread. They replied that he was an emperor; how could he eat ordinary wheat bread? Alexander wondered if he was being made fun of. He was starving, and wanted real wheat bread. When people placed ordinary, real bread before Alexander, they asked, "Is this bread not available in your own country? Why have you conquered so many lands? Is it only to eat the same bread that is eaten everywhere?"

This shook Alexander for a moment. He felt it was the truth. What was the point of conquering a country after country? All that one needed was to live peacefully and happily. When he did not have that happiness and peace



inside him, putting his stamp on every village and town had no meaning.

So it is said that Alexander instructed that when he died, his hands should be kept open, for everyone to see. He wanted the world to know that, though he had conquered so many countries, Alexander the Great was leaving with empty hands. He was unable to take a single thing from this earth.

Now, why is this story so relevant? Look back at all the desires you have fulfilled so far and ask yourself whether they have given you rest. They have only created a few more desires, and those desires have sent you on yet another pointless trip. The mind is like a merry-go-round. A merry-go-round has dummy horses that do not go anywhere. They just go round and round in the same place, giving you the illusion that you have travelled miles, when you have reached nowhere. This is what desires do for you. A mind obsessed with them cannot find peace.

People often prioritize their feelings over their intellect. They constantly seek validation and approval from others. They believe that fulfillment lies somewhere outside themselves. They become slaves to their emotions. No conquest can satisfy a mind that keeps looking outward for what can only be found within.

You may have a craving for beautiful things, and you keep looking at

them. How long can you keep looking? Your eyes will tire of the most beautiful views, and you will close your eyes. Later, you may forget the scenes. All these objects that titillate the senses have their limitations. But your mind is not ready to accept these limitations. It wants unlimited joy and pleasure, which the five senses cannot give you. You simply get burnt out going over and over the same thing.

Dispassion is not about running away from the world or blaming the world. Often, people who think they have dispassion keep blaming their circumstances. They run away from the objects of the senses, fearing them as big temptations. But the fear of temptation is far worse than the temptation itself. Dispassion allows you to retrieve your senses from the objects or the craving, and take them to the Source.

And dispassion does not take away the joy from you; it gives the joy that nothing else can give. It does not divide you; in fact, it connects you to the present moment totally. When your mind is hoping for something, or regretting the past, you are not in the moment. When you are fully centered while doing anything in the world, then you are one hundred percent with every moment. You may be eating, enjoying every bit of it, and you are one hundred percent absorbed in it. You can feel every sip of the soup you are having. Every bite of the food tastes great. Every sight is fresh and new. You look at everything as if you are looking at it for the first time. Dispassion is not something dry and boring. It makes every experience complete.

There is a beautiful verse by Adi Shankaracharya: Kasya sukham na karoti viraagaha, which means, what pleasure can dispassion not bring to you? There is no joy that dispassion cannot give you. This is because you are fully in the moment.

When attention shifts from taking to giving, and from seeking recognition to being centred, a profound freedom dawns. Dispassion helps you understand that everyone who has come to this world has come to give something. We have nothing to take from here. This is a very valuable shift in consciousness.

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



Opinion

The New York Times

The Supreme Court Is Unshackling the Presidency

Kate Shaw

A contributing Opinion writer, a professor of law at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School and a host of the Supreme Court podcast “Strict Scrutiny.”

WE HAVE just witnessed another example of the Supreme Court’s unshackling of the U.S. presidency. On Thursday morning the court issued a decision allowing the Trump administration to cancel Temporary Protected Status for hundreds of thousands of individuals from Haiti and Syria. The administration is now free to move forward with what immigrants’ rights advocates describe as the largest de-documentation in U.S. history.

In addition to its awful human toll, the decision allowing the T.P.S. terminations to go into effect highlights one of the more troubling mysteries of this era. Between the first and second Trump terms, why has the conservative majority of the Supreme Court become so much more accommodating of and deferential to this president? And, in particular, why has Chief Justice John Roberts proved so much less willing to call the administration out on its lies and challenge its motives — particularly since, according to virtually every metric, the second Trump administration has been far more extreme, and far more lawless, than the first?

It’s possible that the court fears that ruling too frequently against the administration risks noncompliance, and so it is doling out its losses carefully. It could also be that for a majority of the justices, support for the administration’s substantive agenda, including its restrictive immigration policies, outweighs concerns about specific legal violations. But neither of those theories fully explains why the court — and Chief Justice Roberts in particular — has approached Trump 2.0 so differently from Trump 1.0.

During the first Trump term, the court ruled against President Trump in critical cases. In two cases that bear more than a passing resemblance to the T.P.S. case, Chief Justice Roberts cast the deciding votes and wrote the opinions blocking Mr. Trump from adding a citizenship question to the 2020 census and rescinding the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.

These decisions did more than thwart the administration’s policy objectives: They essentially called the administration out on its dishonesty.

The census case featured substantial evidence that the goal of the citizenship question was, in the words of a prominent Republican operative, to facilitate legislative redistricting that would be “advantageous to Republicans and non-Hispanic whites.” When the Trump administration sought to defend its actions on the grounds that it needed the citizenship question to enable the Justice Department to enforce the Voting Rights Act, the court concluded that the explanation was plainly pretextual.

The DACA rescission went down on relat-



SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

ed grounds — that the Department of Homeland Security did not consider or explain important aspects of the action it was taking, and, implicitly, that it had concealed its true motives.

Of course, Mr. Trump also notched important Supreme Court victories during his first term. But even some of the pro-Trump rulings came with an undercurrent of skepticism.

In *Trump v. Hawaii*, the court allowed the president to carry out the third iteration of his travel ban, refusing to invalidate the ban on the grounds that it was a product of unconstitutional anti-Muslim bias. But Chief Justice Roberts’s opinion for the court seemed to convey disapproval of Mr. Trump’s anti-Muslim statements, favorably quoting a statement by President George W. Bush, following the Sept. 11 attacks, in which Mr. Bush urged tolerance and emphasized that we are “a great country because we share the same

values of respect and dignity and human worth.”

In what appeared to be an implicit rebuke of Mr. Trump, Chief Justice Roberts’s opinion noted that throughout our history, presidents have “performed unevenly in living up to those inspiring words.” The chief justice’s opinion in that case also turned at least in part on the fact that the policy process that resulted in the ban had involved extensive interagency consultation and input from other government entities, like the Department of Homeland Security. But as for Mr. Trump, the court intimated, he alone could perhaps not be trusted.

Over the past two years, the court’s posture toward Mr. Trump — and Chief Justice Roberts’s posture in particular — has been strikingly different. Even before the start of the second Trump term, Chief Justice Roberts’s opinion in *Trump v. United States* granted Mr. Trump extraordinarily broad im-

munity from criminal liability for acts taken while in office — along the way offering a vision of the presidency beyond the reach of most checks on government power.

This posture has continued. Again and again on the shadow docket, the court has issued entirely unreasoned orders siding with Mr. Trump — allowing immigration enforcement agents to stop citizens and noncitizens alike simply because they speak Spanish or appear to be Latino, allowing the president to remove individuals to third countries without complying with the Convention Against Torture and permitting the expulsion of all transgender service members from the military, among many such orders.

In the T.P.S. case, the court has permitted the administration to terminate the immigrants’ protected status in the face of considerable evidence that it flouted statutory requirements for doing so and that key decision makers — including the president — were motivated by unconstitutional racial bias.

It is true that the court ruled against Mr. Trump in the case of sweeping tariffs on imports, and it will almost surely rule against him in other cases before this Supreme Court term is done. But it is telling what the court did *not* do in the tariffs case.

It did not note the considerable tension between the national-security rationale the administration presented to the courts and Mr. Trump’s many other statements suggesting the imposition of tariffs was actually driven by other reasons: Brazil’s prosecution of its former president Jair Bolsonaro, for example, and India’s importation of Russian oil.

The opinion also did not address the tension between Mr. Trump’s public crowing about the revenue-raising effect of his tariffs and Solicitor General D. John Sauer’s insistence before the court that the tariffs at issue were “not revenue-raising tariffs.” “The fact that they raise revenue is only incidental,” he said. Instead, the court’s majority merely concluded that the statute’s text did not confer on Mr. Trump the authority he claimed.

Even if Chief Justice Roberts now wished to rein in Mr. Trump, it’s not clear that he would have the votes, as he did in the first term. But the chief justice’s decision to assign the writing of the opinion in the T.P.S. case to Justice Samuel Alito, and to join that opinion without writing separately, gives his imprimatur, as well as the imprimatur of the court, to presidential action that is antithetical to the very notion of the equal protection of the laws. It also provides the administration with a permission structure to proceed with still more actions based on egregiously unconstitutional motivations.

Aspiring autocrats and authoritarians often seek to marginalize not just the law but also courts. And perhaps John Roberts has seen this potential, has grasped it and has maneuvered in hopes of avoiding it. The problem is that he has wildly empowered Mr. Trump, and betrayed core constitutional values, along the way.

Why isn’t the chief justice putting limits on this administration?

The Secret Reason Bosses Want Everyone to Return to the Office

Adam Grant, Marissa Shandell and Courtney Elliott

Dr. Grant is a contributing Opinion writer and an organizational psychologist at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, where Ms. Shandell and Ms. Elliott are Ph.D. candidates.

WHEN the pandemic came to an end, many people who had been working from home assumed they would be allowed to maintain that habit at least a few days a week. But today in the U.S., a third of companies have forced everyone back to the office full time and have banned remote and hybrid work.

Some leaders say they insist on full-time in-person work because it boosts productivity, despite clear evidence that it does not. Others claim it’s about collaboration, creativity or culture. Our new research reveals that the objection to any work from home is more likely to be driven by something else entirely: ego.

Case by case, there may be good reasons for teams to work together in person. As a general rule, though, it turns out that ordering people back to the office full time is a power and status move. It’s a signature strategy of leaders who exhibit narcissistic qualities. They see any kind of remote work as a threat to their authority and admiration. They want to be worshiped at the office altar.

Over the past six years, we’ve studied why some leaders continue to support remote work, while others resist it. We surveyed thousands of executives, middle managers and frontline supervisors on a host of personality traits. When we later asked them about their stances on hybrid and remote work, their answers didn’t correlate with how much they trusted their employees or how much they loved being around people. The only trait that consistently predicted objections to remote work was narcissism — the tendency to be self-centered and entitled. The higher the opinions of themselves leaders expressed, the more they coveted power and status — and the more they favored return-to-office mandates.

That pattern held for chief executives of Fortune 500 companies. Since we couldn’t directly measure the size of their egos, we measured factors that many previous studies have identified as reliable proxies for narcissism: the sizes of their pay packages, their signatures and their photos in their company reports. (No, the chief executives probably



JOOHEE YOON

aren’t directly overseeing the page layout, but their underlings have to figure out what will and won’t please the boss.) Commanding outside compensation and projecting an outside image sends a message right out of Ron Burgundy’s playbook: *I’m kind of a big deal*. We found that the higher chief executives scored on this index, the more likely they were to seek power and status by becoming chairmen of their own companies and joining the boards of other companies. These were the chief executives who made the most negative statements about remote and hybrid work during the first two years of the pandemic.

The connection between narcissistic personality traits and wanting people in the office full time is not coincidental — it’s causal. In one experiment, we got leaders to reflect on the role that a bold, assertive ego played in the success of Steve Jobs as Apple’s chief executive and Larry Ellison as Oracle’s. After participating in that exercise, leaders were more likely to oppose remote work.

None of this is to say that individual leaders who reject remote work are necessarily ego-maniacs. Many factors influence workplace

policies around flexibility. But our data does show that overall, self-centered leaders tend to struggle with the idea of employees making independent choices about where to work. Psychologists have long suggested that narcissism is like a drug — it leaves people craving a regular supply of attention and validation. Remote work deprives leaders of access to that supply.

When people aren’t in the office, it’s harder to command and control. Leaders can’t intimidate by hovering over cubicle desks and slamming doors. They can’t establish their dominance by summoning people to a conference room and pounding their fists on the table. They can’t even make direct eye contact to stare people down.

Remote work also prevents leaders from basking in the glow of employee reverence. Instead of standing out in the corner office, leaders are lost in a sea of equal squares on a screen. Instead of rapt attention, they’re met online with boredom, fatigue and interruptions from partners, children and pets. Instead of being showered with immediate gratification, they get glitchy facial expressions and delayed replies. Sycophantic reassurances from employees just don’t have the same effect if they’re on Slack.

Self-centered leaders often respond to these threats by tightening their grip. They declare that people are shirking from home instead of working from home. They threaten to fire people who aren’t on site five days a week.

Rigorous evidence shows that forcing people to come in every day backfires. Take it from studies of over 450 companies and over three million employees: Return-to-office mandates fail to increase financial returns. They succeed only in motivating star employees to quit, reducing the satisfaction of those who stay and discouraging new talent from joining. Experiments at tech companies and nonprofits show that letting people work from home part of the week boosts happiness and decreases turnover by a third — without any cost to performance. In many cases, those employees even get more done, because they don’t have to spend time commuting and don’t get distracted by office interruptions.

There are limits to the benefit of flexible office policies. Research suggests that working from home for more than half the week can be isolating — it’s harder to build connections and cultures. It’s also more difficult to encourage creative collisions, informal learning and mentoring. But it doesn’t take five days a week to accomplish these goals. In fact, it

turns out that people are most collaborative and creative when they work remotely part of the week. They can use a day or two at home to focus on individual deep work and reserve the rest of the week for communication and collective problem-solving. It’s well documented that too much togetherness breeds groupthink (not to mention germs). When we spend some time apart, we actually generate more innovative ideas and make smarter decisions.

Hybrid work does have its own challenges for leaders. It’s not fun to try to inspire through a recorded video message or lead a brainstorming session on a digital whiteboard. But to maintain a competitive advantage in an increasingly flexible world, it’s time for leaders to put their egos aside and master the art of managing from afar. Evidence supports a few basic guidelines.

One: Coordination counts. Teams need anchor days when everyone shows up — especially to welcome newcomers and mentor junior people. At Microsoft, new hires who spent at least a couple of days a month with their manager and their teams were more satisfied with their early experiences, which in turn meant they were more likely to stay over the next year and a half.

Two: Intensity beats frequency. The software company Atlassian has found that spending a few days with your team at a well-designed quarterly team gathering does more for connection and belonging than daily schleps to the office.

Three: Hybrid work is not one-size-fits-all. Different jobs require different amounts of time in person. So do different people; for example, flexibility proves particularly important in attracting and retaining women. And you need to gather together more if your staff operates like a basketball team passing the ball back and forth, rather than a gymnastics team whose members do their own individual events. (This explains why fully remote teams struggle to patent new technologies, but the people who examine patent applications are more productive when they can work from anywhere they like.)

Four: Most people care more about when they work than where. If they can choose the hours, they’re more willing to let leaders pick the place.

Organizational policies shouldn’t be vanity projects. The responsibility of leaders is not to mold the world to their needs. It’s to adapt themselves to the world’s needs, even if it means learning to live without the thrill of a live audience.

Dragging people back to their desks is a power move.

COLUMNIST | LYDIA POLGREEN

A Heist Film for Those Appalled by Corruption

I WAS A few months shy of my seventh birthday the first time I saw looting up close. We were living in Nairobi, Kenya, in an apartment complex near the downtown shopping district. All of a sudden, people started streaming back to our building with armloads of brand-new stuff. I watched in awe as a man balanced a small refrigerator on his head, blood pouring out of a gash above his eyes.

"All the shops are open and everything is free," I declared to my mother. "Can we go?"

We did not go. The shops weren't open, exactly. A group of disgruntled military officers had attempted to overthrow the Kenyan government, then led by a budding kleptocratic autocrat named Daniel arap Moi. Amid the chaos, some of the Kenyan underclass had decided to pry open the gates of shops across the country and help themselves to the goods inside.

Kenya was, and still is, a highly unequal society, and there seemed little evidence that merit was the distinguishing factor between those who had access to wealth and opportunity and those who toiled in menial jobs and lived in penury. The government did little to improve people's lives; corruption was rampant. In a perfect world, no one would steal. This was not a perfect world, and if the powerful were engaged in a smash-and-grab, it seemed natural that ordinary people would join in.

I thought of this childhood memory as I watched the filmmaker Boots Riley's irresistibly overstuffed, technicolor provocation "I Love Boosters." The film, which was released last month, follows a charismatic and very stylish crew of professional shoplifters — boosters, as they are known — who steal high-end clothing from retail stores and resell it to friends and neighbors at a steep discount.

Part anticapitalist satire, part buddy comedy, part heist movie, "I Love Boosters" is a messy, brilliant sendup of the absurd contradictions of our savage era of inequality and political corruption. It asks us: When theft defines a social system, what's the difference between the individual acts of ordinary people and the collective behavior of the powerful?

The movie's heroine goes by the nickname Corvette. Played by a luminous Keke Palmer, she lives in an abandoned fried chicken restaurant in Oakland and dreams of becoming a fashion designer; she plasters her makeshift home with her supernatural, candy-colored streetwear creations.

Corvette idolizes a famous, girl-bossy fashion mogul named Christie Smith, played by a delightfully unhinged Demi Moore. Smith sells her clothes at a highly successful chain of stores called Metro Designers, offering flashy, expensive streetwear in a single color at each outlet. Want a different color? Go to another store. Corvette keeps a well-thumbed copy of Smith's "Lean In"-style manifesto on her night stand, bristling with Post-it notes.

Metro Designers is a favorite target for Corvette and her best friends, Mariah and Sade. The crew, the so-called Velvet Gang, have perfected an ingenious method for their elaborate heists. Corvette, Mariah and Sade, all of them Black women, stuff their oversized outfits with clothes while a pair of large Black men — participants in the scheme — pretend to get into a fistfight. A white woman, another confederate, distracts the salesclerks with feigned hysteria over witnessing Black male violence. In the melee, the Velvet Gang waddle out with their booty.

These thefts are common enough, and bold enough, to catch Smith's attention. In a television interview, she refers to the Velvet Gang as "low-class, urban bitches" and vows to

punish them. In her telling, the members of the Velvet Gang "have no style, they have no ingenuity. They steal it from me." Smith, it turns out, is a thief on a grander scale. Corvette discovers that Smith's company copied one of Corvette's far-out designs, a sculptural jumpsuit festooned with Jurassic scales on its arms and legs.

The thieving doesn't end there. The crew, having got themselves hired at a Metro Designers store to better case the joint, discover that workers are required to wear current-season Metro Designers clothes. The cost is deducted from their meager paychecks, with a 30 percent employee discount. Lunch breaks are so comically short — 30 seconds — that the peevish store manager sets out starting blocks for workers and times them on a stopwatch. A co-worker tries to persuade Corvette and the gang to join a unionizing effort, but they dismiss the idea in favor of their own scheme: a complicated heist of every Metro Designer store in the area.

Riley, the director, has been a left-wing agitator and activist for a long time. He is a self-described communist, and years ago he released rap albums with titles that made his politics quite plain: "Kill My Landlord," "Genocide & Juice," "Pick a Bigger Weapon" and "Steal This Album." His first feature film, "Sorry to Bother You," a black comedy about workers at a sinister telemarketing firm, was a modest indie hit, making about \$18 million on a budget of just over \$3 million. For his follow-up, Riley's producers nudged him toward a script he had shelved that was in a bankable genre: the heist movie.

I adore heist films. The genre has varied over the decades, but the essential elements create a timeless formula: a motley crew of

'I Love Boosters' is the perfect movie for our savage age.

down-at-heel social outcasts who possess unusual skills that the straight world has failed to reward. Invariably led by a charming antihero — think George Clooney's suave Danny Ocean from Steven Soderbergh's "Ocean's" franchise — they have gifts for things like safecracking, explosives management, reading architectural plans and coming up with creative ways to unload hot merchandise.

Their target is at best morally ambiguous: an odious casino mogul, a faceless bank, a jewelry store packed with trinkets for billionaires. The crimes aren't victimless, exactly, but no one roots for the plutocrat who gets fleeced. And most important, the crime itself must be executed with dazzling elegance. Heists are an artistic endeavor in which undervalued forms of labor are combined to pull off something akin to poetry or ballet. In the process, viewers almost inevitably end up on the side of the criminals.

The Velvet Gang are in many ways a classic heist crew — misfits on the edge of society with outside talents for which the world has no use. Expected to take their place at the bottom of the modern economic pyramid, they choose instead to dynamite the whole thing. So far, so heist. But instead of breaking into an art museum or cracking a safe buried beneath layers of elaborate security, they steal clothes from high-end stores. The gang's central crime threatens to upend the usual distribution of sympathy.

Shoplifting, after all, is regarded as a particularly pernicious crime, as close to pure selfishness as one can get. By stealing items most people simply pay for, shoplifters shift the cost of their greedy unwillingness to fol-

low the rules onto everyone else. This basic violation of the social contract would strike anyone as wrong. In recent years, this moral objection has risen to panic as retailers have claimed that gangs of shoplifters have caused huge losses and forced them to close stores.

In business terms, it isn't that simple. TJ Maxx was at the center of the shoplifting panic. An analysis of its parent company's accounts showed that though theft had whittled its margins by about 0.3 percentage points, other costs — including higher spending on shipping and markdowns of unsold merchandise — took away four times as much. In other words, the company's leaders bought things consumers didn't want and paid more to ship them.

Despite those missteps, the chief executive of TJX, the parent company of TJ Maxx, saw his pay rise 23 percent, not adjusted for inflation, between 2019 and 2024. Over that period, the company spent more than \$11 billion buying back shares of its own stock, a common method of rewarding shareholders and plumping the wallets of executives paid handsomely in company stock. That helped the chief executive make 1,565 times as much as the company's median employee. To paraphrase Bertolt Brecht, what is the robbing of a retail store compared to the founding of a retail empire?

This is exactly the kind of legal but mind-bending corporate flimflam at which Riley takes aim. In his hands, the heist movie becomes a metaphor for the multilayered heist of contemporary capitalism. There's the theft of ideas from the street to the high-fashion atelier; the purloined time, wages and dignity of workers; the stolen responsibility, as blame for social and economic problems is shifted from corporations and governments to individuals. In one running gag, supposedly ordinary citizens complain in television interviews about how cheap housing limits their ability to pay more rent and extol the freedom that comes with low pay.

Yet the film's resonance goes beyond the fun-house mirror of modern capitalism to the heart of power. In Donald Trump's second term, each week brings some fresh and shocking example of wanton self-dealing by the president and his cronies: shady crypto deals, the Jan. 6 slush fund, his family's exemption from I.R.S. audits, his flurry of well-timed stock trading, sweetheart no-bid government deals to favored contractors and more. In this heist, it seems, the casino bosses are definitely winning.

Heist movies are all about the thrill of the plan and the skill and camaraderie of the crew sticking it to an unfair system. Hollywood is, after all, part of the system, so heist movies do not always end in triumph for the thieves. In the original "Ocean's 11," a seemingly fail-safe plan to hide the stolen cash in the coffin of a crew member who dies of a heart attack goes spectacularly awry when the coffin, booty and all, ends up as ashes in a crematory.

So it is fitting, in a way, that by the end of "I Love Boosters" — stop reading if you don't want to know — the crew doesn't have much money to show for their ingenious schemes. The film has a happy ending in another way. Through a convoluted series of events, the crew ends up making common cause with the exploited workers in the Chinese factory who make the garments Metro Designers sells. Their efforts set off a series of global strikes, gumming up companies all across the world.

In the final scene, a cartoonish boulder of overdue bills that has chased Corvette throughout the film shrinks to the size of a golf ball, small enough to fit into her pocket. It turns out that the ultimate boost wasn't loot after all, but solidarity.

LETTERS

Anger Over the Immigration Rulings

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Justices Amplify President's Clout Over Immigration" (front page, June 26):

The Supreme Court's decision allowing the Trump administration to terminate Temporary Protected Status for Haitians and Syrians living in the United States is a blow to America's standards for common decency and prestige. How do more than 350,000 Haitians in the United States with protected status return to a nation engulfed in chaos and whose capital, Port-au-Prince, is controlled almost completely by dangerous gangs?

Even the State Department strongly advises Americans not to travel to Haiti because of the catastrophic violence and frequent kidnappings. The department is also backing a United Nations-authorized "gang suppression force" to respond to the precarious security situation.

Haitians in the United States were first granted T.P.S. after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti that killed an estimated 250,000 people, and again in 2021 during the unrest after

the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse that destabilized the country.

Now is not the time to cruelly turn our backs on those who have fled unimaginable natural disasters and chronic insecurity.

ANTHONY ARNAUD
LAGUNA NIGUEL, CALIF.

TO THE EDITOR:

The Supreme Court decision on Thursday on ending Temporary Protected Status for Haitians centered in significant part on whether President Trump's immigration policy is racist.

To be certain that the policy is racist, one need look no further than the fact that only 4,499 refugees have been admitted by the Trump administration to the United States this year, and of those refugees only three are not white Afrikaners from South Africa.

JON LANDAU, PHILADELPHIA
The writer is a former immigration attorney.

TO THE EDITOR:

In April, when the Supreme Court case on Temporary Protected Status was being argued, Justice Samuel Alito suggested that the term "non-white" is not a meaningful category.

Is there any evidence? Well, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which kept out or severely limited the numbers allowed into the country unless they came from Northern or Western Europe. Those barred included Jews who, after being denied entry into the United States, were unable to escape from Europe and were murdered in the Holocaust.

Among the main civil rights victories in the United States were the passage of the Voting Rights Act and new immigration laws that followed, opening the United States to the whole world. Now, President Trump has effectively reverted policy to the 1924 model, despite what the laws say. And the Supreme Court, in another example of judicial activism, is allowing it.

The court is essentially rewriting the law in front of our faces.

JACK M. BLOOM, GARY, IND.

The writer is a professor of sociology at Indiana University and the author of "Class, Race and the Civil Rights Movement."

TO THE EDITOR:

This Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice John G. Roberts — and in particular the Republican-appointed members of the court — will be remembered for their callous disregard for human rights and suffering.

INGRID FURLONG, NEW YORK

Huntington's Dilemma

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Carrying On After Choosing Uncertainty" (Science Times, June 23):

This article eloquently describes why my sister, Nancy Wexler, and I decided in the past not to get a predictive genetic test that could reveal whether we would develop Huntington's disease at some unknown future time.

In that era there were no promising clinical trials of treatments that might prevent, delay or slow the disease, only efforts to alleviate symptoms. Today the landscape is entirely different. Exciting clinical trials of disease-altering drugs are ongoing, and more are planned, though their progress depends largely upon continued federal funding of the National Institutes of Health.

Meanwhile, the quality of life for those living with Huntington's, and for those who know they will develop it, depends upon access to good social support, counseling, medical care and nutrition, as well as services such as home health assistance and physical and occupational therapy. These resources, already unequally distributed, are severely threatened by recent cuts in federal research funding and in safety net programs such as Medicaid and food stamps.

My sister and I are incredibly fortunate that she has access to the best care available. Our greatest wish, besides a cure, is that everyone else has it too.

ALICE R. WEXLER
SANTA MONICA, CALIF.

The writer is a historian and an author who has written and collaborated on books about Huntington's disease.

A Woman's Age

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "If You Feel Invisible, I've Got Great News," by Mireille Silcoff (Opinion guest essay, June 14):

Ms. Silcoff's essay rings true. There's no need to be judged by sinking jowls and expanding waistlines. We women have much to offer.

I went to graduate school when I started on Social Security and graduated the year I enrolled in Medicare. And to this day, I actively apply that education (a master's in biotechnology) to my work with people who are dying.

Approaching 80 this year is to be considered a gift. Cat calls and whistles? Not a chance! Our values change. To thrive, live without illness, contribute to society, travel, enjoy family and friends — these are all gifts. They supersede the past advantages of flowing locks and smoother skin.

SUE DESSAYER PORTER
PORTLAND, ORE.

TO THE EDITOR:

Mireille Silcoff writes: "Recently, I canvassed a number of my middle-aged female friends and asked: If you could drink a potion and become 22 again today, would you do it? A few waffled, but after some thought, not one of them said yes."

Well, I would. I just turned 79, and, unfashionable as it may be to admit it, I'd much rather be 29, or, better yet, 19. I'd look better, feel better, be exempt from ageism and, by far most important, I'd have more years ahead of me.

I felt the same way in my 50s. My old age has plenty of pleasures, and it definitely beats being dead. But I don't consider myself "garlanded with years," and yes, I'd rather be young again.

FELICIA NIMUE ACKERMAN
PROVIDENCE, R.I.

Students and A.I.

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Thanks to A.I., Student Cheating With A.I. Is Harder to Detect" (front page, June 21):

Asking A.I. to write your school assignments is like asking a robot to lift weights. The job gets done, but you accrue none of the benefits.

DANIEL J. BARRETT
ASHEVILLE, N.C.

The writer is the author of 13 books about technology.

TO THE EDITOR:

I spent 40 years in secondary school classrooms and administration. Of course students are using the available technology to do their homework!

The whole concept of homework, except perhaps for reading assignments, is obsolete. Students need to do all written work in the classroom, with the teacher available for guidance. Yes, less material will be covered. But students will own their thoughts and expression.

Education in general clings to outmoded techniques, procedures and standards. It's time for educators to move in ways that are thoughtful, innovative and practical.

DENNIS VELLUCCI, QUEENS



ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH VIA NEON

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

“Without fear and without favour”

ft.com/opinion

What Warsh can learn from Greenspan

New Fed chair must study his predecessor's successes — and avoid his mistakes

Alan Greenspan died this week, but his indelible influence on the Federal Reserve endures. New Fed chair Kevin Warsh has frequently referenced him in hearings and commentary, a testament that the thinking of his predecessor-but-three pervades his own. As Fed chair for almost two decades, Greenspan oversaw considerable success and notable failures. Warsh would do well to study both.

Among Greenspan's most important contributions was inaugurating an era of data-dependent policymaking. To a contemporary observer, a Fed chair paying close attention to reams of economic data might seem to be a given. But the postwar economic landscape that Greenspan inherited was considerably less quantitative than the one today. As an economic consultant in his

early career and a baseball-statistics obsessive in his personal life, Greenspan had a strong personal bias towards considering a wide array of data. He deserves praise as a pioneer in this regard. Each Fed chair since has followed this example during his or her term — and Warsh, who has been critical of the Fed's data dependence, would be wise to do the same.

Greenspan's approach to monetary policy also exemplified an admirable flexibility. During his tenure, he largely stuck to an unannounced 2 per cent inflation target, but did not dogmatically prioritise its sanctity. Far from pursuing what his Bank of England counterpart and occasional tennis partner Mervyn King called an “inflation nutter” approach, focused solely on targets, Greenspan paid close attention to labour market, wage, growth and business data. His discretion was crucial for the central bank to deliver on its mandate in times of stress. Warsh will probably follow Greenspan's flexible

approach, but which indicators he will prioritise remains to be seen.

The most important lessons of the Greenspan era arguably come from decision-making failures stemming from ideological blind spots. Even in his data focus he could be myopic, a strong command of business-level data eclipsing more rigorous analysis of the macroeconomy. Free-market fundamentalism prevented him from considering the risks of unstable credit conditions and mounting financial imbalances.

The consequences were clear: low rates led to cheap credit which, as Bank for International Settlements adviser William White predicted, created large bubbles during the global financial crisis. Global imbalances fuelled the early 2000s China shock that devastated entire American industries.

Neither can squarely be blamed on Greenspan's shortsightedness, but had he shed his Randian faith in unbound free markets, needless harm might have been avoided. If Warsh revisits his

Among his most important contributions was inaugurating an era of data-dependent policymaking

dovish posture of last year, he must appreciate the risks of expansionary policies beyond just inflation. And he should not be theological about markets — or be seduced by the golden calves of Wall Street and Silicon Valley.

One contradiction of Greenspan's tenure remains for Warsh to wrestle with: the so-called Greenspan put. The perception that the Fed chair backstops the US stock market has persisted in various forms since Greenspan's era, and can have dangerous consequences, even if the chair does not hold such a view.

Warsh could usefully dismantle this perception early on: not doing so could encourage excessive risks in an already febrile market environment. This does not mean ignoring equity market reactions — but he should do what he can to dispel the notion that the Fed views the level of the stock market as an end in itself. Greenspan paid lip service to free market ideas, but it is important that the new Fed chair signals a commitment to Greenspan's words, not his deeds.

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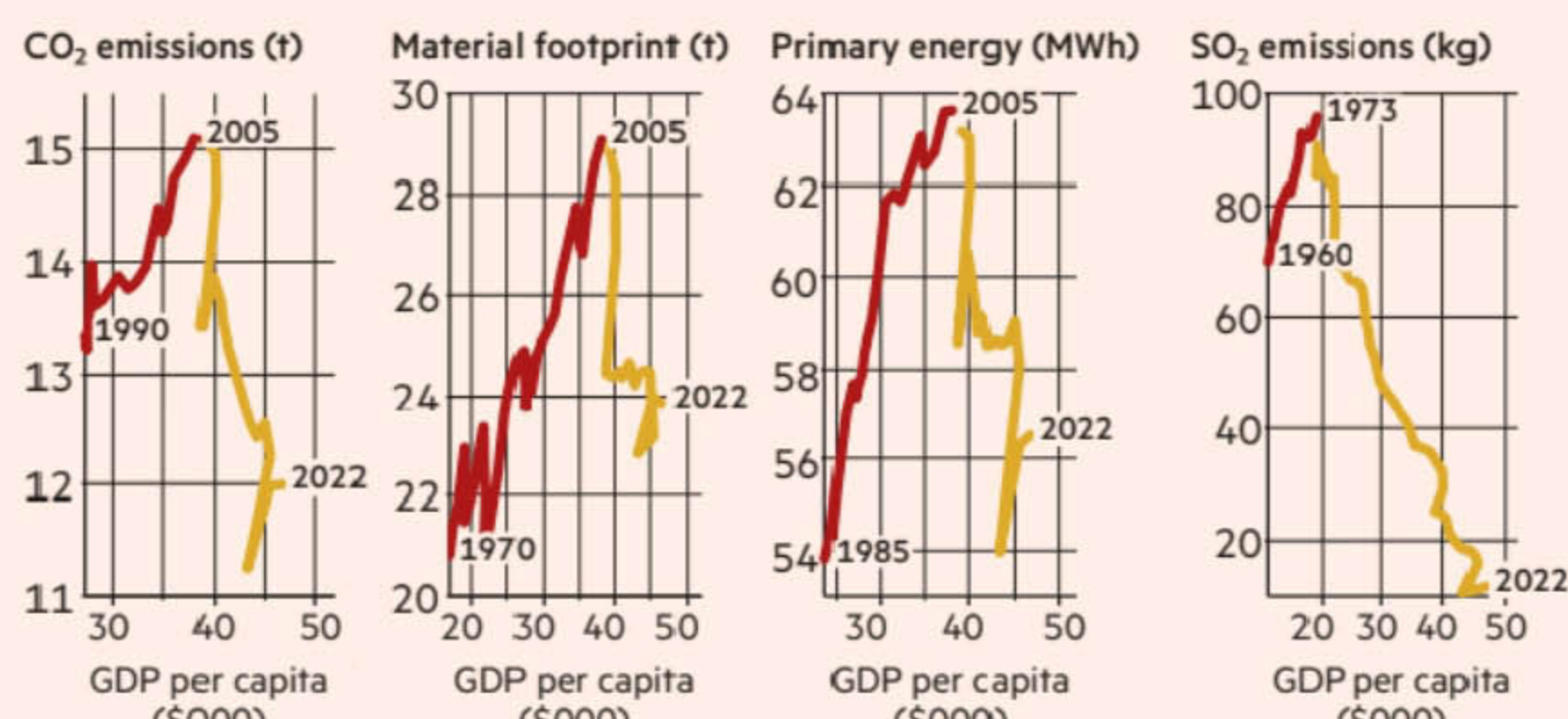
The shrinking arguments for degrowth

John Burn-Murdoch



Growth used to come with increased environmental impact; now rich countries are growing while reducing their footprints

Trajectory of per-capita environmental impact and GDP, high-income countries, 1960-2022



Emissions are adjusted to account for offshoring of manufacturing. Source: “Developed economies are growing while reducing many of their environmental impacts” (Dancer et al, 2026)

It's been a big moment for the degrowth movement. First, French economist Thomas Piketty and a team of researchers published the Global Justice Report this month, a proposal for radically reshaping the world economy in the service of social justice and environmental sustainability, including, as a core requirement, cutting annual per capita economic growth in the west to a trickle of 0-0.5 per cent. He was then joined by others including Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz arguing that “growth is a doomed strategy”.

There is much that the report gets right. Very high levels of inequality can be socially and politically destabilising; it is evidently preferable to raise living standards sustainably rather than by exhausting finite resources. But the idea that economic growth is a barrier to achieving better outcomes is at best outdated, in many cases a misreading of the data.

A few decades ago, the theory would have better matched the evidence. Back then, growth in GDP per capita still tended to be accompanied by growth in pollution and larger material footprints. But that link has long since decoupled in a growing roster of countries and pollution levels are now falling worldwide.

In many cases economic growth now reduces each person's environmental impact. Much of this results from hard-won regulation, hand-in-hand with growth. The solar and batteries revolution — central to decoupling energy from emissions — is now powering millions in poor countries and has also made fortunes in richer ones: a case of growth and wealth creation alongside huge positive externalities for people and planet.

Other assertions are more straightforwardly flawed, namely that growth is no longer accompanied by reductions in poverty, that it has not led to shared prosperity, and that wages have stagnated despite national incomes expanding.

The tight link between growth in GDP per capita and reduction in poverty is one of the most remarkable findings in economic research — and it has held firm across every global region for more than two centuries.

Researchers have long interrogated whether total national income growth is matched by growth in incomes for the poorest, consistently finding that it is, across a range of countries, time

periods and policy environments. When I updated these analyses to include the past 15 years, I found that this link between aggregate and bottom-fifth outcomes has become even stronger. Where incomes for the poorest have stagnated, it is generally because the economy didn't grow (see the UK of late), not because growth was shared unequally.

The argument that stagnant wages in rich countries have decoupled from soaring economic output also often rests on shaky analysis. On both sides of the Atlantic, comparing like with like, workers' output and compensation have kept moving in virtual lockstep.

And earlier this year new research pushed back on the argument that once a country becomes rich enough, further economic growth doesn't boost wellbeing. After adjusting for the way people change their frame of reference over time, focusing instead on whether they say they are doing better than in the past, the research found life satisfaction continued to climb alongside GDP per capita even in countries as rich as the US.

Moving away from individual material wellbeing to broader societal measures, research finds that economic growth fosters trust in government and prosperity boosts social cohesion. Indeed, the past decade of political turmoil in Britain has coincided not with rising inequality (it has been falling) but with anaemic growth.

To be clear, the current system is far from perfect and there are new challenges to shared prosperity on the horizon, not least the risk that AI delivers outsized returns to capital over labour and rich over poor. But where growth slows — whether through demographic decline, policy mis-steps or explicit degrowth agendas — living standards will stagnate (including for the poorest), reducing public support for altruism and pushing us towards a zero-sum world with increased inter-group tensions and more hoarding of scarce resources.

Economic growth isn't everything for everyone, but it turns out it's pretty close. It has delivered remarkable progress on exactly the benchmarks that its critics prioritise — recently even on environmental impact. The problem facing rich and poor alike today is that we don't have enough of it, not that we've had too much.

john.burn-murdoch@ft.com

Letters

Trump's Gaza 'Board of Peace' offers no reason to be cheerful

Former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton is dead wrong in suggesting that President Donald Trump's Gaza plan is the best, and only, possible path to achieving peace (Opinion, June 20). Surely she would recall the numerous similar “development gifts” that were dangled in front of the Palestinians following the Oslo Accords of 1993, but all without success.

I was responsible for the Middle East operations of the World Bank at the time. Following the signing of the

Oslo Accords, the Bank was given the task of promoting development in the Palestinian territories, particularly in Gaza. There were numerous development project proposals emanating from a variety of groups, most notably the US state department, the Israeli leaders, the well-meaning Jewish diaspora and others.

Among the proposals: a divided, access-controlled high-speed highway between Gaza and the West Bank to

ease Palestinian mobility barriers; industrial estates on the border of Gaza run jointly by the Israelis and Palestinians that would bring collaboration; large-scale housing to accommodate a returning Palestinian diaspora; greenhouses to promote agriculture in Gaza; etc.

The Palestinians overtly welcomed such initiatives, but in private conversations at the highest levels indicated considerable scepticism. They believed that the development

proposals were nothing but a convenient way to defer the core issue of Palestinian autonomy and statehood. Most such projects from that era today lie in ruins.

There is no reason to feel optimistic about Trump's so-called Board of Peace faring better. The Palestinian doubts since the 1990s have, if anything, deepened.

Indar Sud
Director of Middle East of The World Bank, 1995-2001, Reston, VA, US

London parks gave a taste of the countryside

It was depressing to read Sarah Langford's feature in your House & Home supplement about the changes occurring in London parks (“Who are London's parks for?”, FT Weekend, May 30), and in particular Lambeth Council's Brockwell Park, where the free-access Country Fair, first established in 1974, has been cancelled this year on the grounds of cost.

For many years I and my National Farmers' Union (NFU) colleagues staged a display about farming at the show, at no cost to the council. It was always popular and attracted enormous interest from predominantly urban attendees. I recall in particular the popularity of a cut-out plywood cow with an ingeniously created udder that when “milked” filled a pail with diluted whitewash. Children who had successfully “milked” the cow were offered a glass of actual milk.

One mother who had watched approvingly as her small daughter energetically got to work on the udder cried out in alarm when the girl was offered her glass of milk, and demanded to know if the milk was organic. On being told it was pasteurised but not organic, the girl was told not to drink it.

There is, I guess, still scope for informing the population of Lambeth about farming, and in my experience a real wish among many of them to learn. Sadly that has now been lost. So was the NFU stand at the Brent Show in Roundwood Park, long forgotten, where despite the irritation of persistent thefts our vast display of English apples was a useful reminder that not all fruit comes from abroad — although some of those attending found that hard to believe!

Shaun Leavey
Sherborne, Dorset, UK

Rent controls are a nettle we can't afford not to grasp

Regarding the article titled “No, now is not the time for UK rent controls” (Money, FT Weekend, May 30), as authors of three think-tank reports that have called for rent controls, we wanted to respond to the concerns laid out in the piece and explain why we think the time is indeed right for rent controls in England.

The author Neal Hudson makes two claims: that recent slowing of rental growth makes rent controls pointless, and that rent controls are likely to impede the building of homes.

On the first point, while it is true that rental inflation has slowed in the past year or two, it does not follow that introducing rent controls now would be pointless. Modelling in our reports shows that moderate caps would still deliver average annual savings of around £400 by the end of the decade.

On the author's second point, we agree that potential impacts of rent



The Bauhaus building in Dessau was built by Walter Gropius in 1925

controls on the availability of homes to rent, and the delivery of new homes, should be taken seriously. But each of our reports offered concrete, evidence-based mitigations.

Regarding landlords for existing rental properties, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's report demonstrated that it is possible to shield the most financially exposed landlords through reforms to taxation, overall reducing the number of landlords making a loss. The Institute for Public Policy Research's proposals included a 10-year exemption for new-build properties that evidence from Catalonia, New Jersey and California shows to work to prevent impacts on housebuilding. The New Economics Foundation suggests a holistic programme of housing affordability measures, including a modern system for fair rents, recognising that no single policy will solve the problem of structurally high rents.

As we look down the barrel of another period of essential bills increasing, it's a nettle we can't afford not to grasp — especially since, contra the article's final line, the thing that international evidence shows most clearly is that rent controls are very effective in keeping rents down.

Rosie Worsdale
Senior Policy Adviser, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, Yorkshire, UK

Maya Singer Hobbs
Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Public Policy Research, London SW1, UK

Molly Harris
Senior Researcher, New Economics Foundation, London SE1, UK

Sketchy behaviour from today's teenagers

Claer Barrett poses the question of teenagers denied their phones: “But when the ban begins, what will they do instead?” (Opinion, June 20). Put a pocket sketchbook in their bag and go out and draw. Please.

Chloë Alexander
Corsham, Wiltshire, UK

Europeans blame capital for the affordability crisis

Gabriel Gatehouse worries that real housing scarcity is being redirected into anger at immigrants rather than at the wealth piling up at the top (“Big Tech is stoking unrest in the UK. Why?”, The Weekend Essay, June 20). It is a serious worry and he is right to raise it.

I have spent recent months on the other half of that question. The European Commission ran a public consultation on affordable housing; it is a rare chance to hear housing-stressed citizens say, in their own words, whom they hold responsible.

The answer surprised me. Europeans point overwhelmingly at investors, speculators and the financialisation of housing and almost never at immigrants. Renters and city dwellers are the keenest to blame capital. Those under the most housing strain were no likelier than anyone else to blame migrants. Even the word “foreigner”, when it cropped up, usually meant the wealthy foreign buyer, not the new arrival.

On this evidence, the deflection Mr Gatehouse fears has not taken hold — not here, not yet. That is reassuring, but no cause for complacency. The pressures he describes are real, and vigilance is what keeps housing-stressed people from finding a scapegoat.

Jaime P Luque
Director, ESCP Institute of Real Estate Finance and Management, Madrid, Spain

AfD's chilling attacks on the Bauhaus

As an American-German with a background in architecture, I found Anne-Sylvaine Chassany's report on the AfD's attacks on the Bauhaus movement chilling (Report, June 22). The article highlights something more subtle than the debate about architecture or aesthetics.

While many understandably focus on the AfD's success at the polls and the constitutional implications, I fear the cultural dimension may prove equally important.

Erich Kästner warned that one must stop a snowball before it becomes an avalanche. By the time it reaches the valley, it is too late.

The Bauhaus is one of Germany's most admired cultural contributions to the world. When certain politicians seek to portray it as somehow alien, decadent or “un-German”, they are doing more than criticising buildings. Cultures are often excluded before people are. Ideas become suspect before citizens do.

Germany's future will not be decided solely at the ballot box. It will also be decided by whether Germans recognise the snowball while it is still small.

Alka Schumacher
Cologne, Germany

Household metaphors for debt are dangerous ground

In her column “Governments need to learn how to talk about debt” (Opinion, June 6) Gillian Tett suggests that governments should embrace “simple metaphors” to explain fiscal circumstances, such as comparing the spending of the exchequer to “household budgets”, an analogy that Tett noted was deployed by Margaret Thatcher and “used again this week . . . by Sir Howard Davies, former chief UK financial regulator”.

This seems an odd suggestion considering such ideas are not novel, but were the bedrock of conservative political advances for a decade after the 2008 financial crash. Not a week went by when the British public were not subjected to dire warnings from Tory governments about “maxing out the credit card” as they leaned on these oversimplified, and factually incorrect, analogies in order to promote their austerity budgets, which did so much damage to the British state and its ability to deliver. All of this, while barely making a dent on debt levels.

That this happened at a time when historically low interest rates had given them the opportunity to borrow to invest in services and infrastructure is especially unfortunate. These metaphors worked to rob us of the last chance we had to fix creaking public services with low-risk borrowing to invest and grow. Perhaps the author and Sir Howard, as well as the BBC journalist who interviewed him, should read the corporation's own 2022 review into its coverage of government spending, which stated “household analogies are dangerous territory, intensely contested, and can easily mislead”.

Nathan Fogg
London SW6, UK

We can live well on less

I agree with Tim Harford when he suggests the government's “Great British Summer Savings” scheme is a bad idea (Spectrum, FT Weekend, June 6). But so might be his proposal for “more power lines, houses, vehicle charging stations, roads, railway lines and power generation”.

Some farmers are using less pesticides and fertiliser, and making more profit and healthier food. How about your columnist shows us the potential of what the world might look like if we consumed less of these things, rather than more.

Sarah Redston
Oxford, UK

Correction

● Elon Musk arrived in Canada when he first came to North America aged 17, not the US as wrongly stated in an article in Life & Arts on June 20

Opinion

The downsides of making \$13tn of profit

MARKETS

Patrick Foulis



One of the extraordinary aspects of SpaceX's IPO has been the scramble to buy shares outside of America. In Australia, brokers' call centres opened emergency hours. Over 100,000 people in stagnant Britain applied for an alternative journey on Elon Musk's financial rocket. There was an investor stampede in Japan. In South Korea unmet demand has become a national scandal. Chinese buyers were barred by US authorities but still found back channels. Even as the Gulf states worry about waning US defence guarantees, their sovereign funds placed multi-billion-dollar orders.

The frenzy reflects Musk-mania and a

bigger trend. Foreigners' holdings of US shares have hit \$22tn, over triple the level in 2015. In many places, the best way of creating wealth has been owning a stake in US capitalism. Gatecrashing America's party has been staggeringly lucrative. But it means the world is now far more exposed to a market crash there. And, in some countries, it raises uncomfortable questions about why, even as they seek more autonomy from an unreliable America, much risk-taking is outsourced to it.

SpaceX is not flying alone. Alphabet announced a record \$85bn equity raising on June 3. Anthropic, Meta and OpenAI could be next, pushing the proceeds for US public equity raising above \$600bn this year. The AI boom is central to this, but America's attractions run deep. It has the best pool of entrepreneurs and US businesses account for just over half of the world's value creation, or profits in excess of the cost of capital.

America also has what Scott Bessent, its Treasury secretary, called this week,

the world's "deepest, most dynamic markets". Since 2009, its banks, asset managers and traders have grown more dominant globally, and funnel savings into its markets. Citadel Securities, which executes a third of share trading in the US market, says activity is "astronomical". Larry Fink, the boss of asset manager BlackRock, had called US capital markets a "juggernaut".

The world's financial relationship with the US has been transformed. Its status as the ultimate safe haven has decayed. As US debts have swollen, the special premium Treasury bonds command relative to other ultra-safe assets has shrunk. China and Europe are building payment networks to bypass the dollar. Instead, America is the venue for taking risks. The world, excluding the US and China, has 38 per cent of its public equity portfolio in US shares, up from 25 per cent a decade ago. Of global risk-taking equity raised this year, via stock markets or venture capital, perhaps 65 per cent will be in the US.

For non-Americans the first response

should be gratitude: their profits from US shares since 2015 have been a staggering \$13tn. Yet the bonanza comes with two concerns. First, if there is a US stock market slump, the rest of the world's losses would be bigger than in the past. A market rout as bad as 2008 would trigger a hit equivalent to 10 per cent of non-US GDP. While investors

Gatecrashing America's party has been lucrative. But the world is now far more exposed to a crash

expect ups and downs, these are huge sums and, combined with the diminished role of Treasury bonds, portend a new kind of crash.

The second worry is deeper. In the original logic of globalisation, location barely mattered. A neutral financial system allocated money to the best firms. Their products were sold to the world. If

you could own Google shares and use Google Search, it made little difference where you or the company were based. Now, this neutrality has weakened. Not all American products are equally available to all countries. Some US allies fear relying on SpaceX's satellites for defence. On June 12 the US blocked Anthropic's Fable 5 and Mythos 5 models from being used by foreign nationals.

The rational response for other countries is to expand or incubate local alternatives. On June 24 Sanae Takaichi, Japan's prime minister, announced a \$2.3tn national investment target for AI, semiconductors and more. Canada's Mark Carney aims to kick-start a \$700bn energy, defence and data surge.

Left unspoken is how this will be financed by a global financial system led by US companies committed to American goals. The global asset management industry raises 55 per cent of its cash outside of the US but allocates 70 per cent of it there. Based on current trends Europeans could end up putting more fresh equity into American AI and

satellite capabilities than European ones this year.

One answer is to use US capital markets to finance risk-taking abroad. SK Hynix, South Korea's memory-chip champion, has launched a \$29bn equity raising in America, with the proceeds to be spent at home.

The other is to change the pattern of the financial system and bend the arc of capital back home. Friedrich Merz, Germany's chancellor (ex-BlackRock), has just backed a new national pension system. Carney (ex-Goldman Sachs) says Canada's pension funds are a "strategic asset" in the new world order. Takaichi could push the \$1.8tn government pension fund to invest less abroad. Done adroitly, it should mean the world's dependence on American risk-taking falls. Done badly and it could yet turn the trade war into a financial one.

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

The firebrand lawyer has won the presidency and vowed to crush drug gangs like cockroaches, write *Geoff Dyer and Joe Daniels*

Even in an era of angry political outsiders, Colombia's Abelardo de la EsPriella is an unconventional choice for president. Like Donald Trump, one of his role models, the presidency will be his first public office. A multi-millionaire former criminal lawyer who revels in the nickname "El Tigre", de la EsPriella campaigned with the sort of brash rightwing populism that is spreading across Latin America.

Often photographed giving a military salute, he has in recent days lambasted journalists and threatened to "disembowel" the leftwing opposition if it blocks his agenda. His lifestyle brand "De La EsPriella Style" offers supporters a bust of a tiger in Colombia's national colours — a symbol of "determination, leadership and dedication to the homeland" — for almost £900.

The far-right de la EsPriella does not have the backing of a major party and spent much of the run-up to last Sunday's election trashing the country's political elite. In an election with no debates and little policy discussion, he has demonstrated mastery of Trumpian politics — using social media to mobilise resentment, demonise opponents and deliver an emotional critique of political reality, especially about crime and violence.

Rodrigo Uprimny, a former judge in Colombia's constitutional court, says de la EsPriella has made lots of splashy promises but has yet to deliver anything concrete. "He is a big showman," he says. Trump celebrated his success on social media: "He Won, BIG!"

Born in Bogotá in 1978, de la EsPriella grew up near the Caribbean coast, where his father was a local politician and lawyer. As a defence lawyer, including in Florida, his high-profile cases included a pastor accused of sexual assault, the mastermind of a pyramid scheme and Alex Saab, who is facing charges in the US of money laundering on behalf of the Venezuelan regime. He has also defended rightwing paramilitaries accused of human rights violations.

When pressed about his clients, de la EsPriella has always insisted that everyone is entitled to legal representation. Faced with a series of investigations into his legal career, he has filed over 100 lawsuits against journalists.

Married with four children, he is also a citizen of the US and Italy. Before the election, his wife, Ana Lucía Pineda admitted that, were he to lose, they might move to their houses in Miami or Florence. "We live wonderfully," she said. In an interview with the FT earlier this year, de la EsPriella said that he loved "the wonders of life... an English car, Swiss watches, Italian clothing, Mediterranean food, European wines".

He has also faced claims of misogyny. During one TV appearance, he asked a female journalist to look at a photo of his crotch, which he suggested could win him "some awesome votes from the female electorate". He later claimed it was a joke. "If a woman feels uncomfortable, a gentleman has the moral obligation to offer an apology," he said.



Arusyak Pivazyan

Person in the News | Abelardo de la EsPriella

Colombia's new Trumpian tiger

Colombia has become the latest in a flurry of Latin American countries in recent years to elect a rightwing candidate — many of them imitating Maga themes and rhetoric. Just as Trump has made taking on drug traffickers a foreign policy priority, the rise in organised crime across the region is the issue that best explains the emergence of maverick outsiders like de la EsPriella.

Outgoing president Gustavo Petro, a former leftwing guerrilla, launched simultaneous negotiations with more than a dozen armed groups, most of which are involved in the cocaine trade. Some of them used the cover of talks to expand. More than half the country's municipalities now have the presence of an armed group. De la EsPriella is promising a full-scale military confrontation with these groups. Inspired by Nayib Bukele, El Salvador's rightwing president, he is also proposing to build several mega-prisons for gang members. (Like Bukele, he sports a perfectly cropped beard).

But many former officials and mili-

tary leaders question the efficacy of a military-led strategy given that gang members often live and operate in populated areas.

On the economy, de la EsPriella is promising to slash spending, which has surged under Petro. But significant budget cuts will be fiercely opposed by

'Many of the proposals he has put forward are very risky and absolutely unconstitutional'

the leftwing opposition, which won nearly 49 per cent in the run-off. Petro has been warning darkly about "mafia fascism". Iván Duque, the last rightwing president, was severely weakened by widespread protests in 2021.

When he takes office in August, there will be two very contrasting approaches open to de la EsPriella. One would be to build bridges with established political

parties and seek approval of Congress for his proposals. His vice-president, José Manuel Restrepo, is a former finance minister and could act as a bridge. "He will not be a weak leader," Restrepo tells the FT. "But he is also a man with deep respect for the constitution and the law."

But at times de la EsPriella has signalled a different path, involving a much more direct challenge to the legal and political order.

"He describes himself as a constitutional patriot who is not going to touch the constitution," says Uprimny, the former judge. "But many of the proposals he has put forward are very risky and absolutely unconstitutional."

Indeed, De la EsPriella has talked about making greater use of decrees and emergency presidential powers and has threatened to withdraw from regional human rights organisations. In one interview, he promised to kill drug traffickers "like rats, like cockroaches".

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Is Venezuela restructuring its debt too quickly?

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



Partly the people of Venezuela. For almost 30 years they have struggled with horrifying misrule under former leaders Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. Then in January President Donald Trump unleashed a military attack to remove Maduro but left his deputy Delcy Rodríguez in charge.

Now they have been hit by two earthquakes, causing more than 500 deaths, leaving thousands injured and inflicting damage that will be made worse by the country's economic plight.

As Venezuela deals with this devastating new catastrophe, it is also having to grapple with the thorny question of sovereign debt. This week it was revealed that the country's total debt pile is around \$240bn — much bigger than previously believed.

That is daunting given its economy has experienced "the deepest drop in GDP per capita seen anywhere in the world since 2013", according to the Atlantic Council. However, last month Rodríguez promised to restructure the debt by the end of the year using Centerv, a New York-based advisory firm.

The fate of this deal matters enormously — not just to Venezuela but to the wider world. For after Trump's unilateral (not to say imperialist) move on Caracas, the key question now is whether a similar approach will play out around the debt.

By any standards, Rodríguez's recent announcement was unusual. One reason is that the Centerv mandate was reportedly enabled by a Trump acolyte. Another is that restructurings normally take years, not months, because of hedge fund lawsuits and China's reluctance to forgive debts (it has been the biggest lender to low-income countries in recent years).

However, the biggest surprise is the process. Normally this starts with an economic assessment and policy programme from the IMF, followed by negotiations with official creditors. However, Venezuela wants a quick deal with bondholders first, without formal IMF co-ordination, and then a deal around commercial and official debt.

Unsurprisingly, some observers hate this. "Venezuelan authorities may be prioritising market investors over the welfare of their citizens," complains Alejandro Werner of the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

Meanwhile, Brad Setser, an economist at the Council on Foreign Relations, admits that "a restructuring process without the IMF makes me very nervous". He thinks it is crucial to have a neutral analysis of Venezuela's external and internal debt to ensure that a deal will not just deliver short-term relief but be sustainable in the long run too.

However, those backing the idea of a quick deal insist they must buck this precedent. That is partly due to the complexity of the debt, which includes around \$60bn of outstanding bonds from the government and PDVSA, the state-owned oil company (plus \$40bn in interest); \$20bn and \$6bn in Chinese and Russian loans respectively; and vast historic claims from oil companies, trade creditors and other companies whose assets were expropriated.

Supporters of rapid restructuring also insist it is needed to kick-start growth and argue that existing IMF debt mechanisms simply can't do that. This is despite recent reforms, under pressure from entities like the Group of Thirty, to create a so-called Common Framework, which tries to bring China and hedge funds into the negotiating fold with more transparency.

This new approach has delivered some results. But the process is still achingly slow, as shown in the IMF's own guidance notes. Indeed the Paris Club of creditor nations warned this week that "the Common Framework must deliver faster".

So can Centerv do any better? Possibly — if it can cut a deal with big bondholders (whom it already knows well), it might then force other creditors to get engaged. And while the IMF is not officially involved now, it may be pulled in later. But one unknown is what China will do. That matters since its loans are reportedly backed by oil revenues (now claimed by Trump). It is also uncertain

This could turn out to be a key litmus test for Caracas and for Trump's ability to bend others to his will

whether non-US commercial lenders will play ball.

Some bond investors might fight a quick deal too. Hedge funds have gobbled up Venezuelan debt this year amid hopes that rising oil revenues and an IMF deal will raise recovery rates in future years. They may not agree to a restructuring based on today's disastrous economy and the newly expanded estimate of debt.

So there is every reason to be cynical about whether the deal will fly. If Centerv can truly restructure the debt against the odds, it will deserve a big cheer but if — and only if — any deal also respects the rule of law and all creditor rights. Sweetheart treatment for US creditors would be entirely wrong.

So pay attention to that \$240bn debt pile. This could turn out to be a key litmus test for both Venezuela, as it contends with the aftermath of the earthquakes, and also for Trump's ability to bend the world to his will. We have already seen the impact of US unilateralism on trade and geopolitics. Now we may learn how far it can infect capital markets too.

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OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Harvey Mansfield | By Tunku Varadarajan

America Is 250 Years Young

The nation turns 250 next weekend, and Harvey Mansfield has been alive—and most certainly kicking—for more than three-eighths of that time. At 94, he's America's oldest living political philosopher after Noam Chomsky, who is three years his senior. "It all depends on how you define philosophy," Mr. Mansfield says with a twinkle, assuring me this isn't a dig at the self-described libertarian socialist Mr. Chomsky. Mr. Mansfield is the nation's oldest conservative philosopher, and he says the semiquincentennial has led to "a surge in demand" for his attention. The day after we meet, he's due to fly to Washington to decant his thoughts on the state of the nation at a couple of think tanks. He was at an academic conference in Paris the week before. It's all part of what he calls his "late-stage productivity," which includes two new books published in the past six months: "The Rise and Fall of Rational Control" is a history of modern political philosophy; "Where Harvard Went Wrong" is a compendium of "50 years of commentary that fell on deaf ears." In 2023 Mr. Mansfield retired as professor of government at Harvard, where he had taught since 1962. He was the "last conservative standing" in his department.

The 'paradox' of being both a brash upstart among nations and the oldest continuous democracy.

Mr. Mansfield sees in America a "paradox": The U.S. is both a young, brash nation and the world's oldest continuous democracy. "We're a country that needs to renew itself every four years, or find out who should run it," he says. "It has, within itself, a youth and a maturity. We change our president, which means the entire government, more or less."

America is "an exemplar of something important, which is a successful republic. But it needs to be continually refreshed, as Machiavelli said all regimes need to be." Mr. Mansfield says America is "exceptional because it accepts the truth of that claim." We always itch to "go back to our beginnings and see what it was that first made us excited and fresh, and made us seek to be an example to the world."

That can become "a form of bullying," in which Americans "demand that other peoples do what we advise. And what we advise may not necessarily be for their good, but mainly for ours." By the same token, "great claims are imputed to us by others, and our failure to live up to them is taken as corruption."

One of America's strengths is its connection with the past. The founding, Mr. Mansfield says, is

"based on the critique of all previous republics." Regimes hardly ever achieve this sort of "retrospection": "Usually, a new regime spends its time, and wastes its resources, on proving that it is better than the regime it just succeeded." Much better to do what America did in 1776—"look at previous republics and see what went wrong. And when you do this, you take the advice of philosophers who inspired your regime, in our case Locke and Montesquieu." Their 17th- and 18th-century liberalism still inspires us in the 21st century.

Renovation lies at the heart of America's history and politics. Machiavelli, Mr. Mansfield's spiritual idol, said that all successful politics is youthful. "The young are better than the old because they don't make presumptions," Mr. Mansfield says. "They are willing to start something anew." Thomas Jefferson, principal author of the Declaration, was 33 in 1776. James Madison and Alexander Hamilton were 36 and 32, respectively, when the Constitution was written. "But they were under the watch and supervision of Franklin and Washington," 81 and 55, Mr. Mansfield says. "We kept our young under control and they didn't go for destructive behavior." Madison called for the Constitution to become "venerable," which Mr. Mansfield describes as "very un-Machiavellian."

"The young are good because they're revolutionary," he says. Old regimes, by contrast, are "based on routine expectations, and these are almost always disappointed. They lose out to those who are willing to make a deal, or a New Deal, to use Trump and FDR in the same sentence."

The revolutionary origins of America set up "the great general expectation for the nation of always getting ahead," Mr. Mansfield says. "So it's a bad thing if the next generation has to live at the lower condition of the preceding generation. Youth can be political and also economic." It also ensures that we, as a nation, don't take our history for granted: "Renewing is never perfect."

As we pore over the Declaration, he urges us to note that it begins with the words "When in the Course of human events," not "When at the end of the late 18th century"—which is, in a way, ahistorical. It doesn't have an arc, only the course of human events, not the course of, say, republics, or colonies, or American peoples."

He also points to a "contradiction" embedded in the Declaration, between deism—the belief in a rational, noninterventionist Creator—and theism, the belief in God who shapes and intercedes in human affairs. Mr. Mansfield delights in the phrase "Nature's God" in the first sentence, adding tartly that "people no longer speak of nature and very little in terms of God." The phrase is "a way of denying that the Declaration invokes the Bible's God, and of God as an endorser or guarantor of regularity."

economy to a halt. Ms. Acton, who holds degrees in medicine and public health, thus found herself the personification of public health, for Ohio's 12 million residents, during the worst medical crisis in the past century.

"I know my voice can bring back a thing or two, right?" she told the roughly 200 people at the IBEW event. "We bonded during that time." Whether Ohioans bonded I don't know, but in a 20-minute talk Ms. Acton made no other reference to her time in that role: an oddity, inasmuch as it's the only reason anybody had heard of her before she announced a run for office.

Ms. Acton speaks in a soft, breaking voice that projects empathy and emphasizes her humble origins. "I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for the good people in my childhood who refused to look the other way when they saw things they couldn't unsee," she said cryptically of her early years in Youngstown. Her childhood "was a pretty rough one," she continues. "I struggled a lot because my mother struggled. We moved a lot as kids. I experienced a lot of abuse and neglect. We were homeless in the middle of winter in Youngstown, but there were neighbors who would literally pull my brother and me up on the front porch and feed us breakfast because they knew we were hungry."

Two days later, at the Stark County GOP headquarters in Canton, Mr. Ramaswamy reminded a raucous crowd that he, too, has a compelling personal narrative. "My dad came over half a century ago from halfway around the world in a small village in a communist state in southwest



MATTHEW COOK

India, where he had minimal electricity, minimal clean water," he said. "My mom grew up in similar circumstances, moved to Cincinnati in the early '80s, worked for a five-figure salary at the GE plant off I-75." In time, his parents saved enough to send him to St. Xavier High School in Cincinnati, "which changed the trajectory of my life. And then I became an entrepreneur . . ."

Yet at the end, the Declaration makes a sort of U-turn. "You have a sudden statement of the signers," Mr. Mansfield says. "A people finding its own independence needs some few who are willing to stake their lives, fortunes and sacred honor to endorse it." This is "quite different from 'all men are created equal.' In order to ensure that principle—equality—it seems that a certain inequality is required. And it's now said that they're acting under 'divine Providence.'" This isn't Nature's God, but "one that watches you."

Mr. Mansfield finds the Declaration a "beautiful piece of writing," while pointing out that historians "argue about how much of the credit is owed to Jefferson." Not a modest man, he put the authorship of the Declaration on his own epitaph. "I kind of like that," Mr. Mansfield says. "I don't mind giving semi-divine status to the Founders. The Constitution, as the Federalist says, deserves to be venerated, not just accepted." He calls the Founders America's "pantheon" and observes: "That doesn't mean that they're all in agreement, because the Olympic gods were not."

Are we guilty of venerating the Founders too much?

"Sure," Mr. Mansfield says, "but more often of misinterpreting them. There are a couple of great misinterpretations, like the *Dred Scott* decision"—in which the U.S. Supreme Court denied citizenship to blacks. Another example is *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), which invalidated a law compelling public-school students to salute the flag. Mr. Mansfield says the justices "made a pretty bad decision by opening up free speech to include free expression that wasn't speech. It means that you spend all your time looking at extreme examples of expression and forget that speech, which is communication,

implies a kind of rationality and sociability." Mr. Mansfield's objections apply all the more strongly to *Texas v. Johnson* (1989), which held that burning the flag is constitutionally protected: "The celebration we give to extreme expression is damaging."

While Americans revere the Constitution, they celebrate the Declaration with much greater fanfare. "Well, according to Lincoln that's correct," Mr. Mansfield says. "The Declaration is more important than the Constitution. The apple of gold is in the frame of silver." He adds that "there's a difference between the revolutionary fervor in the Declaration and the political prudence in the Constitution, and the former was the precondition of the latter." The Constitution was "deliberated on in peace and in secret for two whole months in Philadelphia, away from the mob, with trusted representatives from all the different parts of the country." The Declaration "excites us, and to get excited about something requires an enemy, the British." The framing of the Constitution could "pretty well exclude the British from consideration."

What would the Founders think of America today? "I think they would be pretty pleased and impressed with the things we've gone through, particularly the Civil War and the whole problem of slavery, which they left for us," Mr. Mansfield says. "They would, I think, like the Republicans more than the Democrats." The GOP is "pretty much the constitutional party. They stand up for the Constitution. The Democrats are the party of 'progress,' which means being sometimes in accord with the Constitution and sometimes not. And when it's not, that means a kind of democratization of all those institutions which were meant to guard us against majority tyranny."

What would they make of Donald

Trump? Mr. Mansfield cups his chin in thought. "Well, he's tried to take the Constitution away from the Republicans as something they really want to promote. So 'let's make a deal' is often at the expense of the Constitution." Mr. Trump sees the Constitution "as inhibiting things that he wants to do. He's always looking for a shortcut."

I ask for examples. "Take the universities," says Mr. Mansfield. "What he's doing is very unconstitutional, disrespectful of the high aims of intellectual progress. He's trying to specify the doings of private organizations, which claim to be devoted to higher nonpartisan goals." On the other hand, "would the universities have paid any attention to their own defects and corruptions without a kick from Trump, from a person who didn't respect them, who maybe forces them to think a little bit harder about what an ivory tower is?" He laughs and says that at Harvard, "there are more Palestinians there than there are conservatives."

The Founders might also have liked Mr. Trump's approach to foreign policy. "You have to think of our situation as something like the British Empire," he says. "There's a world out there which is at odds with itself. There's a great distinction between rogue regimes that want to invade other people and normal or peaceful ones that don't. And we're in charge of the peaceful ones." The world "is not global. It's divided into regimes or, as the Declaration calls them, 'peoples.' It isn't enough simply to deter bad regimes, because deterrence doesn't always work. But we need to keep the fight small and within our capacities."

Our allies—as is the nature of allies of a stronger power—"don't want to do anything, but rather want to take a free ride. So we have to do what Trump has done to them occasionally and maintain our alliances by threatening not to do so."

The contest with China would intrigue the Founders. "It seems like the Chinese are correcting the mistakes of the Soviet Union. It's alarming that a country so ambitious and so lacking in liberty and self-government should be so powerful." But the Chinese are "held back by the difference between their founders and ours. Their founders, Mao and others, don't say much about liberty, or elections, or self-government or free markets." They have, however, "adopted the market temporarily but successfully. They've grown rich and strong, in that sense, but without a constitution."

The endgame, the old sage says, will be "a kind of test—an epic test—between our Constitution and their lack of it."

Mr. Varadarajan, a Journal contributor, is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and at NYU Law School's Classical Liberal Institute.

Ohio Campaign Pits Covid Nightmare vs. the American Dream



CROSS COUNTRY By Barton Swaim

Canton, Ohio "You guys know I've worked with everyone on any side of an aisle who'll solve a problem. But it's now about extreme wealth, power, ideology, special interests, being shoved through the black box of state houses where a lot of times folks can't even name who works there." So said Amy Acton, Democratic nominee for Ohio governor, at the IBEW Local 212—the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers—on June 16 in the Cincinnati suburb of Sharonville.

The two sentences nicely capture her campaign strategy. Emphasize bipartisanship and avoid the deranged "resistance" rhetoric of the left, on the one hand—she didn't mention Donald Trump. On the other, take traditional Democratic attitudes and express them generally—relate stories of people struggling to pay bills, call for increased school funding, vow to protect unions ("nonunion employers commit wage theft every day").

If Democrats elsewhere could bring themselves to follow Ms. Acton's lead, they would do themselves a favor. A Fox News poll this week found Ms. Acton leading Republican Vivek Ramaswamy 50% to 49% in a state that last elected a Democratic governor in 2006.

Gov. Mike DeWine won re-election in 2018 and tapped Ms. Acton early the following year as state director of public health. In March 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic brought the U.S.

prospects in exchange for almost no public-health benefit. Ohio schools didn't fully reopen until the spring of 2021. Ms. Acton didn't defend the closures at the Sharonville event, but she had only praise for the force that resisted ending them: teachers unions. Will that matter in November? Many parents deferred to the judgment of public-health officials; some actively supported it. A win by Ms. Acton would suggest voters would rather forget about bad policies in which they were complicit.

As for Mr. Ramaswamy, his advantages are also his disadvantages. The towering ambition of his aims for Ohio make one wonder if the governor's mansion can satisfy him. That he ran for president two years ago only encourages the thought. Ms. Acton furthers the idea that her opponent doesn't care about Ohio as much as he claims by alleging that he "moved his business to Texas before running for governor."

I asked Mr. Ramaswamy about the claim. At first he objected to the singular noun. "I've started a lot of companies," he said, twice. The one in question is Strive, an antiwoke asset-management fund, from which Mr. Ramaswamy stepped down when he ran for president. His successor as CEO decided to move the headquarters to Dallas.

"It hit me pretty hard," Mr. Ramaswamy said of the decision. "But I wasn't mad at him. I was mad at the fact that Ohio couldn't compete with Texas."

Mr. Swaim is a Journal editorial page writer.

In the governor's race, Vivek Ramaswamy reminds voters that Amy Acton closed their schools.

From high school to entrepreneur? Missing from Mr. Ramaswamy's narrative was his time at Harvard and Yale Law. He did, however, note the several companies he founded, one of which "is now a 20, 25 billion dollar company on the Nasdaq." The point of his story, he said, "is that it's only possible in this country." It's the American dream: "There's no Canadian dream. There's no British dream. There's no Chinese dream. It is the American dream that distinguishes this country."

Whereas Ms. Acton spoke mainly of protecting workers and bringing down prices, Mr. Ramaswamy expressed a vision so ambitious that you might wonder if he has yet appreciated the complications of state-house politics. He rattled off statistics and rankings and historical facts with total self-confidence. As in his

2024 presidential run, Mr. Ramaswamy mixes policy wonkery with stem-winding aplomb, returning again and again to his campaign's theme: the need "to celebrate success rather than demonizing it."

Some substantial minority of voters would probably like a safe pair of hands in Columbus rather than a visionary ready to launch Ohio into competition for jobs and growth with Texas, Florida and Georgia.

Still, the man can make a cogent argument—a talent not in abundance among high-level Republicans at the moment. Mr. Ramaswamy ably explains how Washington-induced inflation sent Ohioans' property taxes skyward even as their wages stagnated, how zeroing out the state's capital gains tax won't substantially diminish revenue even as it offers corporations a reason to remain in Ohio, and how education funding disappears into the system's bureaucracy while academic standards slip.

On education, he has the additional advantage of pointing out that Ms. Acton ordered public schools closed on March 16, 2020—a dubious first in the nation. The call belonged to Mr. DeWine, but in the way that politicians shifted accountably to experts during the pandemic, the governor insisted his decisions came from public-health advisers—i.e., Ms. Acton. She resigned as health director in June 2020 because, she later said, the Legislature pressured her to open Ohio's county fairs.

Public-school closings permanently damaged a young generation's

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OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

All of Gavin Newsom's Donors

California Gov. Gavin Newsom broke the news last week that he and his wife are under federal investigation. He says President Trump is targeting him for political reasons, but the news has also brought some public attention to a shadier side of California politics.

Mr. Newsom sought to get ahead of news about the mooted Justice Department probe with a video on social media. He averred that Mr. Trump's campaign to jail his enemies "has reached my own home to get me. He's coming after my wife, Jen. A public servant. A woman who has dedicated her life to supporting women and girls."

There's no doubt that Mr. Trump has gone after his enemies, and we've criticized him often for it. But that may not be the case here. Press reports say investigations into Mr. Newsom and his wife originated roughly a year ago in a local U.S. Attorney's office based on a whistleblower complaint.

The public details are few, but one rich vein for inquiry is Mr. Newsom's pay-to-play politics. For years the Governor has leveraged his power to get businesses to cough up cash for progressive causes. Two beneficiaries are nonprofits founded by his wife, Jennifer Siebel: the Representation Project and the California Partners Project. She has collected more than \$1.9 million in compensation from the former.

The Representation Project produces left-wing films such as the 2019 documentary, "The Great American Lie." The film purports to show how socioeconomic inequality is a result of "the cultural pendulum swinging too far towards revering things we consider 'masculine,' like individualism, power, and money," according to the nonprofit's website.

Ms. Siebel's outfit licenses its films to schools. Such films have been funded in part by Sacramento's business hostages. Contributions to the Representation Project surged 30% in 2015, the year Mr. Newsom announced plans to run for Governor. Coincidence?

The Representation Project last decade raised more than \$800,000 from companies, including investor-owned utility PG&E, AT&T, Comcast and Kaiser Permanente. California American Water, a private water and sewer company, gave \$10,000 to the Representation Project in 2019, as it sought state permits to build a desalination plant. It later received those permits.

The Governor, his wife and California's 'behested payments.'

PG&E was identified as an associate producer in the credits for two of Ms. Siebel's films, which were released while the utility was under investigation by the state for a natural gas pipeline explosion. Former PG&E government affairs executive Brandon Hernandez previously sat on the Representation Project's board. As did two of Mr.

Newsom's staffers.

Mr. Newsom has also solicited donations to the California Partners Project and an array of leftwing causes. California Partners Project has taken in \$4.3 million in behested payments. That includes \$100,000 in 2021 from the California-chartered Silicon Valley Bank, which failed two years later.

These "behested payments," as they're called, are legal in California and arose in the 1990s as a way for businesses to curry favor with politicians. Such donations are required to be disclosed and are listed in a state database. Mr. Newsom has raised some \$350 million in such payments since 2011, most of which have poured in since he became Governor in 2019. Some examples:

Nonprofit Blue Meridian Partners this year gave \$1.6 million at Mr. Newsom's behest to McKinsey & Company for consulting services to inform the state's "strategy" to respond to the GOP's tax bill last year. The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (founded by Mark Zuckerberg and his wife) donated \$50,000 in 2024 for the state Truth & Healing Council, which Mr. Newsom established to "make recommendations to meaningfully address the historical trauma" by the state to Native Americans.

In 2020 the Governor's office raised \$42.5 million to promote Covid public awareness. He also solicited some \$23 million for the political communications firm GMMB, co-founded by Democratic consultant Jim Margolis, for the same purpose.

* * *

Democrats rightly criticize Donald Trump for taking donations from businesses that seem to be buying some political goodwill at the very least. But the available public evidence about the Newsom "behested" network doesn't look all that different.

Proving an illegal quid pro quo would require evidence that Mr. Newsom took an official government act in return for a personal benefit. That's hard to prove. But sometimes the real scandal is what's legal.

A Senate Advance on Cheaper Weapons

President Trump's military action in Iran was supposed to boost American deterrence, and the pity is that he may negotiate away his gains. Which makes it all the more important that Congress—yes, Congress—is pushing the Pentagon to produce cheaper weapons.

The Senate's national defense authorization bill for 2027 would direct the Pentagon to develop cheap alternatives to eight types of core weapons in the U.S. arsenal, including cruise missiles and medium-range air-to-air missiles. This is more prescriptive than Congress usually is on Pentagon purchases.

In Iran the U.S. military burned through pricey missiles that America builds at anemic numbers—Tomahawks, Standard Missiles and the like. Ukraine is a reminder that wars aren't always short, and the U.S. can only deter the wars its adversaries are sure it can fight.

Most ambitious is the call for a cheap air-defense interceptor. Advanced Patriot and Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense missiles were fired at voracious rates in Iran. The question is whether the U.S. can build a missile that can accomplish most of what the Patriot can at a more affordable and sustainable cost.

Iran and Ukraine show that the U.S. needs more affordable missiles.

Defense technology companies are already building some weapon categories in the bill, including cheap cruise missiles (Anduril) and an affordable hypersonic (Castelion). But Congressional support is crucial to encourage companies to invest in the assembly lines. Congress stipulates in the bill that it wants these items procured under faster and more innovative acquisition processes.

The defense authorization is a policy guide not a check, and the big question is whether the President's \$1.5 trillion defense budget to buy such missiles next year will pass. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is meeting with Senators on Capitol Hill, and Budget Chairman Lindsey Graham says he'll push for the "urgent need to plus up the military budget," through a supplemental funding bill or other measure.

That's good news. One of the most overbaked narratives amid the Iran deal is that the U.S. is settling because it couldn't achieve what it wanted on the battlefield. The truth is that in Iran—and in the defense budget—America is struggling far less with technology and military power than with a lack of political will.

Pritzker Goes on a Junk Tax Spree

Progressive politicians lambaste businesses for charging so-called junk fees, even as they do the same to taxpayers. A case in point is the record \$56 billion budget that Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker signed last week, which includes new taxes on digital advertising, social media, crypto and even on prediction markets.

Mr. Pritzker boasts that the budget increases spending on welfare programs, "all without raising taxes on working people." How does he define "working people"? The broad-based digital taxes are sure to whack most of the state's 12.7 million residents.

Start with a new progressive tax on social-media platforms that is levied based on their number of active monthly users in the state. The murky legislative language could sweep in Yelp, Nextdoor and Substack. Platforms with at least one million users would pay a top marginal rate of \$6 a year per Illinois user, while smaller platforms would pay \$1.20 for each user.

The tax will encourage companies to put more services behind paywalls, reduce creator monetization opportunities and raise prices on in-state advertising. "It turns the internet into more of a 'walled garden,' since free accounts become increasingly costly to provide," the Tax Foundation says. Illinois residents will pay the tax one way or another.

The new Illinois budget imposes multiple new digital levies.

The budget also includes a new 10% gross receipts tax on providers of targeted digital ads in the state. The tax is aimed at the likes of Google, Meta and TikTok, but it will invariably be passed along to businesses that buy ads. Think the mom-and-pop taqueria, bike shop or dry cleaner.

A similar tax in Maryland is mired in litigation. The federal Internet Tax Freedom Act prohibits state and local governments from imposing discriminatory taxes on digital commerce. The Illinois tax, like its Maryland cousin, appears to violate the federal law because it doesn't extend to other types of advertising.

The state is also imposing a first-of-its-kind 0.2% tax on digital asset transfers in the state. Sell \$10,000 in Bitcoin, and you will owe \$20. Expect the tax rate to grow as Democrats scrounge for more revenue. Ditto a new 1.75% tax on sports bets made on prediction markets, and a 15% tax on receipts of fantasy sports operators.

Democrats in Springfield like these digital taxes because they apply to activity that is less mobile than income or corporate taxes. They also figure that most voters won't notice since they will occur on transactions mediated by business. But they tell you what Mr. Pritzker's priorities are as he prepares to argue that Illinois policies are right for the entire country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

America Has Never Retreated From the New

Peggy Noonan's concerns in "Can 'We the People' Survive the AI Revolution?" (Declarations, June 20) come from a place of care. She sees a nation that has endured wars, depressions and cultural upheavals, and she wonders what inner resources we must cultivate to endure what comes next. Her emphasis on commitment, faith and human presence isn't nostalgia but a reminder that nations survive when their people remain rooted in one another.

Yet America's story has never been one of retreat from the new. We have always absorbed disruptions, from the telegraph to the internet, and turned each into a wider circle of connection. Artificial intelligence, like other technological jumps, will test our judgment even as it offers ways to deepen the very qualities Ms. Noonan hopes to preserve. If America is to reach its 2,500th birthday, it won't be because it avoided the future but because it learned to humanize it.

AI poses temptations to isolate, but it can also be shaped to strengthen human bonds. Used wisely, it can free time for family and community, help people learn faster, bridge languages and cultures, assist the elderly, empower the disabled, and give isolated people new ways to participate in civic life. The key is to treat AI as a

support for human presence, not a substitute for it.

ANTONIO S. GRAU
Boca Raton, Fla.

Ms. Noonan's concern that artificial intelligence may draw people away from one another captures something real. But the deeper issue may lie elsewhere. Across institutions, AI systems aren't simply connecting or distracting us; they are increasingly shaping the information environment itself. In corporate governance, for example, these systems filter data, prioritize signals and determine what appears material before decisions are even discussed.

The result is subtle but consequential. What appears to be neutral reporting is often already processed, selected, interpreted and structured by algorithmic systems.

TIM HARTGE
Dearborn, Mich.

Let me know when they have designed a bot that can negotiate with a two-year-old. Until then, I am unable to fear for the future of mankind. A chatbot can fool an adult anytime but a toddler could spot a fake at 50 paces.

MARGARET MCGIRR
Greenwich, Ct.

Trump and Vance Replay Poor Policy in Iran

As I read your editorial "Is Iran Really a 'Normal Country'?" (June 18), I kept wondering what obvious reality about Iranian behavior so clearly described therein wasn't clear to President Trump and Vice President JD Vance.

Barring some hidden but brilliant strategy lurking in the background of this horrible deal, it seems as though Messrs. Trump and Vance, like so many of their predecessors, have been duped by the mullahs and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Worse than that, coming in the wake of Operations Epic Fury and Midnight Hammer, have we ever seen a better example of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory? Were the president and his team just outsmarted like every other presidency before or was it pride that made them

think this time would be different?

MICHAEL GENEST
Sweetwater, Tenn.

These last weeks have demonstrated that Iran has the nerve to outlast the U.S. We continue to pull our punches as Tehran keeps swinging away at us. The leadership of our country continues to practice avoidance. We are so averse, perhaps fearful, of war that once again we are capitulating to the Iranians. They are the real masters of the art of the deal.

ALLEN KAPLAN
Benicia, Calif.

Your editorial gives great historical background on the Iran debacle. Perhaps hitting their heads against a wall is starting to feel good to U.S. leaders!

HARRY RUFFALO
Phoenix

Embracing the Political Principles of Lincoln

I appreciated William A. Galston's "What 'Created Equal' Means in America" (Politics & Ideas, June 17). It is important to recognize that without the leadership of Abraham Lincoln, the U.S. wouldn't be celebrating its 250th anniversary.

Lincoln saved the Union and the Republican Party is still the party of Lincoln, retaining his core beliefs in liberty and man's equality. The party's views rise from the idea that all humans are equally competent to manage their own affairs (to govern themselves), that individuals have a right to enjoy the fruits of their labor, and that the government's proper role is to safeguard its citizens' natural rights and accomplish those tasks that private Americans couldn't achieve on their own, such as national defense.

These basic tenets transcend contemporary political labels of conservative, liberal or progressive. They are the foundational ideals that

transformed the U.S. from a nascent nation of under four million people concentrated along the Atlantic Coast in 1790, into a nation of 62 million, stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, with the world's most productive economy by 1890.

As we consider the path ahead, it might be wise to remember what worked in the past.

JIM DUNLAP
Newport Beach, Calif.

Surely, Washington Can Be As Competent as New York

Regarding Charles Murray's op-ed "Trump Can Restore Standards to Federal Hiring" (June 20): While the federal government passed the Pendleton Civil Service Act in 1883, New York State actually included Art. V, Sec. 6 in our Constitution calling for merit and fitness to be ascertained by competitive examination for civil servants.

For over a hundred years we have depended on qualified public employees like water treatment operators to provide potable water and police officers to enforce the laws in an unbiased way, not beholden to political partisanship. If we can do that in New York, then the federal government should be able to do as well.

TOM PILLSWORTH
Loudonville, N.Y.

The underlying problem with our country, as I see it, is a lowering of standards across all facets of life.

DOUGLAS A. MILLER
Charlotte, N.C.

Trump Isn't Over the Hill Yet

Jeffrey DeLisle acknowledges in his letter "Over-the-Capitol-Hill Crowd" (June 17) that President Trump "may be healthier" and "more robust than Joe Biden," but argues that because he is past retirement age, he serves the country poorly. I disagree. Many people half the president's age don't display the energy and stamina he does. He maintains a demanding schedule, remains highly engaged in public affairs, and is pursuing policies that he believes protect American interests.

DAVID TULANIAN
Henderson, Nev.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"How much farther before I can look back on this and laugh?"

OPINION

The Tartan Army Takes America



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

This last in a series on July Fourth themes is about a small sweetness that was gratefully received. As we near our 250th birthday, let us never forget the gift of the Scottish national soccer team and its followers, the famous Tartan Army—the pleasure and delight they gave as they marched through America, drank our cities dry, sang their songs and said: We love you. They brought something out in us; they moved us and helped reveal something we'd stopped noticing. They allowed us to see our battered old country whole, and through fresh eyes.

No one knows exactly how many global visitors have come and are coming to the U.S. for the World Cup. Oxford Economics predicted a surge of 1.2 million international tourists for the games, peaking in June. The U.S. Embassy in Luxembourg said as many as 10 million would come to the 11 host cities.

However many there are, we are hearing from the young ones as they fan through the country to venues

World Cup visitors learn what our country has to offer—and remind us of it at the same time.

down South, out West, in Texas and Utah. They are seeing an America they never imagined and have made now-famous videos about how shocked they are—in the most positive sense. They expected a dark and brooding nation; they discovered a sun-filled magnificence. It's so big, so spacious, has such wondrous shops, the best food and absolutely wonderful people. The videos have flooded TikTok, Instagram and X, and they speak with the wonder of 18th-century explorers who

discovered an unknown indigenous people on a brilliant new continent.

They couldn't stop talking about it. Texas barbecue, ranch dressing, endless refills—in England, asking for a refill is like “asking for a second mortgage” said one video—huge portions, 24-hour gyms, Buc-ee's, Costco, Chick-fil-A. Football stadiums, air conditioning, the sheer variety—all the hot sauces, and 50 states with different rules. Strangers smile and ask how ya doin'. Among my favorites: seeing them delight in yellow school buses, which they thought only existed in movies.

A young man in his 20s, with wonder: “I would trade my Canadian passport for American citizenship without hesitating a single second. Some states have no state income tax.” Here, he said, a young person can compete and succeed. A British woman about 20, driving through a suburb, asked to be adopted “by anyone in the USA as soon as possible.” With Britain's housing crisis, you “have to live in a cardboard box for your first house.” She's driving past homes here, finding their prices on websites, is staggered by the bang for the buck.

One video has a German tourist telling CNN's Jake Tapper that back home he'd gotten “a lot of negative views about the Americans in the last five years,” but had discovered “the people are amazing, so welcoming, the culture is amazing.”

A young Englishman in his 30s: “The media portrays Americans as rude, lazy, all of the above, and it's further from the truth. . . . The amount of hospitality and kindness . . . and pride Americans hold is truly like no other country I've been to.”

A 30-ish bearded South African man: “I'm in awe of the United States of America.” Walking through a park he sees “women walking



DAVID GOTHARD

along in fancy handbags, jewelry on, glasses on, they're not being harassed, nothing. If this were South Africa, gosh, first of all I wouldn't be able to walk through this bloomin' park by myself.”

An African or Caribbean man of perhaps 30 marvels at his room service. “When they say everything in America is big, I understand it. Why the hell is this quesadilla the size of my head?” A now-famous blond woman of about 25 at a fast-food drive-through: “They have bible verses on the bottom of their cup!”

Why were they all gobsnacked? Because when they hear of America in the news, it's school shootings and assassination attempts, riots, Los Angeles burning down with no fire trucks or water in the reservoir. This isn't the fault of journalism; it's an inevitability of journalism: News is the big thing that's happening. Over the years they've probably absorbed the idea that Americans are violent incompetents—a fat and sated people who are altogether a new thing in history: dull-eyed fanatics.

They have also been brought up surrounded by powerful information systems, not only in media but

academia and other institutions, that reflect general progressive international opinion, which sees America as a cruel place where ignorant people eat bad food in bleak landscapes.

And then they landed, and none of this matched. The offerings were fantastic. The people were good.

I keep wondering if, when the millions go home, they'll remember what they saw and it will have an impact on future international relations. (It is 2056 and the final, crucial meeting at the Quai d'Orsay. The U.S. representative says, “I am asking you to trust us, Pierre. Because our nations go back, and because for all our theatrics we are a good people.” Pierre waves his hand. “You don't need to say that, Jake. I was there in '26, at the games, in Missouri. I know who you are.”)

Why have the visitors' views mattered so much to so many of us?

First, there's a funny thing about America: We've never *not* cared about the approval of other nations, and in this are unlike other nations.

Second, when you live inside something—a country, a way of life—you inevitably stop seeing it. Walk

by the same work of art for 30 years, you won't really “see” it each day. The young European arriving at a Dallas Costco or a California In-N-Out Burger sees a small marvel of organization, scale, of possibility. For you it's just Tuesday. You're used to it. They made us see it again.

And in part it's that the negative portrait of America absorbed by Europeans in recent years was also absorbed by us. We internalized our troubles, which are real. The dark sides of our country made us see ourselves pessimistically. But what the World Cup tourists saw was real, it wasn't just sentimental. The spaciousness really is staggering. The generosity of Americans, our openness, is exceptional. The abundance is real, the food culture extraordinary in its range and quality.

What they saw functioned as a needed corrective.

Something else. The visitors confirmed something—that the American character still lives at the street level, in ordinary encounters. They documented what endures and is genuinely lovable.

For me, as I scrolled through them at night, as I thought about why I was so drawn to them, I realized: I am moved because they prove the thing I love is actually there.

Those young visitors, who saw us clearly and said what they saw, gave us a little 250th birthday present.

And here, soon, it comes. No party owns this birthday, no president has dibs on its meaning; we're simply marking an epic journey through history as a people who invented a new political arrangement for man, who knew how to survive, how to triumph, and still care about the opinion of the stranger.

What a journey. Here's to it, to us, to more. Onward to 251.

How Immigrants From France Built a Great American Company

By Ben duPont

As the U.S. celebrates 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, I think not only of my country but also of my family. Not long after the American Revolution, on Jan. 1, 1800, Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, his sons and their families—14 people in all—arrived in America.

They fled the French Revolution, running for their lives, and found refuge in a republic still young and unfinished. They had no way of knowing whether their new country would survive, much less endure. They only knew it offered what the Old World increasingly didn't: freedom to think, to work and collaborate, to worship and to build.

The du Ponts made their start with gunpowder mills on the banks of the Brandywine River near Wilmington, Del. They supplied black gunpowder to the U.S. as its independence was tested in the War of 1812 and to the Union army in the Civil War. In World War I, the company became a major source of smokeless powder and explosives for the Allies.

During World War II, the DuPont company turned its scientific and manufacturing capacity to national service, producing munitions, nylon parachutes, Lucite airplane turrets, and many other products for the war effort.

This included the Manhattan Project. In Hanford, Wash., DuPont designed, built and operated the world's first full-scale plutonium-production reactor. Company leaders were wary, worried about safety, failure and accusations of profiteering. They accepted the job only after President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote to them with a personal appeal. The company's fee was \$1, and profit was returned to the government.

The atomic bomb remains a

complicated topic, but the Manhattan Project revealed something extraordinary about America: Universities, government, soldiers, scientists and private companies came together under perilous circumstances to do what many had deemed impossible.

DuPont owned a controlling stake in General Motors in those years. The automobile conglomerate converted from civilian manufacturing to wartime production, becoming part of America's arsenal of democracy. GM built trucks, tanks, guns, shells, ball bearings, aircraft and ship engines for the war. DuPont and GM were different enterprises, but together they illustrate a central truth: Free enterprise joined to national purpose can become a decisive strategic advantage.

On our 250th anniversary, I am thankful for a country that allowed my ancestors to build. They didn't create America's opportunity, they

received it. They benefited from a political experiment made possible by the courage of the Founders, the sacrifice of soldiers, the labor of ordinary citizens and institutions

This country—its culture, laws and institutions—brought out the best in generations of du Ponts.

strong enough to protect liberty.

At the time of the revolution, the U.S. drew ambitious people by offering them rights and legal protections, open markets, abundant land, and social mobility. Today it draws entrepreneurs for many of the same reasons, updated for a modern age: deep capital markets, world-class universities, sophisticated customers, a culture that tolerates failure,

and a belief—sometimes battered but still alive—that a person's future need not be determined by birth.

Immigrants are still answering the call. According to a recent analysis by the National Foundation for American Policy, immigrants have founded or co-founded 59% of the 775 privately held startups in the U.S. valued at \$1 billion or more.

America remains the best place to turn an idea into a company. The entrepreneurial ecosystem works as well for customers. In the U.S., talent meets opportunity, opportunity attracts capital, capital builds products, products meet customers, customers invite competition, and competition drives progress. This progress reverberates globally.

This is American exceptionalism properly understood. It isn't a claim that Americans are inherently better than anyone else. It's the recognition that America's institutions, habits and

freedoms have made ordinary people capable of extraordinary creation.

But magnets can lose their strength. If we punish risk, overregulate builders, sneer at industry, neglect education, or close the door to people who want to contribute, we will become less exceptional.

My ancestors arrived with uncertainty and hope, welcomed by a country still inventing itself. Their descendants were given the privilege of belonging to it, serving it, arguing within it, building in it, and loving it.

To honor America at 250 we should do more than remember and celebrate the past. We should look forward, preserving those ideals and promises that made this country a magnet for builders in 1800, and passing along that promise, stronger than when we received it.

Mr. duPont is a co-founder of Chartline Capital and Zip Code Wilmington.

Government Isn't Doing Better on AI Than on UFOs



BUSINESS
WORLD
By Holman W.
Jenkins, Jr.

Cowen podcast, Obama CIA chief John Brennan responded to UFO sightings over U.S. military training ranges by clearly suggesting alien life. The backfilling has been hasty since then. In short order came a strange succession of unclassified assessments from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the first pointing to mysterious technologically impossible objects

Remember the late Biden-era drone panic over loss of control of the national airspace? You're seeing something similar now over artificial intelligence.

Recall that earlier episode. In 2020, on the Tyler Brennan responded to UFO sightings over U.S. military training ranges by clearly suggesting alien life. The backfilling has been hasty since then. In short order came a strange succession of unclassified assessments from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the first pointing to mysterious technologically impossible objects

over U.S. military sites, the second walking it all back. Ditto a reversal by NASA, whose then-leader enjoyed burbling in public about aliens but was soon assembling an expert panel to debunk such careless if crowd-pleasing talk.

By February of last year, I was taxing leaders of the Air Force's Barksdale B-52 base about the real problem, which government leaks even now admitted—conventional drones likely operated by unfriendly powers within U.S. airspace. Three months later came a Ukrainian drone attack that destroyed irreplaceable Russian nuclear bombers on the ground. This March, swarms of apparently unjamable drones appeared in restricted airspace above Barksdale itself. On June 15, a B-52 crashed on takeoff in California for unexplained reasons. Who didn't immediately wonder, “Drone?”

It may be hard to get your mind around, but the U.S. government is similarly panicked now over potential loss of control of its information domain thanks to artificial intelligence. As with UFOs, the press has generally played a gullible, distracting role, focusing on Terminator robots and AI-caused mass unemployment. A lot more telling was a Pentagon signal in 2018. It conspicuously added strategic cyberattacks to the short list of provocations that might prompt a U.S. nuclear response. Then came an early 2025 paper by former Google chief executive Eric Schmidt and colleagues. It warned that China might pre-emptively strike U.S. data centers if it feared it was losing the race to artificial superintelligence.

What was perceived as incipient became urgent with the arrival of Mythos in April. This latest Anthropic model was held back from public distribution because it might be used to organize economy-wrecking cyberhacks. There followed a Trump executive order asking model makers voluntarily to submit their products for

Inspiring confidence about their ability to manage new risks? Not a strong suit of Biden or Trump.

federal review. More recently, it took draconian steps to force Anthropic to withdraw even a guardrailed version from the market.

Anthropic and its two closest peers, OpenAI and Alphabet, are accustomed to rolling out upgraded and more capable models every few months to the general public. For now that's stopped. Here things stand without some coherent government leadership. The industry's investment-heavy business approach can quickly blow up if it can't release its products to customers.

Yann LeCun, Meta's former chief AI scientist, is among a minority who say America's AI leaders only hoist themselves by exaggerating both the progress and danger of their latest models. Unfortunately, government fears don't have to be accurate or well-calibrated if they cut to the heart of government's prestige and legitimacy. The large

potential benefits to society of AI Washington might willingly throw away to avoid such risks to itself.

People have been identifying and failing to identify objects in the sky forever. This has made the UFO mirage a ready resort, since early in the last Cold War, for the U.S. government to misdirect public attention from its own misdeeds. So far 100% of identified objects haven't been alien spacecraft, yet people like Steven Spielberg treat the simple fact of unidentified sightings as proof not only of alien visitation, but of government conspiracies.

Americans are especially prone to such invented suspicions when they sense that sources they should be able to trust are lying to them. This problem our politicians and press have recently amplified—lies by Donald Trump's enemies about his Russian connections and Hunter Biden's laptop, lies by Mr. Trump about the 2020 election, lies about Covid, about the value and shortcomings of vaccines, about Jeffrey Epstein, about President Biden's cognitive status, about UFOs.

Even allowing that some government purposes require lying, the natural course of AI adoption ought to improve matters. Sadly, our current class of disinformation-addicted bureaucrats and politicians can also use AI to make things worse. Here it may be useful to witness the still-lacking progress in domestic drone defense. It's not too soon for Americans to start thinking about how to elect a president who can talk sanely and confidently about how we're going to survive this future.

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COMMENT

Yang Junfang

Dialect an enduring bond to home across generations and seas

A film that many of its overseas viewers may not fully understand has opened across Southeast Asia, and is being embraced there as if it were their own. *Dear You*, a drama spoken almost entirely in the Chaoshan (Teochew) dialect of South China's Guangdong province, became an unlikely hit in the Chinese mainland this spring and has since traveled to the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions, Singapore, Malaysia and beyond. Most commentary has focused on why a small dialect film with no big stars succeeded. But the more pertinent question is why it has resonated so deeply with overseas Chinese, and what that reveals about the relationship between language, memory and identity.

The answer lies in something older than the film itself: the bond between a native tongue and the people who once carried it across the seas. *Dear You* is the latest chapter in a long story linking Chinese-dialect cinema and the Nanyang Chinese, the ethnic Chinese communities of maritime Southeast Asia.

That relationship dates back to the war years. In the late 1930s, as China fought for survival, films and newsreels on anti-Japanese invasion from the mainland filled cinemas in British Malaya — among them Hokkien-dialect films such as a 1938 newsreel on the defense of Xiamen, Fujian province — rallying immigrant audiences in the language of their native villages. In the 1950s and 1960s, films in the Hokkien and Teochew dialects, which were financed by Nanyang capital and produced in Hong Kong, gave sojourners who still dreamed of returning home something precious: a homeland they could hear. The native tongue was the link: first as a tool of wartime mobilization, and then a comfort against homesickness.

Dear You marks a third moment in this history, and a reversal. Earlier, films traveled outward from China to the diaspora. This time, a mainland film made in a Chinese dialect has journeyed to the communities whose forebears planted roots there long ago. The direction has reversed. It is no longer the diaspora looking toward home; it is a work from home that traveled out to be recognized and embraced. For decades, the homeland called and the diaspora listened. Now it is the homeland's film that waits to be claimed.

The reversal also says something about dialect itself. Film distributors often regarded dialect as a barrier to a film's reach. In reality, it is a medium of identity and memory. In Singapore and Malaysia, audiences with roots in China's Fujian and Guangdong provinces have wept and lined up to see *Dear You*, not because they follow every word, but because the sound — and its story of letters sent home — speaks to who they are.

At a special screening in Kuala Lumpur, Chiew Choon Man, Malaysia's deputy minister of tourism, arts and culture, speaking on behalf of Minister Tiong King Sing, said the film highlights a shared chapter of history familiar to many Malaysian Chinese families. Even the debate over whether the film should be screened in its original Teochew or in a Mandarin-dubbed version underscores this point. For these communities, the native tongue is not mere packaging; it carries identity.

The emotional engine of *Dear You* is the *qiaopi* — the remittance letters that overseas Chinese once sent home with a few lines of news folded around a little money. Inscribed on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2013, these letters transform a private family story into a shared history of migration, sacrifice and fidelity. That heritage belongs to both China and to the Chinese communities of Southeast Asia, making it a natural bridge between them.

The film's arc mirrors the diaspora's own journey. In a now-familiar formulation among scholars of the overseas Chinese, the diaspora has, over the generations, evolved from "fallen leaves returning to their roots" to "putting down roots where one lands".

Dear You points to yet another stage: reconnection after taking root. Communities that are now firmly and confidently local still choose to reclaim their cultural ties to the ancestral land, not by going back, but by listening once again to a familiar sound and reading an old letter once more. This reconnection, tellingly, is led less by the old than by the young, whose growing interest in regional and local culture *Dear You* has tapped.

Ultimately, *Dear You* shows that the bond between a diaspora and its ancestral culture does not simply fade as communities settle and assimilate. It renews itself, often when least expected, and increasingly through the young.

The native tongue is the thread that binds. A century ago, it called immigrants to support a homeland in crisis. Today, it draws their grandchildren toward a shared memory. Once, that pull was a summons answered out of duty; now it is a connection reclaimed by choice.

The film's own journey has a striking symmetry. The *qiaopi* once traveled outward, carrying a family's hopes and survival across the South China Sea. Now a film built on those letters crosses the same waters in the same direction, yet the people who receive it are no longer distant sons and daughters waiting to be called home. They are confident citizens of their own countries who, hearing a familiar dialect and reading an old letter, choose to recognize themselves in it. The native tongue, it turns out, was never the limit of the story. It was the reason the story could be answered, across the seas and across generations.

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The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

Md Shahadat Hossain

Trust, friendship foundation of relations

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's visit to China from June 24 to 26 has once again brought Bangladesh-China relations into public focus. High-level engagements between the two countries over the past several months, including meetings between their foreign ministers and discussions on economic cooperation, indicate that both sides want to take their relationship to a more practical and productive level. As a Bangladeshi and as someone who has long been involved in promoting Bangladesh-China relations and Chinese language education, I have been observing these developments with great interest.

When I began learning the Chinese language in 1988, I never imagined I would spend so many years working on Bangladesh-China relations. Through my studies in China, participation in various academic and research activities, and my involvement in leading the activities of We Speak Chinese Club Bangladesh Limited, I have come to realize that the true foundation of relations between nations is not merely agreements, loans, or infrastructure. Rather, it lies in trust between people, mutual respect, and a long-term spirit of cooperation.

On May 20, 2024, I had the opportunity to participate in a roundtable discussion titled "China-Bangladesh Relations and the Belt and Road Initiative" at the MBA building of the University of Dhaka. During the discussions among academics, researchers and policy stakeholders from both Bangladesh and China, one theme emerged repeatedly: Bangladesh-China relations are increasingly moving beyond symbolic friendship, evolving into a partnership based on economic cooperation, technology, education, human resource development and regional connectivity.

A joint statement issued after a recent meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries placed particular emphasis on economic cooperation, trade, investment, the digital economy, water resource management, healthcare and people-to-people exchanges. Bangladesh seeks possible Chinese involvement in the management and restoration of the Teesta River. If implemented successfully, these initiatives could inject new



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momentum into Bangladesh's development journey.

At the same time, I believe that maintaining a balanced foreign policy remains the most important consideration for Bangladesh. Historically, Bangladesh has pursued a policy of friendship toward all. Therefore, instead of leaning excessively toward any particular power, our primary objective should be to uphold a multi-dimensional diplomatic balance while safeguarding national interests.

When thinking about the future of Bangladesh-China cooperation, I often ask myself a simple question: Which projects can make the greatest positive difference to the lives of ordi-

nary people? In my view, future cooperation should accord the highest priority to healthcare, education, skilled human resource development, and job creation. Establishing international-standard hospitals and universities across Bangladesh's eight administrative divisions would help distribute the benefits of development more evenly throughout the country. Likewise, high-speed rail connectivity centered on Dhaka could add a new dimension to national economic activities.

Another major opportunity for Bangladesh lies in the blue economy. The immense potential of the Bay of Bengal can be properly tapped by establishing an international-standard maritime research center. At the same time, cooperation in renewable energy, digital technology and artificial

Zhao Xinge and Qiu Ju

Build rules, not rivalries in China-EU ties

The framing of an impending "China Shock 2.0" reflects a contested and increasingly politicized narrative rather than an objective analytical reality. Against this backdrop, China-EU economic relations are entering a delicate, decisive phase of rebalancing. This new wave of Chinese high-tech exports has triggered systemic anxieties over European deindustrialization, and the European Commission has responded by building an aggressive industrial firewall. However, the bloc is engaged in an intense internal debate: where some member states demand sweeping protectionist walls, industrial leaders warn that such heavy-handed barriers will backfire — stifling European competitiveness and derailing the green transition. This friction creates a vital, fleeting window to replace reactionary rivalries with a predictable framework for engagement. While clear, stable rules will unlock shared momentum for economic growth and innovation, excessive securitization will only guarantee that both sides pay a much higher price for future cooperation.

As the world's second- and third-largest economies, China and the EU together account for roughly one-third of global nominal GDP and 30 percent of global trade. They are indispensable partners. China is a major supplier of industrial raw materials and intermediate goods to Europe, while the two sides have strong complementarity in the

service trade. In 2025, the EU recorded a surplus of approximately €21.3 billion (\$24.53 billion) in service trade with China. Strengthening predictability in this relationship is therefore vital not only for the two economies but also for the resilience of global value chains.

Over two decades, China-EU ties have evolved beyond simple commodity exchange to deep industrial integration. In sectors such as automotive, machinery and chemicals, European companies continue to expand their "In China, For China" strategies, benefiting from China's sophisticated supply chains and innovation momentum.

China's strengths in electric vehicles, lithium batteries and photovoltaics have become cost-effective enablers of the EU's green transition. As former European Central Bank president Mario Draghi noted in his report "The Future of European Competitiveness", leveraging Chinese supply chains is the fastest and cheapest path to decarbonization, though it poses competitive challenges to European industries. This dilemma actually underscores the necessity of coordinated cooperation.

At the same time, the EU's green transition offers significant opportunities for Chinese new energy enterprises. Driven by this synergy, Chinese investment in the EU reached €10 billion in 2024 — a 47 percent year-on-year increase — accounting for more than half of China's total investment in high-income economies.

However, in recent years, the EU policy toward China has moved beyond "anti-dumping" measures on specific products toward broader and more systemic forms of protectionism. The proposed Industrial Accelerator Act aims to increase manufacturing's share in the EU's GDP to 20 percent by 2035. It targets strategic sectors, including EVs, batteries and photovoltaics. By imposing strict conditions on non-EU enterprises — such as a 50 percent local employment mandate and technology transfers for large-scale investments —

the IAA is an aggressive shift toward European industrial autonomy.

Equally contentious is the increasing securitization of investment. Since the start of the year, the EU has used the Foreign Subsidies Regulation and cybersecurity amendments to exclude "high-risk" suppliers.

Despite the mounting tensions, there are signs of pragmatic rethinking across European capitals. A recent summit of European leaders "opted for dialogue" rather than an immediate trade war with China. In the past year, high-level engagements have signaled that many European policymakers recognize the value of engagement. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's visit in February was followed by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's trip to Beijing. Both visits reflected efforts to preserve established trade ties while scouting for new growth drivers. The launch of the Open Coalition on Compliance Carbon Markets is a big step toward harmonizing multilateral carbon pricing rules, proving that despite differences, the appetite for pragmatic cooperation remains strong.

Three major concerns are driving the current deadlock. The first is the "trade imbalance". Deficits are increasingly linked to concerns about deindustrialization and job losses, turning economic data into politically sensitive issues.

Second is industrial competition. Disputes in sectors such as new energy technologies are no longer about market share. They now center on deeper issues such as "subsidy transparency" and reciprocal market access.

The third concern is supply chain security, particularly as the concentrated dependence on sources of critical raw materials has fueled the "de-risking" narrative.

In this context, simply emphasizing the sheer volume of bilateral trade is not enough. The challenge is to build institutional arrangements that enhance transparency, predictability and reciprocal openness.

intelligence could play an important role in enhancing Bangladesh's future competitiveness.

Through my long involvement in Chinese language education and human resource development, I have observed that Bangladesh's greatest asset is its young population. Therefore, greater emphasis should be placed on technical education, language training and skills development aligned with international labor market demands. Training programs focused on Chinese language proficiency and modern technologies could create new employment opportunities for thousands of young people in the years ahead.

Personally, I believe that the success of any international development project depends on how tangibly it affects the lives of ordinary people. No project can achieve long-term success without earning the trust and confidence of the people. For that reason, job creation, technology transfer, skills development and strengthening local economies should always remain key priorities of projects.

The fiftieth anniversary of Bangladesh-China diplomatic relations in 2025 has opened a new chapter of possibilities. Various media reports and recent diplomatic engagements suggest that ties between the two countries may deepen further in the coming years. However, the true measure of success will not be the number of agreements signed, but rather how many lives are improved, how many jobs are created, and how much sustainable development is achieved.

Finally, as a long-time observer and contributor, I believe that the greatest strength of Bangladesh-China relations lies not in infrastructure, trade figures, or financing statistics. Its real strength lies in the trust, friendship and mutual respect that have developed between the peoples of the two countries. The stronger that foundation becomes, the brighter the future will be for both nations.

The author is a retired lieutenant colonel in Bangladesh, an adjunct professor, founder and general secretary of We Speak Chinese Club Bangladesh Limited.

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