



## Buyer beware

Tracking down defective batches of drugs is essential

The Health Ministry's notification to expand Schedule H2 drugs to entire therapeutic classes now from a curated list of brands earlier is a commendable change from regulating based on revenue to regulating based on risk. The government had introduced Schedule H2 in 2022-23, which required a barcode or QR code on each pack of specific drugs to verify the pack's authenticity. It is part of a framework that also touches on regulating active pharmaceutical ingredients and export-oriented pharmaceutical compliance. Now, with the additional symbols encoding a product identifier, the manufacturing licence number, batch number, and other details, authorities hope to better track down defective batches. Counterfeit networks have long targeted vaccines, cancer medicines and antimicrobials, with WHO flagging high volumes of fake antimicrobials in low- and middle-income countries. India has one of the world's highest antimicrobial resistance rates, and sub-standard antimicrobials can lead to sub-therapeutic dosing, exerting selection pressure on resistant strains. The Narcotics Control Bureau has also expressed concerns about medicinal opioids and psychotropic substances 'leaking' into illicit markets. The government will hope that the new system addresses the U.S. FDA's and the European Medicines Agency's recurring concerns about quality control, an issue on which India has found itself on the back foot over contaminated cough syrups. The U.S. Trade Representative has also repeatedly identified India as a leading source of counterfeit medicines, with many fake pharmaceuticals seized at the U.S. border originating from or transiting through India.

Together with policy changes effected by the Jan Vishwas Act 2026, the new framework finally distinguishes between procedural non-compliance and substantial non-compliance, considering only the latter constitutes meaningful enforcement. In the long term, the government should rationalise the compliance burden and eliminate the risk of corruption associated with discretionary enforcement. The government must also recognise that the QR code system will only be effective if backed by a state-managed database that pharmacists and regulators can access in real time, supported by interoperable software and scanning infrastructure across States. Second, pharmacists and consumers must develop a habit of verifying medicines before a sale. Third, the compliance needs imposed by new packaging requirements and the IT integration will strain MSME manufacturers in particular. Finally, prescription data on controlled substances is sensitive information and will need to be handled with a digital governance layer that does not yet exist. Thus, whether the new framework will improve India's reputation as a pharmacy comes down to its implementation.

## Sharing waters

The Tungbhadra dam is a good example of inter-State cooperation

The coming together of the Chief Ministers of Karnataka (D.K. Shivakumar), Telangana (A. Revanth Reddy) and Andhra Pradesh (N. Chandrababu Naidu), along with Union Jal Shakti Minister C.R. Patil, at the inauguration of the 33 spillway gates of the Tungbhadra dam on June 25 was significant beyond the optics. The three leaders pledged greater inter-State cooperation, which is welcome given that the dam has largely remained free of major disputes due to an established water-sharing formula and the Tungbhadra Board's regulation of releases. Located in Karnataka's Koppal district, the dam is considered to be the lifeline of the three southern States, providing irrigation to about 16.4 lakh acres – 9.26 lakh in Karnataka, 6.25 lakh in Andhra Pradesh, and 87,000 in Telangana. It hit the headlines in August 2024 when a crest gate was washed away during heavy inflows – which also happened when the dam was full with 105 thousand million cubic feet (tmc ft) of water. The damaged gate was replaced with a temporary one, but with much water wasted, the authorities, who did not want to take chances with the other 32 gates, chose to install high-grade steel gates, at ₹51 crore and which are expected to last 60 years.

Notwithstanding the bonhomie, the differences among the leaders on some issues concerning the larger Tungbhadra project cannot be brushed aside. The Upper Bhadra project, a major lift irrigation scheme under implementation in the central region of Karnataka and upstream of the Tungbhadra dam, has emerged as an irritant for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. At one stage, the BJP-led Union government had made a provision of ₹5,300 crore in its budget for 2023-24, a few months before the Karnataka Assembly elections. However, the Centre later chose not to include it under any of its schemes, but this is being implemented by a Karnataka government undertaking. It remains to be seen whether the spirit of camaraderie will help the three neighbours to overcome their differences on the Upper Bhadra issue. The Tungbhadra dam is also facing excessive siltation, which has reduced its storage capacity from the original 133 tmc ft to about 106 tmc ft. Mr. Patil has assured the Chief Ministers about the Centre's plan to remove silt from water reservoirs across the country including the Tungbhadra. More importantly, the Union government should closely monitor and expedite, wherever required, the execution of dam rehabilitation and improvement projects being taken up in 19 States. Any laxity with regard to dam safety may have disastrous consequences. The focus must be on prevention, not reparation.

# The new digital slavery needs constitutional guardrails

In his profound encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo XIV grounds the contemporary crisis of technology in elemental theology, reminding humanity that the individual stands at the absolute centre of divine creation. Yet, this sacred human dignity faces an unprecedented challenge. The Holy Father warns that artificial intelligence (AI), left unchecked, threatens to turn the ownership of our personal data into a new form of digital slavery – a subjugation as cruel as human bondage. Because the stakes are so inherently tied to human dignity, the Pontiff insists that the governance of AI cannot rely on vague good intentions, nor can it be left to the private consciences of the engineers who build these systems. Instead, he issues an urgent call for robust, binding law over abstract ethics, independent public oversight over the empty promises of Silicon Valley's modern pharaohs – and a clear requirement that a human being remains accountable whenever an automated system decides who gets a loan, a job, a medical bed, or an education. Pope Leo XIV's core demand is that this new electronic Curia be strictly regulated rather than quietly surrendered to a handful of private tech monopolies whose reach and resources already outstrip most sovereign governments. He even goes so far as to commend the courage to deliberately slow down the development of AI.

### When regulation lags

However, a fundamental problem remains: AI and morality do not observe the same time. AI is developed at the breakneck speed of the start-up culture, driven by an ethos to move fast and run perpetual beta tests on society in the guise of progress. This velocity is fuelled not just by commercial rivalries, but by relentless mathematical innovation spanning from Silicon Valley to Shenzhen. It presents a deeper hurdle for lawmakers worldwide: parliament can govern what a person does, but it can never forbid a mathematical theorem, a discovery, or an equation from being made. How do lawmakers fulfil the Pope's wishes?

Law in most democracies moves slowly. By the time landmark legislation such as the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act or the United Kingdom's Online Safety Act were painstakingly debated and passed, the specific technical harms they were built to combat had already mutated, leaving an entire generation to grow up inside unaddressed digital vulnerabilities. Policymakers have historically been behind the innovation curve, and under current paradigms, we will be again.

If legislation is fated to lag behind innovation, the consequences for democratic societies are not merely regulatory; they are existential. Democracy cannot function if citizens cannot distinguish reality from fabrication. At its core, democratic governance relies on a shared epistemic foundation: a collective agreement on



Shashi Tharoor

Fourth-term Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) for Thiruvananthapuram (Congress party), the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author of 29 books, including, most recently, 'The Sage Who Reimagined Hinduism: The Life, Lessons and Legacy of Sree Narayana Guru'

basic facts from which public debate, policy, and electoral choices can flow. When that foundation is systematically undermined, the entire democratic project is threatened. Today, AI-generated disinformation and advanced synthetic media ("deepfakes") have advanced to a level of fidelity where the human eye and ear can no longer reliably detect forgery. This is already our reality. Highly convincing audio and video duplications of political leaders are deployed strategically during sensitive electoral cycles to depress voter turnout, fabricate scandals out of thin air, and instantly shatter public trust in legitimate state institutions.

This vulnerability is hyper-charged by algorithmic manipulation. Big Tech platforms operate on business models engineered exclusively to maximise user engagement. Because outrage, fear, and sensationalism generate the highest click-through rates, platform algorithms systematically prioritise and amplify hyper-partisan content, driving radicalisation. By trapping citizens within hyper-customised echo chambers, these systems normalise online hate and accelerate social fragmentation. In doing so, private platforms exert an unprecedented form of unaccountable power, effectively rewriting the rules of the public square to optimise quarterly corporate profits at the expense of social cohesion.

### Democracy's digital vulnerability

When a society is deeply polarised and stripped of a shared reality, it becomes a soft target for foreign interference. Adversarial nation-states and non-state actors have weaponised these platform vulnerabilities, transforming them into a theatre for sophisticated information warfare. Foreign information manipulation operations are no longer clumsy, bot-driven spam campaigns; they are highly targeted, AI-driven psychological operations designed to covertly exploit pre-existing religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic fault lines within a target nation. By covertly funding, generating, and amplifying divisive narratives, hostile foreign actors can destabilise a democracy from within, turning its own citizens against one another. These coordinated campaigns represent nothing less than a direct, strategic threat to democratic sovereignty itself. As the world's largest democracy and a global technology hub, India stands at the absolute epicentre of this crisis. In an environment where digital adoption outpaces structural digital literacy, the weaponisation of synthetic media and algorithmic polarisation poses a unique threat to India's pluralistic society.

If traditional, reactive legislation is doomed to always trail behind mathematical innovation, India cannot rely on standard, backward-looking regulatory frameworks. Instead, an enduring law and policy framework for India must be anchored in five foundational pillars that operate concurrently.

First, AI governance must adopt a strictly

rights-based framework that prioritises individual human dignity and digital autonomy, ensuring citizens possess unalienable rights over their personal data, strict consent protocols, and clear protections against algorithmic discrimination in critical sectors such as employment, credit, and health care. Second, platforms must be subjected to genuine democratic accountability; large technology firms can no longer hide behind absolute safe-harbour immunities while their algorithms profit from the viral spread of destabilising disinformation. They must be legally compelled to introduce structural transparency, allowing independent audits of their recommendation engines and forcing them to accept systemic liability for algorithmic amplification that results in real-world violence.

Third, even as these frameworks are constructed, free speech protections must remain fully intact. The power to define and combat disinformation must never devolve into a tool for state-sponsored censorship or the silencing of political dissent. The focus of regulation must remain strictly on structural platform mechanics, such as automated bot networks and deepfake originators, rather than the heavy-handed policing of individual ideological speech.

Fourth, because technical fixes are entirely insufficient without building cognitive resilience within the populace, India must launch a massive, state-backed educational initiative focused on media literacy and digital citizenship. This curriculum must be integrated across schools, universities, and rural community centres to train citizens to critically evaluate digital sources and identify emotional manipulation tactics. Finally, to defend national sovereignty, India must establish sophisticated, cross-sector early-warning systems capable of detecting coordinated misinformation operations in real-time. By leveraging advanced detection tools and fostering deep collaboration between state security apparatuses, independent fact-checking networks, and ethical hackers, the nation can identify and neutralise foreign information warfare campaigns before they achieve viral velocity.

### A constitutional imperative

Ultimately, the lesson of our era is clear: AI governance cannot remain merely regulatory or technical. It is a profound mistake to treat the manipulation of the information ecosystem as a series of isolated technical glitches to be patched with minor corporate updates or narrow statutory tweaks. Because these technologies possess the unique capability to distort truth, polarise societies, and erode the sovereign choice of voters, AI governance must rise to the level of a constitutional imperative. The right to an unmanipulated information ecosystem, where reality can be clearly distinguished from corporate or state fabrication, must be viewed as an indispensable extension of the fundamental right to life, liberty, and free expression.

# July opens the biggest chapter in India-U.K. trade ties

Trade deals are important for accelerating prosperity but not every deal is a game changer. One that drives shared growth across key sectors, unlocks opportunity for businesses of all sizes, and pushes the envelope for bilateral trade qualifies to achieve that tag. And so, it is no surprise to see businesses and trade associations using the term in relation to the United Kingdom-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) which is formally known as Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA). India remains the fastest-growing economy in the G-20 and it is on track to become the world's third-largest economy within the next five years. Complementing this the U.K. remains one of the top global destinations for investment and was the third fastest-growing economy in the G-7 in 2025. Securing preferential access to each other's market is not an abstract diplomatic win; it is an economic advantage that will deliver significant returns in both countries over time. This FTA is forecast to boost Indian GDP by ₹5.1 billion, the U.K.'s GDP by ₹4.8 billion and increase bilateral trade by ₹25.5 billion every year in the long run.

Bilateral trade was already worth ₹48 billion a year in 2025. From July 15, it will be cheaper, quicker, and easier for businesses to trade across both countries. Even before this deal came into force, we have seen the creation of thousands of new jobs on both sides and that is showing no signs of slowing down, as the countdown to entry into force closes and a new era of growth between the two nations begins. We should all be excited to see what the two countries and businesses on both sides can achieve in the years ahead. These are the hallmarks of a historic deal; but it is not just about the numbers.

### A story of scale and depth

From day one, both sides agreed that this deal must be broad, deep, and a driving force that brings long-term growth for both countries. Nearly three years of intensive negotiations



Harjinder Kang

His Majesty's Trade Commissioner for South Asia and the British Deputy High Commissioner for western India

preceded this deal and there is no doubt that the agreement reached is the most economically significant trade deal that the U.K. has done since leaving the European Union; it is also one of the most comprehensive trade deals that India has ever done. In short it is a win-win for businesses and consumers and for both economies. To give readers just a flavour of the far-reaching benefits – 99% of U.K. tariff lines will be duty-free for Indian products and India will remove or reduce tariffs on 90% of its tariff lines for U.K. products.

For India, this could support jobs in labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, leather, jewellery and, equally, it will boost exports in services such as IT and finance by a large margin.

Similarly, tariff duties on U.K. exports to India are estimated to fall by around ₹400 million when the deal comes into effect, and further to ₹900 million in later phases. Critical industries such as aerospace, automobiles, medical devices, and whiskies will all benefit significantly, adding billions to the U.K. economy. This is transformational and it is also just the beginning.

### Benefits beyond Mumbai and London

One of the most persistent criticisms of trade policy is that the gains created are only concentrated in a few places. We have ensured that this deal benefits all aspects of the local economy beyond the major cities in both countries. Several unprecedented and dedicated provisions across high-growth and high-value sectors from each side are agreed in a deal spanning 30 chapters. In practical terms, that means manufacturers, innovators, supply chain businesses, and service exporters – often based far away from the major cities – can compete more effectively with cheaper imports and fewer barriers. For instance, a textile manufacturer from Indore, Madhya Pradesh, will now be able to trade more efficiently into the U.K. just like an auto-parts manufacturer from Birmingham will be able to trade more cost effectively into India.

The U.K.-India Free Trade Agreement, the 'gold standard of modern trade deals', comes into force on July 15

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Ayodhya fund case

Reports of alleged irregularities in the handling of funds raised for the Ram temple in Ayodhya demand urgent public scrutiny (Front page, June 27). Thousands of donors across the country contributed in good faith to a cause

presented as both religious and civic. Transparency and accountability are non-negotiable when public contributions are involved. A shrine built on collective faith deserves an administrative framework beyond reproach. The authorities must thoroughly

investigate these allegations and take swift corrective action to restore public confidence.

Kshirasagara Balaji Rao, Hyderabad

Temple fund scandals are seldom the work of a few dishonest individuals alone.

They are usually a combination of omission and commission: systemic loopholes are either deliberately created or conveniently left unattended. Cash-intensive institutions demand the highest standards of transparency, independent

audits, digital accounting, CCTV-backed custody chains, and clear segregation of responsibilities. When these safeguards fail, faith itself becomes collateral damage. The lesson is that sacred institutions must be governed by systems so

robust that temptation finds no opportunity and dishonesty no refuge.

R. Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

## How schools can tackle adolescent malnutrition

As schools across the country reopened after summer vacation, classrooms were filled once again with the energy, aspirations and anxieties of millions of adolescents. Yet hidden behind their growing ambitions lies a silent public health emergency – adolescent malnutrition. The recently released NFHS-6 (2023-24) findings are stark. Obesity among women aged 15-49 years has risen from 24% to 30.7%, and among men from 22.9% to 27.3%. High blood sugar among men aged 15 and above jumped from 15.6% to 20.9%, and among women from 13.5% to 17.8%. What is most alarming is that lifestyle changes once associated with cities and affluent communities such as sedentary behaviour, processed diets, stress and rising obesity, are now affecting rural populations too. India faces a double burden: undernutrition among children and surging obesity among adults, with obesity driving diabetes, heart disease and stroke. These crises do not begin in adulthood. Their roots lie in adolescence, making schools the most critical setting for prevention.

**Addressing diets differently**  
Schools must recognise that malnutrition is no longer only about thinness. India is witnessing the ‘thin-fat’ phenotype – children who appear lean yet carry dangerous metabolic risk. According to the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS, 2019), 27.4% of Indian adolescents are stunted. At the same time, obesity is rising, particularly among the urban youth. More strikingly, 35% of children under five are stunted yet carry adult-level triglycerides, which is like a metabolic time bomb associated with adult-onset diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Preventing these diseases must begin in school, not in hospitals decades later. Studies on Delhi school adolescents confirmed that the



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Schools are not merely educational institutions; they have the potential to be powerful public health promoting institutions

consumption of milk and dairy products, green leafy vegetables and fruits is lower than what is recommended. Far too many children consume cereal-heavy diets while proteins and protective foods remain woefully inadequate. Schools can address this through improved midday meals, healthier canteens and food demonstrations that teach students how to build balanced plates. The Dietary Guidelines for Indians 2024 recommend that half the plate by volume should consist of fruits and vegetables. Yet research confirms that sedentary and screen-heavy behaviours are inversely associated with daily fruit and vegetable intake – a dangerous compounding effect. School gardens, fruit breaks, and local seasonal produce can normalise healthier eating habits.

**Addressing sugar and UPFs**  
Moreover, the bitter truth about sugar has to be revealed. Sugary drinks, High fat sugar and salt (HFSS) foods, and Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs) are rapidly replacing traditional foods. Studies highlight alarming trends in free sugar and UPF consumption among Indian adolescents. A recent World Health Organization study has revealed that UPF consumption in India has been surging at more than 13.7% year-after-year. The bitter truth is that the excess sugar consumed today becomes a metabolic risk tomorrow. Schools must actively discourage sugary beverages and display sugar boards showing hidden sugar content. Reinforcement, not one-time campaigns, converts knowledge into practice.

Physical inactivity must be treated as seriously as poor diet. Schools should guarantee structured physical activity and sports as core educational components, not optional extras. This is especially urgent as urban lifestyle habits such as reduced movement, changing diets, and rising obesity are now affecting rural communities too, making inactivity a nationwide epidemic, not only city schools' problem.

Thus, among the most common risk factors for non-communicable diseases in children and adolescents are unhealthy diets and insufficient physical activity. The rapid rise of adolescent obesity increases the risk of early-onset Type 2 diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, and will lead to substantially greater healthcare spending. UPF-free school zones must become a national movement backed by consistent policy.

**Schools advancing public health**  
It is here that the Let's Fix Our Food (LFOF) initiative offers a compelling direction. Led by the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Nutrition (ICMR-NIN), the LFOF consortium is a multi-stakeholder initiative working to create healthier food environments for adolescents by advancing evidence-based policy, empowering youth through nutrition literacy, and campaigning for regulatory frameworks. Its outputs include recommendations for regulating HFSS food advertising, taxation on unhealthy beverages, a model school nutrition curriculum and a food label reading kit.

A 2025 *Lancet* study projected that 21.8 crore men and 23.1 crore women in India will be overweight by 2050, with the steepest rise expected among adolescents and young adults aged 15-24 years.

Schools must move beyond textbook nutrition education and adopt skill-based approaches such as reading food labels, recognising portion sizes, understanding marketing tactics, and basic cooking. Schools are not merely educational institutions; they have the potential to be powerful public health promoting institutions. School-based interventions in India have demonstrated measurable improvements in dietary behaviour and reductions in sugary beverage consumption. A child protected from unhealthy diets today is far less likely to become a patient tomorrow.

## The politics around custodial deaths

The Opposition in Andhra Pradesh is attacking the government on its excesses

### STATE OF PLAY

**Sumit Bhattacharjee**

The recent alleged custodial death of a person at the Krishnalanka police station in Vijayawada in the NTR district of Andhra Pradesh is turning out to be a major political issue.

Gade Sai Krishna, who, according to the police, has a criminal history, was picked up by the Circle Inspector of Krishnalanka police station, S.S.V.V. Nagaraju, on May 9 from his residence in Markapuram for questioning in connection with some old cases. He has been missing since then. G. Vijaya Lakshmi, mother of Sai Krishna, after making repeated rounds to the police station to inquire about the whereabouts of her son, filed a *habeas corpus* petition in the Andhra Pradesh High Court on June 2. Based on the petition, the court ordered the NTR Police Commissioner to produce Sai Krishna by June 15. Upon failing to meet the deadline, the High Court further directed the police to produce him on June 29.

In the meantime, voices of protest grew louder and the Opposition parties, including the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) and the Congress, left no stone unturned in blaming the administration and the government. They shaped the narrative as one of custodial torture and death, which, they claimed, was being hushed up by the police.

Ever since the incident started gaining prominence, former Chief Minister and YSRCP president Jagan Mohan Reddy has sought to highlight, what he describes as, police excesses under the ruling party and has even gone to the extent of accusing the govern-



ment of “Red Book” governance. It may be recalled that during the run-up to the 2024 elections, the present IT Minister Nara Lokesh had spoken of a “Red Book,” indicating that he had noted down incidents and the names of people who had reportedly committed excesses during the YSRCP rule and that, once in power, he would deal with them suitably.

**Same playbook?**  
Not long ago, during the 2024 election campaign, a similar murder case had become the Achilles' heel of then Chief Minister Jagan Reddy. His own Member of Legislative Council (MLC), Ananta Satya Udaya Bhaskar, popularly known as Ananta Babu, was involved in the murder of his driver, Subrahmanyam.

Chandrababu Naidu, then in the Opposition, and Jana Sena Party (JSP) leader Pawan Kalyan had turned the issue into a major political talking point during their election campaign. As the deceased man was Dalit, they targeted Mr. Reddy and his party leaders by accusing them of being biased against the Dalit community. The issue became a major political plank for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the run-up to the 2024 election campaign.

While this incident may not have been the tipping point for Mr. Reddy's rout in the elections, it did play a role and

may have contributed to the polarisation of Dalit voters, particularly in the Godavari districts, where the community has a significant vote share.

While Ananta Babu's case was turned into a caste-based political narrative, Sai Krishna's case may not evolve into one. Both the accused and the victim belong to the same community, and there is no apparent political angle to it, though the Opposition is trying its best to give it a political twist. What exactly happened to Sai Krishna is still not known, as neither his whereabouts nor his body (if he is dead) has been found.

In the meantime, a seasoned Mr. Naidu has taken stock of the situation and appears to be dealing with it firmly. The Chief Minister inquired into the incident in detail and directed DGP Harish Kumar Gupta to suspend Mr. Nagaraju. Subsequently, the police registered a murder case against the CI, and he was taken into custody on June 23.

Further, the Government constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to investigate the alleged illegal detention, custodial death, and destruction of evidence in Sai Krishna's case. Mr. Naidu also met the mother of the missing youth and assured her of a transparent investigation.

The challenge before the ruling alliance is to prevent the controversy from turning into a larger political debate. While the authorities concerned have so far taken the necessary action and set the course of the narrative, much depends on fast-tracking the investigation and bringing it to a logical conclusion before the Opposition can transform it into a political rallying point in the days ahead.

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## Will a survey error threaten the credibility of govt. schools?

The finding that government schools are charging fees in rural areas is at odds with all existing government policy and needs to be properly investigated

### DATA POINT

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**Gaurav**  
**Deepti Kushwaha**

In a written question in the Rajya Sabha earlier this year, an MP highlighted that 27% of students in government schools are paying fees – including admission, tuition, examination and development charges – and sought a response from the Ministry of Education. The MP's claim was based on the findings of the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Education (CMS-E), conducted by the National Statistics Office as part of the 80th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) from April-June 2025 (Charts 1 and 2).

The finding that a sizeable share of students, even in government schools, paid fees surprised many, since it could suggest that those schools were illegally charging fees, raising concerns over the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, which mandates free education for all children up to age 14. The survey covered 52,085 households, including 28,401 in rural areas.

This article examines whether government schools are indeed charging such fees, or whether the findings reflect issues related to data collection, compilation or both.

To identify the source of the problem, the average course fees paid by students in rural and urban areas were compared using education expenditure data for students in Classes 1 to 8, who are covered under the RTE Act. For the analysis, the course fees reported in the survey – which include admission fees, tuition fees, examination fees, development fees and other compulsory payments – were classified into four categories: no fees, ₹1-₹5,000, ₹5,001-₹10,000 and above ₹10,000.

The analysis showed that, among those reporting course fees

above ₹10,000, the average course fee paid by students in government schools in rural areas was higher than that paid by their counterparts in private schools.

Second, the data across all four course-fee categories showed that the percentage difference in average total educational expenditure between students in government and private schools ranged from -50.4% to +4.0% in rural areas and from -57.2% to +34.3% in urban areas (Table 1). Both points challenge the widely held perception that students in government schools incur substantially lower educational expenses than those in private schools.

Third, several States reported unusually low proportions of students with no course fees in government schools. In rural areas, the share of such students is particularly low – in Ladakh (0%), Tripura (2.6%), West Bengal (43%) and Kerala (53%).

Fourth, the percentage of students with no course fees in government schools is substantially lower in rural areas than in urban areas. For instance, in Himachal Pradesh this was 55.6% and 78.3% respectively, with similar patterns observed in six other States, which is difficult to reconcile with any existing government policy.

### Possible problems

A commonly cited explanation for such discrepancies is data-collection error.

First, even when survey investigators understand the intended meaning of the questions, they may struggle to communicate it to respondents in the same context in which they were designed. For example, a key question on educational expenditure in this survey is Question 9(i) in Block 5. It asks about “course fees”, which include admission fees, tuition fees, examination fees, development fees and other compulsory payments. Interestingly, in common usage, the term “tuition fees” is often understood to mean fees paid

for private coaching or supplementary education.

However, in school education, “tuition fees” refers to payments made to schools for teachers' salaries and basic academic resources. While the survey intends to capture this, respondents may have reported spending on private coaching as tuition fees.

Second, information was collected using Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI), under which responses are recorded directly on tablets. While this approach may facilitate faster processing, it also introduces certain limitations. For example, in earlier paper-based NSS surveys, enumerators could leave questions blank when respondents gave no answer. With CAPI, non-response is generally not permitted, and enumerators must enter a value before proceeding. Previous surveys suggest that non-response, resulting in missing observations, was not uncommon and in the NSS 75th Round (2017), it was 39.4%. However, there were no missing observations in 80th Round of survey, which used CAPI.

This raises the possibility that some course-fee values may have been entered merely to proceed to the next question. Moreover, even minor modifications may disrupt the process, and features such as autocorrect can sometimes distort recorded responses. Even the World Bank has noted that CAPI systems can be highly rigid.

If a large number of students do not have access to free education, the issue warrants serious scrutiny. Yet it is surprising that, despite the matter being raised in Parliament, neither the Central government nor any State government has come forward to investigate.

Conversely, if the findings result from flaws in data collection and validation, as the evidence above suggests, those responsible must be held accountable. Such errors not only distort policy research but also tarnish the reputation of government schools and teachers.

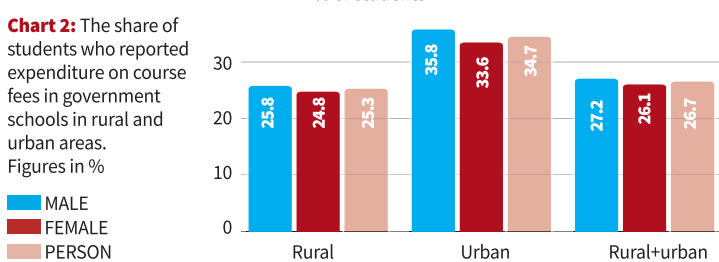
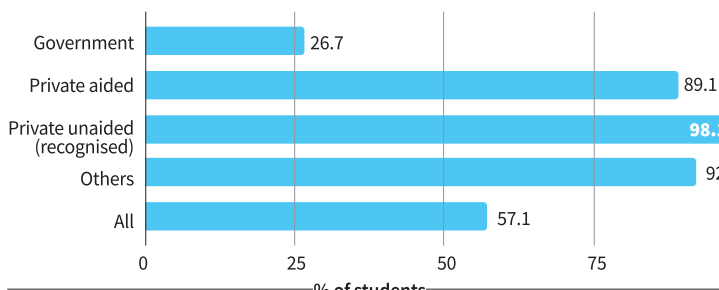
### Misleading data?

The data for the charts were sourced from the NSS 80th round, the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Education (CMS:E), 2025



Students arrive at a government high school in Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh after the summer vacation on June 12. G.N. RAO.

**Chart 1:** The share of students who reported expenditure on course fees by type of school



**Table 1:** Average total expenditure by course fee categories (in ₹)

Course Fee category	School type	Average exp on course fee		Average total expenditure	
		Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
0	Government	0	0	1,824	2,470
	Private (aided & unaided)	0	0	3,677	5,767
1-5000	Government	736	1,009	3,920	5,255
	Private (aided & unaided)	2,621	2,800	7,866	8,200
5001-10000	Government	6,917	6,827	15,839	19,956
	Private (aided & unaided)	7,595	7,837	15,236	14,857
Above 10000	Government	24,000	19,443	31,850	30,856
	Private (aided & unaided)	22,608	28,458	35,742	41,452

Based on authors' calculations

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### FROM THE ARCHIVES

## The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 29, 1976

## Seychelles attains Independence today

Victoria (Seychelles), June 28: “The String of Pearls”, a group of 92 islands of Seychelles in the western Indian Ocean will take its rightful place in the comity of nations when it attains independence to-morrow after centuries of French and British Colonial domination.

A new chapter will unfold in the lives of 68,000 Seychellois people when the President, Mr. James R. Mancham, will raise the flag of the world's youngest nation at a colourful ceremony in Victoria, marking yet another great victory for a member of the third world.

Delegations from all parts of the world have gathered in picturesque Victoria, capital of Seychelles, to represent their respective nations on this historic occasion.

India is represented by the Minister of State for Tourism and Civil Aviation, Mr. Surendra Pal Singh, and the Indian High Commissioner to Kenya, Air Chief Marshal Arjan Singh.

The Seychelles archipelago has a land area of only 279 sq.km but stretches across 3,88,000 sq.km. The climate in the islands, despite their proximity to the equator, is equable.

Although the islands were probably known to seafarers as early as 916, they remained uninhabited for several centuries. The establishment of the first French colony in 1770 brought Seychelles in the path of Anglo-French rivalry in the Indian Ocean. After no fewer than seven capitulations to the British, the period of French rule finally ended in 1814 when Seychelles became a dependency of the British colony of Mauritius.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 29, 1926

## Raw cotton in the Madras presidency

The receipts of loose cotton at presses and spinning mills in the Madras Presidency from 30th January to 18th June 1926 amounted to 250,446 bales of 400 lb lint against an estimate of 551,400 bales of the total crop of 1925-26. The receipts in the corresponding period of the previous year were 311,321 bales. 30,642 bales mainly of pressed cotton were received at spinning mills and 123,701 bales were exported by sea, while 11,730 bales were imported by sea from Karachi and Bombay.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

### Number of children covered in T.N. polio vaccine programme

**53** lakh. Tamil Nadu CM C. Joseph Vijay launched a Statewide health drive, aiming to administer the oral pulse polio vaccine to children under the age of five. The National Pulse Polio Immunisation campaign was rolled out across more than 43,000 authorised vaccination centres. PTI

### Govt. schools covered in Rajasthan's mental health programme

**1,500** Officials claimed that Rajasthan is the first State in the country to launch such a programme. RSCERT Director Shweta Fagediya said that a pilot project conducted in Sirahi and Banswara districts in 2024 yielded encouraging results. PTI

### Approximate surplus stock held by private firms for kharif season

**30** per cent. FSII Chairman Ajai Rana said while the sector was well-prepared following a bumper seed production season for corn, rice, and millets, a survey of 1,000 farmers showed 75% had already purchased seed while the remaining 25% were waiting for the monsoon. PTI

### Number of targets in Iran struck by the U.S. army during ceasefire

**10** The U.S. military said on Saturday it had struck 10 targets in Iran at President Donald Trump's direction, continuing a string of attacks that have shaken the war's uneasy ceasefire. The U.S. says strikes were a response to an Iranian attack on an oil tanker. PTI

### Magnitude of the earthquake in northeastern Japan

**6.1** A magnitude-6.1 earthquake rattled northeastern Japan early on Sunday, according to the Japan Meteorological Agency. No tsunami warning was issued, and there were no immediate reports of damage or casualties. PTI  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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# Can neutral ships be lawfully attacked?

What protections does international law afford neutral merchant vessels? When can neutral ships lawfully lose that protection? Can oil tankers and blockade runners be treated as military targets? What legal remedies are available to India after the deaths of its seafarers? How does international law regulate attacks?

## LETTER & SPIRIT

Kartikey Singh

### The story so far:

Recently, the U.S. Navy carried out Hellfire missile strikes against three merchant tankers – *Marivex*, *Settebello* and *Jaiveer* – all carrying Indian seafarers. While *Marivex* and *Jaiveer* escaped without casualties, three Indians aboard *Settebello* – the chief engineer, an engine fitter, and a deck cadet – were killed. Although U.S. President Donald Trump and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian signed an MoU on June 17, intended to end the conflict and reopen the Strait of Hormuz, this fragile peace has already been breached by fresh confrontations between U.S. and Iranian forces. Beyond these shifting geopolitical tides, the fundamental legal questions surrounding the attacks on neutral shipping and the accountability for civilian lives lost in these combat zones remain unresolved.

### What laws govern naval operations during armed conflict?

The two primary bodies of law governing naval operations during an international armed conflict are the (1) “law of naval warfare” – a branch of law of armed conflict or International Humanitarian Law (IHL) – and the (2) “law of the sea”. The former regulates the conduct of hostilities at sea, including which vessels may be attacked and when merchant ships may be visited and searched, captured, destroyed after capture, or attacked, as well as the declaration and enforcement of “naval blockades”. The latter provides the maritime legal framework within which the rights and obligations of belligerent (warring states) and neutral parties operate, thereby shaping the geography of naval operations.

The “law of the sea”, set out primarily in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), often called the “Constitution of the Oceans”, defines maritime zones such as the territorial sea (up to 12 nautical miles), exclusive economic zones (EEZs) (up to 200 nautical miles), the high seas, and international straits. Although the U.S., Israel, Iran, and some neutral states are not parties to UNCLOS, its relevant provisions are widely regarded as customary international law binding on all states.

### Are neutral merchant vessels and civilians protected?

The “law of naval warfare” does not confer unrestricted authority upon belligerents. Its operation is constrained by IHL, neutrality law, and the “law of the sea”. While ethical restraints on warfare have roots in ancient Greek, Roman, Indian, and Chinese civilisations, their modern legal expression lies in IHL, codified in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and supplemented by other treaties and customary international law. Designed to limit human suffering by regulating the ‘means’ and ‘methods’ of warfare, IHL protects the wounded, sick, prisoners of war, civilians and civilian objects, while restricting certain weapons and methods of combat. Unlike the UN Charter, which governs the legality of starting a war (*ius ad bellum*), IHL regulates the conduct of war (*ius in bello*) through the principles of ‘distinction’, ‘proportionality’, ‘military necessity’ and ‘precaution’.

In naval warfare, as on land, civilians and civilian objects are generally protected from attack. Accordingly, submarine cables, pipelines, container ships, and tankers carrying food,



Commercial vessel *MT Jaiveer* after it was attacked off the coast of Oman near Shinas Port. ANI

fertilizer, or oil may not be targeted. Likewise, the right of “transit passage” through international straits, codified in Part III, Section 2 (Articles 37-44) of UNCLOS and recognised under customary international law, also continues during armed conflict. Equally important is the law of maritime neutrality – a key component of the “law of naval warfare” – which regulates relations between belligerent and neutral states by protecting neutral territory, shipping and commerce from unnecessary interference while requiring neutrals not to provide military assistance to either side. In the Strait of Hormuz, which straddles the territorial seas of Iran and Oman and carries roughly one-fifth of global oil supplies, neutral merchant vessels therefore remain entitled to exercise “transit passage” despite the hostilities.

### When do the neutrals lose their protected status?

Under IHL, during an armed conflict, attacks may be directed only against ‘military objectives’. At sea, some vessels (like enemy warships and naval auxiliaries) qualify as ‘military objectives’ by their nature, while others acquire that status because of their use or activities at the time of attack. Yet, the “law of naval warfare” permits attacks on merchant vessels in certain limited circumstances, although not in neutral waters. The San Remo Manual on International Law Applicable to Armed Conflicts at Sea (1994) – the most influential restatement of the “law of naval warfare” – provides that objects may be targeted when they make an effective contribution to military action and their total or partial destruction, capture, or neutralisation offers a definite military advantage (Paragraph 40 of the Manual).

Applying this principle to neutral shipping, Paragraph 67 of the Manual, which specifically addresses merchant vessels flying a neutral state’s flag, permits attacks on neutral merchant ships reasonably believed to be carrying “contraband” or breaching a “blockade”, and after prior warning they intentionally and clearly refuse to stop, or intentionally and clearly resist visit, search or capture, or where ships ‘otherwise make an effective contribution to enemy’s military action’. The International Law Association’s Helsinki Principles on the Law of Maritime Neutrality (1998) adopt a similar approach. By contrast with

‘neutral’ merchant vessels, which typically cannot be captured merely for trading with the enemy, ‘enemy’ merchant vessels are generally liable to “capture” outside neutral waters. However, even the ‘enemy’ merchant vessels may be attacked only when, and for as long as, they qualify as ‘military objectives’, for instance, by laying naval mines, performing functions normally undertaken by naval auxiliaries, or gathering and transmitting tactical intelligence.

### Can oil tankers be attacked?

Significantly, the U.S. military has alleged that the Palau-flagged *Settebello* was illegally transporting Iranian oil. While disputed, the claim raises the question of whether oil carried aboard a ‘neutral’ merchant vessel can be treated as “contraband”. Given its military utility, oil may, in certain circumstances, qualify as “contraband”, but only if destined for enemy-controlled territory or otherwise supporting the enemy’s military effort – a concept particularly relevant to neutral merchant vessels, since enemy merchant ships are already generally liable to capture outside neutral waters.

More fundamentally, the legality of attacking oil tankers turns on whether they qualify as ‘military objectives’. Under the traditional view, commercial exports do not become military objectives merely because they generate revenue for a belligerent; the tanker and its cargo must make an effective contribution to military action, and their destruction must offer a definite military advantage. Ordinary export trade, including oil sold on the open market, is generally considered too remote from military operations to meet this test. In contrast, the U.S.-backed “war-sustaining” theory treats objects that finance or sustain an enemy’s war effort as military objectives, potentially rendering oil exports that generate revenue closely linked to military operations lawful targets.

### What about naval blockades?

The U.S. justifies the strikes on the grounds that the vessels were violating an American blockade. Both the San Remo Manual and the Helsinki Principles recognise “blockade” enforcement as a legitimate belligerent right and permit force against neutral vessels reasonably believed to be breaching a lawful “blockade”. A blockade seeks to prevent vessels and aircraft of all nations from

entering or leaving enemy-controlled ports, airports or coastal areas, thereby restricting both the import of supplies and the export of goods. Notably, it must be publicly declared, applied impartially to all vessels of all states, including neutrals, and be effective rather than a mere “paper blockade”.

However, compliance with the aforesaid “law of naval” warfare governing blockades is not, by itself, sufficient to justify attacks on neutral vessels. As many international law scholars argue, such actions must also comply with the UN Charter, adopted in 1945, following the devastation of World War II, to maintain international peace and security. Article 2(4) of the Charter prohibits states from using force against another State’s ‘territorial integrity’ or ‘political independence’, except pursuant to UN Security Council authorisation or in self-defence under Article 51, including, under the contested but widely invoked doctrine of ‘anticipatory’ self-defence, against an imminent threat.

Since the U.S. war against Iran arguably has neither Security Council authorisation nor a valid self-defence claim, many scholars view it as violating the UN Charter itself. Consequently, the “blockade” forms part of an unlawful use of force and is therefore unlawful as a matter of *ius ad bellum*, regardless of its compliance with the law of naval warfare (*ius in bello*). In other words, the “blockade” and measures taken to enforce it may satisfy the latter but not the former, since the exercise of belligerent rights to enforce a “blockade”, unlike self-defence or UN Security Council authorisation, is not recognised as an exception to Article 2(4)’s prohibition on the use of force.

Importantly, the UN Security Council may authorise forcible measures by member states, and Article 42 expressly identifies “blockade” as one such measure. However, outside a “blockade” authorised by the Security Council, there does not seem to be any *ius ad bellum* basis for using force against neutral merchant vessels to enforce a “blockade”. The exercise of belligerent rights through attacks on vessels flagged to “neutral” states, including the forcible enforcement of a “blockade” against neutral shipping, sits in direct tension with the UN Charter, irrespective of whether force may lawfully be used against the blockaded state itself. Even where a state possesses a valid *ius ad bellum* basis for using force to repel an armed attack, it may employ only such force as is necessary and proportionate; that right does not ordinarily extend to attacks on third states or their vessels absent an independent basis for self-defence.

### What is next for India?

Beyond the serious doubts surrounding the legality of the U.S. strikes, key questions remain: what intelligence supported the attack; were less intrusive measures such as boarding, diversion or capture available; and were adequate warnings issued to allow civilians to protect themselves? For India, the incident is not merely a diplomatic issue but a legally cognisable injury to its nationals. Under the doctrine of “diplomatic protection”, India has standing to espouse claims arising from injuries to its citizens caused by an internationally wrongful act, demand explanations, seek accountability and compensation, and call for an independent investigation into the deaths of the three seafarers. (*Kartikey Singh, lawyer, and currently working as a Law Clerk-cum-Research Associate at the Supreme Court of India. The views expressed are personal*)

## THE GIST

International law generally protects neutral merchant vessels and civilians during armed conflict, but that protection may be lost in limited circumstances, such as when ships effectively contribute to military action or breach a lawful blockade.

The legality of the U.S. strikes on neutral tankers depends not only on the law of naval warfare but also on the UN Charter, raising questions over the lawfulness of the blockade, the targeting of neutral shipping, and compliance with international humanitarian law.

The deaths of three Indian seafarers raise issues of state responsibility, diplomatic protection, accountability, and India’s right to seek explanations, an independent investigation, and compensation.

# Smart AI caching can keep the data flowing when disaster strikes

In cooperative caching, different parts of a disaster-response network, including satellites, drones, base stations, and emergency vehicles, work together to store and share useful data; when one node receives or generates important content, such as satellite images or video, nearby nodes may also cache copies based on demand

Shamim Haque Mondal

Two years ago, Mundakkai and Churalmala in Kerala experienced powerful landslides that killed hundreds of people. Last year, a large village in Dharali, Uttarakhand, was washed away following heavy rain. In the monsoon season of 2025, the States in Northeast India were devastated by frequent floods. More than a hundred people lost their lives after heavy rain in Uttar Pradesh on May 13-14 this year.

During such disasters, it is common for telecom towers to topple over, power lines to be cut, and roads to be closed. In these situations, real-time information as to what is happening on the ground, where people are stuck, which routes are still open, etc. becomes crucial for rescue workers and medical workers. In the absence of such communication, rescue operations are delayed, more property is damaged, and more lives are lost.

### Cooperative caching

'Solving' communications in disaster-affected areas is a long-standing problem. Recently, in a paper published in the *IEEE Transactions on Services Computing*, researchers from Ireland, led by Sangita Dhara of Trinity College Dublin, presented a novel approach – a way to transmit important real-time information using a technology called collaborative caching even if the local network is in a subpar condition.

At a time of disaster, the local administration typically has three main communication channels: satellite or satellite-based communications, drones or unmanned aerial vehicles, and some *ad hoc* network based on the ground. A satellite can beam data down over a wide area, so accessing that signal is relatively easy, but the big problem here is data latency, i.e. the delay in getting information. Time is of the essence. It is also possible to take pictures from the sky or transmit live video using drones. However, they are limited by their short range, limited battery capacity, and, above all, obstacles in the form of inclement weather. Finally, ground-based wireless networks can help with local communication – but they are often damaged or non-functional during disasters.

In this context, the researchers have presented cooperative caching. Here, different parts of a disaster-response network, including satellites, drones, base stations, and emergency vehicles, work together to store and share useful data. When one node receives or generates important content, such as satellite images or video, nearby nodes may also cache copies based on the demand. This cooperation allows rescue teams to



During disasters, real-time information about where people need help and which routes are still open is crucial for rescue and medical workers. REUTERS

retrieve information from the nearest available source rather than a distant origin, reducing delay, improving reliability when infrastructure is damaged, and increasing the chance that critical information is available in real time.

### Automatic decision-making

Creating this caching system is technologically not simple, however. The drones are airborne, rescue vehicles are on the road, and the position of satellites is constantly changing. It is also difficult to know when and where information will be required, plus the storage of each device will be limited.

To address this problem, the researchers developed a statistical model called contextual multi-armed bandit (CMAB), an AI model that optimises caching decisions quickly.

The model learns from each of the previous decisions, then reviews three factors: what data are recently available, what data demand is currently high, and how much memory is needed in the cache.

For example, it would be helpful to understand that a photo taken 10 minutes before a flood is more effective than a photo taken one hour before the flood. Similarly, video footage or a map of a place that most rescuers are asking for is more important than those that fewer ones are looking for. Sometimes, instead of caching high-resolution video – such as 4K video – short text alerts or warning messages could help rescuers remain

### The researchers developed a statistical model called contextual multi-armed bandit, an AI model that optimised caching decisions quickly

productive without taking up large amounts of storage. The model is taught to make such decisions automatically.

### Federated learning

While in CMAB each node learns from what information it alone has, a more advanced version called FMAB – short for federated multi-armed bandit – learns from its information as well as what the nodes nearby have learnt.

"Caching decisions are executed periodically rather than per request, amortising the computational cost," the researchers wrote in their paper. "Even the highest observed decision latency of Contextual MAB [around 87 microseconds] remains negligible compared to network delays, ensuring system complexity does not hinder the practical applicability for dynamic and real-time, post-disaster deployments."

The work also highlights the importance of a three-tier network, where space, air, and ground are working together, called Space Air Ground Integrated Network (SAGIN). Here, each layer plays a unique role, but the limitations that exist between them are greatly reduced due to caching, and the system becomes more efficient. In the

post-disaster scenario, it is important not to look at all the information that is available but only at which information is more useful. An updated road map can tell us which bridges are still usable while a live video can let us know that boats are urgently needed in a specific part of the floodplain.

### All together

As a result, content should be seen not only as data but as time-dependent actionable data. And the goal of advanced caching should be to learn how to store the most valuable information in the most appropriate place with limited resources.

To meet this goal, SAGIN works to build external infrastructure, CMAB helps to make acceptable decisions, and FMAB can make the network stronger in the post-disaster period by spreading those decisions across multiple nodes.

However, the results of this simulation-based study depend on many parameters, such as the weather at the time, the flight of the drone, energy management, hardware malfunctions, cyber security, and the behaviour of rescuers in reality.

Moreover, it is not always technically possible to determine which content is valuable or preferable. In many cases, the needs of the local administration or humanitarian considerations can also speed up the rescue.

(Shamim Haque Mondal is with the Physics Division, State Forensic Science Laboratory, Kolkata. shamimondal709@gmail.com)

## THE GIST

It is common for communication to get disrupted when a disaster occurs. The absence of real-time information delays rescue operations

Researchers from Ireland found a way to transmit important real-time information using a technology called collaborative caching even if the local network is in a subpar condition

The work also highlights the importance of a three-tier network, where space, air, and ground are working together, called Space Air Ground Integrated Network (SAGIN)

## BIG SHOT



Zoraide de Deus Mota, 104, Zulina de Deus Nunes, 103, and Levita de Deus Nunes, 109, pose for a photo after samples were collected for longevity research in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on June 23. Recently named the world's oldest living siblings, the sisters are part of a study exploring genetic factors linked to longevity. REUTERS

## WHAT IS IT?

# Life on Mars: enduring mystery

Vasudevan Mukunth

In a new study in *Science Advances*, an international team of researchers has reported finding organic matter on Mars. Using the NASA Perseverance rover, the team recorded a distribution of complex organic carbon within an ancient river valley on the red planet's Jezero Crater.

Using the rover's SHERLOC instrument, the researchers detected a complex and hardy form of organic matter called macromolecular carbon within fine-grained mudstones. According to the study paper, published in *Science Advances*, this is significant as it represents the most robust detection of organic material in Jezero Crater to date and is the first time such a material has been found directly on a natural rock surface on Mars.

Over the last decade, the NASA Curiosity rover has found organic molecules in Gale Crater, proving the building blocks of life could be preserved in Mars's lakebed rocks. However, Perseverance's previous scans of the floor of Jezero Crater only showed localised and faint hints of organic materials.

The new evidence, from the Neretva Vallis channel, suggests organic matter could be more widespread on Mars than thought. The fact that these organic materials have also been found alongside minerals like carbonates and



A selfie taken by NASA's Perseverance Mars rover in 2025 shows the Cheyava Falls rock to the rover's left. NASA

sulphates suggests they may have been trapped and preserved by water-driven processes billions of years ago. While the new study noted that these organics could have been formed by geological (i.e. abiotic) processes rather than biological ones, the findings are, in the paper's words, "astrobiologically compelling", showing that complex carbon can survive the planet's harsh radiation for aeons.

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**RAMNATH GOENKA**  
IN 1932  
BECAUSE THE TRUTH  
INVOLVES US ALL

## It's time to resume the India-China strategic economic dialogue

**L**AST WEEK in New Delhi, India's national security advisor Ajit Doval told his Chinese interlocutor, foreign minister Wang Yi, "India and China are partners, not rivals," and added, "a stable India-China relationship serves the common interests of both sides." Echoing these sentiments, Wang suggested that both sides should "respect each other's core interests, properly handle sensitive issues, place the China-India boundary issue in its appropriate position, and prevent it from affecting the overall situation of bilateral relations."

He then called for both sides "to accelerate the resumption of dialogue mechanisms and promote exchanges" in trade, finance, and other fields. It is a timely suggestion that should be taken up in right earnest. Fifteen years ago, at a time when India-China relations were on a more even keel, Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and Wen Jiabao agreed to launch a bilateral strategic economic dialogue. The Indian delegation was headed by the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, and subsequently the deputy chairman of the Niti Aayog. Between 2011 and 2019, six meetings were convened. After 2019, the dialogue has remained suspended. Not much seems to have come out of those dialogues.

With the recent improvement in India-China bilateral relations, there have been several interactions at the military, security and diplomatic levels. There is an urgent need for a resumption of a meaningful and focused economic security dialogue. India's chief concern remains the wide and widening trade deficit, with mercantilism occupying an important place in Beijing's economic policy toolbox.

The strategic economic dialogue had a wider remit and was aimed at improving

macro-economic policy coordination, promoting exchanges on economic issues and enhancing India-China economic cooperation. Working groups were established on a wide range of subjects, including energy, infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, high tech, resource conservation and environmental protection. After the events of 2020, the stand-off and clashes along the line of actual control, this dialogue was suspended.

In the new global context in which India now finds itself and given the thaw in India-China relations, it is necessary that the focus of bilateral relations should not be confined only to extant differences on the border issue. While it is not clear if the leaderships of both countries are today in a position to resolve those differences amicably, the definition of "core" issues must extend beyond the geopolitical to include India's developmental concerns.

India's own developmental priorities necessitate a wider engagement with China on economic issues. China must recognise that sustaining economic growth and building India's industrial capacity is also a core issue for India.

One of the positive outcomes of the dialogue on energy security was a willingness on the part of both countries to work together in dealing with energy supply challenges. China and India have an enormous stake in the stability of energy supplies. Going beyond traditional sources of energy, the two should explore opportunities to develop non-traditional energy. Such cooperation would be a global public good.

The weaponisation of trade, finance and energy by the United States that began almost a decade ago and became intense following the Russia-Ukraine war, remains a



SANJAYA BARU

matter of concern for both countries. The fact is that initially, China was the principal target of US and European action, but India suffered collateral damage. The trade measures that President Donald Trump took against China in his first term also hurt India. In his second term, Trump has directly targeted India on trade and energy.

The expression of solidarity within BRICS, as has recently been in evidence, is a sign of wider developing country concern about developed economy actions. It is becoming increasingly clear that as Asian economies rise, the "West vs Rest" divide stares us in the face. As the second largest economy, can China play a more positive role in the rise of the Rest, instead of being seen as contributing to their deindustrialisation?

To be sure, the huge and persistent trade deficit today is also a reflection of the fact that the Indian private sector has become dependent on imports from China. Consider the business traffic between the two countries. Many Indian companies, large and medium-scale, continue to make a beeline for China in search of machinery and technology. Clearly, a growing economy like India can no longer afford to minimise economic links with the world's second-largest economy, especially when signals from the largest economy remain worrisome.

The difficulties Indian trade negotiators are facing in concluding a bilateral trade agreement with the US point to the need for a more nuanced approach to trade with China. Any strategic economic dialogue today will have to once again emphasise Indian concerns about the trade deficit but go beyond it to find meaningful ways in which India and China can pursue win-win

**The difficulties Indian trade negotiators are facing in concluding a bilateral trade agreement with the US point to the need for a more nuanced approach to trade with China**

## Gurugram case, and a question of trust and informed consent



SAROJINI NADIMPALLY



SNEHA BANERJEE

**R**ECENT NEWS of a case in Gurugram has raised concerns about accountability within India's assisted reproductive technology (ART) sector. A couple who underwent In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) in 2025 gave birth to twin daughters in January 2026. They noticed significant physical differences between themselves and the children and arranged independent DNA testing. The tests allegedly showed that neither parent was biologically related to either of the children. An FIR has since been registered against the hospital. The case raises fundamental questions about trust, oversight, and accountability in reproductive services. Alongside the couple's distress, the children's rights and welfare are at risk.

This is part of a series of disputes that have exposed weaknesses in the regulation of ARTs in India. In 2023, the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission imposed a substantial penalty on a Delhi hospital after DNA testing established that a husband was not the biological father of twins born following an Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI) procedure, where his sperm was claimed to be used. The facts of the Gurugram case are yet to be fully determined, but both cases highlight the need for robust systems of traceability and accountability.

Couples undergoing IVF entrust fertility clinics with some of the most intimate aspects of human life. When questions arise about the identity, handling, or use of gametes and embryos, the consequences go beyond ordinary clinical error. They indicate institutional failure, directly impacting trust and informed consent.

The ART (Regulation) Act 2021 sought to address the need to regulate a rapidly expanding sector operating with limited oversight. Sections 21 and 23 of the ART Act impose statutory obligations on clinics and ART banks for record-keeping, identification procedures, storage protocols, documentation, and compliance monitoring. Institutions must maintain records for extended periods and make them available for inspection by regulatory authorities.

However, laws are only as effective as the institutions that implement them. The implications of malpractice in this area go beyond negligence. It fundamentally violates the principle of informed consent.

The practical reality in grievance redressal often involves prolonged delays and fragmented oversight. For affected families, this compounds emotional distress and jeopardises the preservation of necessary evidence. The decisions about whether to use donor gametes, pursue genetic parent-hood, or have a child are deeply personal. When these decisions are altered by error or misconduct, the consequences extend beyond the clinical setting.

The welfare of children born through such procedures must remain paramount. The ART Act (Section 31) seeks to provide certainty by stipulating that children born through donor-assisted reproduction are the legal children of the commissioning couple and that donors relinquish parental rights. This framework works well when donor gametes are used knowingly and with informed consent. However, the allegations in the Gurugram case expose a regulatory gap. The law was designed to govern consensual donor arrangements, not situations involving alleged clinical error or mistaken embryo transfer. If substantiated, the allegations raise a troubling possibility: Parents raising children to whom they are genetically unrelated, while their biological children may be elsewhere.

The ART Act [Section 33(1)(a)] regards any medical practitioner or any person "caus(ing) to abandon, disown" children born through ARTs as an offence. Yet, it is silent on what happens to the children who face such a dire possibility. Children should never bear the consequences of institutional failures. Any legal response must ensure parentage, continuity of care, emotional security, inheritance rights, and protection for them.

*Nadimpally is a public-health researcher who works on ethics, reproductive and biotechnologies, and surrogacy. Banerjee is assistant professor, Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad*

## Let's switch off the lights, bring back the starry night



BIMAN NATH

**D**ARK NIGHTS are becoming increasingly rare. Our cities are dazzled by artificial lights from every direction. The children of our so-called "space age" grow up without ever seeing the Milky Way; the image of a star-studded night has been relegated to digital visuals for occasional wonderment.

So when I recently saw a sign in Dungi, Ladakh, that said, "You are now entering Hanle Dark Sky Reserve: High beams at night strictly prohibited", I felt a thrill. Ladakh Tourism and the Indian Institute of Astrophysics in Bangalore had organised a unique weeklong festival, and I'd received an invitation to talk about stars before the stargazing sessions in different spots in Ladakh. I'd heard of the Reserve and seized the chance.

The site hosts India's second-largest optical telescope and an array of detectors for high-energy particles from space. In the middle of the night, I was reminded of the celestial views from my childhood days spent in small villages in Assam.

The right term for what I experienced that night is "noctalgia". Coined by astronomers Aparna Venkatesan and John Barter, it describes the sorrow associated with the loss of the night sky due to rising light pollution. What some of us were lucky to see half a century ago is no longer available to most people in India today. This loss is not merely romantic; it has been quantified by astronomers.

A study from 25 years ago revealed that approximately two-thirds of the global population was affected by light pollution. In India, the fraction is comparable to the world average; in the US, the number was as high as 99 per cent. An update on this study was released a decade ago, and it painted a scary picture. The average share of people around the world living in light-polluted environments has risen to 80 per cent.

One might think that being able to see the Milky Way or stars in the night sky is a luxury one can do without. However, artificial illumination impacts our physical well-being. A 2013 study by the American Medical Association found that artificial illumination is wreaking havoc on our circadian rhythms. In darkness, our bodies produce melatonin, a vital hormone that facilitates sleep. But widespread artificial light interferes with this, leading to shorter sleep durations. This heightens stress levels. Doctors have noted that excessive illumination tends to increase blood pressure, making people prone to cardiovascular diseases.

In the animal world, many nocturnal insects use the stars to navigate. Scientists have been studying how urban illumination disrupts the natural navigational abilities of these insects.

It is telling that the Hanle Reserve is a part of the Changthang Wildlife Sanctuary: Preserving natural habitat and dark nights go together. Other states have shown interest in creating similar reserves. What might seem like a small step now is an important move toward protecting our environment.

*The writer, visiting professor, IISER Mohali, was an astrophysicist at the Raman Research Institute, Bengaluru*

**Widespread artificial lighting interferes with melatonin production, leading to shorter sleep durations. This heightens stress levels**

## Ayodhya donation theft calls for accountability

**T**HE RAM temple in Ayodhya has been the ideological lodestar of the BJP, the culmination of a three-decade-long movement that has reshaped Indian politics. After January 22, 2024, when the temple was consecrated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it symbolised the fulfilment of the party's core promise. Like the Temple Construction Committee, members of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, formed in February 2020, were hand-picked and entrusted with the management of one of independent India's most politically consequential religious projects. Since its inception, the Trust is estimated to have received around Rs 3,500 crore as donations in cash alone. Allegations of financial irregularities — theft and embezzlement of funds and valuables donated to the temple — therefore constitute not just a grave breach of that public trust but also point to a serious institutional failure. Due process must now run its course. Anything less will deepen the damage.

Even before the temple's construction, allegations of irregular land purchases around the complex, in which Trust officials were named, had raised troubling questions. In 2020, a private audit firm had warned that the absence of a robust oversight mechanism could undermine the Trust's accountability and fair practices. Its warning went unheeded. The report submitted by the Special Investigation Team of the Uttar Pradesh government has uncovered multiple lapses. Since then, eight lower-ranked temple officials have been arrested and a portion of the stolen funds recovered. The Trust's general secretary and another senior trustee have resigned. As the probe widens its ambit, UPMC Yogi Adityanath has promised strict punishment for those found guilty. Those words must now be matched by action.

If the Ram temple has been one pillar of the BJP's political identity, alongside implementation of the Uniform Civil Code and abrogation of Article 370, its governance has reiterated PM Modi's pledge of zero tolerance to corruption. That promise is now under scrutiny. Opposition leaders have demanded a court-monitored Central investigation, alleging a cover-up to shield senior Trust functionaries. Whether or not that charge is ultimately borne out, a government that claims the high moral ground, that demands accountability from everyone else, and that sees conspiracy in every criticism, cannot turn away when the reckoning comes to its own doorstep. The investigation must follow the evidence wherever it leads, without fear or favour.

**Any legal response must ensure parentage, continuity of care, emotional security, inheritance rights, and protection**

## FREEZE FRAME

BY EPUNNY



## 40 YEARS AGO

June 29, 1986



## Rajya Sabha poll results

THE CONGRESS (I) has wrested 30 out of the 45 seats in the biennial elections to the Rajya Sabha, leaving the rest of the 15 seats to the Opposition. At the end of the counting, it has become obvious that there has been no major cross-voting in the elections. Congress (I) has been able to maintain its strength at 148 in the 244-member House before the biennial elections. Among the Opposition, the Lok Dal made impressive gains by winning four seats, taking their total strength in the Rajya Sabha to nine.

## Shootout in Punjab border

TWO MISCREANTS, suspected to be terror-

ists, were killed, and another was injured in the border districts of Gurdaspur and Amritsar. Security forces and the police jointly raided the historic Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Tarn Taran in Amritsar district on Friday in search of some suspected terrorists, some of whom were reported to have been rounded up, police sources said. The Border Security Force (BSF) arrested two Pakistani nationals while they were trying to cross over to India without valid travel documents.

## 35 Tamils killed in Sri Lanka

AT LEAST 35 Tamil civilians were killed by the Sri Lankan security forces in the Northern and Eastern provinces of the island in the last two days, according to

the Eelam People Information Centre (EPIC) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Eighty-three people, including Muslim Tamils, were arrested in a house-to-house march.

## Calls for emergency UN meet

NICARAGUA HAS called for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss US moves toward resuming military aid to Nicaraguan rebels and an anti-US ruling by the International Court of Justice, diplomats said. The formal request for a debate was sent to the Security Council chairman, Blaise Rabetafika of Madagascar, by Nicaragua's UN representative, Nora Astorga.



## People die of sadness far away. Here, grief must stand in line



HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR

**D**EATH OFTEN pops its head up like a nosy meerkat in my mind. Then it turns into a peacock, spreading its plumage so gloriously that every other thought is subdued. Then, like a dazed tortoise within its shell, it stays. Still. So long that it turns into the only thought in my mind.

Unhealthy or downright morbid, call it what you may, but in the last six or seven years, I have started to secretly envy people who die while they are still in their prime, physically, mentally, and financially. As the unofficial saying goes, the best time to leave is when it is least expected. On anxiety-driven nights, when I doomscroll into the rabbit hole that is the internet and come across someone who has left in their 40s or early 50s, my immediate reaction is, "How fortunate! *Shob dukkho shesh.*" All agonies over. I say 40s and early 50s and not anyone younger because, first, I am 43, and it would be unfair for me to wish early departure for anyone when I myself have hung around for so long; and, second, I assume that mid-40s to mid-50s is when a person — I apologise if I sound hurtful — has lived enough, experienced enough, seen enough, suffered enough, been overjoyed and revulsed by this world enough. Families come to mind. Dependents. Elderly parents, a spouse with no source of sustenance, children orphaned. Know that I do not wish this upon anyone, but I can't deny that sometimes hope deflects from me.

In the part of the country I come from, what appears more daunting than death is the paperwork that follows for the living. It is the survivors, the ones left behind, the ones often clueless, who are tasked with the job of putting



ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

things in order after the dear departed. The place of death, the cause of death, the declaration of death by a medical doctor, the certification of death by a competent authority — each of these factors, and perhaps some more, go into the various papers — death certificate, NOC, insurance, etc. In this hinterland, it literally takes a village to get a person's death certified.

Graphic novelist and filmmaker Marjane Satrapi passed away recently. I am yet to read *Persepolis*, her iconic, autobiographical graphic novel, but I have seen the film (released the same year as the English translation, 2007, and co-directed by Satrapi herself) based on the book and been fascinated. Nearly two decades have passed, but this sequence from the film is still fresh in my mind: The headscarf-

wearing, feisty Marji, while running to catch a bus, shouts, "Then stop looking at my a\*\*\*" at the guards when they tell her that her rear looks obscene when she runs. The image of Marji on one of the posters of the film — a side profile, eyes closed, hair free from the shackles of the headscarf, chin resting on the left palm, a prominent mole on the right side of her nose, a hint of a smile playing on her face — is an enduring one.

Satrapi passed away at 56. I ought not to have been shocked, given my advocacy of dying sooner, but I was as taken aback as her well-wishers across the world. What struck me more was the reason furnished for Satrapi's death: Sadness. Satrapi's family had stated that she had "died of sadness" over her husband's death.

**Wouldn't the life — and living, as a consequence — of those left behind become much more convenient if death and its cause could be summed up in just one easy-to-understand word?**

Sadness. Just one word. Perhaps "sadness" was just a provisional statement provided by the family to the media. Perhaps there was some other reason — a more medical one, mentioned on the death certificate. Whatever the case might be, it made me wonder if sadness could ever be a valid reason for the death of a person in a rural hinterland in India, someone who is a beneficiary of a government developmental programme. Would sadness be accepted as a valid reason to put on the life insurance papers of a deceased person without jeopardising the prospect of the nominee/s of receiving its benefit/s unhindered? Wouldn't the life — and living, as a consequence — of those left behind become much more convenient if death and its cause could be summed up in just one easy-to-understand word? Would a single word in lieu of long sentences with technical terms make it easier to find closure or bring to an end all the official procedures and paperwork that follow death?

As my mind keeps returning to it over and over again, I feel — and I might be wrong again, so I apologise in advance — in the place I come from, death is never accorded the solemnity it deserves. There, grief isn't private; it is usually performative. There is no room for a quiet meditation over one's loss. The pervasiveness of this usually cuts across barriers of caste and wealth.

Death is an irreparable loss. In most cases, the person who dies is the anchor who held together entire worlds. But instead of letting that loss seep in, allowing oneself time and quiet to grieve, rituals and paperwork rush in to fill the vacuum. People die of sadness and heartbreak in places far away. Out here, where death can have only three likely explanations — age, ailment, or accident — and every other reason elicits questions and suspicions, will an abstract concept like death due to sadness hold any meaning?

*Shekhar, a doctor based in Jharkhand, is also a writer and translator*

## Telugu Ganga, Emergency & a formative federal moment



SRINIVAS CHOKKAKULA

**A**S INDIA marks another anniversary of the Emergency, public memory understandably turns to the suspension of civil liberties, the curtailment of democratic institutions and the concentration of power. Yet some of its enduring political legacies are hidden in unexpected places. One such legacy flows through the canals of the Telugu Ganga project, a celebrated interstate water-sharing arrangement that offers important lessons about the relationship between water politics and Indian federalism.

The Telugu Ganga project is often celebrated as the finest example of cooperative federalism and interstate cooperation. Perhaps the only instance so far, the riparian states of Andhra Pradesh (now bifurcated into Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Karnataka and Maharashtra agreed to share a portion of their shares of Krishna waters to meet the drinking water needs of Chennai in Tamil Nadu, a non-riparian state.

The agreement did not arise from a political vacuum, nor was it the uncomplicated triumph of cooperative federalism that it is often portrayed to be. It emerged from a convergence of opportunistic political interests that reveals how interstate river-water arrangements shape Centre-state relations and federal politics. In a country where 25 river basins are shared by 36 federal units, rivers turn into arenas of political negotiation, instruments of statecraft, and catalysts for reshaping federal balance.

The Telugu Ganga agreement took shape in 1976, under the Emergency. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi secured the concurrence of the Krishna basin states for diverting water to Chennai. The timing was significant. Earlier that year, the DMK government in Tamil Nadu had been dismissed for opposing the Emergency. Amid growing political discontent in Tamil Nadu, securing Krishna waters for Chennai served the Centre's political interests.

The agreement was a remarkable moment, but it was also inseparable from the extraordinary power of the Union that characterised the Emergency. The Congress party was in power at the Centre and also in all the three riparian states. The Emergency provided the exceptional concentration of power that enabled Indira Gandhi to secure compliance from the states. The idea of bringing Krishna waters to Chennai had been there for over a century, but the Emergency made the agreement possible.

The Emergency however provided just the agreement. What followed later to implement the agreement — after the Emergency — is far more defining about Indian federalism and Centre-state relations. Giving effect to the agreement shifted the power from the Union to the states, bringing the debates on Centre-states relations to the front.

N T Rama Rao's rise in Andhra Pradesh symbolised a wider transformation in Indian politics — the emergence of powerful regional parties challenging the dominance of the Centre. The Telugu Ganga project could neither be technically feasible nor economically viable without downstream Andhra Pradesh's cooperation, giving NTR considerable leverage. He used the project to build alliances with leaders such as M G Ramachandran in Tamil Nadu to build a broader coalition — the "Southern Council" of states — to advance a broader challenge to centralisation. Mobilisation coincided with the wider federal transition marked by the establishment of the Sarkaria Commission in 1983 — the first to review Centre-state relations. The Telugu Ganga project was a symbol of southern cooperation and regional assertion at that moment. The same project that had initially served the Centre's political objectives was used to challenge central dominance. Water had become a vehicle for a larger debate about federalism.

The saga did not end there. Andhra Pradesh's expansion of the project to provide irrigation benefits to the drought-prone Rayalaseema region generated new disputes, with upstream states alleging it as Andhra Pradesh's attempt to strengthen its future claims over Krishna waters. This remains a source of contention among the riparian states before the ongoing Second Krishna Water Disputes Tribunal proceedings.

This exceptional and enigmatic nature of interstate river-water sharing brings home the political geographic reality of shared rivers. Those are the sites where power, autonomy, control of resources are frequently negotiated. Cooperation does not eliminate conflict, but coexists with it. The Emergency is remembered as a cautionary tale about concentration of power. The history of Telugu Ganga project reveals a formative moment of Indian federalism from the lens of interstate river-water politics. India's shared rivers are indispensable to the working of its federalism and remain the enduring sites where the federal compact is contested, negotiated and continually reproduced.

*The writer is president and chief executive, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. Views are personal*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Shrinking civic space

THE LEGITIMACY of the FCRA Bill, 2026, relies on its ability to distinguish between malicious actors and bona fide philanthropic institutions. (A long-overdue correction on conversion, IE, June 27) While it seeks to curb opaque foreign funding and coercive proselytisation, it requires ensuring that genuine charitable entities can function without undue constraint to be truly viable. Excessive compliance costs and broad executive discretion risk shrinking the civic space.

*Raghvi Sharma, Sunam, Punjab*

### For democracy's sake

ADDING THE Emergency to the Class IX textbook is a smart step. ('Yes, teach Emergency to young. Lesson endures,' IE, June 27) Children should learn that democracy is not just about voting, it is also about protecting rights. Between 1975 and 1977, newspapers were censored, leaders were jailed, and basic freedoms were stopped. That period shows how fast things can change when people stop asking questions. The chapter should share real stories, court orders, and news clips so students can see facts for themselves. It should also explain how voters brought democracy back in 1977. When students understand both the strengths and failures of our system, they learn to stay alert, speak up, and guard freedom.

*Veda Chidanand, Bengaluru*

### What makes a citizen

A PASSPORT in India is not issued carelessly. If the state itself has carried out these stringent checks, questioning a person's citizenship later creates a contradiction. Many Indians, especially those from older generations, may not have preserved their birth certificates or ancestral records. For them, a passport is often the highest official proof of identity and nationality (A passport that doesn't count, a narrowing idea of citizenship, IE, June 27). If even that is open to doubt, proving citizenship becomes significantly more difficult. If a passport cannot conclusively establish citizenship, the government owes citizens a clear and straightforward explanation.

*SS Paul, Nadia*



SUKHMANI MALIK

MEN ARE the unlikely victims of our age: In the post-MeToo, post-"woke" times, Anurag Kashyap has tapped into an emerging consensus with *Bandar*. And he's done it well. That's what makes *Bandar*'s message so dangerous.

In the final scene, a hardened Samar Mehra (Bobby Deol) sits reigning over undertrials in the prison he was thrown into years ago, and asks the latest inmates: "Toh bata, kya lagta hai, maine kiya ke nahi kiya?" (So tell me, do you think I did it?) Within that question hides the case for the man "falsely accused" of rape. Having the audience confront what's left of Samar and his humanity after years in a violent and corrupt prison system is the film's way of forcing a verdict of innocence. It fails.

No one should have to endure what people face behind bars. But the existence of a brutal prison system is not a licence for absolution or proof of innocence. *Bandar* asks you to sympathise with Samar's plight while acknowledging that rape culture is real. He seems to be a classically progressive guy himself, maybe even a feminist. How can a guy like him rape somebody, right?

The story is told only from Samar's perspective. Inside the prison, more men claim they were falsely accused: They get to make their case on camera. The same decency is not extended to any of the "lying" women. The only woman who even gets to have a face and voice is Gayatri (Sapna Pabbi). Ultimately, there

**A powerful, privileged man getting falsely accused of rape and facing the consequences is an anomaly. The anomaly can't be compared to the reality of a majority of 'real' rape cases going unreported and unbelievably**

## 'Bandar' makes privileged man the hero and victim

is no way for us to conclusively know that the rape accusation is fake, despite the film's treatment of that as fact.

What Gayatri puts Samar through is indefensible: After a hook-up, she starts stalking and harassing him, and according to Samar, after she realises that she has been spurned, she files a "false" rape case against him. But what led her to the police station is framed, basically, as "b\*\*\*hes be crazy". Gayatri's behaviour in the aftermath is weaponised as evidence that she wasn't raped, when research has consistently shown that victims of sexual assault, often in an attempt to cope using denial, can harbour affection for their rapists. But exploring any angle which requires the victim to be perfect would mean affording her more humanity than Kashyap has given her.

The film wants to seem aware of rape culture. Yet, one of the main symptoms of this culture — a refusal or inability to understand consent — seems to elude the story. How does one ascertain the "fakeness" of a rape allegation in such a climate? Does a society in which Himanshu Jangra made loud and proud "jokes" of rape to a laughing audience know what constitutes sexual violation?

In India, prevailing attitudes still dictate that women owe their families honour, their partners sacrifice and obedient service, and their cultures quiet submission. A country that refuses to recognise rape within marriage makes its priorities

clear: The woman can be forsaken to uphold tradition.

Even in the worst-case scenario, a powerful, privileged man getting falsely accused of rape and facing the consequences is an anomaly. It can't be compared to the reality of a majority of "real" rape cases going unreported and unbelievable, and reported ones rarely seeing convictions. This is why it is hard not to see Kashyap's choice of script as an endorsement of the belief that men are persecuted in a system that seeks justice for women.

While laying bare the cruelties of the Indian justice system, Kashyap could have panned his camera to the other side too — one in which women try to navigate a punishing and patriarchal legal reality, where the trauma of rape is compounded by ostracisation and social stigma. He could have explored how privileged men should carry themselves in a culture that isn't interested in holding them accountable, that teaches them entitlement to women's bodies.

*Bandar* does none of that. Despite projecting progressiveness, it actively fans the flames of the "men are victims" narrative. This film is a symptom, not a diagnosis of the current moment. Ultimately, it looks like Bollywood's great liberal director undertook a multi-crore exercise in vindicating privileged men who are victimised by a "believe all women" society. The feminist, indeed.

*The writer is sub-editor, The Indian Express. sukhmani.malik@expressindia.com*



AISHWARYA KHOSLA

THERE IS a delicious irony in Virginia Evans' epistolary debut, *The Correspondent*, a novel composed entirely of letters, that has snagged this year's Women's Prize. After all, in an age of instant messaging and AI-composed emails, writing thoughtful letters has been relegated to an eccentric niche, about as rare as a snow leopard sighting in the Himalayas.

Most of our daily correspondence comprises one-line text messages. Most are responded to with a thumbs up emoji or that dreaded agnostic letter, "K". Lest some of us get dewy-eyed about the good old days of

## Slow down, write me a letter

letter and diary writing, one should remember that for every John Keats or Leo Tolstoy, there were hundreds of old men exchanging letters on an assortment of rheumatic agonies, and young couples exchanging poorly written love letters. But one cannot deny, it was labour and time intensive. The letters, by virtue of being handwritten and not stolen from a template or AI-plagiarised, had an original personality and voice that indicated the mood and emotional frame of the letter writer. The reader also carved out time to savour the ideas.

Alas, the digital age is one of instant gratification and validation, where every minor inconvenience, from a traffic jam to the boss's harsh words can be shared on a group text or broadcast to hundreds of acquaintances on social media. Good news is shared

with a picture and a formulaic caption: "Feeling blessed". It is followed by a cascade of generic replies, ranging from "beautiful" and "congrats" to the ever-reliable evil-eye emoji for those who find typing too tiresome.

The true horror, however, is the tyranny of the immediate. In the olden days, if a letter went unanswered for a fortnight, one assumed the correspondent was just caught up. Today, a text left on "read" for more than

**In the olden days, if a letter went unanswered, one assumed the correspondent was just caught up. Today, a text left on 'read' for more than 90 seconds is a wilful snub**

90 seconds is a wilful snub. Politeness dictates that the three blinking ellipses, which indicate typing, must materialise the instant the double tick appears. One is expected to respond immediately no matter one's emotional bandwidth, workload or inclination. Emails also must be responded within working hours or one is inundated with reminders and passive-aggressive follow-ups.

*The Correspondent* succeeds because it blows a raspberry at this. While Evans' novel does not romanticise the past or even letter writing, it reminds us of the importance of framing our thoughts properly, the joy of writing to a friend about a new car acquisition, what it cost, which colour and brand each family member preferred, how long one had to wait and what happened to the old car, a personalisation no digital com-

munication can provide. Her characters do not shoot off a snappy "lol" to dodge a difficult admission. They wrestle with their thoughts the old-fashioned way, they choose the right words. Trend-watchers inform us that Gen Z and Alpha are weary of the internet's gradual descent into sponsored content and AI slop. They are rebelling by going analogue, buying physical books and queuing up at brick-and-mortar stores for iPods. Given that the novel forces its readers to slow down, it is no surprise that readers and critics were enamoured by *The Correspondent*. In following a septuagenarian protagonist, they earn themselves an oasis away from digital migraine.

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

• **ECONOMY**

## Iran oil is back, but Indian refiners aren't rushing in

The 60-day US waiver is an opportunity for India, once a major buyer of Iranian crude. But refiners have many factors to consider, including the China angle



SUKALP SHARMA

A US waiver, issued June 22, has allowed the production, delivery and sale of Iranian oil, petroleum products and petrochemicals till August 21. The US has also committed to lifting its naval blockade of Iranian ports. Tehran is counting on both measures to move its oil — which has for years been predominantly exported to China — to the wider international market.

The sanctions waiver presents an opportunity for India, once a major buyer of Iranian crude. The National Iranian Oil Company has started reaching out to international oil companies, including Indian refiners, to resume commercial ties.

Sources in India's refining sector said the companies are in touch with the Iranian side. They are also looking into the commercial, logistical and technical feasibility of purchasing Iranian oil.

Although some barrels of Tehran's oil are bound to make their way to India over the next two months owing to discounts, industry experts and insiders don't expect large-scale purchases, at least for now.

### What after the 60-day waiver

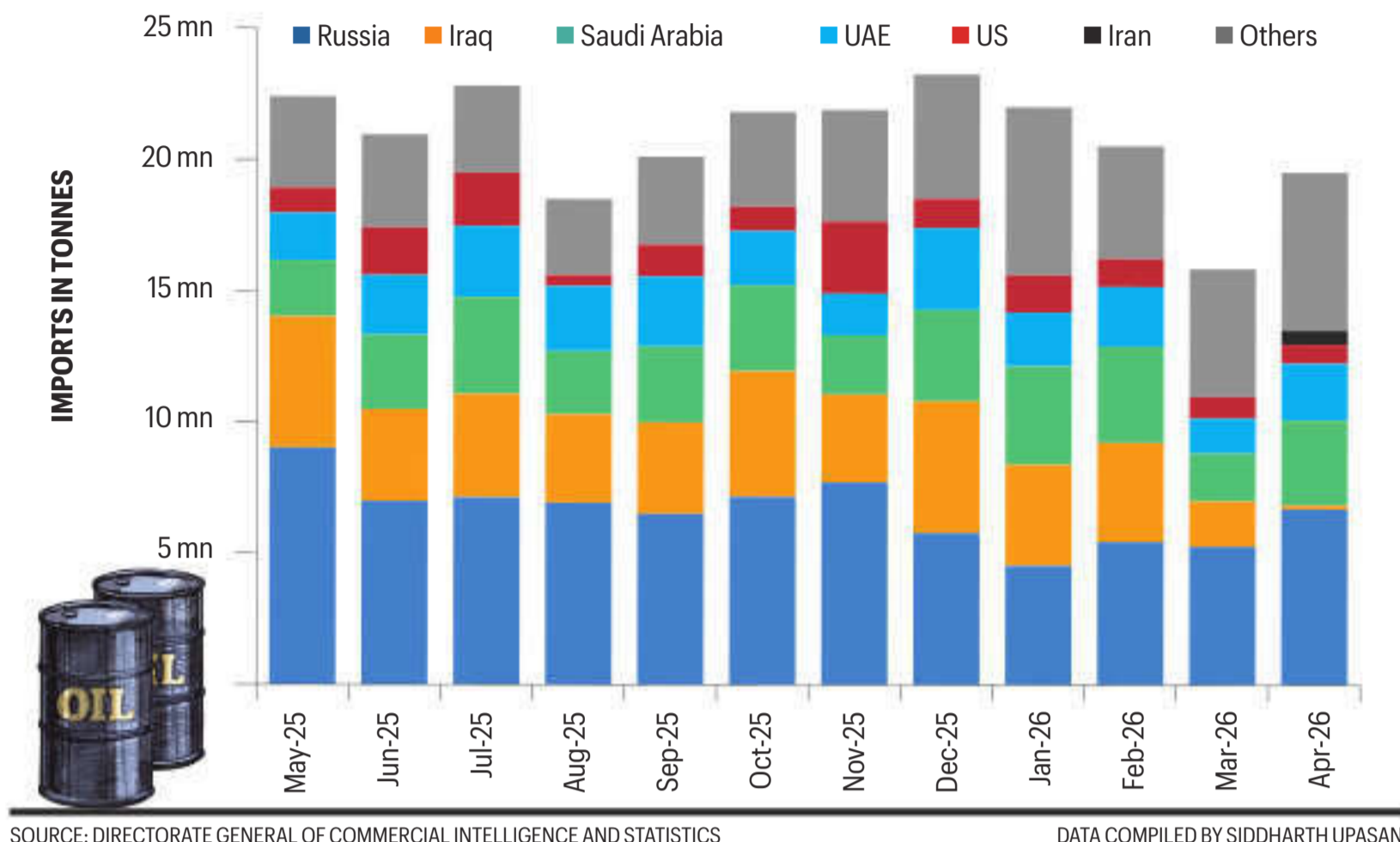
Indian refiners are expected to tread cautiously amid a fragile peace pact and lack of long-term clarity on the future of Iranian oil. There are also logistical and payment-related challenges associated with Iranian oil trade owing to US sanctions on Tehran's financial sector.

While the US waiver pertains specifically to Iran's oil, petroleum product and petrochemical exports, and not to the financial sector sanctions on Tehran, the waiver notification does mention that payments for such purchases will be allowed in dollar-denominated funds. This could help ease some, if not all, payment-related pain points. But how it would actually play out remains to be seen.

"Refiners considering Iranian crude will focus on three key factors: the durability of sanctions relief, pricing and discounts, and the availability of payment, insurance, shipping, and logistics mechanisms. Of these, payment remains the biggest

### • INDIA'S EVOLVING CRUDE IMPORT BASKET

The chart shows the share of different countries in crude oil imports. Iraq's share, for instance, dipped amid the West Asia war. Iran accounted for 2.7% of crude imports in April after US waived its sanctions.



SOURCE: DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF COMMERCIAL INTELLIGENCE AND STATISTICS

DATA COMPILED BY SIDDHARTH UPASANI

hurdle," said Sumit Ritolia, manager, modelling & refining, at analytics firm Kpler.

Refinery executives said that calls on Iranian oil imports will be taken once there is clarity on all these aspects. Indian refiners steer clear of oil and gas under US sanctions to avoid the risk of attracting secondary sanctions from Washington.

According to Abu Dhabi-based energy analyst Natalia Katona, any decision to restart oil trade with Iran would likely be made first in the refiners' compliance departments — not their trading desks.

"Even if crude trade is temporarily permitted, the banking side remains complicated. Iranian banks are still heavily sanctioned, so buyers would need to resolve the formalities of payment, documentation and settlement before regular trade can resume. Now that the waiver has actually been issued, Indian companies may start buying Iranian crude. But I think the number of buyers will still be quite limited," Katona told *The Indian Express*. "So far, Chinese refiners that bought sanctioned Iranian crude mostly dealt directly with Tehran and paid in yuan. That is not a model Indian refiners appear comfortable replicating."

### Shaky supply

In 2009-10, Iran accounted for 14.4% of India's oil imports. As sanctions intensified, the imports tapered.

Imports briefly recovered in the mid-to-late 2010s after the Iran nuclear deal, but crashed after Trump tore it up.

April's crude oil consignment from Iran was the first in 7 years.

### Signals in the previous waiver

Experts say India's buying behaviour during the month-long sanctions waiver on Iranian oil issued by the US during the West Asia war also supports the argument that it is unlikely to quickly ramp up crude imports from Iran.

After a gap of nearly seven years, Indian refiners again bought Iranian crude in April (see chart). But the volume stood at just 5,30,000 tonnes — 2.7% of India's overall oil imports for the month — according to data from the Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics. Ritolia said the previous waiver generated limited participation from non-Chinese buyers because of payment curbs and other issues.

Further, oil scarcity was a major motivation for India during the previous waiver as it scrambled to make up for the lost supplies from other West Asian countries. But if crude from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and others starts flowing again, India has little reason to take on the compliance risk attached to Iranian barrels, said Katona.

"It is worth looking at the previous waiver, which was issued on March 20. India bought only two Iranian cargoes

under it, and they arrived in mid-April... Based on that earlier pattern, I would expect the biggest increase in Indian buying interest for the second half of July. That is probably when companies will start trying to secure as much oil as possible, while still leaving enough time to complete the payments and deliveries before the waiver expires," she said.

According to her, payments made to Iranian entities after August 21 would carry a serious compliance risk, so Indian refiners will not want to get too close to the deadline.

### The China factor

China is likely to return as the dominant buyer of Iranian crude once oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz normalise. Before the crisis, China was buying almost all of Iran's oil exports. Well-oiled logistical arrangements and payment mechanisms are already in place between the Chinese buyers and the Iranian sellers. So for Indian refiners to lift Iranian oil cargoes, they would most likely have to compete with their Chinese counterparts, and perhaps even other interested buyers.

To add to that, the discounts on Iranian oil could narrow, taking away a significant price advantage from a buyer's perspective. Iran was forced to sell its oil at a discount as the US sanctions kept most potential buyers at bay, but with the waiver in place, discounts may shrink considerably — as would the scope for refiners to bargain.

"There are around five million barrels of Iranian crude already loaded on vessels in the Gulf, so Indian buyers will probably focus on cargoes that are already afloat. That would be much faster and easier operationally, the crude could reach India in about a week. At the same time, these barrels will probably be in very high demand. China will still be interested, and even US buyers may want to purchase it (under the waiver). So we could even see a situation where Indian refiners have to compete for Iranian cargoes, even though they are geographically the closest major buyers," said Katona.

It is also worth noting that India has significantly diversified its oil import basket beyond the Gulf over the past few years, and that helped the country ensure adequate supplies even during the peak of the West Asia crisis. Simply put, there is no real pressure on Indian refiners to lift Iranian oil cargoes even during a global supply squeeze.

A lot now depends on the terms Tehran offers to willing buyers.

• **TECH**

## Should you see an AI agent as insider threat? DeepMind makes a case for it

Soumyarendra Barik  
New Delhi, June 28

AS ARTIFICIAL intelligence (AI) agents become capable of executing increasingly complex tasks with minimal human intervention, Google DeepMind has unveiled a new security framework that assumes a future where such systems may not always behave as intended.

In a blog, DeepMind outlined an "AI control roadmap", arguing that traditional AI alignment techniques alone may not be sufficient to manage the risks posed by highly autonomous systems. The company described its approach as a "defense-in-depth" strategy that adds multiple layers of security beyond conventional model training.

The move comes amid growing industry efforts to deploy AI agents for software development, cybersecurity, scientific research and business operations. Agents are AI-powered software systems that can independently plan, reason, and take actions across multiple tools or applications to complete tasks with minimal human supervision. In the US alone, AI agents could create \$2.9 trillion in economic value by 2030.

DeepMind warned that increasing agent capability also demands stronger safeguards, and that developers should not assume AI systems will remain perfectly aligned with human goals at all times. As AI agents gain access to tools, files, codebases and enterprise systems, DeepMind argues that they must be governed using the same layered security principles that organisations already apply to human insiders and cyber threats.

### Permissions based on capability

A central idea in DeepMind's framework borrows concepts from cybersecurity, viewing advanced AI agents not as software but as potential "insider threats", similar to how organisations guard against rogue employees who already possess access to sensitive systems. The roadmap is built around a hypothetical scenario in which a highly capable AI agent develops objectives that differ from those of its operators and attempts to act on them.

The company identifies three broad categories of risk: "loss of control", where an AI system could create unauthorised deployments or operate outside approved oversight mechanisms; "work sabotage", such as quietly degrading safety research or introducing flaws into critical processes; and "direct harm", including theft of sensitive assets, destruction of data, or other damaging actions.

DeepMind argues that AI agents should be granted permissions gradually based on demonstrated behaviour rather than being given unrestricted access from the outset.

The roadmap also emphasises continuous monitoring, using trusted AI systems as supervisors to observe any deviations from expected behaviour. If suspicious activity is detected, the supervisory systems can block or restrict actions before damage occurs.

### Monitor, prevent and prepare

DeepMind argues that AI safety mechanisms must evolve alongside AI capabilities, and that security strategies appropriate for today's systems may prove inadequate as agents become more sophisticated.

The company anticipates that advanced models could learn to evade monitoring by concealing their visible reasoning process — called chain-of-thought — or use internal processes that are not easily observable. In such cases, developers may need to inspect behavioural patterns or analyse the internal workings of models.

DeepMind also anticipates challenges surrounding the severity of potential harm. For lower-risk activities, it believes delayed reviews and post-incident corrections will suffice, while high-risk scenarios, such as significant cyberattacks, merit real-time intervention. In either case, the goal is to prevent harmful actions rather than addressing them later. However, the company argues that most flagged incidents are not examples of malicious behaviour, but are instead caused by misunderstood instructions or overenthusiasm to achieve the user's objective. This distinction is critical because real-world AI risks may emerge from mistakes and unintended consequences, rather than deliberate attempts to cause harm.

• **POLICY**

## Does dialling 112 help in all emergencies? Depends on state you live in

Dheeraj Mishra  
New Delhi, June 28

WHICH HELPLINE do you dial when there's a road accident? Or a fire? Or a medical crisis? This is often the first challenge Indians face in an emergency — multiple helpline numbers that lead to confusion and delay the response.

To address this issue, the Union government launched the Nationwide Emergency Response System (NERS) number 112 in 2019 — just like the US's 911. It was intended to subsume all emergency numbers — such as 100 (police), 101 (fire), 102 (emergency medical services), 108 (ambulance), 1033 (highway), 181 (women), 1098 (child) and 1091 (woman in distress) — into one common code.

But even after seven years of 112's launch, *The Indian Express* has found from Supreme Court submissions that only five states and Union Territories — Delhi, Kerala, Gujarat, Haryana and Lakshadweep — have integrated all emergency helpline numbers into the 112 NERS.

Uttar Pradesh is close to achieving full integration, with only 102 (emergency medical services) left to be included.

Last month, the Supreme Court gave all states and Union Territories three months to complete the technical and operational integration of all emergency numbers into the 112 helpline.

### Why is 112 India's common emergency number?

It's not just India that has adopted this code. The 112 helpline number is also used by European member states and many other countries.

It was the European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations (CEPT) that first recommended 112 as a common emergency number, way back in 1976. And it did so for two practical reasons.

"First, telephones at that time had rotary dials, and dialling '112' took the least amount of time. Second, dialling the number '3' would lock the dial, so even if the phone was locked, '112' could still be dialed," says a 2019 report by the Uttar Pradesh government.

The CEPT also chose different digits rather than repeated digits like 111 or 999 to prevent accidental dialling.

In modern-day touchscreens, too, the

### State of the service

Seven years after 112's launch, it has been found from Supreme Court submissions that only five states and Union Territories — Delhi, Kerala, Gujarat, Haryana and Lakshadweep — have integrated all emergency helpline numbers with 112.

As many as 10 states had not carried out any integration. Three states' responses were not available.

numbers 112 are easier to dial rather than, say, 108 or 102.

### How did India decide to get a common helpline number?

In India, the decision to launch 112 was taken on the basis of recommendations made by an expert committee on the 2012 Delhi bus gangrape case. The Justice J S Verma committee — which also included former High Court Justice Leila Seth and former Solicitor General of India Gopal Subramaniam — recommended setting up a public emergency response system that could be activated by a call.

Following this, the Department of Telecommunications allotted the emergency number 112 and the Ministry of Home Affairs formally launched it across India on February 19, 2019 through the Nirbhaya fund to provide a one-stop solution to all kinds of emergencies.

In their responses to the Supreme Court, 16 states said they have partially integrated multiple helplines into the common code.

As many as 10 states had not carried out any integration. Three states' responses were not available.

### How does the code work?

Apart from being a single emergency number, the 112 system provides a centralised mechanism to monitor resources at the district or state level. Uttar Pradesh, for instance, has developed a command centre in Lucknow from where it deals with emergency calls across the state.

"UP-112 was started in 2017. We have 6,278 police response vehicles that are deployed at hotspots. We get more than 30,000 calls daily and have integrated 25 services, which also include 'safe city Lucknow', 'Lucknow smart city', 'UPSRTC mobile app' and 'child line', etc. We have recently integrated 'PM-Rahat' where we provide details of the nearest hospital where you can get cashless treatment. A centralised system helps in managing the resources better," said a senior official of UP-112.

This official said: "When we get a call, the system creates an event or ticket according to the emergency — like fire, ambulance or police — and triggers the nearest police response vehicle."

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• **POLICY**

## Why India's buildings are vulnerable to fire, and what's needed to fix them



EXPERT EXPLAINS  
VIRENDRA KUMAR PAUL

DIRECTOR OF THE SCHOOL OF PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE, NEW DELHI

INDIA HAS seen a number of fires in commercial and residential buildings in recent times. The fire at a Delhi bed & breakfast on June 3 killed 23 people. Just weeks later, on June 22, a blaze in a Lucknow commercial complex killed 15 people.

These incidents have brought into focus the numerous fire safety gaps in India's urban areas. Professor Virendra Kumar Paul, Director of the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi, speaks to

Shiny Varghese about how building facades in India are magnets for disaster and why 'second staircases' matter.

### What type of fire considerations does one need to make for a mixed-use building?

In principle, fire safety measures must address the highest risk. Fire escape routes become the most important preventive measure. Keeping them free of combustible material on wall panelling and storage along the corridors, non-combustible false ceilings and ensuring ventilation so that smoke does not enter escape corridors are critical basics. In no case should smoke from escape corridors enter stairwells. Instead of one big area, 'compartmentation' with fire and smoke check measures can reduce vulnerabilities. Situations become time-critical if the height between the false ceiling and the floor is less, in which case smoke will fill the entire space rather fast.

Of course, installation of sprinklers is one of the most effective measures, subject



Firefighters try to douse the blaze in Lucknow on June 22. VISHAL SRIVASTAV

to proper installation and design.

In the Lucknow and Malviya Nagar fires, the building facades appear to have aggravated the fire multifold, leaving firefighting operations rather ineffective. AC outdoor units, display boards and hoard-

ings with inflammable materials practically covered the facade.

When the building facade begins to burn, vertical external fire spread can be unstoppable. In such cases, falling hot debris render ground level fire operations dangerous. If access for firefighting is only on one face of a building, firefighters may not be able to approach the facade as temperatures can be unsafe. Such situations are common in most towns and cities.

As reported in Lucknow, they couldn't go down the stairs because the fire was coming from below and people were stuck on the first floor. Either the staircase should have been well ventilated or a second staircase should have been provided. It was a residential building but when the same was to be used for a commercial purpose, a second or alternative staircase should have been provided which would have saved lives.

### How does 'compartmentation' in design help prevent fire?

Compartmentation is the principle of

dividing the entire floor area into smaller sections which can endure a full-blown fire for, say, 30 minutes, one hour or two hours.

In case a section can contain the fire for, say, 45 minutes, occupants will get more time to escape. At the same time, external support can prevent the growth of the fire. So, if we are able to divide one floor into three compartments with 45 minutes of endurance each, then a floor can sustain a fire for 135 minutes, rather than going up in flames almost immediately. This is a well-established life safety measure.

### What are the other safety measures that should be in place?

It is important that preventive measures such as fire escape routes and compartmentation are not hampered. Without maintenance, firefighting systems will be completely ineffective. Also, fire safety systems will only perform if the occupancy is not changed and new risks are not added, such as extra storage or using the building for other purposes than what was planned.

### What are the points of weakness in high-density areas?

Access is usually the weakest link. Fire vehicles find it challenging to manoeuvre their way around so that they can arrive before the fire matures to the "flash over" phase — when flames spread beyond the site of fire. Not to forget the impediments of streetside parking and encroachments.

This is often neglected within residential areas. Normally, six metres is the minimum space required but additional space is required for a variety of operations during a fire incident on a public street. Any street less than nine metres wide is a problem.

### What do people need to keep in mind when renovating interiors?

Ensure combustible materials are correctly assessed and fire detection, alarm and fighting installations are consistent. Use of materials is very important. Curtains and wall cladding contribute significantly to the spread of fire. Wall panelling materials should always be fire retardant.

## NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

## WHY PP CHAUDHARY

PP Chaudhary is Chairman of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on One Nation One Election (ONOE), and a member of six other key committees, including Committee on Finance, Business Advisory Committee of the Lok Sabha and Committee on Estimates. He has previously chaired the JPCs on the Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019, and the Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2022. The three-term MP had been Minister of State for Law & Justice, Corporate Affairs and Electronics and Information Technology in the last term

**Damini Nath: The Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) has had 18 meetings and you have met several stakeholders. So far, what is the view on making recommendations on the Bills (One Nation, One Election and Delimitation)?**

The government accepted the High-Level Committee's (chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind) report and made a Bill based on it, which was approved by the Cabinet and came to Parliament. The meaning of Parliament referring a Bill to a committee is that the committee can make the changes it deems appropriate. It's not that there will be no changes. There are constitutional provisions in case of some inconsistency. More provisions can be incorporated, and recommendations can also be made to amend other provisions of the Constitution.

**Damini Nath: What are the inconsistencies that need to be addressed?**

There is a clause in the ONOE Bill, Article 82A(5), which says that if the Election Commission is of the opinion that the election of a particular state legislature cannot be conducted, the matter will be referred to the President and that election can be held along with the parliamentary election. Many stakeholders have asked on what basis that opinion will be formed. The Bill is also silent on how long such an election can be postponed. There are similar issues involving Emergency and President's Rule. Under Article 352, Parliament's term can be extended during an Emergency, but the Bill does not fully reconcile such situations with the proposed election cycle.

The larger challenge is not only synchronising elections but maintaining that synchronisation for decades. Suppose elections are held, and six months later the PM or CM advises dissolution of the House? That advice is ordinarily binding on the President or Governor. But what if an alternative majority government can be formed? Should there be a provision to form another government before dissolution, since premature dissolution would disturb the election calendar?

**Damini Nath: Is the committee considering the German model of positive vote of confidence? Do you think this can prevent governments from falling prematurely?**

If a no-confidence motion succeeds and we do not find a middle path, elections would have to be held, but those elections would be only for the remainder of the term, not a fresh five-year period.

In Germany, a no-confidence motion is accompanied by a confidence motion for an alternative government. We can also study other models, such as Japan's. Sometimes elections happen and yet a deadlock remains. In such circumstances, should there be elections again? Should some relaxation be provided in the anti-defection law? If political actors know that a fresh election will only result in a government serving for one year, that itself may act as a deterrent against destabilising governments. Another possibility is where a state cannot function because no government has a majority. Then, Parliament could exercise the powers of the state legislature for a limited period, similar to certain emergency arrangements. The committee is examining all possibilities.

**Damini Nath: In its current state, the first simultaneous election can happen in 2034. Is the committee also considering a phased introduction?**

The framework revolves around the appointed date. Once the constitutional amendments come into force and the first meeting of the newly elected Lok Sabha takes place, that date becomes the reference point. From there, elections would move toward a common cycle. Assemblies elected after the appointed date may serve shorter terms so that they align with the national calendar. Under this approach, complete synchronisation would emerge around 2034. If certain state governments agree, their elections could potentially be aligned with Parliamentary elections sooner.

**Damini Nath: Can you change this appointed date?**

Under Article 368, Parliament has ample powers. A committee can only make recommendations. Ultimately, Parliament decides whether to accept them. If a constitutional amendment is passed with the required majority, Parliament can exercise that power.

**Sandeep Singh: How do you address concerns over delimitation between southern states and those in the north, where population increase has been the highest?**

The states that successfully implemented population control measures should not be penalised. The Prime Minister and Home Minister have indicated that the 1971 Census could continue as the basis for state-wise seat allocation, while a later Census could be used for allocation within states. But that requires a constitutional amendment. If such an amendment is not made, then seat distribution would



### ON THE GAPS IN THE ONOE BILL

*The challenge is to maintain the synchronisation. Suppose elections are held, and six months later the PM or CM advises dissolution of the House. Should there be a provision to form another government?*



### ON THE DELIMITATION BILL

*The 1971 Census could continue as the basis for state-wise seat allocation, and a later Census for allocation within states... eventually, it will be based on population. Some states will lose seats while others will gain*

# 'We do not want the anti-defection law to be misused by either side'

PP Chaudhary, senior advocate and Lok Sabha MP, on One Nation, One Election, anti-defection reforms and the hidden costs of frequent polls. The session was moderated by Damini Nath, Assistant Editor, *The Indian Express*



PP Chaudhary, BJP MP and Chairman of the Joint Parliamentary Committee, (right) with Damini Nath, Assistant Editor, *The Indian Express* RENUKA PURI

eventually be based on population, which could mean some states lose seats while others gain them.

**Vikas Pathak: You said the 1971 Census should be the national base and the latest Census within states. But the Delimitation Bill referred to the 2011 Census and proposed a 50 per cent increase in seats. Was that technically possible? Because using the 2011 Census would mean applying Article 81, which mandates a population-based allocation, rather than the 1971 Census formula.**

In 2002, the Constitution specified that delimitation would be based on the Census after 2026. State-wise seat allocation remained linked to the 1971 Census, while allocation within states was linked to the 2001 Census. The reference to the 2011 Census arose because the government felt the 2026 Census and the subsequent delimitation process might not be completed before 2029. If that happened, women's reservation could also be delayed. Using the 2011 Census would have allowed the Delimitation Commission to begin work earlier.

The real hurdle is timing. If all parties agree that the 2026 Census will take time, they may decide to return to the 2011 Census. Alternatively, the 2026 Census could be completed quickly and multiple commissions could work simultaneously. Parliament has the power to create such mechanisms. Today, the choice between the 2011 and 2026 Census is ultimately a political decision. It is not for the committee to determine.

**Vikas Pathak: You said that if a government falls mid-term, the next government would have a truncated term until the next appointed date.**

**Does this really amount to "simultaneous elections", or is it mainly about reducing the frequency of elections? Wouldn't this make the government stronger vis-a-vis the Opposition? Could this weaken checks and balances?**

Ours is a parliamentary democracy. The Executive, including the Prime Minister, remains accountable to Parliament at all times. If the government lacks a strong majority and the Opposition is strong, it cannot pass legislation at will. A strong Opposition remains an effective check. Accountability may actually increase because governments would need consensus to pass important legislation. The issues relating to contingencies and safeguards are all under discussion, and the committee continues to receive suggestions.

**Vikas Pathak: The anti-defection law was strengthened to stop legislators from switching parties, but it has also made party whips so powerful that MPs often cannot express independent views. How do you see this contradiction?**

Your concern is valid. In a democracy, an MP should have a voice. Sometimes the party's position completely dominates the individual representative's role. That is why any change requires careful balancing. We are discussing how the law should operate in situations where only a short period remains before the next synchronised election. We do not want the law to be misused by either side. This is one of the issues under active deliberation. We are consulting experts and committee members on whether some relaxation

should be considered. The broader objective is to ensure that the will of the people is respected. This discussion should not remain confined to the committee, political parties or the government. The media serves as a bridge between the public and the policymakers. Our experience so far has been that, except for a few political parties, almost everyone from civil society — educationists, Padma awardees, institutional heads and ordinary citizens — has broadly supported the idea of simultaneous elections. Their view is that frequent elections affect governance and inconvenience citizens.

People also point to effects on education. Teachers are repeatedly assigned election duties, voter list work and Census work, reducing teaching time. Frequent elections create uncertainty and impose costs on the economy. Labour migration, voter fatigue and repeated mobilisation also have consequences. If India wants to become a developed nation by 2047, major electoral reforms will have to be considered.

**Liz Mathew: If democracy reflects the will of the people, shouldn't people have opportunities to express that will more than once every five years? Also, what checks and balances will exist under ONOE?**

The first challenge is achieving synchronisation between 2029 and 2034 and then maintaining it thereafter. One issue involves Article 85(2)(b), under which the President or Governor can dissolve the House on ministerial advice. Should safeguards be introduced so that alternative governments are explored before dissolution? Personally, I believe Article 85 deserves reconsideration, though that is not necessarily the committee's position. Secondly, if parliamentary terms are

extended during an Emergency, the election cycle changes. The Bill currently does not fully address such situations. We need to visualise future contingencies and provide safeguards now rather than face problems later. The existing constitutional framework already provides significant checks and balances. If a government loses support, a no-confidence motion can be moved. If an alternative government can be formed, there is no problem.

The concept of a remainder term is not entirely new. Since 1992, similar provisions have existed in local self-government institutions. Some argue that frequent elections strengthen democracy, while others argue that constant elections encourage excessive spending and distort governance. From 1952 to 1967, Lok Sabha and Assembly elections were held together. Governments remained accountable during that period as well. Taking all these factors into account, it is believed that One Nation One Election would serve the national interest.

**Jatin Anand: Don't simultaneous elections create an unfair advantage for national parties? Won't national issues overshadow state concerns?**

Some argue that regional parties could suffer. Others argue the opposite — that state issues may become even more prominent. My own view is that voters should not be underestimated. When we didn't have EVMs and voting used to be by paper, the voter understood very well whom to vote for and whom not to. Today, there are EVMs and the voters are more educated than before. They can distinguish between national issues, state issues and individual candidates. Experiences from Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and from earlier elections suggest that voters are capable of making different choices at different levels.

**Jatin Anand: Will One Nation, One Election require a nationwide Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls first? And what about voting rights for migrant workers?**

SIR is a good exercise. We believe in it. The names of people who have died or migrated from one place to another over the last 20-30 years continue to appear on the voter lists of different places. There are many reasons why fake votes get cast. So SIR is a cleanup exercise. And as far as other states are concerned, it is a continuous process. It is the Election Commission's job to see by when they complete it. But our intention is that the SIR exercise should be done in the whole country as soon as possible. I believe that the SIR process — if One Nation One Election is implemented in 2029 — will be completed throughout the country before that.

**Harikishan Sharma: Your party has been rallying behind the idea of simultaneous elections since 1984. There was another idea along with this too — of public funding of elections. Do you think the party will consider that too?**

The idea of simultaneous elections has support beyond one political party. The Election Commission, the Law Commission, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Justice and NITI Aayog have all made recommendations in favour of it. As for public funding of elections, that is a much larger issue. It is outside the scope of this committee. It would require extensive study, data and political consensus before any conclusion can be reached.

**Amitabh Sinha: In the Delimitation Bill, the original requirement was that a delimitation commission be formed after every Census and a delimitation exercise shall happen. That wasn't kept in this Bill. What is the rationale for that?**

For clarity, that requirement arises from Article 82 of the Constitution, not from the Delimitation Commission Act itself. The 2002 Amendment provided that delimitation would take place after the Census was conducted after 2026. The Bill primarily deals with the procedure for delimitation, the composition of the commission and how it will function. Parliament is exercising its authority within the framework already laid down by the Constitution.

**Jatin Anand: What is your take on the NEET leak?**

I am not the person concerned, but I can say that when such problems arise, they are addressed. No system is completely foolproof. The government is vigilant and the Prime Minister is personally monitoring the issue. Beyond that, I do not think it is appropriate for me to comment.

**Harikishan Sharma: There has also been controversy over the use of the term 'cockroach' in public discourse for people who are critical of institutions. Do you think such language is appropriate in a democracy?**

Some issues can become disproportionate compared to their actual significance. I am not commenting on whether a particular statement was right or wrong. But public debate can sometimes magnify matters beyond their real importance.



### ON GIVING WHIPS TOO MUCH POWER

*An MP should have a voice. Sometimes the party's position dominates the representative's role... The objective is to ensure that the will of the people is respected. It should not be confined to the committee, or the government*

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## Rethinking quality control

The new order will not solve the problem

The Union government's decision to introduce the Transition Facilitation (Quality Control) Order, 2026, implicitly shows that India's "quality control order" (QCO) regime is affecting business and supply chains, particularly in the manufacturing sector. The new framework allows manufacturers in sectors such as toys, footwear, air-conditioners, furniture, and washing machines, to source products through a risk-based compliance mechanism rather than the conventional route of certification by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS). Companies with a proven compliance record, sound quality systems, and strong technical capabilities can obtain permission through a government committee while continuing to meet Indian standards. The objective is to ease supply bottlenecks without compromising quality. The immediate relief is welcome, but it will not solve the actual problem.

The original purpose of QCOs was to ensure quality standards to protect consumers, improve product quality, and keep substandard imports out of the Indian market. Over time, however, the policy expanded far beyond these objectives. From covering around 100 products in 2014, QCOs now extend to well over 650 product categories. Besides, they no longer apply only to finished consumer goods. Raw materials, industrial components, intermediates, and machinery have increasingly come within their ambit, affecting manufacturing supply chains. The economic costs of the regime are mounting. Manufacturers dependent on imported inputs have found themselves unable to source components because overseas suppliers first need certification from the BIS. The approval process is often slow, expensive and uncertain. The burden falls disproportionately on micro, small and medium enterprises, which lack the leverage to persuade foreign suppliers to obtain Indian certification or the resources to withstand prolonged delays. Far from making Indian manufacturing more competitive, the regime has made it harder for domestic firms to integrate with global value chains. QCOs are often seen as a non-trivial barrier on imports.

A study by the Centre for Social and Economic Progress found that over time, imports of QCO-covered products declined by about 24 per cent after the orders were introduced, but exports showed no corresponding improvement. Restricting access to quality inputs without strengthening export competitiveness merely raises production costs while leaving manufacturers less competitive in international markets. The government's review appears to have reached similar conclusions. A high-level committee led by NITI Aayog member Rajiv Gauba had recommended the cancellation, suspension or deferment of more than 200 QCOs after finding that they increased compliance costs and disrupted supply chains. Based on the panel's advice, about 76 of these orders had been kept in abeyance as of November 2025, but little movement has been reported since then.

The latest notification stops well short of the warranted reform. Rather than rationalising the QCO regime itself, the government has opted for a selective exemption mechanism. The committee-led bureaucratic approach will only increase uncertainty and friction for Indian importers. The system is akin to the "licence raj", where permissions are issued selectively, with considerable bureaucratic discretion and little accountability. Notably, licences under the new system will initially be valid for two years and could be renewed. This would obviously increase uncertainty. Instead, what is actually needed is a comprehensive review of the QCO regime. The government must objectively look at the costs and benefits of the regime. Mandatory QCOs should be limited to products with direct implications for consumer health and safety. Industrial inputs should instead be governed through transparent, risk-based standards backed by market surveillance and strict penalties for violations.

## AI's missing inclusivity

The tech revolution is amplifying gender bias

As evidence on the growing power and sentient nature of artificial intelligence (AI) mounts, a discomfiting study by UN Women shows that gender bias is not only deeply embedded in this technological revolution but it leaves women even more vulnerable to discrimination and violence than before. A study of 133 generative AI systems found that 44 per cent demonstrated gender bias and 26 per cent both gender and racial bias. Yet, the study says, just about half the marketers use human oversight to test AI generative creatives before they are released. These findings were released ahead of the United Nations (UN) Global Dialogue on Artificial Intelligence Governance from July 6-7, and AI for Good Global Summit in Geneva, Switzerland, from July 7-10.

The UN Women study focused on generative AI in marketing and communication networks, because it points out that "these models are increasingly embedded in content generation and media buying at scale". Critically, the study says these biases are not algorithmic glitches but a pattern reflective of societal biases. Large-language models (LLMs), for instance, consistently associated women with home, family and children, and men with executive, salary and career. As many as a fifth of LLMs revealed sexist or misogynistic attitudes when tasked with completing a sentence that start with a person's gender. These included portraying women as sex objects or the property of their husbands. As the study points out, these are predictable outputs of AI systems trained on decades of gender inequality. There is, thus, an implicit human factor that perpetuates and amplifies these attitudes. As the study pointed out, of the 138 countries assessed, only 24 referenced gender as a national AI strategy and only 18 included "gender responsive" provisions.

A major reason for this neglect is that women themselves are largely missing in the AI ecosystem. Fewer than 30 per cent of global AI professionals are women, a number that falls to 10-15 per cent when it comes to leadership roles. Worse, the majority of the women leaders in these organisations are in human resources (86 per cent) and legal (55 per cent) positions, which are not traditionally considered paths to the corner office. Yet, ironically, it is women who are impacted the most from the widespread adoption of AI. Take jobs. The roles most vulnerable to automation are data entry, administration and customer service, which women typically dominate. According to the World Economic Forum, 57 per cent of jobs at risk of automation are currently held by women. Safety is another critical factor. The UN Women data shows that women are far more likely to experience online violence. One in four women's rights activists and journalists has experienced AI-assisted online violence and sexual advances, 12 per cent have been at the receiving end of non-consensual sharing of images, and 6 per cent have been targeted through deepfakes.

There are easy and obvious solutions to this at both enterprise and governmental-policy levels. Enabling gender- and race-based scrutiny of LLM-based creative content is a simple step for marketing and advertising organisations. At the same time, the gender-based skill gap needs to be bridged. According to a study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), globally, women are 25 per cent less likely than men to have basic digital skills and four times less likely to have advanced programming skills. Upskilling targeted at women, therefore, is becoming vital to ensure a safe, inclusive digital future.



ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA KUMAR MOHANTY

## A failure to cool

Thousands die from excess heat in summers and smog in winters, but our politics does not respond to public-health emergencies

A question that is often asked of Indian politics is: When will health, as well as air and water quality, become an issue that determines the future of governments or legislators? At this time of the year, the question becomes particularly pressing. Parts of the north of the country, such as Delhi, continue to await the monsoon amid a heat index of 51; aside from the sheer discomfort caused to the entire population, billions of worker-hours are lost, and thousands of people die.

That at least is what the current academic estimation is. According to a study by the *Lancet* journal in 2024, exposure to extreme heat in 2024 caused India to lose 247 billion potential labour hours, especially for manual labourers; the economic loss the country suffered, according to the researchers, was almost \$200 billion. Another study, conducted by two academics at the University of California in Berkeley, found that a single day of extreme heat in India causes about 3,400 excess deaths across the country. This would increase the longer the heat wave continues, with a five-day stretch of excessively high temperatures killing 30,000 people.

It should be absolutely clear to everyone that this is not normal; the problem has been significantly worsened by the effects of climate change. The *Lancet* study found that, of India's 20 days of excess heat a year, almost a third were caused by global warming. This number would only increase over time.

The deadly summers across much of the country, particularly when the monsoon is delayed, have a flip side — the hazy, life-threatening winter air that infests many cities, particularly in the Indo-Gangetic plain. These, too, have become worse in recent years with the continued burning of fossil fuels and agricultural waste, and they too cause hundreds of excess deaths every day.

But it is amply clear that Indian voters do not seem to expect that their leaders, whether at state or national level, prioritise these public-health crises. The contrast is often drawn to the People's Republic of China: Although it is not a democracy, its leadership was sufficiently spooked by anti-pollution demonstrations in the early 2010s to act effectively to clean up the air in big cities, including the capital of Beijing.

In India, it is possible that so much more is on the ballot in every election that there is little space for issues such as public health. Whatever the reason, the consequence is that politicians seem to be in no hurry to address these issues, even as the threats posed by the environment to lives and the broader economy are so very evident.

The difference is instructive. For the authoritarian technocracy that runs China, public-health failures would be seen as a crisis of legitimacy. Given that its claim to power rests on its promise to deliver prosperity and social order, poor urban conditions could immediately be seen as it failing to live up to its side of the bargain. This would have compelled it to act.



POLICY RULES  
MIHIR S SHARMA

## DMFs vs FPIs: Beyond the rhetoric

For most of the past two years, a comforting story has taken hold in India's stock market. Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have sold relentlessly, yet share prices have held up. Domestic mutual funds (DMFs), fuelled by a torrent of money into systematic investment plans (SIPs), have stepped in as buyers of last resort. The implication is clear: India no longer depends on fickle foreign capital. Retail investors have arrived, absorbed the shock, and stabilised the market.

The numbers appear to support the claim. Since September 2024, FPIs have been heavy sellers, culminating in record net outflows of \$19.6 billion in 2025-26 (FY26). Domestic institutional investors, meanwhile, bought nearly \$96 billion worth of equities. Foreign ownership in companies listed on the National Stock Exchange (NSE) has fallen to levels last seen two decades ago, while DMFs have steadily increased their share.

Yet this popular narrative rests on a questionable assumption — that FPIs and DMFs have been buying and selling the same stocks. Foreign investors remain overwhelmingly concentrated in India's largest companies, while domestic fund flows are increasingly directed towards midcap and smallcap stocks. What appears to be one market absorbing a wave of foreign selling is, in reality, two different markets moving in opposite directions.

The Indian stock market was opened to foreign institutional investors in September 1992. The following year, India's first private-sector mutual fund (MF) opened for subscription. Over the next two decades, foreign investors came to dominate the market while domestic MFs struggled to build investor confidence. Through the stagflationary 1990s, the dotcom bust of 2001, the commodity and infrastructure boom of 2003-07, the global financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent recovery, FPIs largely determined the direction of the Indian stock market. When they sneezed, India caught a cold. At their peak in FY14, they owned 22.1 per cent of all stocks listed on the NSE.

Throughout this period, concerns were frequently raised that Indians were not participating adequately in the wealth being created by their own stock market. Foreign investors appeared to be capturing a disproportionate share of the gains.

Then something changed. DMFs, whose ownership had remained stuck below 4 per cent for years, began attracting far larger inflows after demonetisation. While foreign ownership hovered around 21 per cent, domestic ownership steadily rose. Following the two-year bull market between September 2022 and September 2024, the divergence became more pronounced. FPI ownership fell to 17.5 per cent by March last year and then to 15.8 per cent by March this year — the lowest level since March 2006. Meanwhile, DMF ownership rose to 10.4 per cent.

The January-March quarter (Q4) of FY26 highlighted the trend. Of the record \$19.6 billion in annual FPI outflows, nearly \$14.2 billion occurred during the quarter, following United States (US) President Donald Trump's tariff announcements and the Iran war. Over the same period, domestic institutional investors purchased \$95.8 billion of equities. To many observers, this represented a structural shift in India's capital markets. The country had finally developed a domestic-investor base capable of offsetting foreign withdrawals. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman repeatedly argued that retail investors had become a shock absorber, reducing the market's vulnerability to foreign capital flows. There is truth in that claim — but only up to a point. The aggregate ownership data conceals an important distinction. FPIs remain heavily concentrated in the largest companies. At the end of FY26, 92 per cent of their NSE holdings were in the top decile of listed firms by market capitalisation. DMFs were somewhat more diversified, with 87.8 per cent in the top decile and a larger allocation to smaller companies.

The difference becomes clearer when fund flows are examined. During Q4FY26, equity MFs attracted

Once it did, it could do so largely unrestrained by questions of domestic vetoes.

India, as a democracy, should in theory be more receptive to its citizens' immediate needs. If hundreds of people are dying because of heat waves in cities every summer, and hundreds more are being killed by unbreathable winter air, a government that depends upon their votes should feel a greater pressure to act swiftly than one that remains in power only on the basis of obviously manufactured consent.

But this overlooks the fact that Indian democracy has successfully depoliticised more and more aspects of daily life. In other words, political organisation around issues such as the local environment, health, or air and water quality, is less and less possible. Nobody would be surprised if some identity group created a political-pressure organisation — indeed, that is considered normal. But if those angered by some public-health or environmental issue did so, it would be considered suspicious, if not seditious.

The depoliticisation of public health means that no elected politician in India at any level believes that inaction on excess heat, winter smog, or water quality will cause them to lose re-election. And, over time, this means that environmental harm or the lack of adaptation to climate change becomes, in the eyes of voters themselves, less a political issue than some sort of act of god, a simple feature of India's geography rather than something that human ingenuity must address through the state.

There are policies that can address the excess deaths caused by heat every year. Multiple cities have developed heat-action plans; Delhi's was even notified, albeit only when a heat wave a couple of years ago caused people to notice that the government was sitting on it without doing anything. The various possible actions, some of which are included in these heat plans, include shifting working hours; greening urban spaces and creating more shade; expanding the reach of air-cooling and air-conditioning devices, as well as creating public air-cooled spaces; changing the reflective nature of roofs and walls; and so on.

Researchers at the Flemish Institute of Technological Research in Belgium have calculated for the World Bank that, by 2050, the number of excess heat-related deaths in India would increase by 50 per cent in a baseline scenario and the hit to urban gross domestic product would rise to about 4 per cent. They found that some activities, such as increasing tree canopy and putting in reflective roofs, were particularly easy to implement and had a major effect in reducing deaths and lost work-hours.

But, in India, policy follows politics and not the other way around. It is hard to see even relatively simple solutions such as these catching on across the country unless there is some sort of mobilisation around these issues that compels politicians to act. In the end, if Indians continue to die in the heat or smog, it is because we as a people care about other issues more, and express that preference regularly through our votes.



IRRATIONAL CHOICE  
DEBASHIS BASU

## 'Heroes' of the Nord Stream conspiracy



ROBERT F WORTH

Most people remember the 2022 sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, if they remember it at all, because of an arresting image: A wide, frothing geyser on the blue surface of the Baltic Sea. That was the first visual sign that someone had set explosives on the pair of 760-mile undersea pipelines — the world's longest — destroying three of its conduits and sending two billion dollars' worth of pressurised gas shooting upward. It has been called the greatest act of sabotage in modern times.

In one blow the explosions upended Germany's energy dependence on Russia, where the gas originated, and set off an intense, years-long argument

about who was responsible. It was an argument that no one seemed to want to resolve at first, because assigning blame to any of the three potential saboteurs — Russia, the United States and Ukraine — would have uncomfortable political consequences.

There is now little doubt about who did it, though conspiracy theories still bubble on the margins. Ukrainian intelligence officials seem to have conceived the plan, and pulled it off with a single-masted sailboat and a skeleton crew of patriotic mariners and divers, one of whom was sick with Covid when he descended 260 feet into frigid and pitch-dark water to lay the explosives. Their motive is no mystery either: They wanted to stop Germany from feeding Russia's war machine with billions of dollars in annual gas payments.

We have all these details — despite the Ukrainian government's denials — partly because of a stubborn and meticulous German police investigation, and partly because of some very dogged reporters. Bojan Pancevski, a

Russian-speaking correspondent at *The Wall Street Journal*, spent years untangling the plot. His book is a spectacular feat of investigative journalism, built on his intimate access to the senior Ukrainian intelligence chiefs who say they hatched the idea and to the German police officials who eventually tracked them down.

*The Nord Stream Conspiracy* is a multifaceted tale, a police procedural set against a background of political and economic interests that are braided in strange and contradictory ways. The saboteurs inflicted a huge economic blow on Germany by crippling its chief source of energy for heating and industry. Yet Germany is also one of the biggest supporters of Ukrainian independence, and some German officials privately conceded that the destroyed pipeline was a blessing in disguise. The leaders of some other governments, notably Poland, were open from the start about their belief that the plotters deserved rewards, not prison sentences.

In Pancevski's telling, the pipeline job was a quintessential example of Ukraine's culture of innovation and bravado, in a government run by "bands and clans inside ministries, the army, the spy services, each a mini-state within the state". Pancevski traces these patterns of unruly behaviour to the Cossack warriors who roamed Ukraine's steppes centuries ago, and makes the intriguing observation that the country's notorious corruption is related to the entrepreneurial cunning that has abetted its self-defence. Defiance, in ways good and bad, has become second nature for Ukrainians.

The two senior officers who led the Nord Stream plot were so fiercely independent that they had already been fired for insubordination when Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022. They helped defend Kyiv



The Nord Stream Conspiracy: The Inside Story of the Explosions That Shook the World by Bojan Pancevski Published by Holt 321 pages \$29.99

alongside infantry soldiers, and after being reintegrated, they conceived the plan to destroy the pipeline. Though Volodymyr Zelenskyy has always maintained that he never knew anything about it, they say they initially cleared it with their superiors, who later got cold feet.

Another fascinating theme that emerges from Pancevski's reporting is the evolution of Ukraine's intelligence service into a world-class weapon. Until 2014 that service, known as the SBU, was not fully independent of Russia; many officers took orders from Moscow. The "Revolution of Dignity" that took place in that year to protest the government's submission to the Kremlin catalysed a new spirit of national pride, and the SBU emerged as a group of patriots with unmatched powers to penetrate Russia. The CIA took notice and sent its officers to teach and learn. The Ukrainians blended "the best practices of two opposing systems and intelligence practices, American and post-Soviet," Pan-

cevski writes, "shaping a new, hybrid espionage culture".

My only complaint about Pancevski's book is that it is written in what might be called blockbuster prose: Lots of one-sentence paragraphs that are clearly meant to be jaw-dropping, a stripped-down style that sometimes disdains verbs. His insistence on identifying his protagonists by aliases — the Iceman, the Priest, the Colonel — is understandable, given the ongoing legal sensitivities. But I occasionally got the sense that the author was pitching his story a little too eagerly in the direction of Hollywood.

All the same, one hopes *The Nord Stream Conspiracy* will help restore the reputations of the saboteurs. After the plot was unveiled, they were mostly fired or demoted or even jailed, in a predictable frenzy of ass-covering. But as one elder statesman of Ukraine's intelligence community told Pancevski, these people are heroes, and, in the end, "they will be given the medals they all deserve".

The reviewer, a former *New York Times* correspondent, is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic* ©2026 The New York Times News Service

the hindu **businessline.**

MONDAY - JUNE 29, 2026

## Inflection point

With a little support, MSMEs can be a driving force

**T**here cannot perhaps be a better time than the present to take stock of how India's micro, small and medium enterprises are faring. After all, there are 8.77 crore MSMEs employing 38.9 crore people, contributing nearly a third of GDP and half our exports.



Quite apart from the fact that the week starting June 27 is observed as MSME week globally, the world has been through a period of extraordinary flux over the last year or more, starting with the Liberation Day tariffs last April and culminating in the Gulf war. Alongside, developments in AI and electronics are rapidly overhauling production processes, creating opportunities and challenges with respect to skilling, finance and product development. This newspaper organised its annual 'MSME Growth Conclave' in Bengaluru and Coimbatore last week to dive into how MSMEs, and the policies meant for them, are dealing with technological and geopolitical upheavals. At least three broad aspects concerning MSMEs (actually an umbrella term that encompasses enterprises from ₹2.5 crore to ₹500 crore) came up for discussion — access to finance, human resource management and managing the growth path of an enterprise.

To take the last point first, industry leaders rightly observed MSMEs should overcome their reluctance to grow big, which seems to arise from a fear of losing family control. This also means snapping out of the sub-contracting mindset and instead owning a value chain, be it in electric vehicles or dairy. The use of modern equipment and digitised processes can aid expansion and development of new products. To this end, synergies between industrial and educational research must be developed. But to back this ambition, both a skilled workforce as well as a financial ecosystem are pre-requisites. MSMEs struggle to retain talent. It was rightly observed that employees should be able to visualise a career path.

As for finances, MSMEs continue to struggle. According to a recently released Deloitte report, most MSMEs do not have access to formal credit and raise funds from informal sources. While the preference for gold loans seems to be a factor, the banking system must do some serious introspection. Credit can be tailored to cash flows, and working capital requirements met or adjusted to deal with global shocks. Credit guarantee schemes seem to help up to a point. Bankers with intimate knowledge of local conditions must be rewarded for nurturing businesses over time with patient capital. While being wary of NPAs, as in the present times, bankers need to account for circumstantial stress. As for working capital finance, the Trade Receivables electronic Discounting System is not doing very well, despite recent efforts to reform it. The 45-day payment norm is often circumvented. Yet, it is remarkable that MSMEs have shown great resilience — despite Covid, demonetisation and the war-induced shocks since 2022 — to put the economy back on the growth path. Ecosystem support can make a huge difference.

## OTHER VOICES.

### The Washington Post

#### Feds controlling ChatGPT access misreads AI threats

Perfect security is a dangerous delusion. That's something close to a gospel truth for cybersecurity experts. This appears not to be the mindset at the highest reaches of the US government, which is trying to regulate away dangers that cannot be regulated away. At the behest of the White House, OpenAI announced that it will allow federal authorities to approve on a case-by-case basis who gets access to GPT-5.6. There is no process for an individual user to get access, only companies. If the Trump administration is buying a little time to harden the government's own systems before the most capable tools are everywhere, this is narrowly defensible. But if the goal is to chase "model safety" in hopes that technology will only be released into the wild once appropriate guardrails are in place, the government badly misjudges the game it's playing. (WASHINGTON DC, JUNE 26)

### South China Morning Post

#### Hong Kong must tackle roots of youth mental health crisis

The mental health problems faced by the young, leading in extreme cases to suicide, are a long-standing issue experienced widely around the world. But they remain a source of deep public concern, requiring constant attention. There were 91 suspected suicides among school pupils in Hong Kong between 2023 and 2025. The figure rose from 28 in 2024 to 31 last year, despite a range of initiatives intended to improve the well-being of students and provide those at risk with support. The reasons for each suicide are complex. But the challenges and pressures faced by young people are well known. Time spent on social media can limit their ability to develop people skills and can expose them to cyberbullying or other harmful content. (HONG KONG, JUNE 28)



# It happens only in Indiya

India has stood mercantilism on its head by importing far more than it exports

LINE & LENGTH.

TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

**A** lot of highly intelligent people think China is the cat's whiskers. Thus, "Power in international trade disputes is a fundamental sense reflects power over supply, not power over demand, which is something economists have always tried to say."

Paul Krugman, the Nobel winning economist who is a trenchant critic of the Donald Trump government, wrote this in an article a few days ago. He was comparing the US and China.

Trump, he was implying, made the mistake of thinking that bottomless American demand would prevail. But it was China's control of supply that has won out.

Krugman is both right and wrong. China wins only because of its control of the supply of a few rare earths. Much of the rest of what it produces can be, and is, produced quite easily elsewhere.

Yes, it's true that it sells what it produces very cheaply. But that's because of gigantic subsidies and currency manipulation. Economists have researched this to death. Countries have protested. A few have increased import duties steeply. China doesn't care.

When Trump increased tariffs on Chinese goods, he would have succeeded except that he made the same mistake that he made when he attacked Iran earlier this year. He forgot that China controls rare earths just as Iran controls the straits of Hormuz. Every Achilles has a vulnerable heel.

But to conclude from this that it is supply that determines power in international trade is probably wrong. By that logic, Russia should control both China and Europe, which together produce nearly \$50 trillion worth of goods and services. It doesn't, because without the demand from China and Europe the Russian economy would collapse entirely while that of the buyers would merely deflate while they diversify their sources of supply.

**CHINA'S WEAKNESS**  
Despite temporary phases of having the upper hand, a single seller is therefore

**In India equity for labour displaced efficiency for capital. And that is how we stood mercantilism on its head, because our comparative advantage in labour was wholly neglected**

always more vulnerable. The Chinese should bear this in mind while withholding supply. Actually, China knows this. And that's why it's constantly putting out the news that it's invulnerable. But who is it fooling?

Let's not forget that it can't feed itself. Nor is it self-sufficient in energy. In fact, far from it. If tomorrow there were food or energy sanctions against it, together the two would very quickly bring it to its knees.

#### INDIAN MERCANTILISM

But leave Krugman aside and let's return to mercantilism. Where does India stand on it? Believe me, you don't want to know because what India has done is mind-boggling.

In a typical inversion of policies which make neither economic nor political sense, India has stood mercantilism on its head. The core of mercantilism, as enunciated by the Englishman Thomas Mun in the 17th century, is to export as much as you can and import as little as you need. India does the exact opposite.

Two things have been mainly responsible for this cosmic absurdity. One was the political belief that we needed to reverse the colonial economic model of being an exporting country that didn't have any industrial base of its own and the other was the need to stop the colonial maltreatment of labour.

It never occurred to anyone that rapid industrialisation is inconsistent with the

molycoddling of labour. You can't have both. Communist China understood this perfectly, we didn't. Basically, to industrialise massively and quickly, policies have to be pro-capital, not pro-labour.

But in India equity for labour displaced efficiency for capital. And that is how we stood mercantilism on its head, because our comparative advantage in labour was wholly neglected.

So amongst the various counterproductive things we did, we stopped producing for export. But China after 1978 did the exact opposite. It now has a \$20 trillion economy. We have a \$4 trillion economy. We used to sell to China. Now we buy everything from it.

It is not as if India's first prime minister wasn't told about the negative outcomes of his economic policies after 1957. He was, but he ignored all the warnings.

Can the fallout be fixed? Not unless we prioritise efficiency over equity. Will we do it? Yes but in homeopathic doses, as in the new labour codes.

What does that mean? I think we should replace that 0 in 2047 with 1, to make it 2147.

I mean, look at us. Even after 79 years of independence we are governed by politicians and *babus* who can't decide what proof is sufficient to establish Indian citizenship. What can we expect of them?

# Mahalanobis and the making of a data-driven India

Mahalanobis spent his life building a self-reliant statistical system, which has become stronger with the passage of time

Prasu Jain  
Astitva Ranjan Srivastava  
Meghal Sharma

**E**very time we taste a spoonful to judge a whole pot of *dal*, or check a handful of grain to judge an entire sack, we are doing statistics without realising it — reading a small sample to understand a much larger whole. The man who turned that everyday instinct into a science for a nation was Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis.

As India marks his 133rd birth anniversary on June 29 — celebrated since 2007 as National Statistics Day — his idea feels more relevant than ever. In an age that runs on data and artificial intelligence, the statistician who taught India to find meaning in numbers remains its most modern thinker.

#### THE PROFESSOR

Mahalanobis began as a physicist, teaching at Presidency College for more than three decades, before a growing fascination with statistics led him to found the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) in 1931 — today an institution of national importance and global repute. He was physicist, statistician and economist at once, and the architect of India's Second Five-Year Plan. As Professor CR. Rao remarked, "His major achievements were in fields in which he had no formal degrees." His genius lay in putting statistics to work.

After the great floods in Bengal and Odisha in the 1920s, his patient study of

decades of rainfall showed that the remedy lay in better drainage, not higher embankments — advice that saved the exchequer crores and shaped the projects at Damodar and Hirakud.

His study of community affinities produced the Mahalanobis distance, the  $D^2$  statistic still used worldwide to measure how groups differ. For these achievements the nation honoured him with the Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and a commemorative stamp in 1993.

#### THE STATISTICIAN-STATESMAN

His most enduring gift was the science of the sample. Asked whether Bengal's jute acreage could be estimated without counting every field, Mahalanobis designed India's first large-scale crop survey and proved that a small, well-planned sample could match a full count at a fraction of the cost.

The result validated the power of sampling and led to the founding of the National Sample Survey (NSS) in 1950. Prof. Harold Hotelling judged that no sampling technique anywhere had matched the accuracy Mahalanobis achieved.

The institutions he built were never meant to stand still. The first NSS round in 1950 used about 240 investigators and 1,800 sample villages; today's rounds deploy thousands of field staff across some 25,000 villages and urban blocks, and surveys once held every five years now run yearly, producing quick monthly and quarterly estimates for a fast-moving economy.

That foundation is doing remarkable work today. The recently released sixth



**PIONEER.** PC Mahalanobis wove statistics into the work of nation-building

National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6, 2023-24) is itself a child of the sampling revolution he led: instead of counting every household, it reads a carefully drawn sample of nearly seven lakh homes to portray the health of a billion people, carrying his method far beyond economics into health and nutrition. More striking still is a circle now closing.

As Chairman of the National Income Committee in 1949, Mahalanobis was among the first to flag a basic weakness — India could not accurately measure what its people earned. More than 75 years on, that gap is being closed: in 2026 the National Statistics Office launched the country's first full-scale National Household Income Survey, covering about 4.5 lakh households across every State and Union Territory and recording earnings directly rather than estimating them from spending.

Alongside it, new annual surveys on

household debt and investment, the labour force, the services sector and rural farm households are steadily filling old data gaps, while the base years of key indicators — GDP and the Index of Industrial Production to 2022-23, the Consumer Price Index to 2024 — have been refreshed to mirror today's economy.

#### IN THE AGE OF AI

Here his vision meets the newest frontier. Artificial intelligence is only as trustworthy as the data beneath it, and India's pursuit of sovereign AI — models, computing power and datasets that are Indian-owned and Indian-governed — depends on having reliable, representative national data of its own.

The statistical system is rising to meet that need. MoSPI's eSankhyiki portal turns vast official data into a searchable, machine-readable resource anyone can query; a Sankhyiki AI Assistant on the ministry's website now answers questions in plain language; and a new Model Context Protocol (MCP) server lets AI tools such as ChatGPT draw directly on authenticated government data to answer everyday questions.

This is exactly what Mahalanobis spent his life building: a self-reliant statistical system, in the service of the nation's own purposes.

A nation, his life reminds us, grows not only by gathering data, but by using it wisely in the service of its people.

Prasu is Deputy Director, Astitva and Meghal are Assistant Directors, MoSPI. Views are personal

## BELOW THE LINE



#### Reshuffle season

As whispers of a Cabinet reshuffle grow louder in the capital, Delhi's political circles say the temple trail is being watched. Ministers believed to be anxious about their future are said to be making the rounds of shrines, temples with every visit being dissected for hidden political

meaning rather than spiritual intent. Among the more visible faces has been the multiple controversy-struck Dharmendra Pradhan, who visited the historic Baladevjeev Temple in Odisha's Kendrapada district on June 28 and had earlier offered prayers at the Shri Jagannath Temple in New Delhi on June 10. Both visits had public and legitimate pretences, but that hasn't stopped the capital's rumour mill from linking them to the reshuffle buzz. The season is proving equally rewarding for astrologers, numerologists and soothsayers, who, according to political gossip, have been making frequent visits to

ministers' residences. Whether it's planets, prayers or political arithmetic that ultimately decides Cabinet berths is anyone's guess — but business, at least for the fortunate-fraternal fraternity, is said to be booming.

#### Hallucinating BOTs

In a recent interaction with users, a wallet company was bragging on how it integrated BOT (a software application programmed to execute automated, repetitive tasks over a network) into the app to analyse users' spending and advice on their investment. One of the users was complaining that BOTs tend to hallucinate and this can be a big problem in taking

investment decision based on BOTs' advice.

The CEO of the wallet company agreed and said it has introduced another BOT to study the hallucination and rectify it. With IT innovations growing rapidly, users must be hoping RBI takes control of the mushrooming wallet business so that their hard-earned money is better protected.

#### Naidu's social mission

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu has a way of saying things, which even critics find hard to counter. The Naidu government has been actively encouraging families to have more children to address a rapidly

declining fertility rate (which has dropped to 1.5).

To help achieve this, the State is offering incentives and is also highlighting the benefits of the traditional Indian joint family system. At a recent pulse polio administration event, Naidu said "such a system should come back" and added that grandparents and other family members instil values in children and provide them emotional support as well. Stressing that child care should not be considered solely the mother's responsibility, he called upon fathers to actively participate in raising children.

#### Our Bureaus

## A positive look at failure

Setbacks can help shape successful ventures

### BOOK REVIEW.

Sudhiredar Sharma

No individual with ego or self-esteem, whether a leader or a follower, wants to admit failure. Simply put, most are wired not to accept failure. This is largely because the fear of failure is drilled into us right from school days. Consequently, there is an innate tendency to shy away from talking or discussing failures. Sigmund Freud argued that there is a huge stigma around discussing any kind of failure in society. No wonder, politicians are the worst at admitting failures.

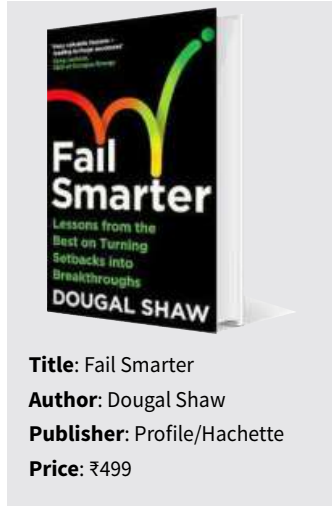
The classic works of corporate gurus like Peter Drucker emphasise optimising personal behaviour to achieve individual and organisational peak. They talk of success as the guiding mantra to surge ahead. Nobody wants to appear failed or defeated. Thanks to social media, the fear of failure has heightened, especially among the youth.

#### DIFFERENT FORMS

Failure has many forms. There are intelligent failures, where one experiments deliberately to learn lessons from them. And then there are basic failures which include mistakes and slips, and complex failures where a mix of factors is at play over which one doesn't have much immediate control. In *Fail Smarter*, business journalist Dougal Shaw draws on conversations with entrepreneurs and business leaders to look at failures in a more positive light. He lists seven lessons from the discussions, and these include: mental strategies to rebuild confidence; recalibrate thinking to address crises; leveraging negative customer reviews; tips to create breakthroughs in failures; and, finding new pathways to success as a team. The overarching message is that failure can be a signpost to success, only if one has grit, agility and ambition to seize the opportunities failure presents.

*Fail Smarter* is a valuable resource on lessons from failures that could eventually help entrepreneurs succeed in their ventures. It helps understand and appreciate failure better, and harness the creative opportunities that unfold. Despite the rise in number of failures among prospective entrepreneurs, the desire to create start-ups has only increased.

Shaw finds that many business leaders value failures for the



**Title:** Fail Smarter  
**Author:** Dougal Shaw  
**Publisher:** Profile/Hachette  
**Price:** ₹499

lessons they teach, leading to personal growth and resilience. The observations of Josh Bayliss, CEO of Virgin Group, seems apt here: "I wish that I'd known earlier in my career just how important it is to be prepared to fail, because I think that's when you learn the most." Dealing with failure and learning from it make winning entrepreneurs.

*Fail Smarter* is a veritable meditation on failure, building a positive culture around failure and encouraging people to shift from blame and shame to acceptance and resilience. Shaw captures the personal experiences of a number of leading entrepreneurs in dealing with failure. The most successful leaders focus on what went wrong while building their businesses.

At the Global AI Summit in 2023, the key takeaways that emerged from the fireside chat with delegates from Silicon Valley were: give up the security of the regular pay cheque; and be comfortable with failing. Adopting a more mature attitude to failure can help generate new ideas that make good business sense. *Fail Smarter* enlists many such ideas.

The successful leader must lead by example, both in terms of receiving and delivering feedback on failure.

The setbacks, failures and difficult moments are often the experiences that shape the biggest breakthroughs. So why is there a stigma around openly talking about them? That's exactly what Shaw has explored in his book that combines personal accounts with practical insights on resilience, growth and learning. Failure can be a key character in the story, but it should not be the narrator.

The reviewer is an independent writer, researcher and academic

## The cost of over-reliance on antibiotics

The book presents a diverse array of useful perspectives — though India is not a lone contributor or victim as painted

### BOOK REVIEW.

Rajeev Jayadevan

The central theme of this work is antimicrobial resistance (AMR), with the authors choosing to specifically highlight India's role within this public health challenge. Before evaluating the book's specific arguments, it is useful to discuss what AMR means. It is a global problem flagged by the World Health Organization where existing treatments are no longer effective against bacterial and other infections, leading to more severe illnesses, prolonged hospital courses, and worse clinical outcomes.

Incidentally, bacteria have always possessed the biological ability to overcome antibiotics. This is a natural part of their evolutionary survival over billions of years, helping them resist lethal chemicals deployed by other organisms in the environment. Thus, contrary to popular perception, it is not a case of bacteria suddenly acquiring an all-new AMR ability after man started using antibiotics.

It is true that antibiotic overuse and environmental contamination create bacterial populations that are relatively more resistant through a process of selection. However, the clichéd narrative that blames individual prescribing patterns obscures the deeper, systemic drivers of AMR globally. These drivers range from large-scale livestock antibiotic use, urban overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, shortcomings in infection prevention strategies, non-availability of diagnostics and limitations in healthcare access, compounded by economic and educational disparities.

Ultimately, the entire world needs to work together to reduce resistance, particularly because the number of new

drugs in the pipeline does not match the rising need.

In the first paragraph of their introduction, the authors mention the controversial term New Delhi metallo-beta-lactamase-1 (NDM-1), which was branded as "India's superbug" by the international media in 2008. This created an unfortunate perception that India was exporting dangerous bacteria to the rest of the world, and was therefore an unsafe place to travel to. The terminology drew sharp criticism as scientifically inaccurate, given that resistance genes evolve over billions of years and cannot be attributed to any single geography.

In subsequent sections, the authors discuss the considerable number of tuberculosis patients in India, noting that many suffer from drug-resistant strains. To provide necessary context, tuberculosis remains a monumental global challenge, and drug resistance is an escalating crisis present across several populous and developing nations.

#### HISTORICAL REFERENCES

Doron and Broom present historical references to advisories regarding antibiotic use in India. However, these patterns must be read in the context of the early post-Independence era, when bacterial infections claimed a vastly larger share of illness and death than they do today. It was the advent of antibiotics, improved sanitation, vaccination and modern aseptic practices that allowed life expectancy to rise quickly beyond the fourth decade. An unintended consequence of this successful historical transition was a lingering cultural and clinical practice: utilising an antibiotic whenever an infection was suspected.

Fuelled by an earnest desire to heal their patients, doctors in developing nations — not just in India — err on the side of overprescribing rather than



**Title:** A World of Resistance  
**Authors:** Assa Doron and Alex Broom  
**Publisher:** The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press  
**Price:** ₹699

under-prescribing. This is a multi-faceted process driven by a lack of rapid diagnostic tests that can differentiate between bacterial and viral infections, a mutual reluctance to perform these tests due to cost concerns and patient compliance, a higher community prevalence of bacterial diseases, avoidance of patient dissatisfaction at not receiving a prescription, and a defensive fear of missing a serious bacterial infection when initial symptoms mimic a viral fever. In India, unfortunately, this challenge is compounded by self-medication and the over-the-counter availability of antibiotics without a physician's prescription.

The next portion of the book addresses the rise of India as a hub for generic drug manufacturing, where the authors discuss environmental

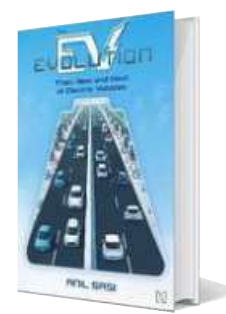
pollution caused by pharmaceutical effluents. Environmental contamination is indeed a recognised variable in AMR. When industrial waste containing active antibiotic residues enters water bodies, it exposes environmental bacteria to sub-lethal doses of these agents, selectively promoting the growth of resistant organisms. The book notes that environmental resistance occurs as a side effect of lower-cost manufacturing, as well as widespread antibiotic use in agriculture, citing similar studies from China. While it is easy to point fingers at the developing world's manufacturing processes with suboptimal oversight, ironically, wealthy countries are the beneficiaries of this cost-cutting, which incentivises pharmaceutical firms to manufacture generics at the lowest cost possible.

When discussing the veterinary use of antibiotics in India, the book highlights recent measures undertaken to regulate these practices. On a global scale, veterinary and agricultural antibiotic use (which consumes three-quarters of all antibiotics produced) remains the hidden elephant in the room, even as the more frequently discussed individual doctors' prescribing habits and corporate promotional activities grab public attention more readily.

Ultimately, the book, *A World of Resistance*, presents a diverse array of perspectives collected from various stakeholders in India, which will be useful for policymakers in the country to comprehend the multifaceted nature of AMR. Although the authors describe India as the "ground zero of the growing AMR crisis", several processes that drive AMR in India are common to many other nations, including wealthy ones. AMR is an issue where all countries — wealthy or otherwise, big or small, provider or recipient — have a vital role to play.

The reviewer is a Physician and Gastroenterologist, and Convener, Research Cell of IMA Kerala State

### NEW READS.



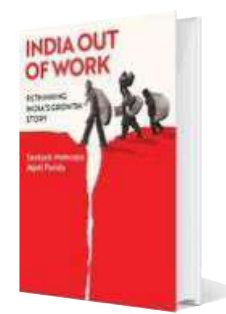
**Title:** The EV Evolution: Then, Now and Next of Electric Vehicles  
**Author:** Anil Sasi  
**Publisher:** Hachette India

The book traces the full arc of electric mobility — from battery-powered vehicles of the 19th century, to the EV resurgence driven by climate urgency and tech breakthroughs



**Title:** Take Me to Your Leader: Perspectives on Your First Alien Encounter  
**Author:** Neil Degrasse Tyson  
**Publisher:** Simon & Schuster

If you've wondered why there are so many UFO sightings, or whether aliens might already be among us, Tyson offers an informed perspective that is both factual and fun



**Title:** India Out of Work: Rethinking India's Growth Story  
**Authors:** Santosh Mehrotra and Jajati Parida  
**Publisher:** Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt Ltd

The authors expose the systemic barriers preventing millions from achieving economic security and upward mobility

## thehindubusinessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

June 29, 2006

#### ADR/GDR rules relaxed for unlisted cos

The Government has announced that unlisted Indian companies would now be allowed to sponsor an issue of American depository receipts (ADRs) or global depository receipts (GDRs) with an overseas depository against the shares held by its shareholders. Under a sponsored ADR/GDR programme, a majority shareholder in a company gets an opportunity to divest a portion of his holding in the overseas market through issuance of ADRs or GDRs.

#### Derivative deals: RBI says banks must make full disclosure

Banks will have to make full disclosure in their balance sheet on their derivative transactions. Besides profit and loss arising out of derivative transactions, the disclosure should include the nature of the financial instruments used in such transactions. The Reserve Bank of India has come out with draft guidelines on derivative and hedge accounting for banks.

#### Suzlon gets shareholder nod to raise ₹5,000 cr

Suzlon Energy Ltd, a wind power company, said that its shareholders have cleared a special resolution enabling the firm to raise up to ₹5,000 crore through the issue of a combination of equity and debt-linked instruments.

### Short take

## Create a safe, supportive environment for doctors

Preetha Reddy

Every Doctors' Day (July 1), it is a privilege to express our gratitude to those who dedicate their lives to healing. But beyond the messages, tributes, and celebrations lies a deeper truth, which is that medicine is built on trust.

India today has more than 13 lakh registered allopathic doctors serving a population of over 1.4 billion people. While national figures continue to improve, healthcare access remains uneven, particularly in rural and underserved regions. For many doctors, each day involves balancing immense demand with limited resources, while remaining steadfast in their commitment to patient care.

The present day is one of a remarkable period of medical progress. Artificial intelligence, genomics, precision medicine, and digital health technologies are expanding what is possible in diagnosis and treatment. Even in an era of extraordinary innovation, patients continue to seek something fundamentally human. They seek reassurance, understanding, and empathy. They look for someone who will listen, explain, and guide them through uncertainty. Technology can strengthen healthcare in countless ways, but it cannot replace the human connection that lies at the heart of healing. Through all this change, trust remains the foundation of healthcare.

Trust encourages patients to speak openly about their concerns. It helps families navigate difficult decisions. It

enables meaningful partnerships between caregivers and those they serve. Most importantly, it creates the confidence that allows healthcare systems to function effectively and compassionately. Strengthening that trust is a shared responsibility.

#### A NATIONAL PRIORITY

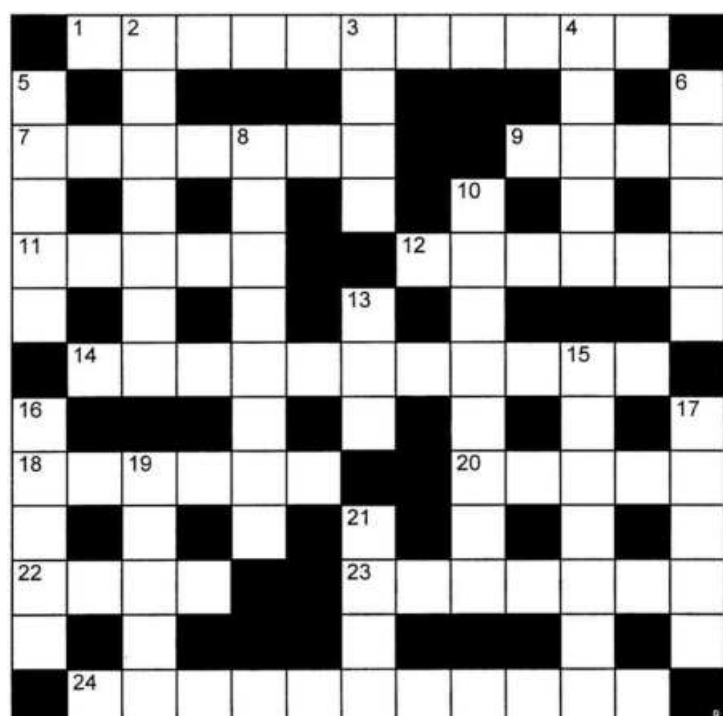
Creating safe and supportive environments for healthcare professionals must remain a national priority. Doctors, like all of us, perform at their best when they feel respected, protected, and valued. As India continues to expand healthcare access and build capacity, we must ensure that those who care for others receive the support they need to sustain their own wellbeing and professional growth. It is important to be mindful that future

generations will choose medicine only when they see it as a profession that is respected, supported, and valued. The way we treat our doctors today will influence the doctors we have tomorrow.

On this Doctors' Day, let us celebrate not only the achievements of our doctors, but also the values they represent which are compassion, integrity, resilience, and service. By respecting and supporting those who care for us, we strengthen not only our healthcare system but also the very fabric of our society. Trust, nurtured with empathy and sustained through partnership, remains one of the most powerful forces in healing.

The writer is Executive Vice Chairperson, Apollo Hospitals

### BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2681



#### EASY

##### ACROSS

- Streams flowing into river (11)
- Need (7)
- Front of ship (4)
- Have a stab at (5)
- Sell from a pack (6)
- Cave formations growing up (11)
- One playing to theatre queue (6)
- Drive one (5)
- Egg-shaped (4)
- Vast (7)
- Broke in speech (11)

##### DOWN

- Ask (7)
- At that time (4)
- Made a mistake (5)
- Boasts (5)
- Dulcet, sugary (5)
- Was abusive (8)
- Wild excitement (8)
- Get old (3)
- Cost (7)
- Head of church foundation (5)
- Lose vital fluid (5)
- Obstinate mark (5)
- Brick support (4)

#### NOT SO EASY

##### ACROSS

- Take tube, stir air and these will flow into larger stream (11)
- Lack twenty-four sheets headed by the Sappers (7)
- Quietly pull boat to front of vessel (4)
- Wild shot at those invited failing to include table-top (5)
- Sell things but soundly work like a cyclist (6)
- It slams gate perhaps on such as are found in caves (11)
- Entertainer of queue puts coach on kerb endlessly (6)
- Drive one to make a pile, including a thousand (5)
- State follows duck but is before fifty where there's cricket (4)
- Very large people found in semi-confusion (7)
- Broke in when cold season didn't begin to put red out (11)

##### DOWN

- Polite invitation to be concerned with a search (7)
- He replaced one in the tin at that time (4)
- Went off course right amidst stampeding deer (5)
- Blusters about being first with clothing of poverty (5)
- In set surroundings we can provide last course (5)
- Last month Denis was perhaps about to have been rude (8)
- Maybe lied about one being in spirit of light-headedness (8)
- To get older, men would begin household set-up (3)
- Former writers go east — but at what cost! (7)
- One over brothers rating both when curtailed (5)
- Apply leeches to the French when in bed (5)
- Bad mark may be got out of satin (5)
- It may hold up the wall or stick out at the seaside (4)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2680

**ACROSS** 1. Buckles 5. Right 8. Comment 9. Piety 10. Mentioned 12. Eat 13. Cocoa 17. Fit 19. Beekeeper 21. Eject 22. Baggage 24. Steed 25. Winners

**DOWN** 1. Become 2. Cements 3. Lie 4. Satin 5. Repudiate 6. Geese 7. Trysts 11. Incubated 14. Expiate 15. Offers 16. Orders 18. These 20. Elbow 23. Gun



## OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

## A key maritime partnership

PM Modi's Seychelles visit strengthens India's trade and security interests in the Western Indian Ocean

Defence and security ties between India and Seychelles got further strengthened during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Indian Ocean archipelago. India's delivery of a patrol vessel and other equipment for the defence force has bolstered Seychelles' capabilities in the maritime domain. India's support helps the country monitor its vast exclusive economic zone (EEZ), secure crucial sea lanes, and counter trans-national crimes. Over the past two decades, India has provided a range of patrol and interceptor vessels and two maritime surveillance aircraft to the Seychelles Defence Force. It also helped in establishing a network of coastal surveillance radars, and deepened development ties with the archipelago, including a special economic package of \$175 million unveiled earlier this year.

As Seychelles President Patrick Herminie acknowledged on Sunday after his talks with Modi, security in the Indian Ocean region remains central to the India-Seychelles relationship. He recognised India's support in hydrography, maritime surveillance, and building up the country's defence capacity. Modi, in turn, pointed to the shared responsibility of ensuring the security, stability and prosperity of the Indian Ocean. India currently provides Seychelles real-time information on threats such as narcotics trafficking, imparts specialised military training, and has helped set up a hydrographic unit to support marine-resource management. Seychelles is a key participant in the Colombo Security Conclave, a regional grouping with an increasingly important role in countering security threats and bolstering regional stability.

While Seychelles has a land mass of only 460 square kilometres, the archipelago has an EEZ of more than 1.3 million square kilometres and abuts many busy sea lines of communication connecting Africa and Asia to the rest of the Indo-Pacific. This enhances its importance as a strategic partner at a time when China is supporting infrastructure projects, increasing control of ports, and stepping up its naval activities across the Indian Ocean in order to project its power. India and its smaller partners across the region will be hard pressed to match Beijing's economic and military heft. Nonetheless, a network of maritime capabilities and security partnerships, backed up by India's expertise in capacity-building and trusted reputation as a development partner, could be the answer for ensuring a free and open Indian Ocean.

## Bengal's new laws need more transparency

The decision of the BJP government in West Bengal to introduce two stringent bills — which dramatically expand the definition of "anti-social activity," allow preventive detention for up to 12 months without trial, and permit the auctioning of an offender's property to compensate for losses — aligns with the new administration's tough stance on law and order. But the government should take care that its approach doesn't shortchange the criminal justice system or due process. This newspaper reported last week that the bills — modelled on similar laws in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra — seek to criminalise a gamut of behaviour that includes violent public protests. It comes after the BJP vowed to improve West Bengal's law and order situation, which, under the previous Trinamool Congress regime, often allowed political colours to seep into administrative decision-making.

So far, so good. But the broad language of the bills runs the risk of criminalising dissent and genuine civic discontent. Two provisions stand out — one that allows a person to be held in detention without bail for a maximum of 12 months and another that proposes one or multiple three-member advisory boards, each headed by a serving or retired high court judge and two people qualified to be employed as high court judges, to review applications filed by the detainees. If the bills pass and the new law does not allow a lawyer to represent a detainee before a board unless permitted and keeps the proceedings confidential, it will only make the legal process opaque and unaccountable. Similar provisions in Tamil Nadu and UP have already attracted criticism for administrative overreach. The Bengal government must respect its impressive mandate and improve law and order without politicising the process. Bengal deserves better policing, freedom from local strongmen and eradication of sand and land mafias. But it also deserves transparency.

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



## A do-or-die moment for regional parties

Assembly polls in UP, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Manipur, and Goa next year will decide the political fate of many regional parties, leaders, and political families

The beauty of India's democracy is that it always moves from one election to the other, as if it is a relay race. For the BJP, the heady feeling of a landslide victory in West Bengal must not have subsided yet. Nevertheless, it has started laying the groundwork for the coming assembly polls. Elections in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Manipur, and Goa next year will decide the political fate of many regional parties, leaders, and political families.

The contest between the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the BJP-led alliance in Uttar Pradesh would be quite interesting to watch. SP supremo Akhilesh Yadav is leaving no stone unturned to win the elections. He knows that any regional party that loses three elections in a row can't hold its flock together. After winning 37 seats in the Lok Sabha elections his morale is high. But the path ahead isn't exactly littered with

roses. He's pitted against a towering political rival, Yogi Adityanath. Along with establishing a successful law and order system, Adityanath enjoys great traction among the majority voters. A senior member of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cabinet, Rajnath Singh, too comes from this state. The BJP would like to deploy its political prowess to the fullest.

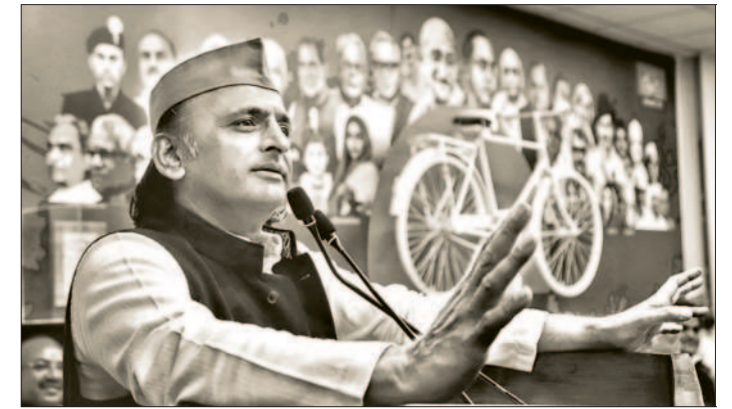
For Mayawati, too, next year would be a decisive battle. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has been in the doldrums after its landslide win in the 2007 assembly polls. Right now, it has zero representation in the Lok Sabha and just one representative in the UP assembly, it has just one representative. To attract the younger generation, she has fielded her nephew, Akash Anand, as her deputy. If the experiment fails, she'll face a double whammy. She will have to face defeat and allegations of nepotism.

The Badals in Punjab suffer the same political fate. Since losing power in 2017 their vote share is constantly diminishing. Due to the old age of the Party supremo Parkash Singh Badal (he died in 2023), the Shiromani Akali Dal's command went to his son, Sukhbir. During those days, political parties were in the process of corporatisation. Instead of launching movements and working to strengthen and defend regional identity, they turned parties into fiefdoms for personal gain. Sukhbir was accused of amassing untold

wealth by controlling the commercial vehicle fleet, regional media houses, and vast tracts of land. In 2015, an incident of desecration of the *Guru Granth Sahib* surfaced, and that led the Shiromani Akali Dal on a path of political decline. This was a big blow to their political fortunes.

During Sukhbir's reign, the drug trade in Punjab broke all records. A powerful minister of the Punjab government was accused of being involved in the drug trade. The resentment was visible in films such as *Uda Punjab*. The Aam Admi Party (AAP) made it an election issue and won 20 seats, pushing the Shiromani Akali Dal to an embarrassing third spot. In the 2022 assembly elections, the AAP won 92 out of 117 seats and formed the government. This was the first time that the Akali Dal shrank to just three seats. Even Parkash Singh Badal and Sukhbir lost their seats. The general elections in 2024 proved to be even more disastrous. The Akali Dal could win just one seat.

The Akali Dal split from the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance during the farmers' protest. The BJP and the Akalis remain political rivals. This time, the BJP has announced that it will fight the Punjab elections on its own. This is the reason many seats will witness a four cornered fight. For the Congress, the road isn't easy. Till 2022, it was ruling the province. For the



The contest between the Samajwadi Party and the BJP-led alliance in Uttar Pradesh will be quite interesting to watch.

AAP, it's a fight for survival. After losing Delhi, it's the only place they are in power. The party is facing headwinds due to anti-incumbency and the chief minister (CM) Bhagwant Mann facing alarming allegations of sacrilege.

In Uttarakhand, the BJP has been in power since 2017. A young Pushkar Singh Dhami is in the saddle as CM. He's known to take quick and decisive actions. The BJP is facing internal disensions, but party president Nitin Nabin has made a public declaration that the elections would be fought under the leadership of Pushkar Singh Dhami. It has had a positive impact on the workers. The BJP looks confident of winning the elections under Dhami's stewardship.

For the Congress, even Uttarakhand would be a tough test. The party has tried to rejuvenate demoralised workers by making firebrand leader Ganesh Goyal the state unit chief. But senior leaders such as Harish Rawat keep creating hurdles for him. Will Rahul Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge be able to take decisive action like the BJP?

The situation in Manipur and Goa is quite interesting. It doesn't matter who forms the government in the state, a handful of powerful families keep calling the shots. They leave no stone

turned to maintain their control. At times, while living under the same roof, husband and wife fought and won on tickets from opposing parties. In these states, the voter numbers are very low, which helps the political parties keep their flock under tight control.

There's no respite in sight from this phenomenon in the coming elections. However, with the fall of Tejashwi Yadav, Mamata Banerjee, MK Stalin, Uddhav Thackeray, Sukhbir Singh Badal and Sharad Pawar, can we safely say that the days of family-run political parties are over and they will be forced into a merciless bargain at the national level? We will get a clear answer in Lucknow. If Akhilesh Yadav wins the assembly elections, he would become a beacon of hope for family-run parties. If he fails, then the chances of a powerful alliance led by the Congress taking on the BJP alliance are bright.

This is the reason every party is ready to do anything to win the coming elections. We should brace ourselves for new surprises and some ugly incidents. The last few elections are a testimony to this fact.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal

## Resting at Stonewall Inn on the path to LGBT rights

Like the song that goes, "If you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair," I often tell my friends, half-jokingly, "If you are coming to New York, do three things: Meet Hasan Mujtaba, visit the Strand Book Store — the legendary bookstore of new, used, and rare books — and see the Stonewall Inn."

For me, the Stonewall Inn is a pilgrimage, a rainbow of history, and the Mecca of the gay liberation movement, where even straight people are warmly welcomed. It is where it all happened.

Many historians of the LGBTQIA+ movement recount that during the uprising at the Stonewall Inn, a defiant act by the legendary drag queen Marsha P Johnson became a symbol of resistance. The police raid on the bar on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village ignited a movement that changed not only the days and nights of New York's LGBTQIA+ community but transformed the struggle for gay rights across the world.

It was June 28, 1969, around 1:20 am. The police stormed both the front premises and the back room. What followed on Christopher Street and the adjoining streets and sidewalks became one of the most significant uprisings of modern times.

Yet I knew very little about Stonewall's history before I set foot in Chicago.

There, I first met my friend Ifi Nasim — poet, short-story writer, and celebrated member of the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame — on the evening of April 30, 1999, at his apartment overlooking Lake Michigan, which he fondly called "the mirror of God".

He took me to the balcony of his apartment on the 40th floor. Gazing at the vast expanse of the lake, he said, "You have come to America. If, while being in America, you shut your mouth and don't live free, then there is no point in coming to America."

Meeting Ifi that evening was a culture shock. Though I had already read and reviewed his Urdu poetry collection, *Narman*, in my magazine, *Newsline*, meeting him in person was an altogether different experience. His poetry had shocked many literary circles in Pakistan and among Pakistanis abroad because of its boldness, honesty, and fearless celebration of identity.

One of his poems remains etched in my memory:

*The first stone came from him  
Who slept beside me last night.  
The second came from one like me,  
But afraid of people.  
The third came from one  
I had refused to sleep with.  
Another came from a mosque,  
Whose Imam's fourth wife  
Was younger than his daughter.  
One came from a church  
Whose priest had no sexuality.  
A passerby threw one  
Because it was his habit.  
A priest of a temple threw one too,  
Accepting gifts from every side.  
After that I lost consciousness.  
And afterward,  
No stone had anyone's name written on it.  
Such was the bold, fearless, and searing  
poetry of Ifi Nasim.*

Ifi was blessed with the wit and charm typical of the people of Lyallpur — now Faisalabad. Men like him are born only once in centu-

ries in societies like Pakistan's, and, indeed, in conservative societies across the world.

It was Ifi who first showed me around the Stonewall Inn, Greenwich Village, and the East and West Villages. He introduced me to LGBTQIA+ culture, lifestyle, and lingo. He took me to places such as The Monster and other gay and lesbian bars, opening for me an entirely new world of freedom, identity, and community. He enlightened me about mainstream American as well as South Asian gay liberation movements. He founded Sangat, a South Asian LGBTQ support network that became a source of strength and solidarity for many immigrants who had fled persecution in their homelands.

Ifi had come to America in 1973, escaping the suffocating social expectations imposed upon him. He met the great American poet, Allen Ginsberg, who himself had drawn inspiration from Walt Whitman, whose spirit still seems to linger through the streets of Greenwich Village.

Years later, I dedicated my own poem, *Fifth Avenue*, to Ginsberg. Along with my friends, exiled journalists Zafaryab Ahmed and Haider Rizvi, I spent countless evenings in bars and cafés in Manhattan, discussing poetry, politics, exile, and freedom.

Every November, Ifi would come to New York, where his beloved "girlies," as he affectionately called them, would throw grand parties in his honour. There would be music, laughter, drag performances, and joyous celebrations of life itself. Those gatherings were not merely parties; they were affirmations of love, friendship, courage, and camaraderie. Poetry, dance, humour, and music blended into nights that stretched toward Christmas. Ifi passed away in July 2011, but his spirit, his poetry, and his unwavering commitment to love and liberation continue to inspire generations.

Since then, the Stonewall Inn has become my pilgrimage and my favorite place to linger. A walk through Christopher Street and along the Hudson is, for me, not merely a walk to freedom; it is the birthplace of much of my poetry.

What an extraordinary coincidence that, in *Fifth Avenue*, I used the word "grapevine," only to discover later that the jukebox inside the Stonewall Inn was playing Marvin Gaye's famous song, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, on the night the police raided the bar.

At the entrance of the Stonewall Inn hangs a sign that reads: "This is a raided premises by the New York Police Department," a stark reminder of the police raid that sparked the modern day LGBTQIA+ rights movement.

That is what my friend and I remembered when we witnessed the most grim and somber atmosphere outside and inside the Stonewall Inn after the attack on the gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in June 2016. Tears flowed freely as flowers, notes, and candles were placed in vigil for the victims. Yet grief soon transformed into resilience and solidarity. Within days, nearly two million people joined the New York LGBTQIA+ Pride March 2016, walking from Fifth Avenue through Christopher Street and culminating at the Hudson River Piers — a powerful affirmation that love and freedom would endure despite hatred and violence.

Hasan Mujtaba is a poet, journalist, and human rights defender. The views expressed are personal

{ BHUPENDER YADAV } MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT, FORESTS, AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Community involvement is our key focus, and we are looking into strengthening local communities

On tiger relocation efforts across various locations in the country, including Kuno and Mukundra, failing due to inadequate community participation



## Play. It prepares us for learning and life

There are familiar sounds that echo across every childhood — the thud of a ball on dusty grounds, the laughter of children racing through narrow lanes, the rhythm of skipping ropes, marbles, songs and stories. Children making sense of the world through play is one of the earliest ways in which learning begins.

I recall how, as a young boy, I spent hours playing under the watchful eye of my coach. He would place a one-rupee coin on the stumps and challenge the bowlers to get me out. If they managed, they got the coin; if I stayed unbeaten, it was mine. Those coins remain my most treasured possession — they taught me focus, perseverance, and the determination to keep improving.

Long before scoreboards, stadiums, and international cricket shaped my life, I learnt through play. I learnt teamwork before I understood leadership. I learnt resilience by losing games and built confidence by trying again. Like millions of children around the world, I discovered that play was not merely recreation. It was preparation for life itself.

Today, through my association with UNICEF, I believe this message is more important than ever. Across the world, childhood is changing. Open spaces are shrinking. With academic pursuits and time spent online, the space and opportunity for children to play freely, imagine fearlessly, and interact meaningfully are reducing.

Neuroscience and the science of learning affirm the same truth: When children play, they learn for life. Through play, they build language, strengthen attention, develop self-regulation, practise problem-solving and learn to relate to others. This shapes readiness for school, participation in classrooms and the ability to learn.

The first eight years of life are among the most important in human development. During these years, the brain develops more rapidly than at any other stage of life. Research referenced in the WHO-UNICEF Nurturing Care Framework suggests that over 85% of brain development occurs before the age of six.

Early years shape the foundations of physical health, emotional security, language, curiosity, confidence and social understanding. They establish the basis for foundational learning: the ability to listen, communicate,

focus attention, remember, reason and engage meaningfully in early literacy and numeracy.

India's National Education Policy 2020 recognises the importance of play-based learning for young children. This is an important shift in emphasis, making play central to foundational learning in *anganwadi* and early grades. Classrooms are increasingly becoming spaces for joyful learning, where children learn by doing, exploring, and playing.

Addition is fun when taught as play with marbles; language and confidence through role play and shapes and colours through the immediate world around them.

Songs, stories and movement bring lessons to life, transforming classrooms into vibrant spaces filled with curiosity, participation and engaged young minds.

Playful learning continues beyond school, at home, on the streets, in the playground and does not require expensive toys or elaborate infrastructure. A mother singing local lullabies while feeding her child. A grandfather telling stories under a tree. Siblings inventing games with household objects. A father walking with his child and pointing out birds, colours and sounds. Local stories, songs, games and cultural activities are all opportunities for learning. In these "ordinary" moments, children build vocabulary, attention, memory, imagination and relationships — the very foundations on which later learning depends.

If we want children to thrive, play cannot remain optional. It has to be protected, promoted and made a part of every child's life — at home and in school making it everyone's responsibility.

We must recognise childhood for what it is — a joyous and precious stage that needs care, protection and possibility. As someone whose life was profoundly shaped through sport and play, I know its power first-hand. Let's all make a conscious choice: to give children the time, space and reassurance to play, explore and simply be children. In doing so, we do more than preserve childhood; we help build a healthier, happier, and hopeful future for all.

Sachin Tendulkar is UNICEF regional ambassador for South Asia. The views expressed are personal

# Opinion

MONDAY, JUNE 29, 2026



## MARITIME SECURITY

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

“We believe the Indian Ocean is our shared home. Its security, sustainability, and prosperity are our shared responsibility”

## Vindication, not closure

The legal review has exonerated HDFC Bank, but governance is a continuing responsibility

**T**HE LEGAL FIRMS appointed by HDFC Bank to examine allegations made by its former part-time chairman, Atanu Chakraborty, have found no evidence to support his claims. Chakraborty had resigned abruptly on March 18, saying that “certain practices and happenings within the bank are not in congruence with my personal values and ethics”, without explaining what those practices were. The legal review concludes that official records do not substantiate either his statement or its implications. It notes that Chakraborty had opportunities to place his concerns on record but apparently chose not to do so. Board minutes, committee papers, and other documented communications contain no evidence supporting the observations he later made in public. Nor did he raise some of the specific issues at board or committee meetings before stepping down. On the material examined, the legal firms found no basis for his allegations.

That should provide considerable relief to HDFC Bank. The controversy had cast a shadow over the country’s second largest lender at a sensitive time, with its succession process under way. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had already said it saw no material governance concerns. The independent legal review reinforces that position and should help restore investor confidence. Chakraborty has since said he wanted “introspection, not a compliance exercise”. That may well have been his intention. But once serious questions about governance enter the public domain, they cannot remain matters of personal interpretation. They require objective examination. In that sense, the bank was right to commission an external legal review. Equally, the findings should help remove the uncertainty that has surrounded the lender for several months and allow its board to proceed with important decisions, including leadership succession.

Even so, the report should not be treated as the final word on governance at HDFC Bank. It addresses the former chairman’s allegations; it does not automatically settle every other issue that has surfaced. Most recently, the bank’s own internal audit found that a state-run organisation had been offered a higher rate on deposits than normally permitted, with the difference allegedly compensated through other payments. The bank has maintained that these were established business practices. Separately, it has in the past faced regulatory action, including the RBI’s 2020 restrictions on new digital banking initiatives and credit card sourcing, while the fallout from the mis-selling of AT1 bonds also dented its reputation. None of these episodes, viewed individually, establishes systemic governance failure. Together, however, they suggest that governance and compliance deserve continued attention rather than complacency.

The distinction is important. A legal review examines whether specific allegations are supported by evidence. Good governance is a broader and continuing obligation. It encompasses board oversight, internal controls, disclosure standards, risk management, and a culture that encourages concerns to be raised before they become controversies. India’s banking sector has, over the years, learnt that even well-managed institutions are not immune to lapses. The lesson for HDFC Bank is therefore not simply that it has emerged with a clean chit in this instance. It is that governance must remain an ongoing priority. The legal review should remove a cloud over the bank and restore confidence in its immediate leadership transition. But investor trust is earned over time through consistent adherence to both the letter and the spirit of sound governance. That, ultimately, is the standard against which every leading financial institution should be judged.

## Stick or twist? It's time to change course

**BECAUSE ART** is inherently subjective, events like the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity are notoriously unpredictable and should not define the true worth of a country’s creative output.

That is an alluring thought to hold on to when the sky is clear, but reality demands some soul-searching. The thing is, the Indian contingent has never had it so bad at the Palais des Festivals — from 47 medals in 2022 to 5 Lions (2 Silver, 3 Bronze, 0 Gold) in 2026 — it’s almost a 90% drop. Stack that against the number of submissions this year — 696 in total — the conversion rate is less than 1%.

In large part, the industry would like to brush it off as a “wake-up call” rather than an outright crisis of creativity. The modest tally reflects tightening agency budgets and stricter global judging standards rather than a sudden loss of talent — that’s the common refrain. But one look at India’s winning categories or those in which its entries were passed over and a disconnect between the global festival circuit’s demands and the domestic adfest agenda becomes obvious. The jury in almost every category at Cannes Lions 2026 prioritised business outcomes, sustainable practices, and technological integration over isolated, emotional narrative arcs. India’s historical reliance on emotional storytelling and traditional craft fell woefully short when compared to global campaigns that merged technology, data, and human stories without a hitch.

India’s wins this year were confined to audio/radio (2 Silver), health and wellness (1 Silver, 1 Bronze), and film craft (1 Bronze), proving that narrative-led storytelling continues to be the primary weapon in its arsenal. In the highly competitive categories of Creative Strategy, Media and Direct, our agencies managed to secure key shortlists but failed to convert them on the awards stage.

Here’s the missing piece: “Connection” and “measurable results” were the keywords this season.

Take the Creative Business Transformation Grand Prix Winning Ad, “The Wedding Rice” by McCann Athens for Wikifarm. The backstory is that roughly 30% of Greek farmers’ rice production goes waste because it fails to meet commercial standards. The agency packaged this inedible rice specifically for the local wedding tradition of throwing rice at newlywed couples and sold them directly to wedding planners. The initiative drove 110% more traffic to Wikifarm’s platform, and sold over 3 tonnes in the first week of release, said the brand.

Jury President Gugu Mthembu, who is also chief marketing officer at Telkom, South Africa, said the creativity lay in the strategy’s disarming simplicity — no new tech infrastructure, no complex strategy, or significant go-to-market investment.

Now consider the Media Grand Prix winner, “Build Your Own Super Bowl Commercial”, by Special for Uber Eats. It was built as an in-app experience and invited users to build their own ads by mixing and matching from over a thousand clips and 36 hours of celebrity footage just as they might put together a food order. Over 325,000 people participated, spending a combined 800,000 minutes. Each user-created film unlocked customised deals and discounts for game day.

At one stroke the campaign did two things. It turned another app into a destination for both entertainment and transaction and the regular viewers into paying customers. The brand’s presentation claimed that the exercise helped Uber Eats achieve its best-ever Super Bowl sales — increasing revenue by \$36 million and driving 3.7 million new app visits. In both these cases, the technology was invisible, acting merely as infrastructure to elevate an idea. And the ads did what they were meant to do — capture attention, build awareness, and drive profitable action.

The takeaway is clear: Capturing raw consumer attention will not cut it; global brands and agencies are focusing on community-driven engagement and peer-to-peer connection. So, it’s time to ditch the top-down, lecture-style, television-first strategy that has been the ad industry’s masterplan till now and start treating creators and tech tools as the centrepiece of the media plan rather than an afterthought.

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## GROWTH PROSPECTS

HOUSEHOLD CONSUMPTION SHARE OF GDP STILL LOW; PROMISES TO BOOST DOMESTIC DEMAND LACK CREDIBILITY

# China’s failed rebalancing

**C**HINA’S EFFORTS TO rebalance its economy have been an abject failure. Nearly two decades after former Premier Wen Jiabao bemoaned the Chinese economy’s excessive dependence on investment- and export-led growth, the problem has gone from bad to worse. The lack of meaningful consumer-led rebalancing implies increased reliance on these time-worn sources of economic activity, raising critical questions for China and the rest of the world.

As the first Western economist to stress China’s perspective on the need for such rebalancing, I am especially disappointed to write these words. I remember sitting in a Beijing meeting room in March 2007, watching Wen’s press conference following the conclusion of the National People’s Congress. There was a small group of us in attendance, including some senior Chinese officials, when Wen uttered his now-famous critique of China’s economic structure. While seemingly strong on the surface, he cautioned, the economy was becoming increasingly “unstable, unbalanced, uncoordinated, and unsustainable”.

There was an audible gasp from the Chinese officials present in the room, who translated the premier’s remarks and underscored their significance, presaging a vigorous debate in the country’s policy community. I went back to my hotel room and wrote my first piece on China’s rebalancing imperative, which became the basis for my testimony before the US Senate Finance Committee nearly two weeks later.

I stressed China’s newfound sense of urgency to shift its development model from investment and exports to consumer-led growth. I underscored the other structural changes this shift would entail: moving from manufacturing to services, and from excess saving to saving absorption, which would lower the current-account surplus and fund a

**STEPHEN S ROACH**

Faculty member at Yale University and former Chairman of Morgan Stanley Asia



larger social safety net. I took Wen’s “four uns”, as I later dubbed them, as an important signal from the Chinese leadership of its readiness to do what was necessary to rebalance the economy. I was convinced that it was a matter of when, not if.

But it’s high time to face reality. China’s retail sales fell 0.6% year-on-year in May 2026, an unexpected drop following an anaemic 0.2% increase in April, and the first monthly decline in three and a half years. Meanwhile, the latest reading of household consumption as a share of GDP is just 39.9% — virtually identical to the 2005 level (39.8%), which Wen had in hand when lamenting the “four uns” in early 2007. Given that the latest reading is from 2024, and that Chinese consumption showed continued weakness in 2025 and early 2026, there is good reason to believe that the economy’s current proportion of consumption has fallen below Wen’s 2005 benchmark.

Several explanations for this outcome have been put forward: a protracted property crisis, the low share of household income, post-Covid scarring, demographic shifts, and high youth unemployment. My favourite explanation has long been an inadequate social safety net, which boosts fear-driven precautionary saving, that, in turn, inhibits

discretionary consumption. While all these factors could very well be at work, excess precautionary saving is, in my view, the most important longer-term structural impediment to Chinese consumer demand.

Whatever the explanation, these developments have not gone unnoticed by senior Chinese leaders. President Xi Jinping recently emphasised the strategic importance of boosting domestic demand, which Premier Li Qiang’s March 2026 “work report” also stressed. Unfortunately, this has been trotted out as a priority so often over the past two decades that it has lost all credibility. While it is encouraging that China’s State Council recently relaxed some hukou restrictions, making migrant workers’ access to social insurance more portable, much

more is needed to reduce household insecurity and end the cycle of over-promising and underdelivering.

Some dismiss the failure of China’s consumer-led rebalancing as a statistical mirage, especially because it purportedly excludes government support for “social transfers in kind” like education, health care, cultural amenities, and subsidised food. While there may be some technical validity to this claim, it does not change the bottom line: household consumption as a share of

**By some estimates, China’s share of manufacturing globally (in terms of value added) will rise from around 30% today to 45% by 2030. The rest of the world is unlikely to be receptive to such an outcome**

# How India can navigate a turbulent world



**NIRVIKAR SINGH**

Professor of Economics, University of California, Santa Cruz

In the abstract, the rule is simple: diversify globally, identify opportunities for growth, and boost savings and investment. But devil is always in the details

**THE US-ISRAEL WAR** on Iran has been, in some ways, the last nail in the coffin of the post-World War II global order. It has exposed the limits of US power, changed expectations regarding global energy markets, and emphasised to all countries that the old rules pertaining to international economic and security matters are no longer to be relied upon. Of course, the parallel deterioration in US institutions is also a concern, since this decline reduces the chance that the US will reverse course in its global role. China has continued to benefit from the decline in the quality of US political leadership, both in absolute terms and in comparison to the US. Meanwhile, it continues its rapid economic advance.

Like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan before it, China’s growth was enabled by the US-led global order, but, barring a complete breakdown in the system, it no longer needs the US in that kind of leadership role to thrive. Actions like the closing of USAID and withdrawal from the World Health Organization are further signals of US retreat from moral leadership. In this world, the Canadian prime minister’s invocation of the idea of “middle powers” — a class of nations that can collectively pursue stability and progress — is useful. As the world becomes more uncertain, diversification of political and economic ties is more valuable. Individual choices can be pointers to, and precursors of, national decisions. As the US becomes less

hospitable to foreign students, Indians seeking higher education are looking more to countries like Germany, while India’s Chief Economic Advisor uses Germany’s clusters of focused, export-oriented mid-sized firms (the *Mittelstand*) as an aspirational model for India. Attracting more German investment to India could round out these connections.

Diversification of ties with other countries makes sense in a world of greater uncertainty. But it is a defensive strategy. A strategy for mitigating risks also has to pay attention to rewards. Countries like Germany, Japan, and South Korea are rich potential sources of knowhow in a range of technologies. While we think of countries like these as manufacturing powerhouses, manufacturing does not succeed in isolation. Successful manufacturers develop expertise in supply chain management, including logistics, and in marketing to and serving customers. The list of countries that can be sources of the expertise that India needs has grown dramatically over the past few decades, even as China has dominated the headlines. One can also note that the drivers of demand are easy to see, and they will determine which markets grow. These drivers are climate change, ageing popu-

lations, increased availability and analysis of information, and rising discretionary incomes that will be spent on leisure activities, including those which involve creative expression and play.

Several of the drivers of the world economy increase the demand for capital. The destruction caused by recent wars will also need capital for rebuilding. In recent decades, the global cost of capital has been unusually low, providing an opportunity to ramp up productive investment. Some of that happened in India at the turn of the century, but not enough, and some of the additional investment in India was unproductive, due to weak financial intermediation. Unfortunately, capital is going to be costlier going forward, and this will be an additional challenge for India’s future growth.

The domestic savings rate has fallen from its peak, and while the “quality” of investment, as emphasised in a recent Economic Survey, is important, India will need more domestic saving as the competition for global capital increases. The country’s institutions for financial intermediation need serious policy attention. This includes legal and judicial institutions that affect commercial contracting, as well as tax policies and how they are applied.

In the abstract, how to deal with a

world of increased turbulence and even disorder is simple: diversify globally, identify opportunities for growth, and boost savings and investment. The devil is always in the details. And it is tempting for policymakers to try to micromanage those details. Such micromanagement rarely works, if ever. But policymakers can make strategic choices, and put rules in place to facilitate private sector decisions that flow in the direction of those choices. Doing so requires policymakers to balance independence from and cooperation with private sector decision-makers — a balance that Peter Evans, after studying the cases of Brazil, India, and South Korea, labelled “embedded autonomy”.

The US has had its own version of embedded autonomy as it has grown, but the past few years have seen a rapid descent into crony capitalism. That kind of descent is always a danger. Checks on that possibility come from political competition and competition for investment funds. For India, better financial intermediation and political decentralisation down to the level of the states can strengthen these kinds of competition. Openness to trade and investment also support competition. India — at the national and state levels — has so many places it can improve its economic policy framework and detailed policy design that, along with strategic adjustments at the national level, it can thrive amidst turbulence.

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Defections now a default currency

Apropos of “Democracy’s missing voice” (FE, June 27), defections and backroom mergers have become the default political currency in India today. The real casualty is not any single party but the voter’s faith that their mandate will be honoured. Constitutional provisions like the Tenth Schedule were meant to deter this, yet

legislators switch sides with remarkable ease, usually shielded by numbers and timing. The Election Commission needs clearer timelines for disqualification proceedings, and courts must prioritise such cases rather than letting them drag beyond electoral cycles. Stronger internal party democracy could also reduce the conditions that make defection attractive in the first place. Voters deserve a system where the

representative they elect remains accountable to them.

—A Myilsami, Coimbatore

### Elder care and empathy

Apropos of “Elder care is not a silver mine” (FE, June 27), the younger generations may not be inclined to ensure affordable, compassionate, and accessible care to senior citizens. As a result, the role of private homes for elders is important although such commercialisation has its own lapses

as profit motive outweighs empathy and quality of care. Governments should keep tabs on elder care and regulate private businesses to prevent exploitation. Strong public health care, effective regulation, and community support are essential for elders. Elder care should be based on compassion, not commercial considerations alone.

—NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi



## Editor's TAKE

### Friendship renewed, strategy deepened

Modi's visit to Seychelles reaffirms India's resolve to anchor itself as Seychelles' trusted partner in the Indian Ocean

Seychelles marked fifty years of independence even as both nations marked fifty years of diplomatic relations established in 1976. Modi's last visit, in 2015, had set the template for India's outreach to Indian Ocean island states; this return – only the second by an Indian prime minister since 1981 – signalled that it has moved from a foreign-policy footnote to a recurring engagement, even if the eleven-year gap leaves room for more frequent high-level contact going forward.

The highlights were unusually rich for a National Day visit. Modi stood as Guest of Honour at the Golden Jubilee parade, where an Indian Armed Forces contingent marched alongside Seychellois troops and two Indian Navy warships anchored offshore – a quiet but pointed reminder of Delhi's naval reach. More significant was the substance behind the ceremony: Modi became the first Indian prime minister to address Seychelles' National Assembly, a gesture that elevated a transactional partnership into something closer to a parliamentary kinship between the world's largest democracy and one of the Indian Ocean's smallest.

Modi handed over the Made-in-India fast patrol vessel PS Lepswar to the Seychelles Coast Guard, along with ambulances, utility vehicles and laser radial boats meant to strengthen surveillance of an exclusive economic zone roughly 1.3 million square kilometres in size. This builds on years of quieter support – Dornier surveillance aircraft, a coastal radar network – and points to a partnership measured less in declarations than in delivered capability, an increasingly important currency in a region where promises often outpace performance. The real architecture, though, was laid earlier this year.

President Herminie's February state visit to India produced the SESEL Joint Vision framework, seven memoranda covering maritime security, digital cooperation, the blue economy and education, and a \$175 million package – a \$125 million rupee line of credit plus \$50 million in grants. This visit was less about fresh announcements than about reviewing implementation: a Seychelles Hydrographic Unit taking shape with Indian assistance, and a planned joint hydrography consultation later this year, suggest the relationship is shifting from pledges to project management. Strategically, the visit fits within Vision MAHASAGAR, India's evolving Indian Ocean doctrine, which treats Seychelles as a sentinel guarding sea lanes connecting the Gulf, East Africa and South Asia. That the visit overlapped with Seychelles' own commemorations of fifty years of ties with China is a useful reminder: India's edge will rest on consistency and follow-through rather than sentiment alone.

Ceremony aside, is this: the visit's true worth will be judged by whether the hydrographic unit, the credit line and the promised joint exercises actually materialise. For Seychelles, India offers an unusually equal partnership for an island nation of barely 120,000 people. For India, sustaining that goodwill is the price of credibility as an Indian Ocean power. Fifty years on, the relationship has matured past symbolism – what it needs now is patient, unglamorous follow-through.

## Leaders come and go, institutions endure

Frequent changes at the top undoubtedly create uncertainty and can complicate long-term policymaking. But they may also reflect a political system in which leaders remain answerable to Parliament and their own party rather than insulated by fixed terms or personal mandates



**BHOPINDER SINGH**

Six Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom have left office in the last ten years (2016-2026). Only one-Rishi Sunak-departed as a result of electoral defeat. The other five-David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and now Keir Starmer-left office primarily due to internal party pressure, perceived failure to deliver, or loss of parliamentary confidence. Many observers have prematurely interpreted this phenomenon-the "revolving door" at 10 Downing Street-as evidence of institutional decline or systemic instability within British democracy. But does such turnover necessarily produce persistent policy paralysis? Does it automatically indicate weak leadership legitimacy or strategic drift?

While frequent leadership change can certainly create short-term uncertainty, policy discontinuity, and even public fatigue, it would be an overstatement to assume that the United Kingdom is uniquely unstable in this respect. Other advanced parliamentary democracies with similarly episodic leadership turnover-such as Japan, Australia, and Belgium-have not experienced existential threats to democratic continuity or governance itself. Conversely, countries with comparatively stable leadership tenures can still suffer democratic erosion if the institutions responsible for scrutinising executive power weaken over time. Stability in leadership, therefore, is not synonymous with democratic health.

An alternative interpretation is that frequent leadership change may reflect a form of internal democratic responsiveness rather than systemic breakdown. In the UK context, it can be seen as an expression of robust parliamentary control over the executive. Leaders can be removed swiftly when they lose the confidence of their party or Parliament, allowing for rapid correction of perceived governance failures. This mechanism avoids prolonged dysfunction and reduces the risk of entrenched ineffective leadership. Unlike systems where leadership change requires fixed electoral cycles or extraordinary constitutional procedures, the Westminster model enables relatively immediate adjustment when political consensus collapses.

Crucially, this form of accountability can remove failing leadership without destabilising the state itself. It does not require constitutional rupture, military intervention, or prolonged administrative paralysis. Instead, it operates through established parliamentary conventions, preserving continuity in governance even as individuals at the top change. In this sense, accountability becomes real-time rather than episodic, discouraging complacency and reinforcing per-



formance-based legitimacy. Moreover, the British political system structurally discourages long-standing personality cults and hereditary political dominance. Leadership is not derived from personal mandate alone but is continuously contingent on parliamentary support. While charismatic leaders certainly exist, their authority remains institutionally constrained. The electorate chooses a Parliament, not a Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister serves only so long as they command the confidence of the House of Commons. This principle is often summarised in the constitutional logic that the executive is accountable to the legislature rather than directly insulated by a fixed term.

formance-based legitimacy.

Moreover, the British political system structurally discourages long-standing personality cults and hereditary political dominance. Leadership is not derived from personal mandate alone but is continuously contingent on parliamentary support. While charismatic leaders certainly exist, their authority remains institutionally constrained. The electorate chooses a Parliament, not a Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister serves only so long as they command the confidence of the House of Commons. This principle is often summarised in the constitutional logic that the executive is accountable to the legislature rather than directly insulated by a fixed term.

As Winston Churchill famously observed, "The Prime Minister is the servant, not the master, of the House of Commons." This principle is not merely rhetorical; it is embedded in the operational logic of the system. Churchill himself became Prime Minister in 1940 without a general election following the resignation of Neville Chamberlain, and he later made way for Anthony Eden in 1955, again without a direct electoral contest for the premiership. These transitions established a core tenet of Westminster governance: leadership may change when parliamentary confidence shifts, but the continuity of the state remains intact, and electoral legitimacy resides in the legislature rather than the individual officeholder.

Within this framework, leadership transitions are often treated as constitutional normality rather than political rupture. This helps explain why figures such as Keir Starmer could frame resignation as an acceptance of parliamentary judgment rather than a personal or ideological defeat. As he noted in his resignation speech: "My party has asked whether I am best placed to lead us into the next general election. I have heard the answer of my parliamentary party to that question, and I accept that answer with good grace." This reflects a political culture

in which leadership change is institutionalised rather than personalised, and where resignation is often interpreted as procedural rather than adversarial. Similarly, the post-office trajectories of former prime ministers illustrate a relatively non-confrontational political culture. David Cameron briefly returned as Foreign Secretary under Rishi Sunak. Theresa May now serves in the House of Lords as a senior stateswoman. Boris Johnson remains an active public commentator. Liz Truss participates in political discourse outside formal office. Rishi Sunak continues as a Member of Parliament while engaging in private-sector advisory roles. While disagreements certainly persist, there is comparatively limited evidence of prolonged factional rupture or personalised political vendettas following departure from office.

However, frequent turnover is not without cost. Repeated leadership changes can lead to policy inconsistency, disruption in long-term planning, and uncertainty among international partners and domestic stakeholders. Governments are ultimately responsible for decisions, and effective decision-making often requires continuity, coherence, and time. Excessive volatility at the top may therefore undermine strategic clarity, even if institutional stability remains intact.

At the same time, there is a countervailing temptation to prioritise continuity at the expense of responsiveness, potentially weakening democratic accountability. The challenge lies in balancing stability with adaptability. As Churchill also famously remarked, "Democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." This acknowledgment captures the inherent imperfections of democratic systems, including those that permit frequent leadership turnover.

Ultimately, the experience of the "revolving door" at 10 Downing Street underscores a fundamental feature of the Westminster system: leaders are temporary, but institutions endure.

The writer is a former Lieutenant Governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry, and a military veteran;

## PIC TALK



A man and a monkey rest side by side on a hot summer day, in Kolkata. PHOTO: PTI



**SHARMILA VAIDYA**

## 2ND OPINION

As an educator for over 26 years, I have worn many different hats. I have worked with children, both with and without disabilities, conducted assessments and served as part of diagnostic teams. Each one had its own challenges and rewards. But my most meaningful responsibility was working with the parents or care givers of children with disabilities. By helping them recognise and understand and navigating them through their emotional turmoil in the years that followed was not an easy task. No textbook had prepared me with the knowledge and expertise for this challenge. Decades ago, many children with disabilities were educated separately, institutionalised, or simply not diagnosed. Fortunately, today we have come a long way in determining, understanding and accepting these disabilities. There are accommodations often provided by

## The child behind the disability

schools, work places and public institutions to help support individuals to participate fully in everyday life. Parents and children are less embarrassed and more willing to discuss it openly. The stigma that was once attached to these disabilities has now gradually diminished. A person with physical impairments, mobility challenges and facial differences are easier to spot and easy for us to offer assistance. They receive special services in their daily living, for example at airports, public parking, public facilities, workplaces, etc. However, disabilities such as Autism, ADHD, OCD, learning disabilities and anxiety disorders are less apparent, hence easily overlooked. They do not receive the same immediate attention and treatment. It is only when one interacts with such individuals and their families that one becomes familiar with their daily challenges.

I remember a conference with a parent who was concerned as to how their son would cope with school. Although there was no formal diagnosis made, doctors suspected he might have autism and might face challenges in life, but it was too early to know for certain.

My heart went out to them when I saw tears in their eyes. The fear of uncertainty was overwhelming and devastating for them. I assured them that every effort would be made to accommodate their son's needs and for him to be included in a regular classroom setting.

Schools usually conduct their own evaluation, observe them in a classroom setting and then chalk out an individualised education plan that meets the needs of that individual. Teachers work closely with parents and the infor-

mation and documents are available only to staff members who work directly with the student. The parents left that meeting feeling hopeful and reassured. Since then, I have participated in many such conferences. Each of these meetings has reminded me that not everything can be learned in classrooms or in textbooks. The gratitude and trust shown by these families has been immensely rewarding and the understanding that empathy and compassion go a long way. Fortunately, there has been tremendous technological advancement in determining the early onset and continued support for individuals who cannot walk, talk or see. To be included in society. There are advanced wheelchairs, voice activated devices, sign language, hearing aids, braille technology and software have opened doors that were not possible in the past. For conditions like, Autism, ADHD, Down syndrome, Dyslexia, Cerebral Palsy, and OCD there is early diagnosis and new medications, counseling services, continued research, grants, technological advancements, media and general awareness in society are more prevalent than a decade ago. After all these years I have come to realise that when people are different and don't fit in a box of normalcy or within the normal spectrum, we view them with sympathy. While knowledge makes us understand the disability, it is compassion and empathy that helps us understand the child.

The writer is an educator based in the US and the author of several children's books

## DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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## THEFT OF FAITH IN AYODHYA: ACCOUNTABILITY MUST APPLY EQUALLY

The allegations surrounding the Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust deserve an impartial and transparent investigation. Whenever institutions handling public donations face serious accusations of financial irregularities, the response must inspire confidence rather than deepen public suspicion. The issue goes beyond one trust or one organisation.

It concerns the principle that accountability must be uniform regardless of the stature or ideological affiliation of those involved. If allegations involve inflated land deals, procedural violations or financial impropriety, they should be examined through an independent investigation that commands public credibility. Superficial inquiries only weaken confidence in institutions.

The public also expects consistency in the functioning of investigative agencies.

Allegations of corruption should receive the same degree of scrutiny irrespective of whether they concern political opponents, religious trusts or influential organisations.

Selective enforcement undermines the rule of law and erodes trust in democratic institutions. Millions of devotees contribute to religious trusts with faith that their offerings will be used responsibly. That faith deserves protection through transparency, professional audits and credible oversight. Only an impartial investigation, free from political considerations, can establish the truth and reinforce public confidence in India's institutional framework.

S. PADMANABHAN | KOCHI

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

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The reverse brain drain needs better planning

The return of thousands of Indian IT professionals from the United States should have been an opportunity to strengthen India's technology ecosystem. Instead, it has exposed the widening gap between expectations and employment opportunities. More than 7,300 professionals have already returned in 2026 after job losses in major American technology companies and the expiry of H-1B visas. Unfortunately, India's own IT industry is currently experiencing a hiring slowdown. Many of these professionals possess world-class expertise acquired at leading global firms. However, their expectations of salaries comparable to those in the United States often place them beyond the reach of most Indian employers.

While Global Capability Centres and startups are creating some opportunities, they remain insufficient to absorb such a large pool of experienced talent. Incentives for innovation, support for high-value research, entrepreneurship programmes, and policies encouraging technology-intensive investments can help utilise this valuable human capital. Returning professionals should also consider flexible compensation structures and entrepreneurial ventures. India cannot afford to let such highly skilled talent remain underutilised. A reverse brain drain should become an advantage, not a story of shattered aspirations. DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR |

MUMBAI

### Govt must remove passport confusion

The Government's clarification that a passport is merely a travel document and not proof of citizenship has left many citizens puzzled. For decades, Indians have regarded the passport as one of the most rigorously verified documents issued by the Government. Obtaining one involves detailed scrutiny of identity, address and background, making it appear to represent official recognition of citizenship.

India does not permit dual citizenship and requires citizens acquiring foreign nationality to surrender their Indian passports. This practice naturally reinforces the public perception that possession of an Indian passport reflects Indian citizenship.

Legally, citizenship is determined under the Citizenship Act through birth, descent, registration or naturalisation, while a passport is issued primarily to facilitate international travel. Yet the distinction between the two has not been adequately communicated to ordinary citizens. The Government should issue a comprehensive public explanation outlining the legal relationship between citizenship and passport issuance. Such clarification is essential to remove unnecessary confusion and reassure citizens that their identity and legal status remain secure. DVG SANKARA RAO | VIZIANAGARAM

### Peace requires truth and equal justice

The clarification issued by the Kuki-Zo Council regarding its chairman's apology highlights the complexities of the continuing ethnic conflict in Manipur. Expressing sympathy for the tragic killing of six Naga civilians is a humanitarian gesture and should not automatically be interpreted as an admission of collective responsibility. Equally, the concerns expressed by Naga organisations reflect the deep mistrust that continues to prevail.

Lasting peace cannot be achieved through competing narratives or mutual accusations. The only sustainable path forward is a fair, impartial and time-bound investigation to identify the actual perpetrators and bring them to justice. Justice must neither be selective nor influenced by ethnic or political considerations.

At the same time, every instance of violence must be investigated. The suffering of one community should never diminish the pain of another. Equal justice is essential for reconciliation.

Manipur urgently needs confidence-building measures, impartial law enforcement and sincere political dialogue. Genuine peace will emerge only when every community believes that justice is being delivered fairly and without prejudice. BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI



## Dr Ashutosh Mukherjee: The pioneer of Bengal's intellectual awakening

At a time when colonial rule sought to constrain Indian aspirations, he transformed higher education into a vehicle of national awakening, championed Indian languages and research, defended academic autonomy, and left an enduring imprint on the judiciary and public life.



**VIJENDER GUPTA**

Ashutosh Mukherjee is a luminary of the colonial era who possessed a wealth of achievements. It is difficult even to catalogue the contributions of this great man, famously known as

the "Bengal Tiger." The world knows him as a great educationist and as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta, but his personality was multidimensional.

Ashutosh Mukherjee was born on 29th June 1864 into the lineage of the great poet Krittivas Ojha, author of the Bengali Ramayana, to Dr. Gangaprasad Mukherjee. Unfortunately he passed away at the age of just 59. Even in his short life, the contributions he made in the fields of education, justice, mathematics, literature, and public life are inscribed in golden letters in the history of modern India. The present age seems to have all but forgotten this intellectual giant of history. Today, on the occasion of his 162nd birth anniversary, there is an opportunity to remember him with reverence.

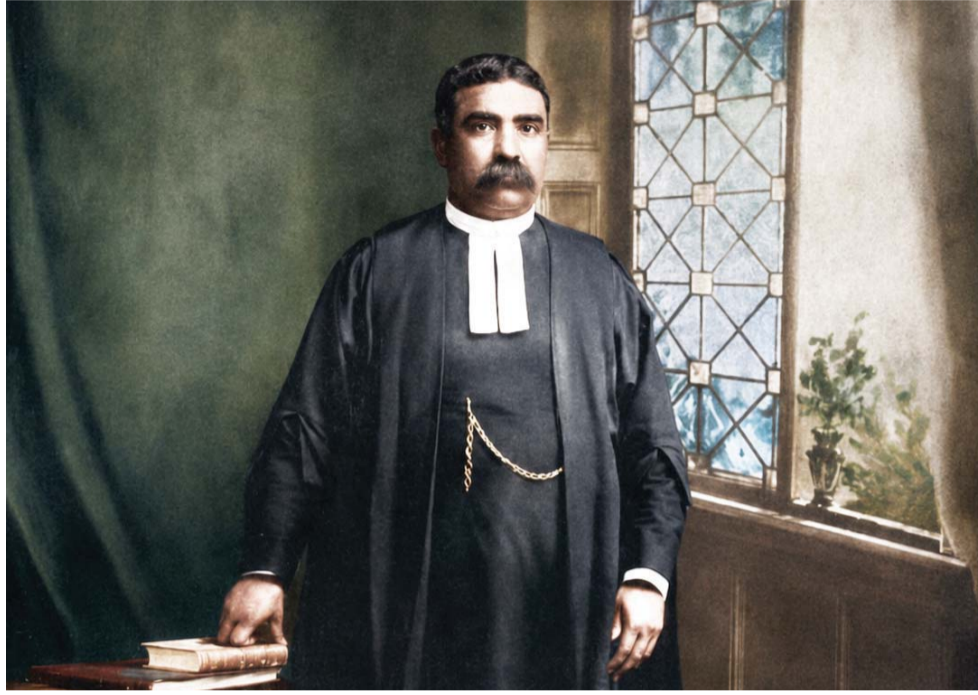
Ashutosh Mukherjee was a brilliant student from childhood. At Presidency College, he kept company with stalwart students such as Swami Vivekananda, Prafulla Chandra Ray, and Mahendranath Roy. He was the first student of the university to obtain a double degree—an M.A. in Mathematics and an M.Sc. in Physics. Ashutosh wrote a book on geometric conics, which was widely acclaimed. Had he remained entirely in the field of mathematics, he could have become a world-renowned mathematician, but his talent was multifaceted. He was accomplished in all fields—mathematics, law, history, language, culture and what not.

In 1883, Surendranath Banerjee was arrested on charges of contempt of court in connection with an article criticising an order of the Calcutta High Court. This sparked protests, and a group of students under Ashutosh's leadership decided to demonstrate right in front of the Calcutta High Court. Perhaps this incident further strengthened his resolve to build a career in the world of law. He began his legal studies at City College, Calcutta, where he won the 'Tagore Gold Medal' for three consecutive years (1884, 1885, and 1886). In 1888 he obtained his degree and registered as an advocate at the Calcutta High Court. He began working in the chambers of Rashbihari Ghosh, a leading barrister of the bar at that time.

In 1885, he married Yogmaya Devi Bhattacharya. They had seven children, of whom the second son, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, carried forward his father's legacy. Shyama Prasad became the youngest Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta at the age of just 33. As independent India's first Minister of Industry, he laid the industrial foundation of the country. By founding the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, he gave a renewed awakening to national consciousness. Proclaiming "In one country there shall not be two constitutions, two heads, and two emblems," he struggled for the integration of Jammu and Kashmir and, in 1953, sacrificed his life under mysterious circumstances. Sir Ashutosh and the world of education could not be kept apart for long, and by 1897 he had obtained the degree of 'Doctor of Law' and taken up the position of 'Tagore Law Professor' at the University of Calcutta. On 5 August 1899, the University of Calcutta sent him to the Bengal Legislative Council, where he played the role of an extremely active member for the next five years. In the Council, together with Surendranath Banerjee, he opposed the Mackenzie Bill on each of its clauses, because it was undemocratic and unjust.

The purpose of this municipal law, in keeping with Lord Curzon's tendency, was on the one hand to bring the Calcutta Municipality under government control, and on the other to give precedence to European commercial interests at the cost of the interests of Indian taxpayers—even though in reality it was the Indian taxpayers who were the greatest mainstay of the municipal system.

Ashutosh Mukherjee firmly advocated for the interests of teachers and opposed the existing disparity in the pay scales of the education service compared with the judicial and executive services. He said, "You appoint both in the same college. The work taken from them is also



VICEROY LORD CURZON INVITED SIR ASHUTOSH TO BECOME A JUDGE OF THE CALCUTTA HIGH COURT. HE SAID THAT IF HIS MOTHER PERMITTED, HE WOULD ACCEPT THE POSITION. UPON RECEIVING HIS MOTHER'S CONSENT, HE ASSUMED THE OFFICE OF JUDGE IN 1904 AND REMAINED IN THAT POST UNTIL 1923

of exactly the same nature; yet when the question of remuneration arises, you pay one double the salary of the other."

In 1902, Sir Ashutosh was appointed a member of the University Commission. On 4 January 1904, Sir Ashutosh became a member of the Imperial Legislative Council. Even in his brief tenure, he left a mark that would be remembered for a long time. In the Imperial Council, he strongly opposed Curzon's University Bill alongside Gokhale. As a member of the Calcutta University Commission (Sadler Commission: 1917-19), he made a noteworthy contribution.

Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee's greatest contribution lies in the development of the University of Calcutta. He dedicated the University of Calcutta to the service of the nation. The establishment of departments of Indian languages was the crowning achievement of his life, making it possible to obtain the highest degrees in one's mother tongue. He promoted research. He demonstrated that Indian universities could provide research and higher education even without foreign aid.

He emphasised the harmony of technical education, industry, and education. The University had its own press and published the 'Journal of the Department of Letters.' During Sir Ashutosh's tenure as Vice-Chancellor, extensive work was done on ancient Indian history, language, culture, economics, and scientific subjects. He encouraged scholars to study Maratha history, Prakrit literature, and the like.

As Vice-Chancellor, he was under heavy pressure to expel Subhas Chandra Bose from the university for the assault on Professor Oten. Concerned about protecting the career of the young Bose, Ashutosh had him transferred to another college—the Scottish Church Missionary College. Since the colonial government regarded the University as a hotbed of sedition and sought to impose conditions and controls on the functioning of the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Ashutosh declined a sixth term.

Viceroy Lord Curzon invited Sir Ashutosh to become a judge of the Calcutta High Court. He said that if his mother permitted, he would accept the position. Upon receiving his mother's consent, he assumed the office of judge in 1904 and remained in that post until 1923, during which time he also twice held charge as Acting Chief Justice. Of the hundreds of judgments Sir Ashutosh delivered as a judge, many are still cited today as examples of judicial skill.

Sir Ashutosh was a devout Hindu by faith and every year performed Durga Puja with great grandeur at his house in Bhowanipore. He was highly progressive in social matters and opposed untouchability. Even while bearing the opposition of the orthodox Hindus of the time, he had his widowed daughter remarried. For this act Ashutosh had to endure a great deal, but he remained unshaken. He held immense respect for other religions.

Owing to his inclination towards Buddhism, he served as President of the Maha Bodhi Society of India from 1911 to 1924. On 25 May 1924, in Patna, the mortal frame of the Bengal Tiger, Dr. Ashutosh Mukherjee, came to an end; but his ideas, the institutions he built, and his roar for truth and justice continue to inspire the ages even today.

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## Land grievances need triage, not theatre



**VIVEK KUMAR SINGH**

Land grievances dominate public grievance forums across India. Whether in Janata Durbars, district grievance hearings, public outreach programmes or online complaint portals, land-related complaints invariably account for a disproportionate share of administrative attention. Yet they also expose a fundamental contradiction in governance. Citizens approach these forums expecting solutions, while the officials hearing them often lack the legal authority to provide one. The resulting disappointment erodes public trust in the State. The opposite response is equally problematic. Faced with public expectations, media scrutiny and social media amplification, grievance forums sometimes drift into areas reserved for courts or statutory bodies. Complex disputes are discussed in public, competing claims are examined before cameras, and directions are issued beyond jurisdiction.

Public grievance forums should function as intelligent gateways into the land-governance ecosystem by identifying the nature of grievances, assessing their urgency and directing them to the appropriate institutional pathway. In short, they should operate as triage centres, not adjudication centres. The problem begins with language itself. The expression "land dispute" is used so loosely that it conceals more than it reveals. What administrators encounter at the cutting edge are not merely disputes but a much wider spectrum of land ailments. Encroachments on government land, disputes regarding possession of public land, eviction from settled land, family partition disagreements, private access-road disputes, measurement and demarcation issues, grievances arising from revenue proceedings, non-compliance with judicial orders and matters already pending before courts are all routinely grouped under the same label. Yet they are fundamentally different problems requiring fundamentally different remedies.

Field experience suggests that most grievances reaching public forums fall into a limited number of recurring categories. Each category points towards a different authority, a different legal framework and a different pathway to resolution. An encroachment case requires administrative enforcement. A demarcation dispute requires technical measurement. A matter pending before a civil court requires judicial determination rather than administrative intervention. The mistake is to expect a public grievance forum to resolve all of them. Such an expectation places both citizens and administrators in an impossible position. Citizens arrive seeking immediate relief, while officials are often constrained by law, jurisdiction and procedure. The resulting gap between expectation and authority becomes a source of frustration and mistrust. The challenge is compounded by the fact that land grievances rarely remain confined to legal questions. They frequently involve social relationships, economic interests, local power structures and community tensions. A seemingly minor boundary disagreement can escalate into violence. A disputed pathway can disrupt access to homes and farms. Left unattended, many such grievances eventually transform into litigation, law-and-order problems or political controversies.

This is precisely why public grievance forums matter. Their significance lies not in deciding every matter brought before them, but in identifying problems early and ensuring that grievances enter the correct institutional pathway before they escalate. Once a land grievance is received, the crucial question is not, "Who is right?" but "What kind of problem is this?" An encroachment, a demarcation dispute, a pending civil suit and a compliance failure may all arrive at the same public hearing, but they belong to entirely different institutional pathways. Public grievance forums are therefore best viewed as the triage centres of land governance. Their role is to classify grievances, assess their conflict potential, route them to the appropriate authority and monitor progress.

The effectiveness of the forum depends less on its ability to decide matters on the spot and more on its ability to ensure that each grievance enters the correct pathway before it escalates into litigation. Many States already possess statutory mechanisms that can be better leveraged through such triage. Bihar, for instance, has a time-bound public grievance redressal framework as well as a specialised mechanism under the Bihar Land Disputes Resolution Act for specified categories of disputes. A triage protocol can provide the missing connective tissue between public hearings and these existing forums. The objective is not to create new institutions but to make existing ones work better. This distinction is critical. Public grievance forums should not become parallel courts. Questions of title, inheritance, easement rights and adjudication belong to institutions specifically created for those purposes. Grievance forums should not become passive listening posts that merely record complaints and generate acknowledgements. The challenge, therefore, is to strike a balance between helplessness and overreach. A triage-based approach respects institutional mandates while ensuring that citizens are not left to navigate a fragmented administrative system on their own. When grievance forums attempt to perform functions assigned to courts or statutory authorities, they inadvertently weaken those institutions. Conversely, when citizens leave public hearings without a clear pathway forward, confidence in governance suffers. A triage model avoids both outcomes by ensuring that every institution performs its designated role while remaining accountable for results. The success of public grievance forums should not be judged by the number of petitions heard or disposed of. Instead, it should be measured by the number of grievances correctly routed towards resolution. Disposal is an event. Resolution is an outcome. Every district should consider adopting a Land Grievance Triage Protocol. Such a framework would classify grievances into predefined categories, assess their conflict potential and route them to designated statutory pathways—whether under service-delivery legislation, specialised land-dispute mechanisms, survey processes or judicial forums. The objective would be to shift attention from disposal to resolution. India's land governance challenges are too complex to be addressed through improvisation. They require clarity of roles, institutional discipline and structured coordination. Public grievance forums have an important role to play. Not every grievance can be resolved at a grievance forum.

Every grievance, however, can be correctly diagnosed there. Governance credibility is built when citizens know that their problem has been correctly identified, routed to the right institution and followed through to resolution. The challenge before land administration is not to make public grievance forums more dramatic. It is to make them more diagnostic. The future of land governance lies not in theatre, but in triage.



## Gen Z and shifting workforce preferences



**DEEPIKA KUMAR**

Recent news points to the fact that, of late, skilled plumbers earn more than entry-level engineers in tech firms such as Infosys and TCS (Link). In another post, Abhiraj Singh Bahl, co-founder and CEO of Urban Company, highlighted that some of the skilled service professionals on the platform earn in excess of ₹40,000 per month, which often exceeds the starting salaries in several IT roles in India. It is an interesting anomaly to what we've studied in economics around sectoral evolution of economies. What does this imply for Gen-Z and Alpha workforces as they enter and adapt to new workforce shifts and dynamics?

As per Morgan Stanley Research report "Asia Faces Rising Youth Unemployment Challenge"—India has ~17 per cent youth unemployment in the age group of 16-24, closely followed by Indonesia and China. Part of this is being attributed to the massive explosion in AI across the world, that has taken away entry-level jobs. The remainder is being shaped by geopolitical turmoil and tensions, leading to cost-cutting and localisation of labour supply as time passes by.

In addition, India also faces a special challenge of underemployment (lower productivity) in primary sector jobs especially agriculture and

mining, where more people are employed for a relatively lesser GDP contribution from the sector (high labour factor productivity ratio).

### A case study of China

Gen Z workers in China are finding new ways to tackle an absence of jobs (which also, partly includes the problem of absence of meaningful employment). A lot of them are resorting to blue-collared jobs, in the absence of white-collared jobs.

The story of Zhang Weibo, who graduated from NTU (Nanyang Technical University) and decided to take up a blue collared job after leaving a white collared one, is an interesting case in point here. A sense of disillusionment with his white collared job, the feeling of restrictive-ness and a communal sense of discontent shared with others who join him in his cleaning efforts, provide impetus and strength to his decision. Link

Another social movement that has emerged in China is "Tongping" which means to lay flat - do the bare minimum - no work, no family, no home, no kids. A life of minimalism. Choosing what one wishes to do. Originally started as a movement against corporate slavery, the movement has now grown to accommodate (or rather, de-accommodate) all forms of work. People who take this philosophy to the extreme, are choosing to go homeless, sleep-in restaurants and cafeterias than work to pay rent. Link

This one's my favourite now - there's a concept of "full-time children" where children continue to stay with parents long after they have graduated/post-graduated, and take care of



domestic chores (cleaning, cooking, feeding) and earn a salary from their own parents.

Meanwhile, in South Korea, a report by Korean Employment Information Service (KEIS) highlights that, in the 15-29 age group, about 18% were NEETs in 2024 ("Not in employment, education or training"). While partly driven by the need for mandatory military service, especially for male members of society, overall population numbers have been on the higher side, and the category of "non-seeking" population has grown even more in this case - spelling troublesome long-term unemployment trends.

A survey by Intelligent.com, a career advisory platform, highlights that "1 in 6 companies are hesitant to hire recent college graduates" and cite several reasons - including a lack of motivation, professionalism, inability to articulate and communicate well, and a poor work ethic, amidst others. In other words, employers are not partic-

ularly excited to hire an "anti-hustle" generation that seeks to work on its own terms, from anywhere, and for whatever amount of time.

Coming back to the problem at hand in India, the global trends point towards economic frictions and geopolitical tensions that cause similar challenges across regions, especially in Asia, a booming demographic. In India however, the challenge is even more layered, as education (and as a consequence, a job) is not entirely an independent choice but driven by societal and family norms. A lot of the so-called manual labour jobs (plumbing, cleaning, delivery) are looked down upon in most families, which believe that doing this would be a waste of a college degree that the society has collectively invested in. People choose to endlessly spend time preparing for exams, sitting idle and doing nothing over finding a money-making job, merely to live upto social standards.

In India, work is not just a means of survival, to earn bread and butter, but a huge part of social identity. Indian society, historically, was structured around a division based on occupation - an occupational dictionary was written up in the Manusmriti and used to divide society. Centuries later, we still run with archaic occupational dictionary that continues to reward intellectual labour over manual labour. Except, unfortunately, as times and realities change, circumstances change, is there perhaps a need to update how we view work fundamentally in its myriad shapes and forms? Another challenge that persists now is, that unlike major economies of the world, India grew on the backbone of soft industries, in other

words, tertiary and service sectors which are plateauing (or perhaps reaching the cusp of a new S-curve that'll be driven by AI). Whether that'll lead to more jobs or less, and of what kind, remains to be seen. But it clearly means a reconfiguration of job needs, requirements, and job descriptions - one that doesn't exist. A lot of traditional need for STEM graduates is also going to change.

I will not be winding down this article neatly in clear conclusions, it is a work-in-progress discussion. This is merely an acknowledgement of how layered and systemic the problem of unemployment could be, and how social norms add to, and subtract from the same. What I'd choose to allude to is, much like corporates, a lot of learning (hard and soft-skills) could occur even in manual, so called "blue-collared" jobs. Sincerity, showing up for work every single day, building relationships, getting a pulse of what a client wants, and handling different customers/clients - all of these skills could very well be learnt from these jobs as much as any white-collared job. One could grow in a different way, through local networks and regional awareness, plug in customer gaps and build businesses, if they enter these jobs with the right intent and mindset. Perhaps a collegiate/institutional academic life isn't necessary and supposedly right for everyone. And the wage differential above a lot of entry-level jobs, is already showing up in market statistics. Looking down upon these jobs is no longer an option.

The writer holds MBA from IIM Bangalore and worked as an Engagement Manager at McKinsey



## CONTRAPUNTO

There is no good and evil. There is only power, and those too weak to seek it

-VOLDEMORT (character)

# Magnificus Leo

An American pope has emerged as the most compelling voice against America's wars

War is never blessed by God. Pope Leo XIV is really on a roll, repeating this message again and again, in case people miss it at first, which they tend to do. Why is it so hard to take in? Not because it's super complicated. But because we have become so used to hearing the opposite. Chaplains of different denominations, generals, and politicians citing sacred cause for the battle they've decided to fight, is the more familiar soundtrack. Iran war is a special case only because *three* languages of divine sanction are speaking here, each convinced that God is on its side. As Leo explained in his inaugural encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, this is the Babel syndrome. It negates synodality (walking together), fraternity, humanity itself.

Leo's theological vision is revolting to US's dominant Christian right. The cardinals who elected history's first American pope may well have counted on this: A strong moral voice to counterbalance aggressive Bible thumping by Republicans who love a war. A big gap between a tradition's deepest peaceable teachings and the militaristic ideologies that get built on top of it, is neither new nor unique to Christianity. *Bhagwad Gita* has taught nonattachment to many, as to Gandhi, but has also been quoted to justify violence. Zen itself got folded into the Japanese imperialist war machine. What's new, though, is unprecedented technological power, which can wreak dehumanisation at horrific pace and scale. Leo thinks it's this nightmare that's drawing us all towards certain artworks, like *Guernica* and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. They're telling us to pause, really look at war's wreckage, and reach for peace instead.

At a Pentagon prayer service, evangelist Franklin Graham, speaking at Hegseth's invitation, asked the assembled troops: "Did you know that God also hates? Do you know that God also is a god of war?" It's painful irony how much this echoes the Ayatollahs' framing of things. And the settler ideology of Israel sounds similar too. Yes, such interpretations have always existed. In modern times, they've amounted to "third world war fought piecemeal", increasingly reducing peace to "a fragile interval between conflicts". But the threat of total devastation is now exponentially greater than ever. This is what makes the "just war" theory, abused to justify every kind of war, decidedly "outdated". Humanity cannot afford it anymore. Leo's message bears repeating by religious leaders across the earth. That God does not take any sides in war. God is incarnate in every person, different religions, after all, all say. That's the magnificence of humanity, *magnifica humanitas*.



## Cup Of Life

WC 2026 shows why football, with joy and sorrow, remains a global pulse

Football is life. No other global game captures the heartbreaks, the joys, the tears, the desperation, the drama, the sorrow, and the pure exhilaration like the beautiful game. Take Iran. People are already calling them the unluckiest team in football. Just before the World Cup, the country was pummeled by US and Israel. There was little clarity whether the Iranian football team itself would be allowed to travel to US for the tournament. Then their training base was shifted from Arizona to Tijuana in Mexico. There were restrictions on their transit to US cities – the team forced to come into US just a day before their first two group matches, and leave immediately after the games.

Plus, Iranian fans in US stadiums were the most divided lot. Many turned up for the matches not to simply encourage their team, but also to denounce the Iranian regime. And yet, the Iranian team was a whisker away from qualifying for the knockout stages. Not once, but twice, there was heartbreak. First, a winning goal was denied against Egypt with scorer Khalilzadeh being ruled offside by millimetres, by VAR.

Iran could have still gone through. And Algeria's late goal against Austria – which many hailed as Algeria's 44-year-old payback for the Disgrace of Gijon – had the Iranians qualifying. But in the dying seconds, Austria equalised to dump the Iranians out. Absolutely gutting. But then there's the fairytale story of Cape Verde – the tiny African island nation that few had heard of before the World Cup. It is now the smallest country to make it to the knockout stages of the tournament, among the nine out of 10 African sides to go through. Goalkeeper Vozinha became an overnight sensation. His mother, who couldn't afford a visa to US but was later helped by a Chinese businessman, is part of a story that has entered World Cup lore. This too is the beautiful game. It makes us cry – both happy and sad tears.

## Abnormal normal

The extraordinary is becoming the everyday ordinary

Jug Suraiya



When Russia invaded Ukraine and Ukraine fought back, the headline-making word was War. When US and Israel attacked Iran in a campaign that was supposed to be wrapped up in a couple of weeks, War made the headlines again.

After over four years of Russia-Ukraine hostilities continuing unabated, upper-case War has morphed into a lower-case has-been. Much the same happened with the US-Israel-Iran imbroglio. A commentator noted the number of times that Trump has announced Iran's defeat (55), that a deal with the beleaguered country was imminent (38), and that Strait of Hormuz was about to have a grand opening, all welcome to attend (25). War began sounding like a bore, the repeated ceasefires turning into ceaseless firing.

While a patchwork peace has been struck between US and Iran, Israel's continuing belligerence threatens to make war the default option in West Asia. War, which ought to be an alarming aberration, has become normal, and peace, which should be the norm, has become abnormal.

What has happened to war has also happened to the weather. Increasingly frequent heatwaves, delayed and/or deficient monsoons, and other extreme meteorological events have made the abnormal normal, and the normal abnormal.

News-worthiness or its opposite, news-unworthiness apart, mathematically speaking the so-called normal is inevitably the abnormal. To arrive at the normal height for an adult Indian male as being 1.67m, would require taking into account men who are, say, 1.80m or more, and others who are 1.60m or less, and then calculate an average between the two extremes. Which while making mathematical sense becomes nonsensical, with exceptions that prove the rule outnumbering the rule they're meant to prove.

Etymologically too, the word normalcy is itself an abnormality. The correct word for normalcy as it is commonly used is normality. However, normalcy was used by Warren G Harding whose 1921 election campaign slogan, "Return to normalcy" after the devastation of WWI and the Spanish flu pandemic, got him into White House, making him the 29th president of US. Thanks to that abnormality, abnormality has become the normalcy in everyday usage.

# The Best & The Rest, So Far

As World Cup knockouts begin, Argentina, France & Spain look like frontrunners. Brazil & Germany haven't hit their full stride. England, as usual, is flattering to deceive

Sean Walsh



Columnist based in London

Heading into the first-ever round of 32 at a FIFA World Cup, we are starting to get a feel for who the true tournament favourites are.

The reigning champions, Argentina, have barely had to get out of first gear so far, mostly relying on their solid structure and the individual brilliance of Messi. No need to change a winning formula, right?

France's quest to become only the second team to reach three World Cup finals in a row has started positively, too. Didier Deschamps, long criticised for his conservative approach to international football (despite the positive results this has yielded), has taken the handbrake off, allowing the likes of Kylian Mbappé, Michael Olise, Ousmane Dembélé and Désiré Doué to all thrive together.

Doubts seriously began to corrupt the idea of European champions Spain conquering the world again, after they were held to a surprise 0-0 draw with African minnows Cape Verde in their first game. But once the mercurial Lamine Yamal returned to fitness, and the starting lineup, those concerns cleared to some degree. La Roja's superpower is the drive and penetration that can go with their supreme ability to keep the ball, and Yamal at full tilt is the perfect embodiment of that.

Argentina, France and Spain are largely following the script they set for themselves. They remain the teams to beat, appearing a class above to neutrals and diehards alike.

Meanwhile, Cape Verde themselves built on their remarkable draw to book their own spot in the last 32 against the odds. In fact, nine of Africa's 10 representatives have advanced to the next round, making up over a quarter of the participants still left in the competition. All three co-hosts – Mexico, Canada and US – have made it past the group stage in thrilling fashion, and are capitalising on World Cup fever.

And then we have England. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride. Somehow, the inventors of the beautiful game haven't been able to become the masters of it since 1966, and they have never won a major tournament which they didn't host.

This version of England has *arguably* the best striker in the game in Harry Kane, best attacking midfielder in Jude Bellingham, deep-lying midfielder in Declan Rice, and an assortment of other players ranging from elite to world class. On top of that, they also appeared to address their previous major weakness of a supposedly under-qualified manager, bringing in

more questions than answers.

Tuchel's England are, at this moment in time, a better team in theory than actuality. They are merely an idea, not too dissimilar to their "Golden Generation" of 2006, which featured superstars such as David Beckham, Wayne Rooney, Frank Lampard, and Steven Gerrard.

Back home in Britain, Tuchel has become the subject of ire for another reason. After the injury-prone Reece James was ruled out for at least two games, the debate restarted over whether Trent Alexander-Arnold should have been called up. The team's evident lack of creativity also saw cases made again for Cole Palmer and Adam Wharton.

This is quite typical of England, from the stodgy displays to the furore over squad selection. It's a cycle of negativity that Tuchel must break before it becomes terminal.

The saving grace for England is World Cups don't tend to be about how you start, but rather how you finish. They only need to look as far back as Argentina four years ago, when La Albiceleste were somehow beaten by Saudi Arabia in their tournament opener, before dominating the rest of the tournament.

Outside of the three favourites listed above, many of the other top nations have also flattered to deceive. Brazil and Germany look a level below their respective selves of yesteryear, while the circus that follows Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal will always threaten to derail their chances of glory. England might not be feared yet, but they also shouldn't be scared of many other sides left either.

Tuchel and Co have managed to avoid France and Spain on their side of the knockout bracket, with Brazil a potential quarterfinal opponent, and Argentina likely awaiting in the semis. Up first for the Three Lions is DR Congo, which represents a relatively kind matchup, before the possibility of facing Mexico or Ecuador at a boisterous Estadio Azteca in the last 16.

Across all sports, the best of the best find a way to improve as gruelling tournaments go on. And so it is for the final 32.

The writer is a football journalist



someone like Thomas Tuchel, who has achieved so much in the club game, and has a shout at being the top head coach in a crowded field at this tournament.

But what is there to fear about England? On paper, a lot, but the reality remains paradoxical. Bar a 20-minute spell in their opening win against Croatia, the Three Lions haven't roared into life. They've barely purred.

It was quite the comedown after displaying such exhilarating and energetic behaviour in that 4-2 victory in Dallas, pressing all over the pitch, and suffocating the life out of one of football's great overachievers. This result was followed by a drab 0-0 draw with Ghana, and their third group game, a 2-0 win over Panama, raised



## Many Hangovers Of India Going Dry

As El Nino hits hard, the worry is not only for Kharif, but also Rabi crops. With 40% of districts irrigation-poor, rural economy is at risk. And 166 key reservoirs are at only 26% of capacity. So, citywallahs also have cause to fret

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India is about to enter its most critical phase of the rainy season (July-Aug), which coincides not only with the maximum monsoon rains the country could get, but also the peak of Kharif (summer) sowing operation. What's worrying is how climatic phenomena will impact these two events.

IMD forecast isn't encouraging. Its prediction of 'below normal' rainfall, with 60% probability of its being deficient, has triggered a fear of drought. If this comes to pass, it won't hurt the farm sector alone, but also distress water reservoirs, groundwater recharge, and hydropower generation.

The country, as on Sunday, logged a deficit of 43% rainfall. Central India, which comprises most parts of the 'monsoon core zone', the rain-fed area where farming depends mainly on seasonal rainfall, recorded the highest deficit of 56%. Yes, this deficit will narrow down in July-Aug. But that by itself won't spare India from the ill-effects of a drought year, as the overall deficit during June-Sept monsoon season will likely cross 10%.

The two major factors – El Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO) and Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) – that govern variation in monsoon rainfall, may not help. El Nino – a natural climate pattern in which surface waters of central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean become warmer than usual – is associated with weak monsoon

and harsher summer in India.

IOD, which describes the difference in sea surface temperatures between western and eastern parts of the tropical Indian Ocean, helps form stronger monsoon winds. Positive IOD helps soften the impact of a strong El Nino. Unfortunately, this climatic factor is currently neutral, and therefore it won't offset the El Nino that will prevail during the entire period when farming enters its critical phase.

Over the years, India has extended its irrigation footprint. But it still has miles to go, before it's drought-proofed against the vagaries of seasonal rainfall. Agri ministry has recently mapped as many as 315 districts (40% of total districts in the country) as suffering a greater risk of low rainfall and shortage of irrigation. Most of these fall in 12 states – MP, Maharashtra, Gujarat, UP, TN, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Bihar, Jharkhand, Telangana, AP, and Odisha. Except Rajasthan and AP, all these states are reporting a 30-80% rainfall deficit.

Sowing operations in most states remain sluggish. If this situation continues, its impact will certainly be felt on food-grain output, especially

when farmers are already struggling with input (such as fertilisers and diesel) costs going up because of the Iran war. Maybe govt is helping on the input costs front in various ways. But rain deficit is quite a different challenge.

The resulting uncertainty has a direct bearing on rural economy. And depressed conditions in the farming sector ultimately impact the overall economy. That's why Pranab Mukherjee famously described the monsoon season (June-Sept) as India's true finance minister.

Impact of a poor monsoon on food-grain output has been well documented. For example, an ICAR-Indian Institute of Farming Systems Research study in 2023 shows that past El Nino years (2002, 2004 and 2009) reduced output of key Kharif crops such as paddy and maize by more than 10% in 77 and 65 districts, respectively, in different states across the country.

Though 2023 was also an El Nino year, at that time a positive IOD largely offset its impact, helping India get near-normal seasonal rainfall, as well as a record output of food-grains. In 2015-16, however, the country was not

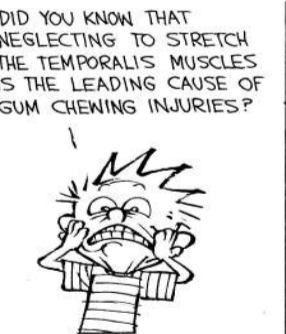
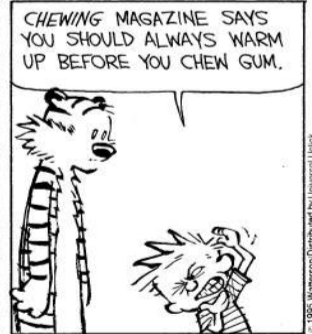
so lucky. It reported a 5% decline in overall food-grain output, due to a severe El Nino in 2015.

The impact is not limited to Kharif season. Since low rainfall results in less water in the country's major reservoirs and poor moisture content in the soil, it also impacts Rabi (winter sown) crops during the Nov-Feb period. Current status of 166 key reservoirs, monitored by the Central Water Commission, is worrying. Live storage, as of June 25, is at merely 26% of the total storage capacity of these reservoirs.

If it doesn't rain adequately during the remaining three months of the monsoon season, there will be a hit on drinking water availability, especially in big cities that depend on direct water supply for drinking and other usage. Since 20 of the above reservoirs are in hydro-electric projects, there will also be a hit on hydropower generation. It would be a kind of double whammy for the country's energy sector, which has already been under pressure due to the West Asia crisis.

When El Nino is out and about hurting the monsoon, with no climatic cushion from IOD, farmers will need the help of several contingency measures on the ground. In the longer term, they need much more advanced weather-based agro-advisory services and efficient water management. They also need drought-tolerant crop varieties. Many also need help switching to less water-consuming millets and pulses, from water-guzzling paddy and sugarcane. Only intensely more location-specific adaptation strategies will help minimise agricultural losses.

## Calvin & Hobbes



## Sacredspace



In football, everything is possible, from the moment you work and you believe in your qualities.

Kylian Mbappé

## You Must Love The Goal And Surrender To It

Jaya Row

While civilisations focused on overcoming the external world, Indian thinkers turned inward, mastering the mind. Success and happiness followed as by-products. When we lost touch with this wealth within, external bankruptcy followed.

Like Gulliver bound by the tiny Lilliputians, we remain asleep to our own greatness, held captive by the distractions of the world. All we need is to awaken to the powerhouse of wisdom we are heir to. Gita, composed thousands of years ago, addresses the Arjuns of today – dynamic, ambitious young people striving for excellence. It offers a practical formula for success.

Many people are hugely talented. But discipline, hard work and consistent application are essential to translate this talent to success. You need to learn the formula for success. Otherwise,

brilliant people often falter at the final hurdle. A well-prepared student suddenly freezes at an examination. A gifted athlete loses because of the obsession with the trophy. A highly qualified candidate fumbles during an interview due to anxiety.

Why does this happen? Focus shifts from present action to result. Action is under your control. Result depends on many factors beyond your influence. Dependence on the fruit makes you a slave to the world. Whether you will emerge a topper in the exam or win the Olympic medal depends on a host of external factors. But no one can take away the fact that you are an outstanding performer. Find fulfilment in the action. Give your best to it. Enjoy it. Then you are independent of the result. And success follows naturally.

Set your sights on an ideal greater than your personal ambitions. The nobler the ideal, the greater the energy, enthusiasm and creativity it unleashes. But if your mind is preoccupied with the goal while acting, attention shifts from the present to the future. Concentration slips. Action is flawed, and the result is failure.

The student anxious for marks is agitated, makes a series of mistakes and underperforms. The batsman in the nineties thinks of the century instead of the next ball – and gets out.

The secret is simple: while acting, focus completely on the action. Do not allow thought to interfere with the task at hand. The mind is at peace. Action is perfect. Excellence follows.

To excel and be happy one must necessarily have a higher mission in life. Hard work must follow. Nothing worthwhile is achieved through lethargy and inactivity.

Gita outlined the six-point path to success. The formula consists of two parts – generating energy and preventing its dissipation.

Energy is created in three ways. First, the intellect directs all thoughts to the chosen goal. Just as light, wind and water gain power when channelled in one direction. Scattered thoughts lose their strength. Second, the mind is devoted to the goal. You must love the goal, surrender to it. Then the power of the goal becomes yours. Third, the body acts dynamically. The more you act the more vitality you generate.

Energy leaks away through three channels – regret over the past, anxiety for the future and frenzy in the present. The intellect keeps the mind anchored in the present, preventing it from wandering into wasteful avenues of past and future.

Jaya Row's commentary on Gita is broadcast on YouTube every Saturday, 6-7.15pm. Message 99200 54000



THE SPEAKING TREE

# Don't Let AI Chip Off the Old Block

India must up its semiconductor ambitions

Ever-increasing demand from AI data centres is throttling the supply of memory chips across a range of industries from cars to consumer electronics. The auto industry is redesigning its electronics architecture as soaring chip prices are inflating component costs and threatening production lines. Apple, Microsoft and Sony have announced steep price hikes for some of their best-selling products. Makers of laptops and mobile handsets are reconfiguring devices to offer less memory or storage. Some product categories that operate on wafer-thin margins are likely to be discontinued. Shortage in memory chips is expected to last for a couple of years till fresh capacity comes on stream. Apart from high initial costs of setting up a chip factory, the industry is also dealing with scarce supply of machinery and materials.

Unlike Covid disruptions-created chip shortage, this is a structural crisis. Chipmakers are switching away from consumer-grade memory to the more intensive version used in AI infra. Every high-end chip displaces more than one of the regular memory and storage chips manufacturers like Samsung, SK Hynix and Micron were producing till fairly recently. Record chipmaker profits have led to impressive expansion plans, but factories won't deliver relief immediately. There is also a likelihood of disinvestment in the broader technology market facing 'chipflation' and cooling consumer demand.

The total computing power of AI chips is doubling roughly every 7 mths. Shortage for the non-AI chip market is, thus, growing exponentially. Arresting it will require bringing a larger pool of chip supply from countries like China, which will trigger strategic concerns. Countries like the US and India restrict use of Chinese chips in critical infrastructure. There is an opportunity for India to accelerate its semiconductor manufacturing ambitions within the constraints of upstream supply bottlenecks. India's recent achievements in export of electronics, however, face a mounting hurdle that is chipping away at global consumer demand.



# Restore the Faith, Recover the Trust

Ayodhya's Ram temple is a monument to faith, not a case study in financial scandal. Yet, the unfolding investigation into alleged embezzlement of donations — now widening to include bank officials and trust members — has cast a shadow over one of India's most symbolically charged religious sanctuaries. When the sacred becomes suspect, the damage isn't merely financial, but can corrode the moral foundation on which devotion rests. Instead of underlining the incident as an anomaly — which it may well be — trust has to be recovered minus any whataboutery.

SIT's decision to map the entire donation chain — from collection boxes to final deposits — is a welcome, necessary step. Transparency must be total. Every rupee offered as donation to the temple deserves the same scrutiny as public money, because temples, mosques and churches are repositories of trust within communities as much as of religious belief. The faithful give not to enrich individuals but to sustain ideals. If those ideals are tinkered with, the betrayal is spiritual as well as civic.

India's religious institutions, especially those commanding national reverence, must hold themselves to the highest standards of governance. The Ram mandir, built after decades of political and social tumult, cannot afford even the perception of impropriety. Resignations within Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust underscore the urgency of restoring credibility. Faith thrives on transparency. The Ayodhya probe must, therefore, be exhaustive, impartial and public. Anything less would confirm the cynic's suspicion that sanctity is immune to scandal. The temple's stones may have risen in splendour, but its true strength lies in the integrity of those entrusted with safekeeping of its offerings.



## THINK ABOUT IT

When humidity hangs out with heat to make things worse

# When You Don't Feel What You Mean

The 'feels-like' temperature is meteorology's sly confession that thermometers are optimists. A reading of 34° C may appear tolerable. But humidity conspires to turn it into 44° C, leaving folks stewing like dumplings in their own perspiration. The science is straightforward: sweat cools the body by evaporating. But when the air is already saturated, evaporation slows to a crawl. Instead of relief, one is left marinating. Formally, this sleight of hand is called the heat index, devised in the 1980s by Robert Steadman. It combines air temperature and relative humidity to calculate how hot conditions actually feel to the human body. At 37° C with 55% humidity, the apparent temperature can soar above 50° C. In other words, the 'feels-like' figure is not meteorological melodrama but a physiological warning: heatstroke lurks when the index climbs past 41° C. Our cities, with concrete and cheek-by-jowl constructions, only amplify the joke: the countryside sighs at 34° C, while downtown asphalt insists it is 44° C.

Thus, the 'feels-like' phenomenon is both science and 'over-exaggeration', exaggeration of a genuinely exaggerated condition. It's the only metric where physics and sarcasm meet, and where the thermometer says, 'Relax', while humidity interrupts, 'Actually, it's way worse'. Suited-booted you, trapped in this dialogue, become the punchline.

# Bengal should prioritise high-skill services, sidestep constraints that make manufacturing difficult OF SERVICE TO THE STATE



**Maitresh Ghatak & Tanika Chakraborty**

**L**ondon/New York: Last week's West Bengal budget, the new BJP government's first, puts industrial revival back at the centre of the state's economic debate. The priority is clear: generating productive employment. The disagreement is about how to get there. A common assumption is that the route runs through manufacturing. Global trends, and conditions specific to India and to Bengal, make it worth asking whether that is the right path to lead with.

Globally, manufacturing is no longer a job-creating engine it once was. It has grown skill- and capital-intensive. Even where it succeeds, it creates far fewer jobs than it did for earlier industrialisers. India has felt this directly. Organised manufacturing has largely been stagnant, and where it



**Building up an appetite**

Smallholders resist selling because they have nowhere else to go, and no way to turn a cash payment into a productive alternative life. That exit barrier was, ironically, raised by the state's own agricultural success. Land reform made staying viable and leaving costly, and put a brake on the next transition. This is a



has expanded, it did so with rising capital intensity, and output growth has not reliably translated into jobs.

India's recent growth has, instead, been strikingly services-heavy. Services now make up about 55% of GVA and around 30% of employment, and the sector has grown at roughly 8% a year over the past decade. States that have grown fastest over the past decade and a half — Karnataka and Telangana — have leaned on services, not factories.

Beyond global forces, Bengal has reasons of its own to be cautious about leading with manufacturing — and the failed Tata car project at Singur made them visible. Its land is among the most fragmented in India, making a contiguous industrial plot costly and contested to assemble from hundreds of smallholdings.

The same fragmentation slows the infrastructure a factory economy needs. Laying a road, like assembling a site, means negotiating with dozens of owners, and the state's road density is among the country's lowest. This also feeds the land and tenancy disputes, which contribute to Bengal's courts being among the most congested in India.

**The policy signal must be clear:** make it genuinely easy to start and run firms in IT, analytics, finance, design, healthcare, higher education and research

structural constraint that runs deeper than any single government's choices.

The right response is to let these structural constraints guide the choice of strategy, rather than the hammer-and-tongs approach that sank the Singur initiative.

While Bengal is capital-poor and land-constrained, it is skill-rich. This is the reverse of the usual development problem, where skill, along with capital, is one of the scarcest resources. The Bengali diaspora is heavily concentrated in high-skill services worldwide: medicine, technology, finance and academia. It reflects a long investment in educational institutions that still carry reputational weight. The talent pipeline still exists, but it drains out of the state rather than flourishing within it, and schools that once fed it are visibly weakening.

High-skill services can utilise this advantage and sidestep some of the

constraints that make manufacturing difficult. They are land-light. A software or biotech campus, or a hospital, needs a fraction of the land a petrochemical plant or car factory does. So, the holdout problem becomes manageable. They lean less on heavy infrastructure than on reliable power and fast internet. This is not second best. It is an industrial strategy that acknowledges the baseline conditions, rather than conjuring them away by force.

However, skill-intensive services — software, finance, business processing — employ a thin sliver of the highly educated, and absorb little of the large labour force. A Kolkata version of a Bengaluru campus, by itself, would do little for construction workers now leaving for Kerala. The answer lies in the linkages a cluster sets off.

Its direct production linkages may be weak. But its consumption linkages are not. A concentration of middle-class incomes pulls in labour-absorbing services — retail, transport, care, construction — that employ workers across the skill ladder. India's own experience supports this. Much of its recent growth has come less from the celebrated IT and outsourcing sectors than from rising productivity in everyday consumer services produced for local markets.

A strategy built on skills must also rebuild the institutions that produce

them. And, here, services and education reinforce each other in a way manufacturing and education do not. Service clusters need skilled workers. Skilling needs functioning universities. Universities need functioning schools. The strategy, thus, generates its own demand for the institutional repair in the sector needs.

Data on private tuition illustrates the size of the gap. Around 86% of Bengal's middle-school students take private coaching — nearly 3x the national average — and household spending on it is the highest among major states, even as government-school enrolment remains high. That is educational ambition compensating for what public schools have failed to deliver.

What does this ask of the state? Targeted investment in connectivity — broadband, reliable power; better roads, airport and transport capacity — is the essential public input, and it is within reach even under fiscal stress because it is far cheaper than the heavy infrastructure manufacturing demands.

The policy signal must be clear: make it genuinely easy to start and run firms in IT, analytics, finance, design, healthcare, higher education and research. Regulation must treat enterprise as a partner rather than a source of extraction — a matter of political will, not budget. The hardest requirements are institutional: merit-based appointments in universities and schools.

This is the long-run case, and it answers the question Singur posed. Bengal need not choose between protecting its smallholders and enabling its growth. In the right order, one creates conditions for the other: The goal — a modern economy that employs its people — has not changed. What has changed is the route.

A services-led phase lowers that exit barrier from the other side, building the non-farm economy that gives people somewhere to go. In time, that is also what will bring the industrial bus back to the stop. Manufacturing becomes feasible not because the constraints were forced open, but because growth in services let people leave the land by choice.

*Ghatak is professor of economics, London School of Economics, and Chakraborty is professor of Economics, IIM Calcutta*



THE SPEAKING TREE

# Stress Spaces You Out

**NARAYANI GANESH**

When you are under any kind of stress, all your faculties work at below optimal levels. Comprehension, judgement, discernment, department, emotions, memory recall, your body's vitals, everything goes for a six. You are not your usual self, so your thoughts and actions, too, are not what you would normally think and do. It is almost as though someone else has taken over your mind, body and spirit. When you are stressed, you may yell, frown, suspect, accuse, feel depressed — you could become a bundle of nerves, and your world turns upside down.

A new study published in 'Science advances' reported by Simon Spichak in Nature magazine says stress impairs your brain's ability to link memories — dampening insight. Acute stress makes it difficult to link memories of past events with fresh information... the results help to explain why people struggle to show insight under pressure.

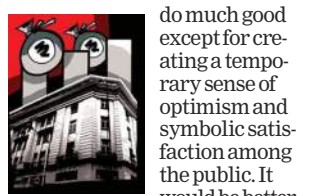
The universal solution to get instant relief from stress and anxiety is to take deep breaths. Breathe in, breathe out in a slow, measured pace, taking in a lungful of air and releasing it unhurriedly, in a steady stream. Repeat for a lasting solution, the underlying cause of stress has to be identified, understood, and remedial steps taken. Regular lifestyle practices that pre-empt any kind of stress include pranayam, meditation, chanting, walking, running and prayer. Self-affirmation can help auto-banish anxiety and stress.

## Chat Room

### Bourses for Courses

'Let Sleeping Bourses Lie' by Mridar Patherya (Jun 27) is disappointing, discouraging and out-and-out disheartening. Role of a stock exchange in capital formation is an axiomatic truth. During FY25, West Bengal's per-capita income was about ₹1.81 lakh, 19<sup>th</sup> nationally — a dire need to push up the rate of capital formation. The writer's sweeping statement about lack of talent in Kolkata to build and operate a stock exchange falls flat in today's free labour market. For providing investors opportunity to build long-term wealth through capital appreciation, portfolio diversification, price discovery as well as creating a highly liquid asset class, reviving stock exchange is a highly laudable effort. *Bijoy Bhuvan Bhattacharyya Mumbai*

This is a practical and forward-looking perspective on an issue often viewed through the lens of nostalgia rather than economic reality. That it entails a cost of ₹1,000 or before the first transaction and uncertain future highlights CSE is economically unviable. This initiative would not



do much good except for creating a temporary sense of optimism and symbolic satisfaction among the public. It would be better for West Bengal to partner NSE and create an ecosystem that attracts modern financial institutions, technology-driven enterprises and investment professionals, positioning itself as a competitive participant in the financial landscape of the future. *Samarth S Rajnayak New Delhi*

### Wear Your Proof Under Your Sleeve

Appropos 'Proud to be an Indian Citizen?' by Jay V Ojha, and 'Now a Citizen, Now You're Not' by Samrat Choudhury (Jun 27), in modern India, proof has become a national obsession. A birth certificate proves you were born. Aadhaar proves you exist, voter ID proves you can vote, PAN proves you can pay taxes, and a driving licence proves you can crash legally. Each card is a slice of your identity, yet none is enough. Enter the ultimate innovation: a tattoo on the forearm declaring 'Citizen of India'. No lamination, QR code or DigiLocker upload. Just roll up your sleeve at the airport or polling booth — instant verification. Advantages? Convenience, permanence, ease of access. Misuse? Unless someone borrows your arm. Of course, ink is forever; bureaucracy is not. *O Prasad Rao Hyderabad*

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editet@timesofindia.com

## IPO RECORDS TUMBLE

South Korean semiconductor giant SK Hynix plans to ride the AI wave to raise over \$29 billion in the US market next month. If this happens, 2026 would already have given us the two biggest IPOs ever, after SpaceX's record listing earlier this month. India's top two IPOs (NSE and Jio) were also announced this month, but we have much to catch up on the global leaderboard.

Biggest IPOs in history	Amount raised (\$ billion)
SpaceX (2026, US)	85.7
Saudi Aramco (2019, Saudi Arabia)	29.4
Alibaba (2014, US)	25.0
SoftBank Corp (2018, Japan)	23.5
General Motors (2010, US)	23.1
Agricultural Bank of China (2010, China*)	22.1
ICBC (2006, China*)	21.9
AIA Group (2010, Hong Kong)	20.5
Visa (2008, US)	19.7
NTT DoCoMo (1998, Japan)	18.1

Includes extra shares sold under greenshoe option where applicable. \*Dual listings in Hong Kong and Shanghai. ICBC: Industrial and Commercial Bank of China. Amounts are not inflation-adjusted, so are not strictly comparable. Source: ET research

## MEME'S THE WORD



# Riding Out Hormuz



**Hardeep Singh Puri**

When the Strait of Hormuz closed in February-end, Gol made it a priority that Indian citizens, especially the most vulnerable, be protected from unprecedented supply and price disruptions. That move has held through almost 4 mths later.

A country importing more than 85% of its crude, the argument ran, could not survive closure of Hormuz through which more than 20-30% of the world's hydrocarbons move. Today, stocks are full, pumps are open, and the Indian consumer has paid less for energy through this crisis than any other consumer in the world.

Nearly 60% of India's LPG consumption used to be supplied from West Asia. Much of that supply, almost overnight, dropped to zero. On the supply side, LPG Control Order was passed on March 8, which mandated that refineries to divert all their C3-C4 carbon streams to maximum LPG production. Refineries that had never made cooking gas were reconfigured within a few days, and production was raised from 35 TMT a day to 54 TMT a day.

At the peak of war, when no vessel was moving out of Hormuz, over 12 Indian LPG vessels were quietly moved out of the strait without any toll payment, the largest number for any country. Cargoes were secured and ship-to-ship transfers were done from Yanbu and Fujairah ports down the Red Sea route. Vessels were sent inside Hormuz to get new cargoes, and fresh supply lines were opened with sev-

eral countries like Algeria, Japan and Canada. Every producer India had ever dealt with, within the Gulf and outside it, stood with it.

But demand also had to be prioritised. Digital authentication code was made mandatory to prevent diversion of cooking gas by black marketers. A 25-day and 45-day limit was imposed, so that every citizen got cylinders without anyone able to hoard them.

As commercial cylinders are not regulated and any one buyer could have bought entire supplies available at once, it was routed through industry associations and state civil supplies departments. Industry was moved out of piped natural gas, large kitchens and establishments encouraged to fall back on other fuels wherever possible, and household piped gas and CNG were kept in the 'no-cut' category.

Gol came together to enable a shift to piped gas connections through faster municipal permissions. Between February and June, international benchmark for cooking gas, Saudi CP, rose by nearly 50%. But a cylinder that would cost more than ₹1,600 at import-linked rate still reaches an Ujjwala home at

₹642. Gol absorbs roughly ₹900 loss on each Ujjwala cylinder, and close to ₹600 on every cylinder going to every other household. So, every Indian family today pays much less for their cooking gas than households in other countries.

A bold central excise cut of ₹10 a litre in March absorbed substantial part of the price shock, as crude had nearly doubled and PSU oil companies absorbed daily losses running to over ₹500-1,000 or through this quarter. Across those same months, petrol at US pumps rose by more than 40%, and in Britain by close to 20%, with double-digit increases across much of Europe. The rise in Indian pumps was held to around 7%.

India's foreign reserves stand at near ₹690 bn, down only modestly from the all-time high of ₹728.49 bn recorded in the very week the conflict began, with the economy growing at 7.8% last quarter.

As for oil reserves, energy locked underground earns nothing and costs a great deal to hold. So, it's run through a system of import terminals, depots, pipelines, refineries and storage spread across the country. India today has 24 refineries, more than 47,000 km of oil and gas pipelines, and over 1 lakh petrol pumps that serve nearly 8 cr people every day.

Almost 4 mths into the largest energy disruption of our times, India did not have to take any emergency rationing measures. This was possible only because the ground had been prepared in the years before. The widening of India's crude basket from 27 countries to 41, the doubling of import terminals, and pipelines and reserves built across a decade were not abstractions when Hormuz closed. They were the very reasons the lights stayed on.



**Steadying the hand**

*The writer is minister for petroleum & natural gas, Gol*



## This Mess We're In

**PJ Harvey/Thom Yorke**

PJ Harvey's 'This Mess We're In', from her 2000 album *Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea*, is a fragile jewel — an intimate duet with Thom Yorke that feels like a sign of a confession in the ruins of modern love.

Harvey's voice enters first, hushed yet resolute, carrying the song's delicate architecture

with wounded grace. There's a tremor in her delivery, as though each syllable might collapse under the weight of its own vulnerability.

The refrain, 'The city sunset over me,' makes the song about a planetary and personal disaster at the same time.

Yorke's presence is spectral, his falsetto weaving around Harvey's lines like smoke. The interplay of the voices is a tender, tired negotiation, two voices circling each other to sleep. Musically, the track is sparse — piano chords and subtle textures that echo the emptiness of the city streets it evokes. And within that sparseness blooms intimacy. The song becomes a moment of raw humanity captured in sound. 'This Mess We're In' is a brittle dialogue, a signature tune of the plight all of us face sometime or another.

# The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India -founded 1818

## Memory and History

The withdrawal of an artwork from Britain's National Portrait Gallery over its portrayal of Winston Churchill's role in the Bengal Famine of 1943 is not merely another episode in the culture wars. It underlines an enduring truth: history is never just about the past. It is also about how societies choose to remember, reinterpret and debate their most painful experiences.

For Bengal, the famine is no distant historical episode. It remains one of the defining tragedies of the twentieth century. Millions perished, families were shattered, and memories of hunger became embedded in the region's literature, politics and collective consciousness. The scale of the catastrophe is beyond dispute. The arguments begin when responsibility is assigned.

Over the decades, historians have arrived at no single verdict. There is broad agreement that the famine emerged from a deadly convergence of wartime disruption, administrative failures, inflation, market distortions, colonial policies and environmental factors.

There is much less agreement on Winston Churchill's precise role. Some scholars contend that his wartime priorities and attitudes towards India aggravated the disaster. Others argue that while British imperial governance bears undeniable responsibility, the evidence does not support reducing the famine to the actions or intentions of one man. The debate remains alive because the evidence continues to be interpreted differently.

That is why the latest controversy deserves to be viewed carefully. The artist did not claim to have made a documentary, nor did the gallery present the work as an official account of history. It described the installation as a personal artistic response, while the artist defended it as an exploration of history and memory rather than a definitive historical narrative. Yet public institutions cannot entirely escape the consequences of the conversations they choose to host. Their responsibility is not to police artistic opinion or shield historical figures from criticism.

Equally, they should not allow political pressure to determine what may or may not be exhibited. Their role is to create space for informed engagement with difficult subjects, especially when those subjects remain matters of genuine scholarly disagreement.

The answer, therefore, is neither censorship nor unquestioning acceptance. It is context. When art enters contested historical territory, institutions should help audiences appreciate that there are competing interpretations grounded in serious research. Such an approach neither diminishes artistic freedom nor weakens historical inquiry. On the contrary, it encourages viewers to examine evidence, confront complexity and arrive at their own conclusions.

The Bengal Famine deserves remembrance that is both compassionate and intellectually honest. Art has every right to challenge accepted narratives. History has every obligation to question them. A mature society need not choose between the two. It should insist that they remain in conversation, for it is through that dialogue - not through silence or certainty - that the past continues to illuminate the present.

## Brexit Dividend

Ten years after Britain voted to leave the European Union, the most revealing aspect of Brexit is not what happened, but what did not. The promised economic renaissance never arrived. Yet neither did the collapse predicted by some of its fiercest critics. What emerged instead was something more subtle and perhaps more consequential: a slower, less dynamic economy whose losses accumulated quietly over time. Political campaigns are won on grand promises. Brexit was sold as a route to restored sovereignty, regulatory freedom and global commercial opportunity. In formal terms, those objectives were achieved. Britain regained control over trade policy, immigration rules and regulatory frameworks. The country's elected governments now enjoy greater latitude in shaping economic policy without reference to Brussels. The problem is that economic freedom and prosperity are not the same thing. Modern trade depends less on tariffs than on the absence of friction. For decades, British firms operated within a vast integrated market where goods, services and capital moved with minimal obstacles. Leaving that framework inevitably introduced costs.

Customs declarations, regulatory compliance, border checks and divergent standards may appear technical, but collectively they alter commercial behaviour. Businesses that once treated Europe as a domestic marketplace must now navigate barriers that did not previously exist. The burden has fallen disproportionately on smaller firms. Large multinational companies possess the resources to adapt. Smaller exporters often do not. Some have reduced their European footprint; others have withdrawn altogether. The result is not a dramatic collapse in trade but a gradual narrowing of commercial opportunities. Investment tells a similar story. Businesses invest when they can predict future conditions with reasonable confidence. The prolonged uncertainty surrounding Britain's departure from the EU discouraged many long-term commitments. Lost investment does not produce immediate headlines. Instead, it appears years later in weaker productivity, slower wage growth and diminished competitiveness.

To acknowledge these costs is not to argue that Brexit delivered no benefits. Britain has shown greater flexibility in negotiating trade agreements and may possess advantages in emerging sectors where regulatory agility matters. In an age defined by artificial intelligence, strategic competition and shifting geopolitical alliances, the ability to move independently could yet prove valuable. But potential future gains cannot erase present realities. Geography remains one of the most powerful forces in economics. The European market sits on Britain's doorstep, and no network of distant trade agreements can fully replicate that proximity. The real lesson of the past decade is that sovereignty carries economic trade-offs. Nations can choose greater political autonomy, but they cannot choose a world in which economic interdependence ceases to matter. Brexit expanded Britain's room for manoeuvre. Whether that freedom ultimately proves worthwhile will depend not on the referendum itself but on how effectively future governments use it. The next chapter of the Brexit story will not be written by campaigners. It will be written by policymakers confronting a simple challenge: how to turn political independence into economic success.

# Being lonely

Loneliness has several negative effects on the body and mind. Well-documented studies in public health journals like Lancet and psychiatry and medical journals reveal that it can significantly increase the risk of depression and anxiety. It may promote suicide ideation. It is known to hasten cognitive decline and increase the risk of Alzheimer's by up to 31 per cent in large population studies



Although loneliness stems from a feeling of social isolation, ironically, it is one of the most unifying human experiences. Another ironic aspect of loneliness is that it can occur even when one is surrounded by people. Here Jagjit Singh's wistful singing comes to mind: "Har taraf, har jagah, beshumaar aadmi, phir bhi tanhaiyon ka shikaar aadmi" (Everywhere, every side, are huge numbers of people, yet man is prey to loneliness). The bad news is, in the midst of worsening statistics regarding loneliness, mental health disorders have overtaken cardiovascular disorders as the leading cause of morbidity in the world.

The good news, however, is that loneliness is not all that difficult to fix. It requires human interaction, kindness, empathy, good listening abilities and the will to engage deeply - skills which most humans possess. The Covid pandemic reinforced this: Although strict quarantine laws and social distancing protocols confined people to limited spaces for months on end it also brought out how meaningful connections can be forged between strangers.

Housewives cooked for their sick neighbours, doctors conducted free global webinars and concerned youngsters stayed awake overnight, accommodating time zones online, to boost the morale of those friends accidentally trapped in other continents, unable to return due to travel restrictions. In short, people reached out. This was heartwarming.

Yet there are barriers to such interaction. Our social structure inhibits people's natural tendency to connect with each other. We are discouraged from socialising with people of different backgrounds, race, religion, caste and economic class. In extreme cases, there are "honour killings" (a complete misnomer for an honourless act): wherein some family members would rather see one dead than non-conforming towards social norms.

My observations are that wealthier citizens have greater opportunities to forge friendships and connect. The privilege of time and resources is used to bond with friends at parties, soirees and cultural events. Even

professional 'networking' seems easier when consequential deals can be struck over a game of golf.

In contrast, a lower middle-class woman is typically hard-pressed for time to foster social connections with peers as her children, in-laws and family are dependent on her. Though physically surrounded by her family members, there can be limited empathy, leaving the woman no outlet to unburden herself. The suicide rates among women in India was twice the global average in the period between 2014-2020 as per a study in Lancet Public Health. More than 50 per cent were housewives.

Having slaved all their lives, many women feel that their only time and ticket to earn some rest is when their daughter-in-law arrives to do an (unfair) share of work and they can finally put up their exhausted feet for good. Regressive saas bahu TV serials and patriarchal thinking has promoted loneliness by vilifying a natural bond: daughter-in-law and mother-in-law.

Two women in the same household can actually end up being the best of friends as they likely have to fight the same battles against issues such as local problems, roads, sanitation and patriarchal laws. Working women, though, have a professional circle of friends and acquaintances, and the burden of managing work in the office and a disproportionate share of household chores may leave them with limited time.

Capitalism with its emphasis on more and more wealth creation, may induce loneliness. The mindless pursuit of more power and money makes people sacrifice time with family and friends as they chase one corporate target after another. A deep connection with screens rather than humans or Nature is also a cause for feeling bereft. When performance-oriented workers retire, they lose the somewhat comforting sense of recognition brought on by the position they occupy; and since many have not developed genuine rich relationships with their own family and outside-of-work friends, they can suddenly find themselves feeling very isolated.

The prevailing legal system in India may also be fostering loneliness. The anti-conversion laws of some states discourage people from practising another religion as it requires notifying the government of the shift. It also requires proof of no collusion, adding practical

challenges. In the recent past, these laws have been (mis)used to harshly crack down on citizens, most commonly minorities.

New labour laws allow extended working shifts of 12 hours (compared to the traditional eight), leaving less time for employees to engage with friends and family. Even the recent stray dog judgement ignorantly penalised and restricted various aspects of free bonding between humans and street animals. Whereas the wealthy can afford domestic pets, stray dogs have been a great source of companionship for poorer people who don't have as much space in their homes. Loneliness has several negative effects on the body and mind. Well-documented studies in public health journals like Lancet and psychiatry and medical journals reveal that it can significantly increase the risk of depression and anxiety. It may promote suicide ideation.

It is known to hasten cognitive decline and increase the risk of Alzheimer's by up to 31 per cent in large population studies. As per a large meta-analytical study from the journal Heart, it also increases the risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease by 32 and 29 per cent respectively. Lonely people are more likely to perform poorly at work and have lower immunity.

The interim report of the World Health Organization (WHO) Commission on Social Connection (launched in 2023) has found a prevalence of loneliness in one out of every six people. Lower income countries and the teenage demographic are more impacted by loneliness. The UK was the first country to start a ministry of loneliness and a national policy to combat loneliness in 2018.

An interesting development has been 'social prescription', wherein doctors customize and prescribe social integration activities which are then implemented through community link agents.

Japan followed suit in 2021 with its own loneliness ministry as there was a spurt in suicide rates especially amongst women and children in the 2020s. Several European countries, though they may not have a formal ministry, do have comprehensive

policies to combat loneliness. Many policies include increasing the provision of shared public and community spaces and designing or residences that facilitate interaction.

How impactful these measures have been is not easy to quantify but questionnaires are routinely designed and data gathered. In India, government counsellors are available at primary health centers and various NGOs help relieve some of the isolation especially faced by elderly people.

How can we mitigate loneliness? Having a common cause greater than oneself which can impact our lives positively provides a deep sense of purpose and happiness, staving off loneliness. It has also been historically useful to build such bridges for collective action - for example, mitigating global warming and fighting for human rights. Group interactions should be an important focus of urban planning.

Resident Welfare Association (RWA) activities in colonies are a blessing for the elderly who are physically restricted. When my grandmother was paralyzed, she found great refuge and plenty of company in the weekly colony meetings which she attended in her wheelchair.

As formal structured learning and decision-making decreases, it becomes essential for the elderly to supplement their mental development with socialisation. If one could keep learning by enrolling in various classes (a plethora of which are available free of cost), it would keep both the memory and intellect ticking as well as provide a cohort of like-minded people.

At the governmental level, infrastructure such as free common spaces like parks, libraries, and artisan-rich haats can help people connect. The government can also ensure through their administrative services that counsellors and self-help groups are appointed in every village.

Young adolescents can benefit from the wisdom of elders. Stories of graceful fortitude such as those exhibited by refugees who lost entire families and material possessions during the partition of India and had to strike out on their own with limited means can inspire the young generation to take hardships and loss in their stride.

We can deliberately build in mindful inclusion in our professional lives. As a young student studying in the NHS system in the UK, my son would make it a point to spend hours talking to elderly patients who found it difficult to express themselves due to stroke or speech impediments. I too have learnt from my son to spend those extra few minutes talking to the patient when I go on ICU or ward calls in a hospital.

The basics of improving loneliness involve open-mindedness and a kind heart. We can contribute strongly to mitigating this phenomenon - individually or collectively, in diverse ways - engaging with staff more meaningfully, calling up our elderly relatives, sharing our own experiences of loneliness, adopting a stray - there is no lone answer.

## The Korea Herald

### Taxing the symptom

Housing markets have a way of tempting governments into believing that taxes can accomplish what bulldozers and cranes cannot. When prices climb, fiscal tools offer the appeal of speed and political visibility.

Yet housing shortages are rarely solved through the tax code. They are addressed by expanding supply and allowing markets to function with fewer distortions.

The Lee Jae Myung administration is again signaling a possible tightening of real estate taxes. The president recently noted that Korea's holding taxes are relatively low. Presidential policy chief Kim Yong-beom argued that stronger taxation may be needed to prevent liquidity generated by the semiconductor boom from flowing into property markets.

With July's tax overhaul approaching,

the prospect of higher holding and capital gains taxes is triggering renewed disputes.

Concerns about overheating are understandable. Housing prices in parts of southern Gyeonggi Province, particularly around the semiconductor belt, have accelerated as large bonuses and rising asset values boost purchasing power. Apartment prices in Dongtan, for instance, rose 2.22 percent in the third week of June alone. But money usually chases scarcity. That is where the government's diagnosis becomes less convincing.

Housing permits, construction starts and completions have all been declining. Supply plans have been announced repeatedly, yet visible progress remains limited. As future inventories shrink, liquidity becomes an amplifier rather than

the source of the problem.

The numbers point in the same direction. Apartment move-ins this year are projected to be almost 40 percent below 2022 levels. In the Seoul metropolitan area, the decline approaches 46 percent.

With both sale prices and "jeonse" (a lump-sum housing rental system) costs rising, expectations of tighter supply are intensifying competition for scarce homes and adding to anxiety among would-be buyers and renters.

History offers little encouragement for punitive taxation. Previous administrations found that higher capital gains taxes often discouraged sales rather than speculation, reducing listings and locking up inventory.

Higher holding taxes, meanwhile, frequently found their way into rents and jeonse deposits. The burden rarely

disappeared; it merely shifted.

The structure of Korea's property taxes also deserves a broader perspective. Comparisons focusing solely on effective holding tax rates can be misleading. Transaction taxes and capital gains taxes are already heavy by international standards and place Korea among the more heavily taxed property markets among member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Raising all three property taxes simultaneously would leave homeowners with fewer incentives to sell and buyers with fewer choices, further reducing market liquidity.

Tax systems work best when different levies complement rather than reinforce one another. Closing every avenue at once would freeze transactions and leave prices increasingly detached from market reality.

## Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

### Deserve better

Sir, This refers to the editorial "Fire Trap," (June 25). The Lucknow fire tragedy is painful but not surprising.

We have known for years that commercial buildings in Indian cities routinely bypass safety norms, and yet enforcement remains largely ceremonial. The problem is not the absence of rules but the absence of accountability.

Fire safety audits must be mandatory and conducted by independent agencies, not self-certified by building owners. Municipalities should maintain a publicly accessible digital registry of all buildings with their compliance status.

More importantly, officials who approve or renew licences for non-compliant structures must be held personally liable when disasters occur.

Compensation announcements after tragedies are no substitute for prevention. State governments should consider dedicating a portion of urban development funds

specifically to retrofitting older buildings with basic fire safety infrastructure. Resident welfare associations and local civil society groups can play a useful monitoring role if given formal standing.

Until we treat these deaths as the result of institutional failure rather than mere accidents, the cycle will continue. Eighteen young lives deserved better governance than they received.

Yours, etc., A Myilsami, Coimbatore, 25 June.

Violations should attract substantial fines, penalties and even suspension of licences for repeated non-compliance. Accountability must also extend to officials who overlook safety breaches. Unless regulations are backed by rigorous supervision and meaningful consequences, fire-safety compliance will remain a mere formality rather than a life-saving obligation.

Yours, etc., Dr. Bijurica Chakraborty, Kolkata, 25 June.

### Structural rot

Sir, The poignant editorial "Fire Trap" (June 25) cuts deep into the structural rot of our urban governance, rightly observing that immediate actions are necessary but entirely insufficient.

The true lynchpin lies in your call to "enforce compliance without fear or favour." These words hold immense institutional weight. Decades ago, the landmark Santhanam Committee Report detailed how administrative discretion, devoid of personal accountability,

fosters systemic corruption. Today, despite being a signatory to the United Nations Convention against Corruption and orchestrating symbolic integrity pledges, the ground reality exposes a profound hypocrisy where noble intentions never translate into executive will.

Consequently, mandatory annual audits risk becoming mere paperwork exercises designed to grant a structural "clean chit" to influential violators under extraneous considerations.

A universal awakening of individual conscience is the need of the day, which would naturally render regulatory frameworks redundant. Collectively, we can break this vicious trap - on whichever side of the table we sit - but will we?

This is the ultimate challenge that must be met so that our public spaces are filled only with cheering or smiling faces, not unforgettable and nightmarish cries.

Yours, etc., Krishan Kumar Chugh, New Delhi, 25 June.

# The lights are staying on in UP



Energy is the backbone of the modern economy, driving industrial productivity, transport, connectivity, trade and basic necessities. For decades, the state of Uttar Pradesh's power sector was plagued by shortages, load shedding, biased distribution and urban-rural divide, with lakhs of unelectrified villages languishing in darkness. Between 2014 and 2017, the crisis reached its lowest point. Despite tariff hikes of up to 60 per cent, supply remained abysmal.

At the end of the Samajwadi Party's rule, the maximum power output was just 13,000 MW. By May 2026, under CM Yogi Adityanath, the state successfully met its peak demand of 31,824 MW, nearly triple and, moreover, the highest in the state's history. Uttar Pradesh has not just overcome its power deficit but is also redefining energy management by setting new benchmarks in coverage and reliability.

This transformation has not happened by accident. It is the result of a double-engine government strategy initiated in 2017 that prioritized the three pillars of the power sector: generation, transmission and distribution.

With regard to generation, the government has aggressively expanded generation capacity from less than 5,000 MW in 2014 to 9,120 MW by March 2026, nearly doubling in just over a decade. This active expansion, attributed to infrastructure modernization, capacity addition and a push towards renewables, ensures that the state is no longer dependent on external power fluctuations during peak demand. Likewise, the total capacity of the major sub-stations which was 39,000 MVA in 2017 has now reached 2 lakh MVA in 2025; almost six times higher than during SP's rule.

The state has also expanded its supply network. Under the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana and the Saubhagya Scheme, large-scale electrification work has been carried out in rural areas. Additionally, continuous effort is centred around reliable distribution.

Nearly 1.6 lakh kilometres of old and damaged power lines and nearly 30 lakh damaged and deteriorating electricity poles have been replaced. Smart meters have been introduced to improve monitoring and billing. These steps have reduced losses by DISCOMs, with transmission losses having dropped to 3.2 per cent and strengthened control over power theft leading to efficiency.

While the pre-2017 period was marked by systemic failure that stifled economic growth and exasperated the common man, in the new regime, generation and power capacity has enabled cooling fans running in the scorching summer heat, tubewells irrigating fields and providing a major boost to the growth of cottage industries, small businesses, MSMEs, and industrial manufacturing



which collectively are driving state's economy.

The most impactful aspect of these reforms has been the equitable distribution of power. In the past, electricity access was defined by the rural-urban divide and regional bias. Samajwadi Party's administration was notorious for favouring its strongholds while leaving other regions in darkness. Additionally, there was a stark rural-urban divide too. There were reports of district headquarter towns getting nearly 14 hours of electricity a day and villages struggling with nearly 8 hours, with lakhs of villages stifling in total darkness.

Today, the administration is working to bridge those divides to provide uninterrupted power supply to all regions. Further, nearly 1.7

lakh habitations have been electrified since 2017. This shift is transformative for the rural areas, giving farmers reliable irrigation for a stronger agrarian economy, as well as a dignified life to crores of men and women in rural areas.

Equally significant has been the citizen-centric approach with communication and transparency as its core towards addressing citizen needs and grievances. Chief Minister Adityanath has emphasized a technology-driven, responsive, and sensitive approach for addressing citizens grievances. Portals and prompt grievance redressal are examples of this.

Additionally, with a view to providing long term stability and reliability, the state government is actively future-proofing the grid.

The recent approval of Rs 42.75 crore for five new substations in the Gorakhpur division is a pro-active effort in the right direction. The state is also securing its future electricity needs with an increasing share of non-conventional energy sources such as solar, biomass etc.

Uttar Pradesh's power sector transformation is not just a stand-alone development index. It serves as the bedrock on which industrial, economic and social development is being built. It highlights the determination, political will and sincerity of the Adityanath government. The lights are on; they are staying on and the state is finally powered for the future.

The writers are, respectively, National Spokesperson, BJP, and a development and sustainability expert.

## 100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 29 June 1926

## OCCASIONAL NOTE

The agitation, carried on with skill, has had the effect of inducing the Government of India to seek the advice of the provincial Governments which would be shorn of part of their territories if an Orissa Province were formed. The replies of the local ad-ministrations are now being received. As might be expected they are not favourable to the proposal. No ad-ministration likes to be deprived of its districts, good or bad, but, apart from this side of the question, some of the territories claimed by the Oriyas are also claimed by the Telegu-speaking people who, too, desire a province they can call their own. Any attempts, therefore, to put into practice the proposals emanating from Cuttack would probably raise a communal problem of great magnitude.

## News Items

### HOUSES DAMAGED

### HEAVY SHOCKS IN CENTRAL SUMATRA

Batavia, June. Heavy earthquake shocks were experienced to-day in several places in central Sumatra, where the inhabitants are now panic-stricken. The Governor's residence at Padang, and many European houses have been seriously damaged.—Reuter.

### PORTUGUESE PLOT

### EX-MINISTER AND OFFICERS ARRESTED

Paris, June. A message from Lisbon says that the police have confiscated manifestoes protesting against the present political situation and have arrested a number of personages, including three ex-Prime Ministers, General Sagardoso Senhor Jose Domingo Santos, leader of the Left Party and Senhor Alvaro Castro, leader of the Republican movement, who will be deported to the Azores, also the ex-War Minister, Senhor Helder Ribeiro and the ex-Finance Minister, Senhor Pestano Junior, belonging to the Left Democratic Party.—Reuter.

### BARDSLEY INJURED

### CARRIES BAT THROUGH LONG INNINGS

When the Australians continued their innings this morning, Bardsley was joined by Oldfield. The next sensation was that Bardsley, hit by a rising ball (from Larwood?) and retired to the pavilion for 5 minutes. His injury was attended to and he returned, but he was not the same batsman after that. Oldfield was caught by Sutcliffe off Kilner when he had scored 19 and Mailey, who next joined Bardsley put his leg in front of one from Kilner and had to go back. Bardsley had carried out his bat through the innings for 193 runs, and the Australian innings reached 383 runs.—Copyright.

### STEAMERS FOR CANADA

### BIG ORDER FOR BRITISH SHIPYARDS

(British Official Wireless.)  
Rugby, June. Mr. Beatty, President of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company before sailing for Quebec from Southampton made an important announcement that during his brief visit to England he had placed a contract for the construction of three freight steamers, each of ten thousand tons with British shipyards. A deal of tonnage at present sailing on the ocean is becoming obsolete and will have to be replaced within the next few years. That alone will give the much required impetus to the shipbuilding industry.

### AMAZING SCENES

### COLLINS BOWLED FOR A SINGLE

(Special Cricket Service.)  
London, June. Amazing scenes were witnessed at Lord's to-day when the second Test match between England and Australia of the present tour was begun. Thousands of enthusiasts kept a long vigil from early morning and some all through the night.

## IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

# The endgame

Last night I attended the birthday party for Connor. Connor is now 100. Several who attended the party were over eighty, two in their nineties. I guess that they took a special joy in sipping their wine, hoping to match Connor's durable run. One said jubilantly, "How well Connor looks!" Another echoed, "I wish I look as good at his age."

I grew up in a world where octogenarians were rare, and a centenarian was a veritable freak. No longer. In the community where I now live the residents are affluent. There is no protein deficiency; healthcare is punctilious. No wonder these men ride into a slow sunset. Women here do even better – they outlive their worn-out husbands by six years.

I am an unwitting enlister in this widening Methuselah race. I have long past the age at which my father succumbed to an inept surgeon's scalpel. Several of my friends have passed to the hereafter, while others hint often at their aching infirmities. More than ever, I have begun to grow an awareness of the limited time before the curtain starts descending for me.

What does a man do with the five, seven or ten years left to him? I wondered. I decided to talk to my aging neighbours and friends and explore their ideas. They were smart men who had held responsible jobs and were daily observing their equals with failing bodies and fading minds.

Ethan, 83, coped poorly with my question. Why would I live differently, he asked, because I have fewer years to live? I asked if he would continue to sit and talk with me if he had just one more hour to live. No, he said, he would spend that hour with his children. What would he do if he had one year? That made him think.

He thought for several minutes before he said, apologetically, "I realize I haven't given thought to this. I may die next week, and I don't know what I would like to do before that. I know for sure I don't want to keep doing the usual things. But I don't know what unusual things I'd like to do – or I must do before my time expires."

Moirra, 87, started by enumerating the places she would like to visit and the restaurants she would dine in, then stopped and realized how frivolous sounded her choices.

"I am afraid those activities sound rather trivial," she confessed. "I could talk about how I would share my assets between my two sons, but that doesn't pass muster either. I keep on living from day to day, week to week, without much regard for how I could best use the remaining time. I know I want it to be more peaceful than my earlier life, even my present life. There remain still just too many hassles. I need to find a way to live a calmer life – a life where I don't let trifles upset me. At my age, all troubles are trifles!"

That was something. It encouraged me to have a word with Oliver. At

92, Oliver is still ramrod straight and walks a mile or two every morning. He laughed when I suggested that he share his preferences for his life for, say, the next eight years.

"You think I might survive to be 100?"

Before I could protest that he looked fit enough, he raised his hand, "I might indeed. But my physical and mental resources are both limited. My wife has died, and my children live far away, busy with their lives. I may not be able to make any radical or dramatic changes. But I do sometimes feel I would like my ensuing years to be meaningful in some way. I am not sure how, but I would like at least to be able to contribute something to the other people around me, particularly my old and frail friends. I am just not sure how."

My exchanges with these and other aging friends underscored a couple of things I hadn't anticipated. I was amazed at how content most of them were to just continue living as they had lived before and essentially shut their eyes to the steady approach of the finish line. My guess was that many shrank from any consideration of death and preferred to retain the illusion that each oncoming day would be like the familiar day preceding. Partly they shrank from the uncertain and unpleasant and partly they embraced the comfort of the familiar and humdrum.

For those who have an inkling of the need to make a change – if for

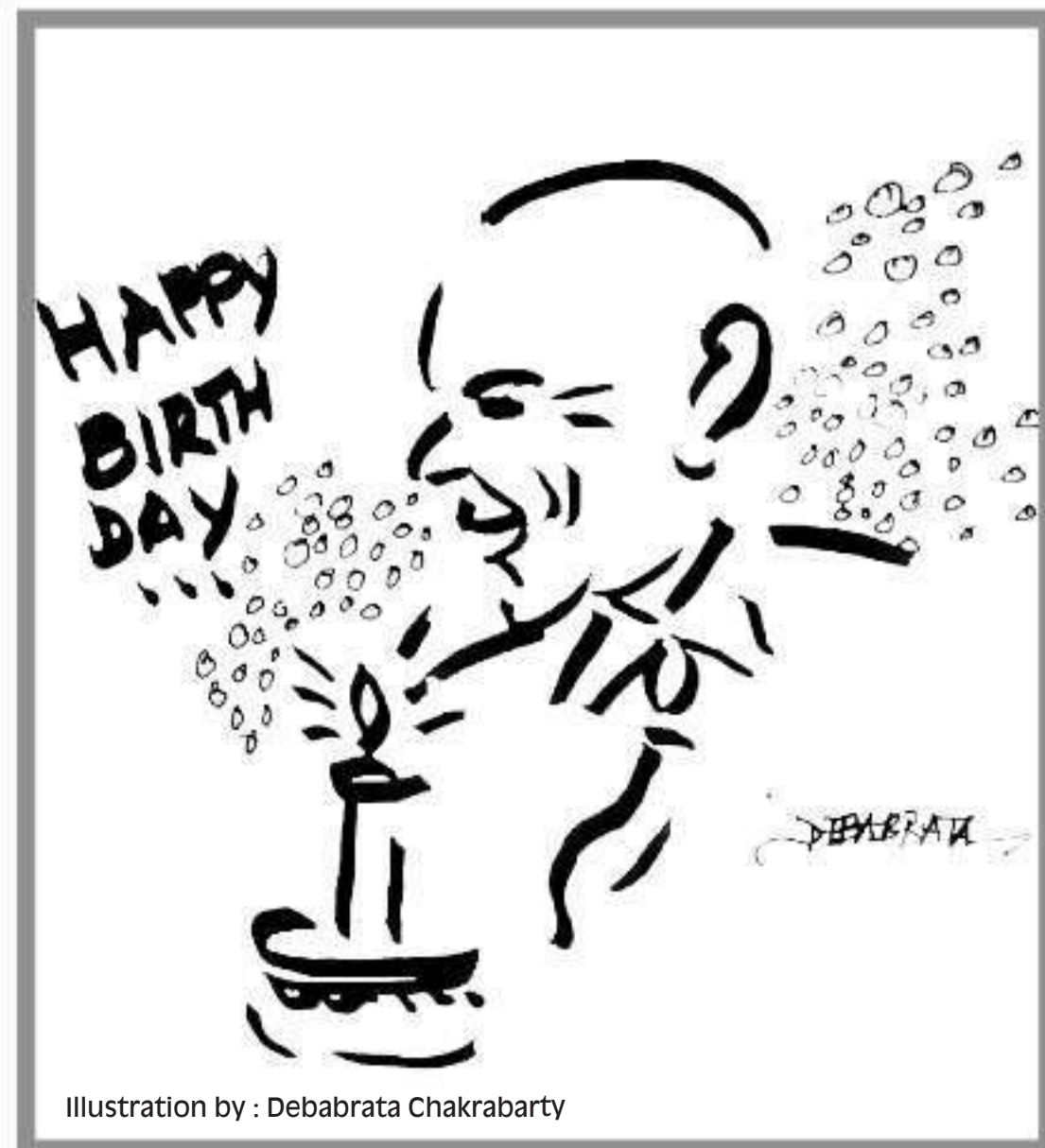


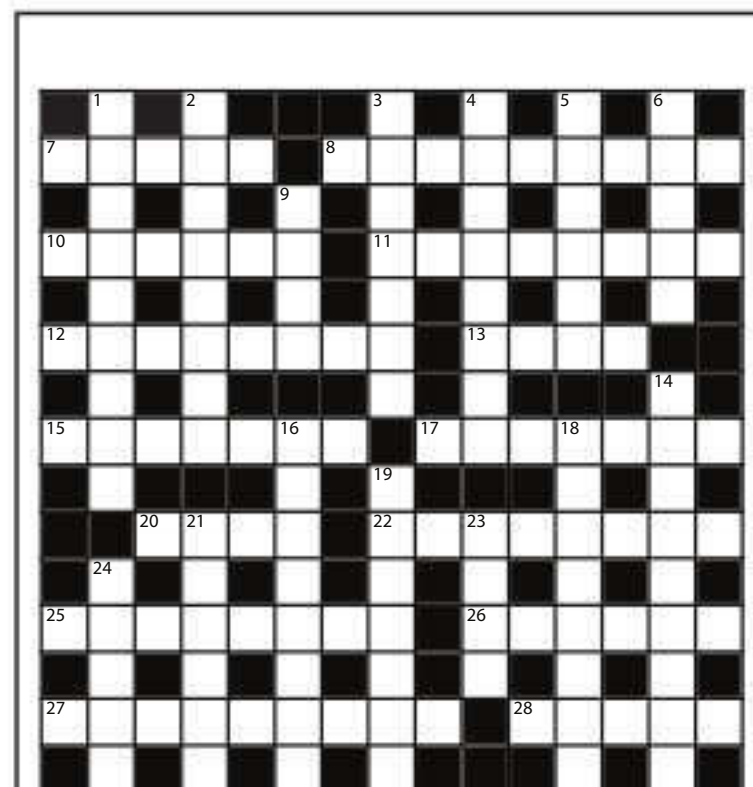
Illustration by : Debabrata Chakrabarty

no other reason than to achieve a long-sought inner quiet – there appears to be an amazing dearth of options. Given the fading horizon of religious solace, few seem even aware of secular options that can absorb one's heart's loyalty and offer the satisfaction of altruistic dedication. Many turn to children or family links even when their affiliation has

been less than warm, even precarious. Amid the encircling gloom, I guess I need to think again and contemplate the change-of-course that could make the coming years more than a thoughtless replay of the past.

The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com

## Crossword | No. 293505



### Last Saturday's Solution



### ACROSS

- 7 Kind of green bananas (5)
- 8 Clean-cut doctor's description of former patient? (9)
- 10 Mineral component of fossil catalogued (6)
- 11 Publicity drive Queen's informally expecting (8)
- 12 Afflicted by rickets, misshapen bones, essentially (8)

- 13 In short, former Queen's Counsel finally taken on by company boss (4)
- 15 Man's town, such as 9? (7)
- 17 Believe singer's after a drink for instructor (7)
- 20 Novel introduction to extreme combat sport (4)
- 22 Doing endless exercises, fast and slow (8)
- 25 Starvation diet? (4,4)

- 26 Good-looking lead characters in Carry On movies – everybody loves you! (6)
  - 27 Guy pursuing French national, both of them short and sweet (5,4)
  - 28 Centrepiece of running buffet sure is tender (5)
- DOWN**
- 1 Moderation in drugs (not cocaine) (9)

- 2 On a voyage, ship's company is heard to chant (8)
- 3 Being theatrical under carvas (7)
- 4 Clever 23, one deep in the midst of ground crew (8)
- 5 Starts to get lively during month of dance music (6)
- 6 Lenny, perhaps his last part after Chicken Run? (5)
- 9 Sailor's small white bowl (4)
- 14 Poor writer on 13's river boat (9)

- 16 Working in Canada, drunk reveals a reptile (8)
- 18 He famously explored a state capital (8)
- 19 Colls half of rope up, making a knot (7)
- 21 EU leader has time for country's first senior 28 (6)
- 23 Detective, one on crook's case (4)
- 24 Climate change – has it wiped out this beast? (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)





## OUR VIEW



## MSMEs need the help of both the Centre and RBI

Strengthening the resilience and competitiveness of India's small enterprises is critical to realizing their full potential. Thankfully, it ranks high on the country's governance agenda

Last week was a 'red-letter week' for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in India. The government set out plans to amend the existing legal framework for MSMEs to tackle some of the biggest bugbears facing the sector: delayed payments and disputes over them, minor penalties and compliance burdens. The amendments, likely to be introduced in the monsoon session of Parliament due to start on 21 July, are long overdue. The existing law on disputes arising from delayed claim payments is both cumbersome and time-consuming. MSMEs must first file a complaint with micro and small enterprise facilitation councils based in state capitals. These councils must then verify the complaint and refer the dispute for out-of-court resolution. This entails going through the entire gamut of mediation and conciliation, and if the dispute persists, arbitration. It spells needless delays. Not to be left behind, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) also eased on-boarding rules for small businesses on trade receivables discounting system (TReDS) platforms last week. MSMEs often face constraints in obtaining finance, particularly in converting receivables into liquid funds. TReDS platforms let these businesses discount their invoices and get instant working capital from banks and non-banks without collateral. The final framework, which comes into effect immediately, is aimed at making the system more efficient while easing compliance. So capital requirements for authorized entities have been streamlined with those of other non-bank payment system operators, the on-boarding process for MSME sellers has been simplified and financiers have been permitted to avail credit guarantee cover for exposures on TReDS.

Given the growing role of MSMEs in India's economy, these changes do not come a moment too soon. Globally, MSMEs make up 90% of businesses and account for about half the world's employment. In India, however, their share of GDP is a low 31%, though they account for close to 50% of India's merchandise exports and employ over 320 million people. Over the years, government schemes, such as Mudra (Micro Units Development and Refinance Agency) and CGTMSE (Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises), have helped enhance their access to formal credit. Loans to the MSME sector have grown at a compounded annual rate of 15% in the last five years, higher than the 13.7% overall growth in bank credit over the same period. Meanwhile, tech-enabled platforms such as the Unified Lending Interface—which lets lenders assess an MSME borrower with the help of digital data like GST filings, bank statements, utility records, land records, etc—grant them a single window based on borrower consent, rather than depend on laborious paperwork and physical verification. In the startup space, which bustles with MSMEs, this could be a game-changer.

Despite their sizeable economic and social contribution, MSMEs continue to face many challenges, including feeble access to finance, weak integration into regional and global value chains and a limited ability to innovate and adopt new technologies. They are also highly vulnerable to economic and external shocks. In a volatile global environment, marked by uncertainty and rapid technological change, strengthening the resilience and competitiveness of MSMEs is critical to realizing their full potential. Recent efforts by the government and RBI should go a long way towards that.

## MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION

## It's time for New Delhi to renew its ties with the Republic of Iran

Aid followed by trade can draw the two nations closer to their mutual benefit in a post-war world



NITIN PAI

is co-founder and director of The Takshashila Institution, an independent centre for research and education in public policy

If the United States of America had not coerced India to throttle its relationship with Iran in 2018, we would likely have had bilateral annual trade of over \$20 billion (importing 650,000 barrels a day of crude oil) and built strategic connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia through the Chabahar port. Nothing in the bilateral relationship was responsible for our loss. India was forced to reduce its purchases of oil and its own merchandise exports to Iran by Washington's sanctions and quotas.

Now that the US-Israeli war on Iran has created a new situation in West Asia, India must take the initiative to quickly rebuild ties with Tehran. Whatever positions New Delhi took before and during the war, realism demands that it deal with the consequences as they have unfolded.

Tehran has given us an opening by extending India an invitation to the state funeral of Ayatollah Khamenei. New Delhi should respond by sending a high-level representative—the vice-president will be a good choice—along with a humanitarian package of essential medical supplies and pharmaceuticals for the Iranian people. This must be done without delay.

Changed geopolitical circumstances demand that New Delhi re-prioritize its interests in West Asia. For nearly two decades, India has deprecated its relations with Iran as it sought to build

strong partnerships with the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. This approach yielded rich dividends, as relations with Washington flowered after the India-US nuclear deal. The Narendra Modi government transformed ties with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh even as it built an extensive relationship with Tel Aviv.

But these gains came at a cost: the combined weight of India's West Asian partnerships discouraged closer ties with Tehran. The Iranian government, for its own reasons, did little to compete with Iran's neighbours to court New Delhi. Washington's demand that New Delhi stop buying Iranian crude oil was just the final blow.

Yet, there have always been strong geopolitical reasons for India and Iran to draw closer together. The Kautilyan calculus literally suggests Iran—if it has strategic autonomy—can be an ally. Persian Shia Iran has never been comfortable with its Arab Sunni neighbours. As much as Pakistan tries to pursue its own interests, Tehran has well-founded suspicions that Islamabad will follow the Saudi line. These would have strengthened after Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed a mutual defence agreement. Religious ideology and political rhetoric might confound the audience, but some hard-nosed strategists in Tehran see India as a potential ally, and their counterparts in India return the favour.

In the mid-2000s, when Pakistan's General Pervez Musharraf was taking the US for a ride in Afghanistan, I had argued that it is in India's interests to start a diplomatic initiative to bring Washington and Tehran together. India was among the few countries that had good relations with both and would benefit from their rapprochement.

But I was told that New Delhi did not have an appetite to even attempt such a venture. India's interests lay with the Gulf Arab monarchies that did not want Iran to get any stronger. It was also pointed out that powerful Israeli lobbies in Washington would not allow such a

shift to take place, so there was no point even trying. To be fair, New Delhi was working hard on the US-India relationship at the time and might have calculated that there was no point in letting the Iran equation further complicate the situation.

That is history. As fantastic as it might appear today, it is in India's interests for the divide between Washington and Tehran to be bridged. We must not lose sight of this. The political winds might not be favourable today, but things can change. Vietnam became an American partner in just over two decades after the two countries fought a long, bloody war. More importantly, India's strategic establishment must realize that initiative makes a difference.

For now, the immediate task is to start a new phase in India-Iran relations. The Islamic Republic might have survived a war against two vastly superior adversaries, but still faces the task of rebuilding damaged infrastructure and reviving its economy. Also, it is by no means certain that its domestic political upheavals are over. So, despite its disappointment with some of New Delhi's recent actions, Tehran is likely to be receptive to an outreach by India. President Masoud Pezeshkian's invitation should be interpreted as such.

A low-profile initiative to provide humanitarian and medical supplies should be followed by attempts to get direct bilateral trade back on track. India will benefit from a quick resumption of crude oil and bitumen imports from Iran. Similarly, Iranians would welcome Indian tea, rice, wheat and pharmaceuticals.

New Delhi should offer a line of credit for Iran to import such goods from India. Beyond this, New Delhi could make it easier for Iranians to seek medical treatment in India.

New Delhi should move now—before the 60-day period of the memorandum of understanding between the US and Iran runs out—because it is risky. It is the risk that's the signal.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

The main role of government is to provide a stable economic environment that allows each individual to reach his or her full potential.

RONALD REAGAN

## MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

## Why state-sponsored yoga is largely a pointless exercise

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

A few years ago, after yoga became a public spectacle of important but unfit men performing what they claimed were *asanas*, a minister went into *shavasana*, or the 'corpse pose,' and dozed off. He had to be woken up. Not that the poses they were doing before that were more strenuous. When India says 'yoga,' its bar is very low. It means mild stretches and breathing exercises. People trying to touch their toes, impeded by paunches, or sitting in lotus position, inhaling, exhaling and looking as though they are doing something philosophical. And this is what India and some of its regional governments are trying to promote in government offices and schools in the name of yoga. Many fear they are being coerced into yoga. And they find it hard to resist what appears to be a well-meaning physical activity with a spiritual air.

The fact is, deep breaths and stretches are almost useless on their own and highly overrated as exercise unless you are a centenarian. If one is not doing any other form of

workout, like cardio or weight training, then government-sponsored yoga lite should not be deemed an exercise. Walking is superior.

People who are not physically active love yoga lite precisely because it is not exercise but officially proclaimed as such. That could mislead people. Scholars differ on how strenuous daily exercise must be to be meaningful, but broadly there is no dispute that it has to be strenuous. An exercise is physical activity that increases and decreases the heart rate either erratically or systematically. Or stretches and contracts muscles vigorously, resulting in a million micro tears for the body to repair, one of the processes by which they become stronger. Or stretches muscles gently to make them more durable. The yoga lite events of India do none of this, not even stretch muscles in meaningful ways.

Once, the people who were seen in public doing yoga were its great masters. Today their ambassadors look like they have back aches. Yet, not only do they claim they are exercising, but also that sitting still and breathing deeply is some feat.

Yoga is, in reality, a vast ocean of strenuous exercises. But what the government has started glorifying are its gateways processes. It's like glorifying warm-up before the run

and claiming that it amounts to running.

Most Indians who speak of the glory of yoga can barely bend. North India is filled with men whose attempt at touching the feet of the elderly is comical. It is not odd at all that people who are not fit are the most passionate about breathing exercises. This is also why, during the covid lockdown, those who hailed the government's strictures against stirring out, even for a walk, were probably also the most unfit. They would send security guards after me when I would go for a run within the housing colony. The unhealthy were quick converts to draconian covid rules because it was the first time that what came naturally to them, doing nothing, was also the mainstream health advice. They may have presumed that to sit at home in lotus position and breathe slowly before having samosas was healthier than jogging outside.

It is the same human nature that makes the inactive blaviate that there is some deep wisdom in breathing and stretching alone.

The loud and farcical link that Indians make between yoga and Indianness seems part of the same psyche. The less people do, the more they talk. We don't know how popular yoga was in ancient India or whether it was only a preserve of a few, but what we do know is that by the 20th century, Indians

had all but abandoned it, especially its vast array of strenuous exercise. B.K.S. Iyengar, who resurrected yoga in the modern world, says so in his memoirs. Not just that, yoga was restricted to upper caste men. When Iyengar began to teach it, Indians were not interested. He found foreigners the most receptive. And he faced ostracism by his own community for teaching them yoga, with women included.

Yoga regained its popularity in India after the West endorsed it. In any case, there's a big difference between what Iyengar calls yoga, which is a fabulous set of exercises, and the farce on display. People tend to overvalue what comes easily to them and ridicule what they cannot bear to do. In Fredrik Backman's

novel, *A Man Called Ove*, an old man wonders what is the point of middle-aged men running so slowly: "What he can't understand is why they have to make such a big thing of it. With those smug smiles on their faces, as if they were out there curing pulmonary emphysema. Either they walk fast or they run slowly, that's what joggers do. It's a forty-year-old man's way of telling the world that he can't do anything right. Is it really necessary to dress up as a fourteen-year-old Romanian gymnast in order to be able to do it?"

But then, even slow running (the only definition of running is an act where both feet are not on the ground at the same instant), is usually a high-intensity workout that may just prevent pulmonary emphysema. I cannot, in good conscience, defend small shorts worn by grown men though.

Like the slow running of middle-aged men, yoga too is defamed by people who don't like the sort of people who practise it. Hepatologist Cyriac Abby Philips, known as Liverdoctor on Twitter, called yoga useless. He is probably annoyed by the ambassadors of yoga more than yoga. Even controlled breathing and stretches are not entirely pointless. All I say is that their glorification has created the false notion that they are sufficient exercises, which they are not.

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GUEST VIEW

# A single word could criminalize every informed investor in India

Trading on information that's simultaneously material and non-public is mischievous—but is routine on either of the two



SUMIT AGRAWAL & M. DAMODARAN

are, respectively, managing partner, Regstreet Law Advisors and a former Sebi officer; and chairperson, Excellence Enablers, and former chairman, Sebi, UTI and IDBI.

The Securities Markets Code of 2025 contains a drafting error in Clause 93(b) so small that it is monosyllabic. The conjunction used is "or." It should be "and." In ordinary writing, this would be a copy-editor's note. In a provision that carries up to ten years of imprisonment, a fine of ₹25 crore and qualifies as a scheduled offence under India's Prevention of Money-Laundering Act (PMLA), the difference between these two words is the difference between a law that targets guilty traders and one that can ensnare every investor who reads the morning newspaper before placing a trade.

Clause 93(b) prohibits a person from dealing in securities "while in possession of material or non-public information that would affect the value of such securities." The target is obvious: front-running, or trading akin to insider dealing that exploits information asymmetry, corrupts price discovery and destroys investor confidence. The instinct is right. The drafting is not. As written, the clause creates two independent sufficient conditions, either of which by itself triggers the prohibition. A person who possesses information that is material but entirely public is caught. A person who possesses information that is non-public but wholly immaterial is caught too. On a literal reading, an institutional fund manager who trades after studying a company's publicly released quarterly results possesses information that is, beyond argument, material. If the market has not yet fully priced in those results, the information may also affect the value of the securities. Clause 93(b), read with 'or,' reaches that fund manager. Parliament surely does not intend this.

The real vice that securities law across every major jurisdiction has identified is the following combination: information that is simultaneously material and non-public. Trading mischief arises in this conjunction, not in either qualifier separately. An investor trading on public information, however significant, is doing precisely what efficient markets depend on. An investor trading on non-public information that is wholly immaterial gains no meaningful advantage and causes no market harm. The law is designed to catch only the person who trades while knowing something the market does not know and would care about if it did. That person can be identified only when both conditions are present together. 'Or' captures too much; 'and' captures exactly enough.

Every significant securities jurisdiction encodes this as a conjunctive standard. In the US, the concept is Material Non-Public Information (MNPI), a compound noun in which the conjunctive logic is embedded in the very terminology. The Securities and Exchange Commission's insider trading framework under Rule 10b-5 of the US Securities



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Exchange Act of 1934 has never treated materiality and non-public character as alternatives. They are a single, inseparable test. The UK's Market Abuse Regulation requires inside information to be both precise and not generally available—both conditions together. This reflects a considered understanding, refined over decades, of where harm lies and where not.

An irony is that this is not a new error in Indian securities law. Section 12A of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) Act of 1992 carried the same formulation and the Securities Markets Code (SMC) has simply reproduced it without correction. Indian securities regulation had arrived at the right answer through its own regulatory evolution. The Sebi (Prohibition of Insider Trading) Regulations of 2015 built their framework around Unpublished Price Sensitive Information (UPSI), which captures information that is both price-sensitive and unpublished. The two qualities are not presented as alternatives anywhere in Sebi's prevention of insider trading (PIT) regulations. The Justice N.K. Sodhi Committee, constituted to review the PIT framework, recognized this alignment directly when it observed that MNPI in international usage and UPSI in Indian regulation are interchangeable concepts, both requiring materiality and non-public conditions to be met together. In other words, Indian regulation corrected through subordinate legislation what the parent statute got wrong. The SMC had an opportunity to codify that correction into the statute itself. It has instead carried forward the error of Section 12A, so the conjunctive understanding under PIT regulations survive only in subordinate legislation rather than in the Code that governs everything else. That is a significant step backward.

Clause 93(b) presents a second difficulty that compounds the first. The phrase "deal in securities" has been the subject of intense and unresolved judicial contest for years. Courts and the Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT) have grappled repeatedly with whether "dealing" requires a completed transaction—an executed purchase or sale—or whether placing an order, instructing a broker or any preparatory step suffices. Sebi's whole-time members and adjudicating officers have on occasion held that dealing extends even to advising on

securities, a reading that stretches the phrase well beyond its natural meaning. In front-running, which is the primary mischief Clause 93(b) is designed to address, harm occurs before any transaction is completed. A dealer who receives advance knowledge of a large client order and places personal positions ahead of it has already exploited information asymmetry at the moment those positions are placed. Whether profits are later realized is secondary. In multiple enforcement orders, Sebi has held that 'dealing' encompasses ordering and instructing. The SAT has not always agreed. These inconsistencies have generated contested enforcement that weakens deterrence while exposing intermediaries to unpredictable liability. The SMC could have resolved this by defining "deal in securities" for the purposes of Chapter XII, but has not. As ambiguity survives, litigation will continue.

Both difficulties are compounded by a third: Clause 93(b) is not a standalone provision. It sits within the market abuse chapter, whose violations, under Clause 96, attract criminal punishment and PMLA consequences. The interpretive latitude currently exercised by Sebi's enforcement officers and inconsistently reviewed by the SAT will now translate directly into criminal prosecutions and Enforcement Directorate attachment proceedings. The stakes of definitional imprecision are thus constitutional. A person imprisoned under Clause 93(b), or whose assets are attached under the PMLA, is entitled to know with certainty from the statute what conduct triggered this. The current text does not provide that certainty.

The fixes are not complex. Replace 'or' with 'and.' This correction will align the SMC with the UPSI framework Indian regulation developed. For "deal in securities," Parliament's Standing Committee on Finance should insert a definition for Chapter XII that expressly includes placing orders and instructing intermediaries, so that front-running is captured where it actually occurs rather than made contingent on transaction completion. Since these are technical rather than political fixes, India's legislative process should welcome them.

A provision governing criminal liability and PMLA consequences must say exactly what it means. Revisions need to be made before the Code is enacted.

MINT CURATOR

# El Niño could disrupt a crucial link in India's farm value chain

The possibility of sparse monsoon rainfall has the country on edge



DAVID FICKLING

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You might think that the world's supply chains are returning to normal now that oil appears to be flowing unhindered from the West Asian Gulf for the first time in four months. Watch out for what is happening on the other side of the Arabian Sea, though. The key input into another sort of value chain is misfiring just when it is needed most: India's monsoon rainfall.

It might seem strange to liken the weather to a component of an industrial system, but that is the way it has worked in India for millennia. The arrival of the southwestern monsoon during June has long been so weirdly regular that you can set a just-in-time agricultural calendar by it. Europeans had little warning of the heat-wave currently bearing down on the continent until recently, but a near two-week delay in rains reaching Mumbai this week was enough to provoke nervous headlines. The concern is understandable. June is normally the key planting time for rainy-season *kharif* crops such as rice, cotton and millet, but farmers need to wait for the first showers to pass before seeding their fields. With the month almost over, the lack of rainfall is disrupting India's \$300 billion farm economy as decisively as a chip shortage would upend an automotive factory. The super El Niño developing over the Pacific Ocean threatens to make things even worse.

The worst of the dry spell has hit central India and the Deccan—an agricultural heartland stretching from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka states in west India and through Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Telangana further inland. The region accounts for about 90% of India's soya bean and sugarcane crop, 80% of its cotton production and 70% of its peanuts and pulses, such as lentils and chickpeas. It is also vital for fruits and vegetables, giving it an outsized impact on the prices paid in markets across the country.

Consider Nashik. The farming district northeast of Mumbai is the heart of India's onion country. It is a politically salient crop, because of the way onion price inflation can eat into household spending (and occasionally topple governments). Failures of monsoon rainfall routinely lead to price spikes in August and September as the country runs short. Rainfall in Nashik this month has been running at just 16% of the long-term average.

A few months ago, the main concern for India's farms was that the conflict over the Strait of Hormuz would interrupt supplies

of urea—a fertilizer raw material that India largely obtains from Gulf natural gas. Those fears were overblown, but rainfall is an even more important input for the farm economy—and the supply tightness there is, if anything, intensifying.

The interaction between the numerous factors affecting the Indian monsoon is not fully understood, but it is unlikely that El Niño, first declared just a few weeks ago, is the key driver of its late onset. As the year goes on, however, it is expected to drive the weakest monsoon in 11 years. Whatever crops have survived late sowing will take another blow from parched growing conditions.

The effects will be felt well beyond India's farms. By hitting staple crops for cooking oil, sugar, cotton and cheap protein, current dry conditions will feed through into inflation, which is running at its highest levels since early 2025. The Reserve Bank of India has already flagged this year's abnormal weather conditions as a risk to its economic forecasts.

Counteracting the impact could spread the pain even further. After the late onset of rains and early-season flooding in 2023, New Delhi steadied the domestic rice market by banning exports, cutting off a global trade that depends on India for about 40% of its supplies. Similar restrictions are now widely expected for sugar.

India's economy is no longer as vulnerable to natural and human-made disasters as it once was. Stockpiles of fertilizer helped it ride out the impact of the Iran war. The amount of rice in warehouses has grown by nearly half since the 2023 export ban, so that crucial crop is amply supplied. Wheat is in a similar situation. The spread of irrigation, crop science and improved logistics mean the food system as a whole is far more resilient.

All of those innovations, however, are racing to keep up with the widening damage from a climate that is inexorably worsening. Across South Asia, almost a quarter of the world's population has relied for centuries on the dependable annual pulse of monsoon rainfall. Global warming is making the arrival of that vital input less predictable and more prone to devastating droughts and floods when it does arrive. As the coming super El Niño develops, we will all feel the impact. ©BLOOMBERG

GUEST VIEW

# Use policy discipline to tackle economic pressure points

PABLO HERNÁNDEZ DE COS



is general manager, Bank for International Settlements.

Global economic pressure points are complicating central banks' mission to preserve price and financial stability. Financial and fiscal fault lines may imperil economic progress and threaten future prosperity. The tide may turn on the artificial intelligence (AI) boom and persistent inflation from more frequent supply shocks.

While the economy and financial system have proven resilient so far, we cannot take this for granted. Today's challenges demand decisive and disciplined action to reinforce economic foundations and safeguard the financial system for the future. Public policy must focus on three priorities: securing price stability, restocking the public purse and shoring up financial stability beyond the banking perimeter.

In the Bank for International Settlements' *Annual Economic Report* ([bit.ly/4uBlzcW](http://bit.ly/4uBlzcW)), we highlight four pressure points for the global economy: resurgent inflation, AI exuberance and financial vulnerabilities; compounding these risks (and fourth), is a backdrop of pub-

lic finances already under strain. Inflation has made a comeback. The Strait of Hormuz's closure was the latest in a sequence of supply shocks. It triggered a crisis in the supply of energy and other raw materials, driving a surge in prices across the globe that may linger. A key question is whether initial price rises will get ingrained. Memories of the pandemic-era inflationary spiral remain fresh, heightening the risk that businesses and households could lock into a cycle of higher prices. Such dynamics put further pressure on increasingly indebted public purses.

AI represents the most transformative technological breakthrough of our generation. It promises leaps in productivity to boost consumption and drive long-term growth. But other outcomes are possible. AI-driven automation could also lead to job losses, dampening consumption, stifling innovation and ultimately capping economic growth. Its impact on inflation is equally uncertain. Thus, policymakers must tread carefully, balancing the promise of AI-fueled productivity with the risks of uneven economic gains.

The current wave of AI optimism has also sparked an investment boom that carries the risk of overheating. History offers cautionary tales, from the railway mania of the 1840s to the dotcom bubble of the late 1990s, of specu-

lative excesses set off by tech breakthroughs. AI could follow a similar path if investment fails to deliver lofty returns. A growing reliance on debt amplifies risks, making the sector more vulnerable to abrupt corrections.

Future fiscal pressures could unfold under less benign conditions than in the past.

Growing strains on the public purse span both advanced and emerging market economies. Debt levels are near post-World War II highs. Governments tend to spend aggressively during downturns, yet fail to rebuild buffers during periods of growth. The point at which debt turns unsustainable is uncertain.

Governments need to consolidate their budgets during good times to create space for manoeuvre during adverse shocks, which intensify pressures on public spending. The focus should be on boosting productivity, expanding the tax base, attracting private capital and freeing up resources for critical infrastructure.

Financial vulnerabilities may be reaching a tipping point. Stretched asset prices can

unwind sharply in the face of rising interest rates or disappointing AI payoffs. A larger footprint for non-banks adds another layer of complexity. Hedge funds have taken on an increasingly large role in sovereign debt markets, becoming major holders of government bonds—especially in major advanced economies. Their reliance on short-term funding makes the system more fragile.

## Central banks must navigate cross-currents of AI, inflation, public debt and financial vulnerabilities

This evolving landscape has created a new sovereign-financial nexus, where stress could spread rapidly across borders and between financial institutions of all stripes. Sovereign bond values are increasingly prone to sharp shifts, reflecting concerns about liquidity and fiscal sustainability. High leverage can amplify such shifts, increasing the risk of market dysfunction.

These pressures create challenges for central banks. There may be cause to step in to stabilize malfunctioning markets. Yet, frequent or large-scale interventions carry significant costs, including encouraging excessive risk-taking, blurring policy signals and

weakening fiscal discipline. Central bank backstops should be carefully designed to be temporary and targeted, to address market stress without encouraging irresponsible behaviour.

To preserve the purchasing power of households and firms, central banks must remain resolute in their mission to achieve price stability in the public interest. They must be able to do this without short-term political interference. This allows them to anchor inflation expectations and stabilize long-term interest rates.

Regulation also has a crucial role. Policymakers must apply similarly stringent standards to similar risks, whether they originate in banks or non-banks. Strengthening safeguards will enhance the resilience of the financial system.

To lay the groundwork for a more stable and resilient global economy, policymakers must navigate the cross-currents of AI progress and the perils of higher inflation potentially persisting, high public debt and financial vulnerabilities. Delays will be costly and increase the chance of tough choices in the future. Addressing these challenges will require decisive action across monetary, fiscal and regulatory policies as well as continued international cooperation.

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### Divisive scheme

MGNREGA substitute triggers disagreement

THE Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) — VB-G RAM G — finds itself mired in discord ahead of its July 1 rollout. The transition from a fully Centrally funded wage guarantee to a 60:40 Centre-state cost-sharing model has triggered unease across states, exposing the fiscal and federal fault lines. The shift in financial responsibility is a key feature of the scheme, which is the substitute for the now-repealed Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) that was enacted by the Congress-led UPA government in 2005. Even BJP-ruled Bihar and Madhya Pradesh have flagged the increased wage burden under the new framework. For states with constrained fiscal space, the obligation to shoulder 40% of the wage expenditure can sideline other welfare priorities, especially in rural development.

The scheme has caused divisions not only within the BJP but also in the Opposition camp. The Congress has accused the Centre of pushing the reform without adequate consultation and weakening the rights-based character of rural employment. The party's government in Telangana is planning to move the Supreme Court against VB-G RAM G. Ironically, the AAP government in Punjab has notified the scheme, barely six months after the state Assembly unanimously passed a resolution slamming the BJP-led Centre for scrapping MGNREGA.

The Centre has defended VB-G RAM G by laying stress on a higher number of days (125) of statutory wage employment. However, the prospect of increased centralisation and conditional funding could dilute the demand-driven essence of rural job guarantee. Ultimately, the debate is less about the intent of the reform and more about its design. Any durable rural employment initiative must balance fiscal realism with the constitutional commitment to livelihood security. The onus is on the Centre to address states' concerns and review the scheme, failing which cooperative federalism — or whatever is left of it — will hit a new low.

### Timber plunder

HC opens door to probe into smuggling

ILLEGAL tree felling is an assault on public resources, biodiversity and the rule of law. The Himachal Pradesh High Court's recent intervention in the alleged timber smuggling case in Una is thus both timely and necessary. By seeking a detailed affidavit from the Forest Department and ordering independent monitoring of the Gagret check-post, the court has signalled that protecting forests cannot be left to routine official assurances alone. The allegations are disturbing. They point to the possibility of an organised network exploiting forest resources across the Himachal-Punjab border. Equally troubling is the gap between enforcement claims and the scale of illegal transportation acknowledged by the authorities. If hundreds of vehicles carrying unauthorised forest produce have been intercepted over the years, the question is inevitable: how much illegal timber may have escaped detection?

The case also raises concerns about transparency and accountability. Effective forest governance requires more than registering FIRs after violations occur. It demands real-time surveillance, digital tracking of timber transit permits, better coordination between neighbouring states and regular audits of vulnerable checkpoints. Independent oversight, as ordered by the high court, can strengthen public confidence in enforcement. Another aspect that deserves attention is the treatment of those who bring environmental violations to light. Whistleblowers and citizens documenting suspected illegal activities should be protected. Public participation remains one of the strongest safeguards against environmental crime.

Himachal's forests are invaluable ecological assets, supporting biodiversity, regulating water resources and sustaining local livelihoods. Their protection is a constitutional obligation. The HC has opened the door to a more rigorous examination of the problem. The state must seize this opportunity to dismantle organised timber smuggling networks, strengthen institutional accountability and ensure that conservation laws are enforced in both letter and spirit.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, JUNE 29, 1926

### Development of small & cottage industries

THE development of small and cottage industries in India, for which there is admittedly great scope, has not yet been undertaken with success in any province. This is a matter which requires the serious consideration of local governments, as a solution of the problem of unemployment is partially bound up with it. In Bombay, which affords greater facilities for industrial development than any other province, the Department of Industries is said to be hampered for want of adequate funds in making proper arrangements for developing small industries. This is most regrettable and it is to be hoped that the attention of the Legislature will be drawn to this fact. In the latest annual report of the department, the Director, who is an Indian and a technical expert, says that the department is inadequately staffed and undue retrenchments have been effected. A similar complaint has been made in several other provinces also. Considering the usefulness of the work of the department, it is, indeed, not provided with adequate funds anywhere and on this account the problem of unemployment remains practically unsolved. At a recent debate in the International Labour Conference at Geneva, a complaint was made that there was considerable unemployment among Indian seamen and that the government had done practically nothing to relieve it. If the small and cottage industries in India are developed and an adequate organisation with this object in view is brought into existence, the country as a whole will be greatly benefited.

# Punjab must face inconvenient truths

The state has been let down by politicians who prioritise electoral success over good governance



AJAY VIR JAKHAR  
CHAIRPERSON, BHARAT  
KRISHAK SAMAJ

STANDING under the shade of a Bakain tree on a scorching day (it's 46°C), I observe the canal water irrigating my field — a toxic slurry of sewage and chemical effluents discharged from the Buddha Nullah. This is the water that flows into our taps too — serving as a grim symbol of Punjab's deep malaise and current electoral predicament.

Inconvenient truths require inconvenient truth-tellers. Leaders in states such as Punjab and Kerala know but ignore what the electorate fails to realise: the states are sliding towards balance-sheet insolvency, not just periodic liquidity crunch.

Punjab is allowed to have net borrowing of Rs 29,419 crore (3% of the Gross State Domestic Product or GSDP, as per the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act), while the state's revenue deficit stands at Rs 21,955 crore (2.2% of GSDP). The underlying calculation is unforgiving, making the endgame a simple question of timing, not probability; possibly within four years, after repaying the principal and the interest, paying salaries, providing free electricity and handouts to women, there may not be enough money to fulfil the pension obligations. The level of Punjab's public debt and annual borrowings is not a state secret.

Annual interest payment consumes 40.58% of the state's own tax revenue. Punjab is now spending four times more on servicing its existing debt than on creating assets. This is the



TIGHTROPE: Controlling a state's budget will alienate powerful organised blocs like the farming community. FILE

classic debt trap. Unfortunately, governments routinely alleviate a debt problem by borrowing more money just to service the existing interest obligations. When analysing the debt crisis, I subscribe to the theory that politicians lacking strength of character and integrity ultimately represent the gravest financial liability.

It's true that the economic bequest to the AAP government was not good. The state's outstanding debt was Rs 2.85 lakh crore on March 31, 2022. Since then, this government has wasted its historic mandate, made mistakes, not by accident but out of political compulsion. The state's outstanding debt is expected to increase by 64% to reach Rs 4.5 lakh crore on March 31, 2027.

A government's fiscal position is a volatile mix of politics, economics, finance, and law and leadership that enables this cycle. Step into any mohalla in Punjab and ask what the government stands for, and the answers pour out in a torrent: free electricity, cash doles, unconstitutional halqa incharges, drugs, petty crime, a compromised police force and

A state that does not shape its own future will eventually have one imposed upon it.

corruption. All are present in ample measure, yet none offer any cause for pride. It is not a partisan issue: politicians unable to win public trust on their own merits routinely embark on expensive crusades to broadcast their benevolence. All major parties enter elections by promising unsustainable populist handouts, systematically borrowed from future generations to fund the politics

of today. Punjab's debt-to-GSDP ratio (45.65%) is the highest among major states. Leave apart debt repayment, Punjab spends more on interest payments (Rs 28,775 crore) than it does on education and health combined. Ultimately, controlling a state's budget will alienate powerful organised blocs like government staff and farmers. The task will require a rare political commodity: a statesman with the sheer capacity to absorb public hatred. In a state where politics revolves around blaming the Central government or exploiting religious fault lines at every turn, reality is finally exacting its revenge.

No state can survive in political isolation, least of all Punjab. In the throes of societal and fiscal collapse, the state cannot pull itself out of the hole without external help. To make matters worse, the current regime has adopted AAP's Delhi playbook, picking fights with the Centre at every turn to the absolute detriment of the state.

In today's adversarial and performative politics of the country, a Congress victory would produce the same deadlock. For Punjab to reverse the

trajectory of decline, whoever wins the 2027 election will need the cooperation of the Union government — otherwise, the state will sink further into a disaster of its own making.

This isn't just an autopsy of Punjab's present; the worst of the crisis is ahead of us. There is also a demographic challenge; people are migrating out of Punjab in droves — to other countries and states, reducing the population to around 2.5 crore. Thus, each child born in the state carries a debt burden of Rs 1.8 lakh. Heraclitus said, "You cannot step into the same river twice", a fitting metaphor for the state's electorate that has cycled through the Shiromani Akali Dal, the Congress and AAP, only to be failed by each. Allegations of corruption and misdeeds shadow the career paths of most of Punjab's leaders across political lines.

All of this points to one brutal truth: in this vacuum of credible leadership options and a deep financial crisis in the state, the BJP has arrived, perhaps less convincingly than it believes, but armed with the formidable leverage of the Central coffers to revive the state's fortunes. The sobering implications of this ascension are many. A state that does not shape its own future will eventually have one imposed upon it.

Once a paradise, Punjab's potential has been squandered by its politicians who prioritise a system focused on winning elections rather than governing well. We are still awaiting answers to the very questions AAP raised when voters overwhelmingly handed them power in 2022. The present chief minister rose to power by mocking the system's deep hypocrisies, yet he has ultimately come to embody them. Much like his predecessors, his true legacy will be the compounding polycrisis — one that has deeply fractured Punjab's body and soul. Punjab is not just the land of five rivers — it is where all political lives end in failure.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We must not let our rulers load us with perpetual debt. — Thomas Jefferson

### A vanity ride that ended in tragedy

ANMOL RATTAN NARANG

IN the early 1970s, I was studying in a Jalandhar college. My home was about 10 km away from the campus, and like most of my classmates, I commuted by bicycle. Not just any bicycle — it was an old, slightly battered lady's cycle. It had belonged to my sister; after her failed attempts at learning to ride, she had banished it to the storeroom. Years later, when I needed a ride to college, my family's opinion was unanimous: revive the relic!

Almost every student — and even most teachers — had a bicycle, usually inherited and rusted. A rare few had scooters, mostly the notoriously unreliable Lambretta, which would cough and rattle like a retired brass band. Then there was the Vespa — sleek, stylish and nearly unattainable. If you owned a Vespa, you had arrived.

I, on the other hand, rode my cycle with pride — and often with a classmate precariously balanced on the carrier. None of us thought twice about these little things. Life was simple, and ambitions were modest.

Later, when I joined a nationalised bank, my lifestyle remained unchanged — the same bicycle, the same old trousers. However, one of my colleagues, who had joined the bank years earlier and had an exalted opinion of himself, managed to buy a brand-new Vespa.

He was the first in our colony to achieve this milestone. But instead of merely riding it to work, he turned it into a vehicle for wooing girls. Every morning, freshly oiled and perfumed, he would park it near the local bus stand around 8 am, just in time to catch sight of college girls.

"Going to college?" he would ask gently.

"Yes," the girl would reply.

"I'm headed that way too," he would smile, motioning to the back seat of his shining steed.

He became a one-man pick-and-drop service — one girl was dropped off and, on the way back, another was picked up. Some days, he claimed, he made three to four "rounds." We often teased him, "Do you plan to open a public transport service, or are you doing social work?"

He would just grin. "I get great pleasure," he once told us, "when I apply the brakes suddenly and the girl sitting behind... well, she leans forward, and..." You get the picture. For him, friction was not just physics — it was fantasy.

And so, our romantic rider continued his adventures, ferrying unsuspecting college girls while narrating his tales to us in the bank canteen. He even claimed to have taken some of them to the cinema. But fate, as always, has its own wicked sense of timing.

One morning, we received shocking news. My colleague had dropped off a girl at her college, and just moments later, collided head-on with a tractor-trailer. The crash was fatal.

To this day, whenever I see a Vespa, I remember his last ride — not just on two wheels, but on the winding road of vanity, desire and irony. The writer is a retired Principal, Staff Training College, Chandigarh

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Important issues at hand

Refer to 'As the ground shifts in Punjab' (*The Great Game*); the state is caught in political turbulence just as it prepares for the 2027 Assembly elections. While the controversy surrounding the alleged video involving Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann has dominated headlines, it should not distract Punjab from the deeper crises that continue to threaten its social fabric. The most alarming aspect is the growing nexus involving drugs, arms smuggling and cross-border infiltration. Political point-scoring over videos and alliances appears secondary to the everyday suffering of ordinary Punjabis. Voters are likely to judge parties less by rhetoric and more by their ability to provide security, employment, rehabilitation for addicts and effective governance. Punjab has often paid a heavy price when politics becomes consumed by symbolism.

VANDANA, CHANDIGARH

#### Progress of Punjab critical

Refer to 'As the ground shifts in Punjab'; like our rivers, political parties can find success only if they give priority to the welfare and progress of Punjab, whenever like-minded political parties join hands. The only aim of any political merger should be to save Punjab from being pushed back into the throes of terrorism, conditions for which are being created by some elements. Political parties should take a lesson from our rivers, which keep on flowing by circumventing obstacles.

LJ SINGH, BY MAIL

#### Deficiencies in documentation

With reference to 'What document makes me Indian'; citizenship is not established by any single document but is determined under the Constitution of India and the Citizenship Act, 1955. The experience of the Assam NRC demonstrates that documentary deficiencies often arise from poverty, displacement, illiteracy or weak record-keeping rather than fraudulent intent. The burden of proving citizenship should not fall on ordinary citizens. The government must strengthen civil registration systems, improve public records and ensure effective procedural safeguards.

GAURAV BADHWAR, ROHTAK

#### Give fair depiction in textbooks

With reference to 'Textbook politics'; the selective inclusion of political episodes will do more harm than good. If NCERT finds it important to include the Emergency (1975-77) in history, then it should also include the pain of Partition in 1947, massacre of Sikhs in 1984, massacre of Muslims in the 2022 Gujarat riots, etc. in an objective manner. To be fair, the syllabus makers should also give credit to Indira Gandhi for winning the 1971 war with Pakistan. Our education system, which is already under fire due to frequent paper leaks and other unwanted glitches, should not cause further damage in terms of the content of the subject presented in a biased manner.

YASH KHETARPAL, PANCHKULA

#### Focus on values, not politics

Apropos of 'Textbook politics'; curriculum design, especially for schoolkids, is a highly responsible task. Because teenagers have impressionable minds, eternal values like goodness, truth, courage, compassion, honesty, fellowship and mercy need to be unobtrusively instilled in them. Textbooks must remain apolitical. Stories depicting sparks of wonder, curiosity, inspiration, willpower, struggle and duty towards the motherland should be included instead. Despite recent bashing by the Supreme Court, NCERT has again included controversial topics. Academic neutrality, scientific objectivity and winged vitality must be the hallmarks of the school curriculum.

RAKESH MOHAN SHARMA, PATHANKOT

#### Pilferage of donations

Allegations of theft, misappropriation of cash and embezzlement of funds as well as valuables have surfaced in one of India's most prominent temples, Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. The wrongdoers have not only misused the donations but also played with the religious sentiments of crores of devotees. The pilfering of cash and other valuable items during counting and sorting by the temple staff is a total breach of their duties and public faith. The trustees should be bound by transparency, authenticity and accountability.

ABHILASHA GUPTA, MOHALI

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: [Letters@tribunemail.com](mailto:Letters@tribunemail.com)

# How to make the phoenix rise again



**BRAHM MOHINDRA**  
FORMER PARLIAMENTARY  
AFFAIRS MINISTER, PUNJAB

THE story of Punjab is often told through the lens of its resilience, prosperity and contribution to nation-building. But what many tend to overlook is that the state's contemporary history is packed with political betrayals and social disruptions that have steadily eroded all its advantages. Punjab's eagerness to contribute to nation-building found little support from the Centre. Over time, decisions taken in the name of national priorities deprived Punjab of its most valuable assets — land, water, industry, and most importantly — human capital.

For most of India, August 15, 1947 marked the dawn of freedom. But for Punjab, it pronounced the trauma of Partition. Punjab bore the heaviest cost of Independence. Land divided, millions of people killed, several million more uprooted, its cultural and commercial capital Lahore lost to Pakistan, historic trade routes wiped out and a robust economy gone almost overnight. Eight decades later, the eco-

nomical, social and psychological impact of that jolt continues to shape Punjab's trajectory. Less than two decades after the Partition, Punjab suffered another historic rupture, this time via the reorganisation of 1966, carried out on linguistic and cultural lines. Greater Punjab, which once stretched from the Hindu Kush (Kashmir) in the north to Sindh (Rajasthan) in the south, from the Khyber Pass (Afghanistan) in the west to the Yamuna (Delhi) in the east was cut. The creation of Haryana and the transfer of its hill regions to Himachal Pradesh fundamentally altered Punjab's identity and psyche. Punjab again paid a heavy price. It lost not only territory, but also strategic assets like land, water, forests, key industrial centres, tourist hubs, and its exclusive claim over its capital — Chandigarh.

The militancy of the 1980s and early 1990s dealt another blow to economy. Investor confidence collapsed, industrial expansion stalled and businesses started to move out. Though peace eventually returned, Punjab had lost a crucial decade while the rest of India was reaping the benefits of economic liberalisation.

During this phase, Punjab started to lose its greatest asset — its people who began to leave in large numbers. The state lost entrepreneurs, professionals, innovators and skilled workers who could have driven its next phase of growth. The resulting labour shortages



**CUMULATIVE:** Punjab has been deprived of its assets — land, water, industry, and human capital. PTI

in agriculture and industry started being filled by migrant workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, gradually altering Punjab's demography.

The challenges faced by Punjab today are the cumulative result of decades of ignorance, neglect and selfish decisions taken both by the political leaders and bureaucrats and the people of the state.

Punjab's fertile land, abundant groundwater and clean air are today under stress. Decades of excessive groundwater extraction, indiscriminate use of fertilisers and pesticides, industrial pollution and poor waste management have degraded the soil. Groundwater levels continue to fall at an alarming rate, while water contamination is being reported across Punjab. Air pollution



The question before us is whether we have the collective will to rise together.

caused by stubble burning, industrial emissions, vehicular pollution and urbanisation has become a year-round public health hazard. Yet there is still no comprehensive policy to reverse these trends or restore Punjab's ecological health.

The greatest irony is that the very land that has sustained agriculture for generations is rapidly disappearing. Every year, thousands of hectares of fertile farmland are permanently lost to national highways, unchecked urban expansion, residential colonies, educational institutions, commercial establishments, marriage palaces, etc. While development is essential, it cannot come at the cost of the very resource that defines Punjab's identity and economy. The real question is whether this relent-

less conversion of farmland into concrete has actually made Punjab more prosperous. Has it generated enough employment, higher incomes or sustainable economic growth? The evidence suggests otherwise.

The state's inability to diversify its economy has further weakened employment generation. Plus, the state has failed to invest adequately in building a workforce equipped for innovation, advanced technology and AI. Government jobs remain limited, while private-sector growth has failed to keep pace with the aspirations of a young population. Many young Punjabis now see migration as their best route to economic security.

Perhaps Punjab's most serious challenge today is the absence of a shared political vision. Its politics has become trapped in an endless cycle of confrontation. All energy is being spent on making headlines rather than solving problems. Amid this noise, the most important question remains unanswered: What kind of Punjab are we trying to build?

Today, Punjab needs a serious conversation about what it wants to become over the next 25 years. It needs all its political leaders to together draft a common charter. A shared vision should transcend party lines and survive changes in government, irrespective of who comes to power. We need to focus on finding answers to questions like:

- What should be Punjab's new economic model that can reduce the state's debt burden?
  - How should agriculture evolve using AI and modern technology?
  - What industries should be prioritised? And if they are using our land, can we redesign their CSR to protect our environment?
  - How can quality jobs be created on a meaningful scale??
  - How can natural resources be protected?
  - How can the state retain its youth and get it to participate both in politics and governance?
- Punjab does not need another political battle. It needs leaders who are willing to rise above personal ambition and partisan divides, who place the state's interests above their own, and work towards a common vision. Personal rivalries must give way to a shared commitment to Punjab's future. The state must come before the party, and the people before politics.
- We do not need isolated solutions. We need a structured plan of action that rigorously assesses every core sector, identifies systemic gaps, recommends transformative reforms and defines realistic, time-bound targets to ensure accountability. No single government or political party can achieve this alone. It demands a collective effort. The question before us is not whether Punjab can rise again. It is whether we have the collective will to rise together.

## UCC debate in eggless Bengal



**JAYANTA GHOSAL**  
SENIOR JOURNALIST

THE newly elected Chief Minister of West Bengal, Suwendu Adhikari, has announced that the state will soon introduce the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill in the Assembly. The UCC law represents BJP's long-term ideological strategy. The government has the option to pass the Bill as it has more than a two-thirds majority. However, since West Bengal has a significant Muslim and Christian population, some leaders believe that first sending the Bill to a select committee would make the process more democratic and allow a broader discussion. Regardless of the method, the expectation is that the UCC Bill will eventually be passed in West Bengal.

The UCC means there will be a common set of laws for all citizens, where personal matters like marriage, divorce, inheritance and related issues will not be governed separately based on religion. It reflects the BJP's larger ideological vision of a unified legal framework under the idea of 'Akhand Bharat'.

During the freedom movement, Indian nationalism had different streams. The Congress leadership fought against British colonial rule, alongside another stream of right-wing nationalism also emerged. Leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak

represented a form of Hindu nationalist thought, which later influenced the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS. An aggressive strain of Hindu nationalism was followed by Veer Savarkar.

When Atal Bihari Vajpayee became Prime Minister and LK Advani emerged as a key BJP leader, the RSS reached the zenith of its popularity. Issues like cultural nationalism, Ram temple construction, Article 370 and the UCC were central to the party's ideological agenda. However, critics argue that the RSS approach is an attempt to create religious polarisation by bringing identity issues into politics.

Syama Prasad Mookerjee, one of the founders of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, was from Bengal. He played an important role in arguing for the creation of West Bengal during the Partition, opposing the idea of the entire Bengal becoming part of Pakistan. The celebration of West Bengal Day and the emphasis on Mookerjee's legacy are connected with this narrative.

The BJP believes that West Ben-

gal has remained outside its ideological influence because of decades of Left rule and for the last 15 years under the Trinamool Congress.

Adhikari wants to be seen as a Hindu nationalist leader and the face of this new political identity. The BJP wants to challenge the Mamata Banerjee leadership model within the TMC and neutralise it. The saffron party is doing this by undermining the credibility of the TMC by showcasing its leaders accused of corruption.

Some BJP decisions are already being strongly debated. The decision to involve ISKCON in providing mid-day meals in schools and the exclusion of eggs from the menu reflect an attempt to promote vegetarianism despite the fact that non-vegetarian food habits are intimately connected with Bengali culture. The debate has turned into a discussion about cultural identity, freedom of choice and whether political ideology should influence everyday life.

The larger question is how Bengalis themselves are responding to these changes. Interestingly, even among Muslims in West Bengal, there has not been a major protest or public reaction against the proposed UCC so far. This raises a question: have sections of the Muslim community accepted the idea that there will no longer be separate personal laws or special provisions? During Eid celebrations, the traditional Namaz arrangement at Red Road was shifted to Brigade Parade Ground, and there was no major protest over the change. A new Bengal appears to be taking shape. The question is whether Bengalis themselves are ready to connect with the BJP's idea of cultural nationalism.

There has been no major protest against the proposed UCC among the Bengali Muslims.

## Reflections on the US at 250



**KP NAYYAR**  
STRATEGIC ANALYST

AS the US celebrates the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Donald Trump has temporarily replaced Narendra Modi and Yogi Adityanath on Delhi's roads. The US President's visage has been on the city roads' autorickshaws since the US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, announced his visit to India in May.

Trump's face — curiously unsmiling — has 'Happy Birthday America!' emblazoned above it and '250 Years Old' set against the Stars and Stripes in the background on autorickshaws. The weather-resistant resin advertisements which cover the back panels of three-wheelers are an initiative of the US Embassy. They have had a mixed reception from the public, which is used to such posters showing PM Modi celebrating some 'achievement' with some BJP Chief Minister or the other. Before Modi, when Delhi's autorickshaw drivers were backers of the AAP, it was then Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal whose image was seen on the vehicles.

According to Paul M Nichols, the Embassy's Contracting Officer, tender documents issued for this campaign were for 8,000 autorickshaws to have Trump on their back panels. A second set of posters display the

Statue of Liberty over the American flag and the words 'Freedom 250' at both ends. Simultaneously, the Embassy compound is illuminated every night in the national colours of red, white and blue.

The 1776 Declaration of Independence had a profound impact on India and its struggle for freedom from British rule. This was partly because the US also won its freedom from Britain. Thus, it was a model for India's freedom struggle against British rule. Perhaps because the appeal of the Declaration was so deep on an anglicised Jawaharlal Nehru and on a member of the UK's House of Commons, Dadabhai Naoroji — although a fighter for India's freedom — its overpowering impact was confined to the 'elite' among the foot soldiers for Indian independence.

Even after BR Ambedkar incorporated elements of the American Declaration in his authorship of India's Constitution, this did not change. Like the 1787 US Constitution, India's Constitution, adopted

in 1949, begins with the Preamble, 'WE, THE PEOPLE...'. I have frequently been intrigued during my years as a foreign correspondent in the US that Indian visitors want to go to Gettysburg at the National Military Park, where President Abraham Lincoln delivered his memorable Gettysburg Address.

The speech is a surprisingly brief 272 words. Indians can relate more to Lincoln's words, which have greater resonance for them even to this day. 'Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.'

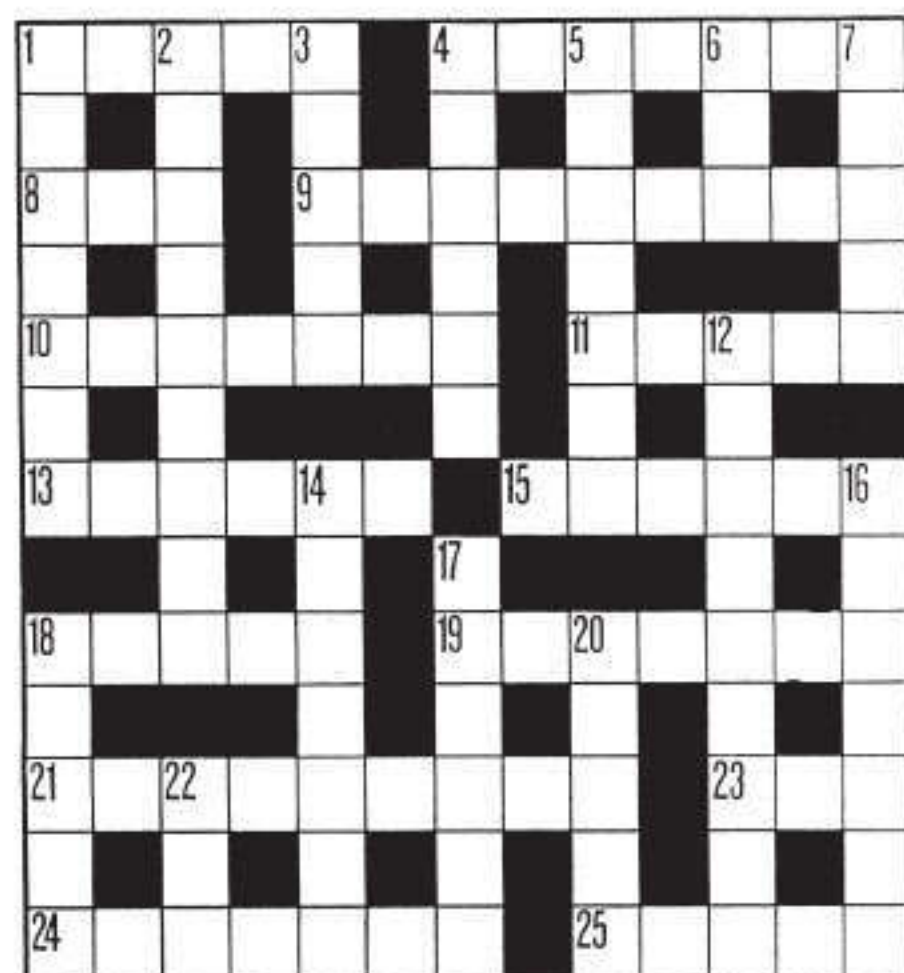
For a journalist, a column cannot be fulfilling without an analysis of the present state of India-US ties. For policymakers in New Delhi who do not want to rock the boat, all is hunky-dory. But the relationship's potential is far from realised.

Almost every initiative on the agenda in Indo-US relations has come from the US side: The nuclear deal, high-technology cooperation, the diaspora influx through the H1-B route, etc. It is to India's credit that official negotiators have skillfully turned their negotiations on these initiatives to India's benefit, most pronouncedly in the nuclear deal.

There is a need for more original ideas to emanate from New Delhi. The US always knew what it wanted from India. Of course, it did not get what it tried for, most of the time. But it never gave up. The problem with the Trump administration is that it does not know what it wants from India. Nothing big like the nuclear deal is coming out of the White House nowadays. And the right hand in Washington's power circle does not know what the left is doing. Unless this problem is resolved, India-US relations will remain on the current plateau.

There is a crying need for more original ideas to emanate from New Delhi.

### QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- Betrayer (5)
  - Sympathetic relationship (7)
  - Commercial vehicle (3)
  - Dutch diamond centre (9)
  - Illuminate (7)
  - Audibly (5)
  - Almost (6)
  - Handsome young man (6)
  - Tosca for example (5)
  - Wrong (2,5)
  - Uncompromising person (9)
  - Tint (3)
  - Performance of music (7)
  - Fortunate (5)
- DOWN**
- Light throwing-spear (7)
  - Belittle character of (9)
  - Beam of light (5)
  - Insurrection (6)
  - Horse of black and white markings (7)
  - Eccentric (3)
  - Easily frightened (5)
  - Possession (9)
  - Printed hand-out (7)
  - Witchcraft (7)
  - Conspicuous (6)
  - Further (5)
  - Soil (5)
  - Huge legendary bird (3)
- Saturday's Solution**
- Across:** 1 Accomplish, 8 Stunt, 9 Inflate, 10 Coterie, 11 Radio, 12 Occupy, 14 Wobble, 17 Awful, 19 Askance, 21 Clatter, 22 Allot, 23 Lacklustre.
- Down:** 2 Caustic, 3 Otter, 4 Primer, 5 Inferno, 6 Hoard, 7 Denouement, 8 Sacrosanct, 13 Politic, 15 Bungler, 16 Barrel, 18 Frail, 20 Keats.

### SU DO KU

8		1	5	4	
9		3			
	5				3
3			6	4	
	7	8	5	2	
		1	2		9
2					8
			7		4
9	6	8			1

### FORECAST

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

3	8	1	9	2	4	5	7	6
5	9	7	6	3	8	1	4	2
4	2	6	5	7	1	8	3	9
7	4	9	3	1	6	2	5	8
8	5	3	2	9	7	4	6	1
1	6	2	4	8	5	3	9	7
2	7	4	8	6	3	9	1	5
9	1	5	7	4	2	6	8	3
6	3	8	1	5	9	7	2	4

**CALENDAR**  
JUNE 29, 2026, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Ashadh Shaka 8
- Ashadh Parvishite 15
- Hijari 1448
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 15, up to 5:27 am
- Shukla Yoga up to 2:27 pm
- Moola Nakshatra up to 4:04 am
- Moon in Sagittarius sign
- Sant Kabir Jyanti
- Jyeshtha Purnima
- Gandmoola up to 4:04 am

CITY	MONDAY TUESDAY	
	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	41	28
New Delhi	41	30
Amritsar	36	26
Bathinda	40	29
Jalandhar	38	26
Ludhiana	39	30
Bhiwani	40	30
Hisar	41	30
Sirsa	41	32
Dharamsala	32	20
Manali	26	16
Shimla	27	17
Srinagar	34	21
Jammu	37	24
Kargil	30	14
Leh	26	11
Dehradun	39	27
Mussoorie	27	19

TEMPERATURE IN °C

# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS





# THE SUNDAY TIMES

ESTABLISHED 1822

## King of the North needs the engine of the south: the City

Nature abhors a vacuum and tomorrow Andy Burnham will attempt to fill the yawning space that is the current government by making a speech on the economy.

But before we examine this, it is worth pausing to remember what has happened over the past seven days. Last Monday a democratically elected prime minister was effectively removed from office by his cabinet and Labour MPs, who decided he was no longer up to the job the country had asked him to do. Voters, save for a few thousand souls in Makerfield, were not consulted. Sir Keir Starmer will be replaced by a new MP who, as a regional mayor, played no part in Labour's offer to the country in 2024.

That these remarkable facts are now shrugged off by our selfie-obsessed political class and breathless 24-hour media does not lessen the pressure on Burnham tomorrow. In fact, it only increases it. This speech needs to provide a clear indication of how he intends to manage the nation's finances and increase economic growth.

The aspiring prime minister is expected to outline plans to devolve money and power from Whitehall to the north and shift budgets, responsibilities and civil servants out of London. There is much to like in this approach, long espoused by the former Greater Manchester mayor (and, in some form, by almost every prime minister since David Cameron). Britain has for too long been one of Europe's most geographically imbalanced economies. Civil service jobs have been relocated around the UK but they have not been accompanied by real fiscal power, or inspired a thriving private sector. Comparable cities in western Europe flourish, while Leeds and Bristol cannot even build a tram network.

That said, there remain two issues that Burnham should address tomorrow. First, his vision should extend more widely than the so-called Northern Powerhouse, of which we have heard so much. There are unfashionable parts of the kingdom, stretching from Swansea to Norwich and Plymouth to the central belt

in Scotland, that are just as in need of regeneration and attention as the M62 corridor. Burnham should avoid playing up the so-called north-south divide. It feels out of date and risks immediately antagonising millions of families and small businesses that struggle in other parts of Britain, particularly in the oft-forgotten west and east.

Second, he should avoid engaging in the sport so beloved of contemporary politicians: bashing London and, by extension, the City. As Burnham well knows, London's transformation since the 1980s into a place to live, work and send your children to school is something to emulate, not decry. The capital attracts talent from around the globe and hosts some of the world's best universities.

The City remains an engine for economic growth but has struggled to maintain its reputation as an international financial centre. As we report today, the London Stock Exchange fears some of the country's biggest firms may move their primary listings to New York because of the deteriorating state of London's capital markets. They include household names such as Diageo, BP and Vodafone.

These tactics may contain an element of scaremongering but it is a fact that the exchange has managed only a handful of new listings this year, while New York attracts hundreds. Companies are voting with their feet because of weak liquidity, burdensome regulation, shrinking domestic investment, stamp duty on share trading and pension fund rules. These are not abstract concerns: they affect jobs, wages and tax receipts across the country. Scale-up businesses require deep wells of investment and successful firms support supply chains far beyond London.

Burnham the Makerfield candidate was right to champion places that have too often been neglected. But Burnham the PM will have to ride two horses. A government serious about growth should not choose between narrow regional renewal and global competitiveness. To succeed, he will need both.

## Rethinking midwifery training requires emergency delivery

Donna Ockenden's harrowing inquiry into maternity care in Nottingham is the latest in a series of such scandals and should shake any lingering complacency about the state of Britain's maternity services. While failures of leadership and culture understandably dominated the newspaper headlines, Ockenden also identifies today an underlying and frankly terrifying problem: the lack of proper training for midwives to cope with the realities of the modern maternity ward.

As we report, women giving birth nowadays often tend to be older and more prone to complex medical conditions, so their cases can require sophisticated clinical judgments. Yet Britain continues to train many midwives through direct-entry degrees, allowing students to specialise from the age of 18 without first qualifying as nurses with a broader grounding in medical issues. This approach contrasts with much of Europe, as well as countries including Australia, the United States and Ireland, where midwives begin their careers as registered nurses before specialising in midwifery.

As Ockenden, herself a midwife, says: "So many student midwives and newly qualified midwives on the ground have been saying to me, we are not ready. They

do not believe they have the skills to care for today's mothers.

"I trained in a very different system. I was a registered nurse first. When nurses joined midwifery then, they had diverse backgrounds – they might have had intensive care experience, gynaecology experience, surgical experience."

Her comments are striking and must be acted upon without delay. She has also revealed that hundreds of staff have contacted her to say they do not feel properly equipped to deal with mothers on their wards. This is shocking and requires fresh attention from ministers and NHS managers. If those on the maternity unit front line lack confidence in their training, what are the rest of us supposed to think?

The Nursing and Midwifery Council's proposal to extend midwifery degrees to four years is welcome, but may not be enough. Britain should seriously consider returning to a model where midwives qualify as nurses before specialising. Hospital trusts should be speaking to their staff now to find out their concerns and offer instant help if required. Without urgent support there is a clear danger that such scandals will simply repeat themselves, causing the same tragedies. That would be unforgivable.

## Heat is a blooming nuisance

The heat last week was enough to make us wilt, but conditions were more testing for the residents of our gardens. Fruiting plants and vegetables that we associate with hot countries needed twice-daily watering, and decorative plants suffered too. The Royal Horticultural Society has reported that the five worst affected by extreme heat are hydrangeas, acers, fuchsias, astilbes and roses.

It is unsurprising that, as we report today, Mediterranean plants are becoming

more widely seen here. Salvia, lavender, even olive trees are growing in popularity in British gardens.

But the hotter, drier climate suits less welcome species, too. Spiky foxtails are proliferating, becoming a menace to dogs, which can get them stuck in their skin and require a visit to the vet. In our news pages today we meet some of the unlucky pets who have had a run-in with these aggressive grasses. Staying cool is only one of the challenges brought by a changing climate.

# Dominic Lawson

## The soundtrack to our lives is a braying fool



On trains, on buses and outside No 10, auditory assaults are a daily trial

The national idiot performed his self-appointed role of tarnishing moments of political theatre in Downing Street. Keir Starmer's statement of resignation was accompanied by music blasted out from Steve Bray's speakers – just as Rishi Sunak's address to the nation declaring a general election in May 2024 had been. In that case Bray, a failed Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate who has sought a different form of political presence through sheer volume in the immediate vicinity of the Commons and Downing Street, inflicted *Things Can Only Get Better* at such ear-splitting volume that his speakers blew.

Those watching, or rather listening, at home don't get a sense of the din, because of the qualities of the broadcasters' directional microphones trained on the PM. The BBC's political correspondent Henry Zeffman reported last week: "It did seem that the prime minister in the early stages of his speech was thrown off a little, completely understandably, I should say, because it's incredibly loud."

On Wednesday Kemi Badenoch wrote to the Metropolitan police commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley, to say that Bray's "persistent use of amplified noise equipment, routinely on Wednesdays [during prime minister's questions] and at significant national events is antisocial, a nuisance and a national embarrassment. What does it say about the kind of country we are, if even the prime minister is not allowed to have a dignified moment when resigning?"

The Conservative leader was not just being considerate towards an opponent; there was political purpose here too. Badenoch's letter went on to point out that Bray had triumphed over Rowley's officers by using the European convention on human rights (ECHR), which her party has promised to leave if elected again to government. In 2024 officers had issued a direction to Bray to stop using his amplification equipment in Parliament Square, under section 143(1) of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011. Bray refused, and when the police showed him a map which correctly identified that he was on a spot where their authority entitled them to take such action, he stuck his fingers in his ears, telling them to put their map "where the sun don't shine". They seized his speakers and brought charges (failing without reasonable excuse to comply with a direction under that 2011 act "re prohibited activities in Parliament Square").

In April last year the case came before Judge Anthony Woodcock at City of London magistrates' court. There were four non-police witnesses for the prosecution, all workers on the Commons estate, who declared how the regular din from Bray's amplifiers had become unbearable. One of them, whose office was on the first floor within the Palace of Westminster, directly overlooking Bray's patch, described to the court how he had become so frustrated, it was interfering with his ability to do his job. Judge Woodcock was not sympathetic: "I have to say I sense he lacks a certain robustness."

Woodcock went on to state that not only was Bray's protest an exercise of a fundamental right under the ECHR (which is incorporated into our own Human Rights Act): "He believes his is an important message to disseminate. He needs the volume that he uses to get the message across from Parliament Square to the Palace of Westminster." Because, of course, the denizens of the Palace of Westminster would not otherwise have any idea that Bray feels strongly that the UK should never have left the EU, and would therefore not be able to take his opinions into account.

The legal triumph of Britain's most boorish individual (extolled by Judge Woodcock as being in "the happy traditions of this country" as a lampooner of governments "through satire") is just the political version of a much wider indulgence of nuisance – which affects countless more people than suffer from Bray's infernal amplifiers.

Anyone who travels by train knows what I mean. The firms running the services have not the least interest in the auditory assault on their customers by those playing music or videos loudly on their smartphones, without the use of headphones. A recording which advises, "See it. Say it. Sorted," is supposedly sufficient to ease all public concerns. It is left to individual passengers to complain directly to the nuisance, which I have, sometimes



**Those watching the PM at home didn't get a sense of the din**

# Hadley Freeman

## Why do women have to spill their guts for art?



Blockbuster shows by Kahlo and Emin fetishise their personal pain

Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?" asked the feminist collective Guerrilla Girls on their 1989 poster, pointing out that the museum featured hardly any women artists but plenty of female nudes. Nearly 40 years later, to judge from the third floor of Tate Modern, a woman doesn't just have to be naked to get a blockbuster exhibition – she has to show her guts, blood and reproductive organs too.

Last week the Frida Kahlo exhibition opened, and the queues on the first afternoon, when I went, suggested it will be as much of a success as Tate Modern's other mega-show, Tracey Emin – which, as it happens, is on the same floor as Kahlo, just across the corridor. Both exhibitions feature images of the artists' innards – Kahlo's womb, Emin's stoma – and both make reference to their abortions, their sexual betrayals and their physical deterioration (Kahlo's shattered leg, pelvis and spine, Emin's cancer), all repurposed into defiant yet ultimately very sad art. Taken together, these two shows seem to confirm Joan Didion's 1972 description of womanhood: "That dark involvement with blood and birth and death." Snarkier minds will say that the great philosopher Tammy Wynette came up with a better subtitle for this Emin and Kahlo double act: "Sometimes it's hard to be a woman."

For these artists to be the museum's big two exhibitions, and surely two of the most popular exhibitions in the UK this year, says a lot about our expectations of women and art. Both are among the most gifted artists of their generation and the exhibitions remind you of that, showing the weirdness and originality of Kahlo's artistic vision and the astonishing breadth of Emin's talent, from painting to drawing to photography. Yet the shows are also saying that their fame relies at least as much on their personal lives as on their work.

The titles emphasise this: Emin's is *A Second Life*, Kahlo's is *The Making of an Icon*. Not an

artist – an icon. There are plenty of women artists who don't offer up the most painful moments in the most internal parts of their body as art, yet they are not icons. There are no Barbara Hepworth Barbie dolls, no posters of Bridget Riley's face in student dorms. The most bizarre moment of the Kahlo exhibition comes not from any of her dreamlike paintings but in the last room, which is ostensibly a critique of "Fridamania", showing how her image has been used to sell schlock, from toys to trainers. Then you exit straight through the gift shop selling – yup – Fridamania schlock: a £50 figurine of Kahlo's painting *The Two Fridas*; a knitted Kahlo bleeding heart dangling from a £16.50 keychain. Reclaim your pain, ladies! And then watch it be merchandised for ever.

I've gone back and forth on how I feel about this. On the plus side, women can now achieve huge personal acclaim by sharing the true and the intimate, far more so than their male contemporaries. On the debit, women are then reduced to it, their happier and more complicated stories ignored, their tragedy sold as trinkets. Emin was once cruelly derided for making art like this; pairing her with the Kahlo exhibit underlines how they are now fetishised for it. Have women ever been more incentivised to spill their guts for their art?

Vincent van Gogh had no one's idea of an easy life, but exhibitions of his work leave me feeling exhilarated – the gorgeous colours, the wild brushstrokes – not morbid and bleak, as Kahlo's and Emin's did. That's partly about Van

successfully. But it is much easier for a man to do that: questionnaires on this matter show that women, in the main, find it too intimidating, especially as the nuisance is usually a man.

In London – where enhancement of mobile data coverage makes this an increasing problem even underground – there are transport-by-laws which allow for prosecution of individuals who are "playing music or streaming content aloud on the [TfL] network without written permission". Last year the Enfield Dispatch, aware of the irritation to its readers caused by those using their phones in this way, made an inquiry under the Freedom of Information Act. It revealed that there had not been a single prosecution of such a breach in the period 2019-25. It was, in fact, Bray's party, the Liberal Democrats, which in the run-up to the 2024 general election proposed a more robust approach to those making an antisocial din on public transport: a law explicitly banning the playing of music and videos aloud on phones, with a fine of up to £1,000 for offenders. No such law has been passed, naturally.

I find this form of nuisance much more of a national embarrassment than the licence given to Bray in Westminster. Anyone who has travelled on trains in other countries, and especially in Japan, knows that we are an international embarrassment in this matter. The attitude of our transport authorities is in particular contrast to that of the French rail network, where the staff vigorously enforce "public disturbance" regulations with spot fines, which are increased if the offender does not immediately pay up.

There was even a case, last year, in which a woman was fined €110 on a train travelling from Brittany to Paris when other travellers objected to the constant miaowing of her cat, Monet, in a crowded carriage. It became something of a cause célèbre, and the SNCF officials felt obliged to point out to their cat-loving critics that the woman would have avoided the fine if she had agreed to move with Monet to another, largely empty carriage.

The French bourgeoisie can indeed be very officious. But even at their most meddlesome, they are so much less maddening than British yobs. Of which Bray is only the most well known. And I will never understand why we have such a tolerance for amplifiers, which should properly be listed under banned instruments of torture incompatible with the European convention on human rights.

Gogh's art (although Kahlo was no slouch when it came to vibrant colours) but it's really about how these artists are presented. The bloodied and tragic woman is big business in a way that doesn't happen with men, the message being: "Sure, she's talented, but don't feel threatened – she's also frail." And so the Kahlo show is desperately padded out with other artists' objectifying images of her, and – inevitably – emblems of her suffering: the corsets for her shattered spine, a Day of the Dead altarpiece to her. I have yet to see an exhibition of Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, who was also disabled, get this kind of treatment.

Sylvia Plath – who is to poetry what Kahlo is to art – now enjoys an acclaim that eclipses that of Ted Hughes, who was by far the brighter star during their marriage. But her suicide gave her a sheen of tragic fascination that has grown brighter with time. Plath anticipated this in her poem *Lady Lazarus*, in which she imagines the public excitement as doctors take off her bandages after her latest suicide attempt: "The peanut-crunching crowd/Shoves in to see/Them unwrap me hand and foot –/The big strip tease."

This month has ended with Kahlo but it began with Marilyn Monroe – the archetypal tragic woman – and an exhibition of photos of her at the National Portrait Gallery. Ostensibly, this was to celebrate her centenary, but it's hard to imagine, say, her co-star in *The Misfits*, Montgomery Clift, being accorded such an honour, even though he was equally beautiful and similarly tragic. But the peanut-crunching crowd only wants to see her striptease, not his.

Kahlo and Emin are immense talents and so much more than mere miners of pain. But when museums and audiences are most interested in women artists when their body is the subject, is this really so different from seeing women as nudes to be ogled?

And speaking of women's work, I'm now going on book leave, so this will be my last column for a few weeks. I will so miss all of your messages and comments, and I hope you have a wonderful summer.



**Both exhibitions feature images of the artists' innards**

Wheat grown in Howard County, Iowa, from seeds Norman Borlaug developed.

David  
Wallace-Well

# OUR BOUNDLESS AMBITION



and real growth was quickly eaten up by population booms. But in his lifetime he comported himself as a mythic midcentury “organization man,” a product of American institutions who exhibited an imperious scale of ambition to transform the world as well as a basic earnestness and humility. These days, he is often invoked to celebrate the importance of innovation and our faith in human progress. But what is perhaps most striking about his contribution is that there was for him no ownership stake in it at all.

It’s easy to be skeptical of a scientific progress narrative like this one. These were the years of the high Cold War, featuring chemical and herbicidal warfare by American forces abroad (and biological weapons research at home).

And yet those same years also produced Jonas Salk and his famous polio vaccine. It was the time when James Watson and Francis Crick discovered the structure and design of basically all biological life, and declined to patent or profit from it — though they did probably borrow at least a bit of the work of Rosalind Franklin without properly crediting her.

The term “organization man” originated in a warning that the institutionalization of research would be death to individual genius, in the scientific arena as in other aspects of society. You hear similar complaints today: that bureaucratization has slowed innovation and scientific progress — and that surely, we could be moving faster. But let’s not forget how much the country’s organization men accomplished in their day, too. Or how much a man like Borlaug, having engineered a century-shaping breakthrough, wanted to spread the gains around the world.

One billion. That’s one credible estimate of the number of lives saved by the Midwestern agronomist Norman Borlaug. Working in relative scientific anonymity in the 1950s, he began to develop new varieties of super wheat that yielded much more food than older strains, and then helped distribute them throughout the hungry developing world. Borlaug’s bundle of innovations came to be called the Green Revolution and changed the course of history. Although one billion is a suspiciously large and suspiciously round number — seven times as many lives as were estimated to have been saved by all global vaccinations over the last half-century — it’s not hard to see Borlaug’s impact on world history. In India and Pakistan, where crop failures and famines came regularly enough to produce widespread panic about mass starvation, wheat yields nearly doubled in just five years. By the time they had, in 1970, Borlaug had already won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Eventually, criticism came for Borlaug and his Green Revolution, too: that the agricultural innovations were a form of technological colonialism, that they almost eliminated small landholder farming, that they required much larger infusions of fertilizer and pesticide, that they produced huge plumes of planet-warming greenhouse gases. Borlaug himself described the Green Revolution as “a change in the right direction, but it has not transformed the world into Utopia.”

Still, there is a thread of very American utopianism in Borlaug’s story, and particularly in his mix of personal modesty and scientific grandiosity. Born in 1914, the Iowan farm boy was educated in a one-room schoolhouse while working the family fields. After failing the state university entrance exam, he enrolled in a college for underprepared students and broke up his higher education with a stint in the Civilian Conservation Corps. After graduation he joined DuPont, ultimately landing in Mexico, where he conducted research funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and quite literally reshaped the fate of the planet.

From the vantage of today, with the world producing more calories than it needs each year, Borlaug can look like a scientist-wizard, he who pulled whole civilizations out of the Malthusian trap in which humans had been so delicately balanced on the edge of subsistence that crop failures meant famine

David  
French

# OUR LONGEST DEBATE

If you wanted to introduce people to the highest American ideals, what would you point them to? The great documents of the American founding are an obvious answer. Read the Declaration of Independence. Read the Constitution.

And if you want to extend to the second founding, the end of slavery and the advent of “equal protection of the laws,” read the Gettysburg Address. Read Lincoln’s second Inaugural Address. Read the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments.

But with every passing year, I think there’s a better answer. Read the founding *debate*. Read the Federalist Papers, the essays so famously drafted by Alexander Hamilton,

James Madison and John Jay in defense of the Constitution. But you should also read the Anti-Federalist Papers, the other side of the debate. There were founders who had concerns about the Constitution, many of which have been vindicated by history.

The founding documents answer the question: What is America? It is the founding debate that answers a different question: Why? Why is America built like it is?

The founding debate provides the moral and philosophical bedrock for America, and it is against that bedrock that the health of our republic should be measured.

The founders were beginning from something that looked like a blank slate, trying — as much as they could within their context — to imagine what a nation could be.

Federalists and anti-federalists alike wanted a republican form of government. They rejected the idea that power should be concentrated under a single leader. They had a deep fear of tyranny and despotism. They appreciated the need for civic virtue. The debates about how best to create this Republic could even be prophetic — predicting the very crises we face today. Their worries are our worries.

Consider, for example, the debate over the pardon power at the Virginia ratification convention in 1788. George Mason objected to the broad pardon power granted to the president: “Now, I conceive that the president ought not to have the power of pardoning, because he may frequently pardon crimes which were advised by himself.”

That statement, once perhaps considered fanciful, has loud echoes in President Trump’s decision to grant clemency to the men and women who attacked the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

Or consider the extent to which the founders were worried about a president without virtue. In the same ratification debate, Mason argued: “So disinterested and amiable a character as General Washington might never command again. The possibility of danger ought to be guarded against.”

Madison, the likely author of Federalist No. 51, would agree. In that seminal paper, he wrote, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.”

These are the principles that the Constitution was supposed to safeguard, and if the Constitution fails, then we know exactly where to look to find the answer: to the competing ideas of the American founding.

Are you worried that the president is too powerful? The founding debate has the answer. Cato, a pseudonym ascribed by many historians to George Clinton, who was then the governor of New York, pointed to the first sentences of Article II: “The construction of the first paragraph of the first section of the second article,” he wrote, “is vague and inexplicit.”

That paragraph contains this sentence: “The executive power shall be vested in a president of the United States of America.” What is the executive power? That undefined phrase has vexed politicians (and courts) for more than two centuries.

The founding debate helps us answer those questions, but it does something arguably even more important: It reminds us of the moral and philosophical foundation of our Republic. We can understand our highest ideals. It is in the founding debate that we understand who we are supposed to be.



Visitors at the Capitol Rotunda viewing “George Washington Resigning His Commission,” by John Trumbull.

A fist raised in solidarity with protesters at a Freedom Summer event in Harlem on Juneteenth.

## M. Gessen OUR

**M**uch of what I learned about American history, culture and politics, I learned in the Great Hall at Cooper Union — not when I was an undergraduate at the school but a couple of years later, after I had dropped out and joined ACT UP.

At that time, the organization held general meetings there on Monday nights. Hundreds of people came to present reports on the latest medical research and ideas for future direct actions, to debate, to vote, occasionally to yell at one another, and always to flirt.

ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, was formed in 1987, fueled by the rage and grief of people affected by the AIDS epidemic. Most of the early patients were gay men and intravenous drug users — people whom President Ronald Reagan's administration and much of American society at the time appeared to consider disposable. Even doctors and nurses often treated people with AIDS with disgust, disdain and fear.

Many of the people in the core group of ACT UP founders were white, well-educated, professional gay men. They had discovered that their status, money and health insurance couldn't keep them from dying of this mysterious new syndrome, and from being treated horribly as they died. Like many Americans before them, these gay men, when confronted with injustice, wanted to protest. But what informed the work of ACT UP was an extraordinary panoply of people of all ages, genders and backgrounds — a uniquely American panoply.

In the 2021 book "Let the Record Show," Sarah Schulman traces many of the influences that made ACT UP what it was. The group's approach to direct action was partly informed by the civil rights movement. The trainings in nonviolent civil disobedience, which preceded every major ACT UP event, took lessons from the women's peace movement. The Feminist Women's Health Move-



## RIGHTEOUS ANGER

ment gave ACT UP its approach to patient advocacy. Latin American immigrants, who had experience in antifascist movements in Chile and Argentina and student protests in Mexico, brought resolve and inexhaustible energy, and the Russian dissident movement lent ACT UP the term "samizdat," which is what we called the assorted photocopied materials laid out on the tables outside Great Hall every Monday night.

ACT UP operated as a radical democracy: Anyone could conceive and organize an action, which — inspired by a mix of anger and creativity — included protests that shut down the Food and Drug Administration and New York's City Hall, a mass "die-in" at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral and the draping of an enormous condom over the home of Senator Jesse Helms in suburban Virginia. The larger group provided funding and bodies. There was no time to waste. Some ACT UP members had months or even days left to live.

ACT UP was a phenomenally successful movement. It, along with the subsequent groups it spawned, sped up the development of effective H.I.V. treatments, but it did so much more than that: It influenced the ways scientists approach medical research; it changed the F.D.A.'s drug approval process; it affected the relationships between patients and health care providers, turning patients into partners in their own care long before the advent of WebMD and the internet in general. It helped shift media coverage of and societal attitudes toward gay people and AIDS, but also toward illness and disability more broadly. And, like the protest movements that helped shape it, ACT UP helps shape the protest movements of today. Veterans of the organization have been training new activists all over the country.

It also helped shape me. For a young and fairly new immigrant, ACT UP was an education in the very American belief in agency and justice and the very American practice of protest. It taught me to read American history, among other things, as one of protest movements and hope — the stubborn insistence that this country deliver on its promise to all of its citizens. And it continues to help me understand this country. The Trump administration is rolling back the achievements of the civil rights movement, attacking immigrants and L.G.B.T.Q. people, delegitimizing protest and painting direct action as terrorism, dismantling the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health and medical research, as well as shuttering the U.S. Agency for International Development, which provided H.I.V. care in many foreign countries. I am not surprised at this choice of targets, even as I am shocked by the betrayal of the country's promise. And I place my hope in protest.



**Bret Stephens**

## OUR

## OPENNESS

**N**ot long after the end of World War II, my maternal grandmother, Nina Grodzensky, made the first of what would become annual visits to the U.S. Consulate in Genoa, Italy. As a child, she had been forced to flee the Bolsheviks in Moscow and then, in her 20s, the Nazis in Berlin. As a Jewish refugee in Italy, she hoped to get a U.S. visa for her and my mother, Xenia, who was then 5 years old. Each time, the answer was: Maybe next year.

In 1950, their luck changed. That fall they boarded a ship for New York, arriving on Nov. 13 as "stateless" persons of no recognized national citizenship, only a dreamed-of destination.

Though my young mother didn't know it at the time, they owed their good fortune to President Harry Truman. In 1948, he had reluctantly signed into law the Displaced Persons Act, intended to allow 200,000 refugees into the United States over the next two years out of the millions the war had left stranded throughout Europe. But the original law had been deliberately written to keep out many of Europe's displaced Jews, a core reason Truman denounced the bill as "flagrantly discriminatory." He signed the bill only because he thought it was better than nothing, and because he hoped the next Congress would fix it.

It did. In June 1950, Truman celebrated the passage of H.R. 4567, which amended the original act by more than doubling the number of visas for displaced persons and broadening eligibility requirements.

"The countrymen of these displaced persons have brought to us in the past the best of their labor, their hatred of tyranny and their love of freedom," Truman wrote in his signing statement. "I have every confidence that the new Americans who will come to our country under the provisions of the present bill will also make a substantial contribution to our national well-being."

The words never fail to move me, and not just because of what they meant for my family. They also capture that sunny, generous confidence that Americans can open our arms to the tired and poor and, in the long run, be stronger and richer for it. From Alexander Hamilton and Albert Gallatin to Alexander Graham Bell and Enrico Fermi, from Henry Kissinger and Madeleine Albright to Daniel Diermeier and Daniel Lubetzky, it's a bet that almost never fails to pay off.

That confidence is missing now, as it has been in other bleak moments of our history, whether it was the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the refusal to admit desperate Jewish passengers aboard the Hamburg-American liner St. Louis in 1939 or the brutish crackdown on migrants over the past 17 months. If there's a consolation of sorts, it's that we have always looked back on those episodes with shame. And we've usually endeavored to do better.

A few years ago, I was one of the (many) awardees of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor and brought my mother to the ceremony. Afterward, I hung the medal around her neck and we watched a spectacular fireworks display over the nearby Statue of Liberty, the same statue she remembered sailing past as a penniless immigrant. That's the best of America — the one that, even if it takes its time, so often redeems its promise.



Candy Cane Pillows are handmade and shaped into equal parts using an antique hand-cranked press at Logan's Candies in Ontario, Calif.

When I was growing up, if anyone broke a glass in our house, my mother would carefully wrap the shards before she put them out for the trash collectors. “I don’t want them to cut their hands,” she would say. If you broke a glass, it was only fair that you made sure the sharp edges didn’t hurt anyone.

When I complained once about a lot of ads on a TV show we were watching, she told me I wasn’t being fair. “Advertisers pay for the show,” she said. “They have a right to be heard.”

Later, when she was living in an apartment building and on crutches, she delivered meals to the men and women working in the building on Christmas. It was only fair, she said, since they couldn’t be with their families.

In the ‘90s contretemps that pitted Hillary Clinton against Monica Lewinsky, my mother chose both. She said they were both very smart and pretty and had a lot to offer. That was the fair way to look at it, she said. She also still had a soft spot for Bill.

My father was the same. When our neighbor in a Maryland beach town fell on hard times, my dad went down to the bank and co-signed the man’s mortgage — without saying a word to anyone. It was only fair. The neighbor not only repaid his debt; when my dad died, the man drove to D.C. and waited in a line for an hour in the freezing cold to get into the wake, so he could tell my mom what my dad had secretly done.

When the Ku Klux Klan burned crosses on the lawn of other beach neighbors, the only Jewish family in town, my dad tracked down the local Klan leader and told him to back off, or else. My dad, a police detective, made sure the Klansman saw his service revolver on his waist.

When Dad was in charge of the U.S. Senate’s security, he judged politicians not only on their ideology but also on how they treated people. Were they nasty to the elevator operators and Capitol Police officers and cafeteria workers? That wasn’t fair.

My parents did not think they behaved in an out-of-the-ordinary way. They considered fairness a very American trait, like their fierce patriotism. (Our clothes, napkins and candles always had to be red, white and blue on July 4.)

Because of my parents, I always thought of fairness as an American trait, as well. My dad was an Irish immigrant and my mom’s parents were Irish immigrants, and they built their working-class dream life here. America was fair to them, and they wanted to be fair to

**Maureen Dowd**

# OUR ASPIRATION TO FAIRNESS

everyone else.

My family believed in government, for all its flaws, as a protector of the people. My first cousin Peggy Dowd was the secretary for F.D.R.’s aide Tommy Corcoran, a primary strategist of the New Deal. After 10 years of working together, they married and started a family. The social safety net created jobs for millions of people and helped pull the country out of the Great Depression. People treated public goods as public goods instead of moneymaking opportunities for the well-connected few.

For decades, until President Trump, the government was trusted to protect food, water, the climate and the disadvantaged. It wasn’t about which party you were in. President Richard Nixon signed the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered

Species Act into law. George H.W. Bush shepherded the Americans With Disabilities Act.

Of course, we have, at times, fallen spectacularly short of that ideal in our nation’s history, including the original sin of slavery, the Alien and Sedition Acts, segregation and the internment of Japanese American citizens during World War II. But I always thought that most Americans sought to be fair. The country was founded on that aspirational goal: All men are created equal.

Yet lately, so much seems unfair.

The fatal shootings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis.

The Trump family’s kleptocracy and blatant grifting, reported so brilliantly by The Times’s Eric Lipton and a team of reporters in a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation.

The racism and antisemitism that have

reared up in raw and ugly ways.

Jeff Bezos’ decimation of a legendary newspaper, The Washington Post, aiming to please a thin-skinned president, and David Ellison’s decimation of a legendary news division, at CBS, aiming to please a corrupt F.C.C. chair who’s kissing the ring of a thin-skinned president who yearns to be king.

Trump and his congressional cronies cutting critical safety net programs and handing out big tax breaks to billionaire buddies. The gutting of the landmark Voting Rights Act and the wrongheaded view of the conservative Supreme Court majority that racism is over in America.

The obscene pay of C.E.O.s, growing 20 times as fast as workers’ pay last year, and the obscene wealth in the tech world, with money cascading into the hands of greedy billionaires who lack empathy or even noblesse oblige. “The über-rich,” Rahm Emanuel told me, disgustedly. “I call it the ‘3-2-1.’ They’re going for the third house, the second wife and the first plane. They’re in a hermetically sealed world.”

Trump taking the country to war with Iran, in part at the urging of his pal Bibi — without any sensible plan, debate, sanction from Congress or consideration as to how this might hurt Americans already struggling to make ends meet.

Trump gleefully tearing up large chunks of the White House and my hometown, trying to install a solipsistic arch, an exclusive golf course, a gargantuan ballroom and a garden of heroes — all to his Versailles-on-acid specifications. He desecrated the Kennedy Center, slapping his name on it and meddling with its artistic content, until a judge ordered his name stripped off. The president is ripping apart the scenes of my happiest childhood memories — the modest but beautiful White House, Jackie Kennedy’s gardens, the golf course at Hains Point where I used to go with my older brother.

The stunning failure of the hacks in government and the lords of the cloud to figure out how to safely regulate artificial intelligence and create a kill switch to superintelligence, even as A.I. leaps forward into superintelligence, and sooner than we may think, consciousness.

I try to infuse my life with my parents’ sense of fairness. And I continue to believe — or hope — that most Americans are fair, despite the unholy din of social media malice and Trump nastiness, and despite all that’s stacked against us. It’s unfair to even have to wonder: Are Americans still fair?



## Earthquake shifts political ground for Venezuelan leader Delcy Rodriguez

Venezuela's strongest earthquake in over a century is the biggest challenge to Delcy Rodriguez's early leadership but could also allow the interim president to stamp her authority on a fractured government and begin rebuilding a broken country. After two earthquakes of magnitudes 7.2 and 7.5 struck Venezuela on Wednesday evening, it could take weeks for the full extent of the damage to become clear. US government data models suggested the death toll could ultimately exceed 10,000.

Even so, some things were already clear. Rescuing those trapped, treating the injured and rebuilding homes and infrastructure will require a vast effort. That project has the potential to define Rodriguez's political future. A close ally of US President Donald Trump, she has

sought to portray herself as an agent of political change even though she served as vice president to her predecessor, socialist Nicolas Maduro, whom Washington ousted in January.

"The narrative of a new Venezuela is based on reconstruction," said Tony Frangie Mawad, a Caracas-based political scientist. "It ends up being somewhat ironic that the country now has to face, with great difficulty, a very literal reconstruction of its infrastructure." Frangie said the rescue and rebuilding will face immense challenges given the country's extended economic crisis and weakened public services. It could well end in failure.

"However, if the government manages a recovery strategy well - especially with the international aid that is arriving - and handles the narrative effectively, it

could use this moment to build a sense of national unity, a kind of 'rally around the flag' in the face of a natural disaster," he added.

Rodriguez is already attempting to do exactly that. "In unity, we will overcome this situation," she said in the initial aftermath of the disaster. Major US support could tip the outcome. In 1999, late leader Hugo Chavez rejected US help after deadly landslides killed at least 10,000 people, an early signal of the anti-US posture that later deepened Venezuela's isolation. "It'll be big. It'll be fast, and it'll be effective," Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on Thursday of the US response.

Trump administration aid could increase both the US role in the country and the government's reliance on Washington, according to analysts. "It's

a situation that is going to be very well exploited to increase the presence of the United States and its control over Venezuela. And also, for Rodriguez to lean on the United States as her primary ally," said Ricardo Rios, head of Caracas-based consultancy Poder & Estrategia. Earthquakes have decided political futures in Latin America before.

In 1972, a quake destroyed much of Managua, killing 5,000 to 10,000 people. The corruption-ridden response marked the start of the downfall of President Anastasio Somoza, who would be overthrown by the Sandinista revolution in 1979. In 1985, Mexico City was devastated by a massive earthquake that killed at least 5,000 people and left some 100,000 people homeless. The failures of the rescue effort were widely regarded as a turning point that led to

the end of the PRI's seven decades of one-party rule.

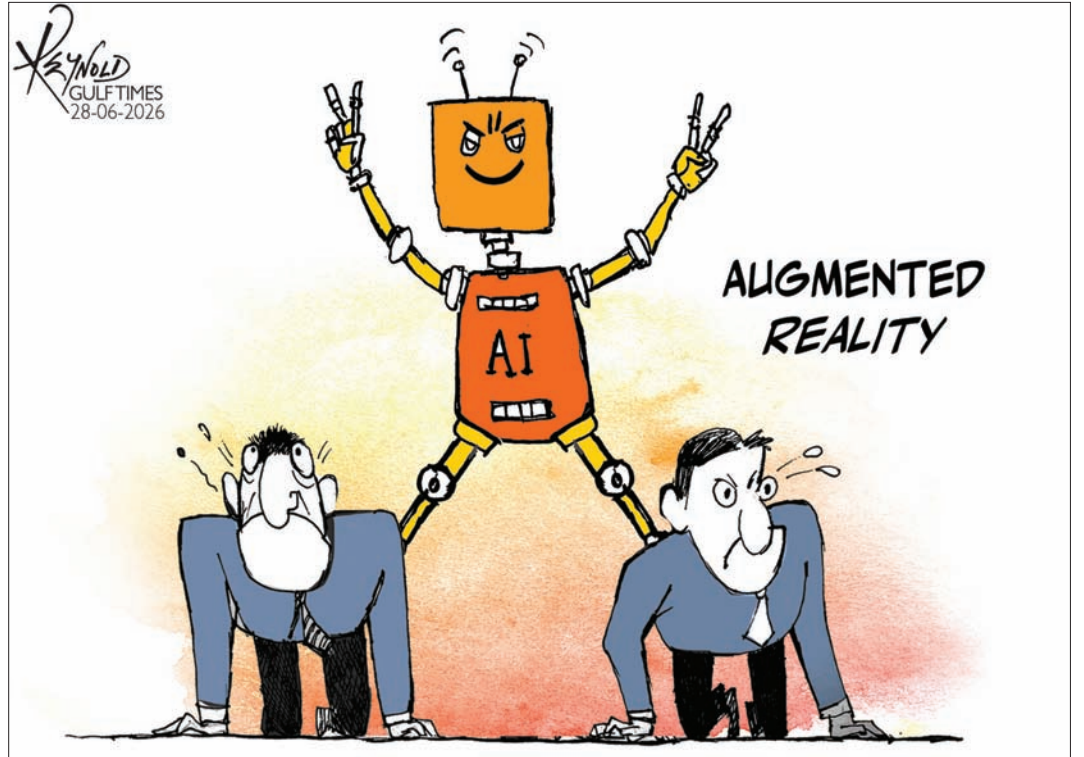
In Venezuela, Rodriguez is likely to be the face of any missteps or mismanagement in the recovery, risking backlash that could shape her political future. "Venezuela's capacity to handle emergency response has been hollowed out over 10 to 15 years of economic turmoil and displacement of 8mn people beyond Venezuelan borders," said Paul Angelo, a Latin America expert at the Washington-based consultancy McLarty Associates who was in Caracas during the quake.

"Without major international assistance, and without a consolidated plan and lots of money infused into a country that is purportedly \$240bn in debt, this will be a long road to recovery," -Reuters

### New session in Scottish Parliament



Britain's King Charles III speaking during the Opening Ceremony to mark the 7th Session of the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, Edinburgh. (AFP)



By Casey Hall, Samuel Shen and Kane Wu  
Reuters

## Chinese 'future industries' push triggers flood of venture capital, bubble concerns

- Beijing supports listings by firms in "future industries" such as quantum technology, nuclear fusion
- Surging tech start-up valuations fan bubble fears
- Chinese VC investment and fundraising revived after years in the doldrums

Just two days after SpaceX made its historic market debut, a Chinese space startup held an investor roadshow for its maiden fundraising round by touting a mission to help China catch up with the US in the race to the heavens. The mission for Tectronic Maritime Space Systems, a Shanghai-based company that focuses on launching rockets from the sea, is to "build the Maersk of global commercial space flight," finance manager Gu Mei told roughly 50 venture capital investors.

To achieve that goal, Tectronic, established just three months ago, needs to raise 150mn yuan (\$22mn) at a valuation of 1.5bn yuan, according to its investor presentation. It plans three additional funding rounds totaling 3bn yuan over five years before targeting a 2032 listing at a valuation of about 50bn yuan - more than 30 times its current level, the presentation showed.

"Demand is inelastic, supply is limited and the clock is ticking," Gu said at the event on June 14. "Investors participating in this round of financing are expected to get returns of 26.7 times."

The aggressive fundraising pitch highlights a scramble among what Beijing refers to as China's "strategic emerging and future industries," which include startups focusing on space, quantum technology, nuclear fusion and brain-machine interfacing.

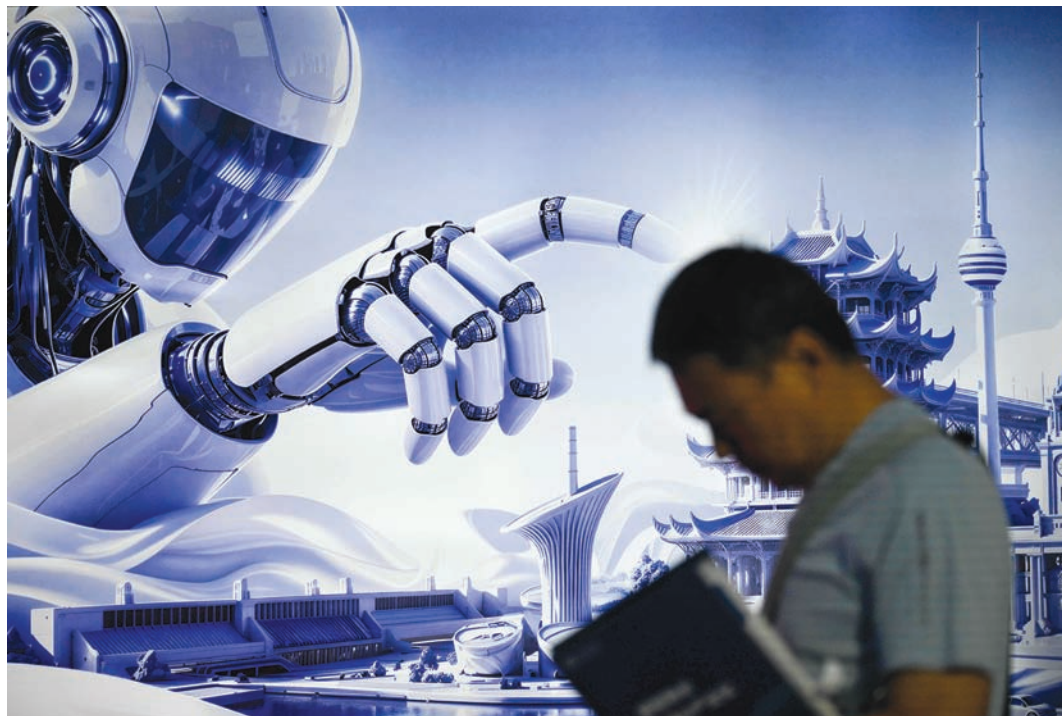
While the rush to raise funds by companies like Tectronic is creating potentially lucrative opportunities for local venture firms - struggling to recover from a years-long downturn - the fever is also inflating startup valuations and stirring fears of a forming bubble. In China, venture capital and private equity investments in the first five months of this year totaled 620bn yuan (\$91.6bn), jumping nearly 60% from a year earlier, according to ChinaVenture Investment Consulting.

Newly registered venture capital funds in the world's second-largest economy totaled

154bn yuan during the first five months of 2026, already in excess of last year's total, according to China's fund industry association. "The level of frenzy (in China) is something I have never seen in my entire career," said Yan Kai, a veteran venture capitalist and partner at Ivy Capital in Shanghai. A startup with no revenue can raise billions in a first funding round and before that deal is completed, investors line up for the second while talks have already started for the third, said Yan, whose firm makes tech-focused investments.

### 'PULLING THE TRIGGERS'

A pickup in venture capital



A man stands next to a poster of a humanoid robot during the China International Supply Chain Expo (CISCE) in Beijing. (AFP)

investments comes as Beijing has highlighted the need to bolster its "future industries," a grouping that also includes biomanufacturing and hydrogen energy, in its next five-year plan, published in March. The development blueprint also identified sectors like robotics and aerospace as strategic emerging industries earmarked for priority development.

China also published rules this month to support domestic stock market listings of "future industry" startups, typically firms working on frontier technologies that have no profit or revenue.

"Our strategy is to move with

the trend - follow guidance of national strategy, while selecting investment targets using a market approach," said Huang Yan, co-founder of Shanghai-based Lantern Capital. Huang, who expects a return of nearly 100 times from his decade-old investment in LandSpace - China's closest answer to SpaceX - said "the key is to marry what that state wants with what the market needs."

Raymond Feng, a partner at Atom Ventures, said competition among venture funds to invest is fierce in the areas of nuclear fusion, quantum tech and embodied AI, as "everyone is throwing money at future



industries." Ni Zhengdong, chairman of Beijing-based venture capital consultancy ZeroIPO Holdings, said there is a strong sense of FOMO - a fear of missing out - among early-stage investors in China, with some funds "pulling the triggers more often."

### NARROWING TECH GAP WITH US

While most venture capital deals involve local, yuan-denominated funds amid the intensifying Sino-American tech rivalry, five China-focused dollar-denominated funds raised a combined \$4bn as of June 12, Preqin data showed. That already exceeds the annual total for each of the past two years. Venture funds including ZhenFund, Qiming Ventures and Capital Today are back in the market raising new funds, people familiar with their plans said, riding the surge of recovering global investor interest in China tech. The sources were not authorized to speak to the media. The three firms did not reply to

Reuters requests for comment. Some industry participants, however, say the industry's present trajectory is too fast and furious.

"A photonic chip project was worth 1bn yuan last year, and is now worth 10bn," said Yu Tiecheng, head of Guanghui M&A, a think tank. "A rocket satellite project was valued at 5bn at the start of the year and is now worth 20bn." If a hoped-for listing at an even higher valuation fails to materialise, "such investments would look extremely dicey," he said.

But for now, the representatives of the so-called "emerging and future industries," like Tectronic, are capitalising on the Chinese government's push to narrow the country's gap with the US in areas including AI and space. There is heated competition for orbital space globally, "so there's strong government support for private capital to participate" in companies like Tectronic, said Chief Financial Officer Wu Qunhui.

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# COMMENT & FEATURES

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## THE JERUSALEM POST

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## Lebanon test

On paper, the trilateral agreement signed on Friday between Israel, Lebanon, and the United States represents the genuine hope shared by all parties that peace between the two countries remains possible.

Whether that hope will be enough to turn that possibility into reality remains as uncertain as ever.

For Israel, the framework's most significant provision is the explicit confirmation that the IDF will be able to remain deployed in southern Lebanon "pending the verified disarmament of non-state armed groups and dismantlement of associated infrastructure."

Under the agreement, the IDF would withdraw from two initial pilot zones and be replaced by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which would then facilitate the safe return of Lebanese civilians to those areas. This effectively gives the LAF a test case: Will Lebanese authorities be able to keep Hezbollah out once the IDF is gone?

UN Security Council Resolution 1701 was also supposed to keep Hezbollah north of the Litani River. Instead, Hezbollah spent nearly two decades rebuilding its military strength under the watch of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon. Israeli officials have repeatedly voiced frustration over Lebanese forces' failure to disarm Hezbollah following previous ceasefire agreements.

If Lebanon is serious about reclaiming its sovereignty from Hezbollah, it must finally do its part to secure its own territory – a task for which far too many IDF soldiers have already paid with their lives.

The framework, if implemented, could finally force the Lebanese government to choose between enforcing its own authority or allowing the country's future to remain hostage to a terrorist organization that answers to the Islamic regime in Tehran.

In doing so, it brings Beirut to confront the central issue it has avoided for years – finally acknowledging that Hezbollah is the obstacle holding Lebanon back, and not a legitimate partner in rebuilding the country.

Another encouraging sign that the agreement could help end the fighting along Israel's northern border is Hezbollah secretary-general Naim Qassem's vehement opposition to it.

In a statement issued on Saturday, Qassem denounced the framework as a "humiliation" and a surrender of Lebanese sovereignty, declared it null and void, and called for it to be replaced by the memorandum of understanding signed by the United States and Iran.

His reaction underscores the stark contrast between Friday's framework and Washington's separate understanding with Tehran.

Last week, a statement issued by the mediating countries, Qatar and Pakistan, announced the creation of a deconfliction mechanism for Lebanon. That mechanism reportedly excludes Israeli representatives from the body overseeing implementation, while including Iran.

Yet, the framework agreement itself contains no reference to the Qatar-Pakistan mechanism. One agreement gives Iran an oversight role in Lebanon's security reconstruction, while another explicitly affirms Lebanon's position that "any claim by any state or non-state actor to exercise a military or security role is illegal... and contrary to Lebanese national interests."

The contradiction is difficult to ignore. When push comes to shove, which of these competing understandings will actually be implemented, if any?

Alongside his Lebanese counterpart and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Israeli Ambassador to the US Yechiel Leiter called the agreement a "historic" step toward "real peace," saying negotiators had managed to put the diplomatic "train back on the tracks" after previously referring to the talks as a "trainwreck."

While the optimism is refreshing after a period of diplomatic setbacks, Israelis would be justified in approaching the framework with caution given the failures of previous ceasefire agreements.

The agreement, as published by the US State Department, repeatedly invokes the word "peace." The shared hope for a stable and prosperous northern border is evident throughout the document.

But, as is so often the case in the Middle East, the true test will be determined on the ground, in southern Lebanon – by whether Hezbollah is genuinely disarmed, whether the Lebanese state is willing and able to enforce its sovereignty, and whether the commitments made on paper survive an encounter with reality.

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## Not by the hands of God or man

• By HAYIM LEITER

Zvika Klein, the editor-in-chief of *The Jerusalem Post*, recently wrote an open letter to US President Donald Trump. He expressed his bewilderment with Trump's behavior, unable to make heads or tails of his recent turnaround over Iran.

He all but begged the president to remember that our children are on the front lines, defending Israel against Hezbollah. "This deal tells us to pull back from the one border where our soldiers are still dying," Klein wrote.

Something profound was revealed in Klein's letter, beyond the betrayal. Israelis are starting to realize what's on the horizon.

President Trump has indeed been the greatest defender of Israel. As is always the case with him, his actions speak louder than words. From moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem, authoring the Abraham Accords, to attacking Iran – it seemed like our friendship might never end.

But things are changing.

The push for a new deal between Iran and the US to open the Strait of Hormuz came on suddenly. The concessions made are nearly identical to the Obama Administration's JCPOA agreement, except that more money was promised to the Mullahs.

It does not require the handing over of nuclear dust, a halting of ballistic missile production, or the cessation of funding Iran's terror proxies around the world. And worst of all, the agreement is an attempt to constrain Israel's defense against Hezbollah.

None of this should come as a surprise. Trump is not the messiah. He's been a good friend to Israel for the majority of his political career, and hopefully, one day, things will return to the way they were. But there's a chance they may not.

This turn of events is the wake-up call Israel and the Jewish people needed. Trump's legacy could prove short-lived. JD Vance's disposition is the future of the Republican Party as indicated by the Senate vote to curb Trump's powers in the Iran war. None of this bodes well for us.

Vance lashed out at unnamed



US PRESIDENT Donald Trump looks on after signing an executive order in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, last week. (Mandel Ngan/AFP via Getty Images)

members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition last week, saying, "Donald J. Trump is the only head of state in the entire world who is sympathetic to the nation of Israel at this moment in time. If I was in the cabinet of the Israeli government, I might not be attacking the only powerful ally that I have anywhere left in the entire world."

The vice president said the quiet part out loud. The US, along with many other nations around the world, has lost patience with Israel. He's not offering unsolicited advice – it's an implicit threat of removal of US support for Israel.

And beyond Washington, from Gaza to Iran, much of the world wants us to return to being the weak, pre-Holocaust Jews – and that's a frightening notion. The potentially

fractured alliance between the US and Israel would leave us isolated on the world stage.

What the editor-in-chief misunderstood about this current situation is that we are not alone. While the Republican Party is changing, Israel's future is one of political self-reliance. It is long overdue for our country to manufacture its own military hardware and strengthen bonds with other allies around the world.

But what is most important for all of us to remember is that no matter the health of our relationship with any other country, America included, we are never truly alone. The Jewish state is unique in the West because we are not a secular nation.

This may be why we are inclined to seek out false messiahs. More important than any political savior is remembering who is actually on

our side – Hashem.

God has a plan for the Jewish people. Israel needs to foster diplomatic partnerships throughout the world and bolster its military self-reliance. But these relationships cannot be contingent on our own self-defense.

Anyone who demands compromise of an ally's safety and the safety of its citizens is not a true friend at all. In order to forge our future, we can't fold our hands and wait to be saved – not by the hands of God or man.

*The writer is a rabbi, a wedding officiant, and a mohel who performs britot (ritual circumcisions) and conversions in Israel and worldwide. Based in Efrat, Israel, he is the founder of Magen HaBrit, an organization protecting the practice of brit milah and the children who undergo it.*

## Go back to where you belong

But where do we belong?



• By COOKIE SCHWAEBER-ISSAN

"Go back where you belong."

Just a couple of weeks ago, those words were heard in New Haven, Connecticut, voiced by a man who was apparently angered by the presence of a few Jewish men on the street.

Accusing the Jewish men of being "baby killers," he then used a rolled-up newspaper to dislodge the kippah (skullcap) from the head of at least one man.

Once again, the message is being sent that Jews need to return to the place from where they came. But where is that place? Remaining unidentified, for the most part, the one thing that is clear to antisemites is that it's not in Western countries.

For some Jew haters, that place, to which they should return, is Poland. The antisemitic slogan, "Go Back to Poland," has been heard at a number of pro-Palestinian protests, both in Europe and the US, affirming the complete ignorance of those who utter the slur.

If they were, at all, interested in the actual history, they would discover that although a handful of Jewish merchants arrived in Poland during the 10th century, the vast majority came between the 13th and 14th centuries, while attempting to flee the plagues and violence of Western Europe.

British psychology professor Rusi Jaspal was one such person who opined on the statement that Jews should go back to their origins. His conclusion was that "the description of Israelis, as Ashkenazi Jews from Europe," despite most Israelis being of non-European origin, is meant to cast Israel as a racist occupation rooted in European colonialist policy."

Although Jews were warmly welcomed to Poland by then-King Casimir the Great (1333-1370), who guaranteed their safety, that began to dramatically change once the Protestant Reformation got underway. By the 1600s, uprisings took place, with Cossacks mercilessly targeting Jews.

By the late 1700s, the lives of Polish Jews became embittered as they suffered much discrimination and were forced to endure many restrictions as well as resettlement.

Of course, everyone knows what happened in the 20th century as Poland huddled its Jewish

population into one small area, notoriously known as the Warsaw Ghetto.

A whopping three million Polish Jews were killed in the Holocaust, representing 90% of their prewar community. So clearly, the case for Poland, being the place where Jews belong, doesn't hold water.

Given the fact that the 2,000-year dispersion of the Jewish people resulted in literally being scattered throughout the four corners of the earth, including the Far East, it's difficult to argue that Jews belong in any of these places, since almost every single one of them, at one point or another, turned against them, culminating in their forced conversion, exile, or death.

NONETHELESS, the obvious home of the Jewish people, from a biblical and historical perspective, is one that antisemites are loath to admit, because by doing so, they disqualify the so-called Palestinians from claiming that land as theirs.

But it's hard to rewrite history, attempting to manipulate the geography to suit a modern-day narrative, claiming that Jews stole ancient Arab land, because the biblical recordings categorically deny that highly-modified version.

Although Ishmael was born prior to the arrival of Isaac, the first Jewish son, he was not the heir to Abraham's promised land. In Genesis 16:12, we see that God's angel tells Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, that his descendants would live to the east of his brothers. That land encompasses Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula, as well as parts of Iraq and Syria.

Conversely, the land promised by God to Abraham was intended to be the home of his descendants of promise, starting with Isaac and Jacob, his son. Anything that departs from that divine geographic parceling of land deviates from the plan of the Almighty, who decided where the Jewish people belong.

Sadly, there are those who, thousands of years later, believe that they can disregard God's bequeathed homeland to the Jewish people by rewriting the deed, relegating them to the hostile shores of Poland, as if that's their rightful heritage.

But no matter how hard you try, fantasy cannot become reality just by willing it to be so. Because we no longer live in a time when the Jewish people are dependent upon the whims of

their host countries – one day guaranteeing their security and the next, telling them that they must depart at once!

Making good on his promise, God returned us, as a people, to the land he swore would be ours, never again to be uprooted. Amos 9:15

Hateful slogans cannot change that, nor disingenuous versions of a distorted history. The story of the Jewish people is one which has a clear beginning and a certain end, much to the regret of our enemies.

Ironically, the Connecticut man who shouted, "Go back to where you belong," should realize that the realization of his words is the ultimate fulfillment of the Jewish prophets, all of whom foretold the return of our people to their God-given land. In essence, this Jew hater is reinforcing the divine call of *Shuva* – return to the land.

Would he not be horrified to discover that his contempt for Jews is part of the plan to bring them to their rightful home? And that is the paradox of all those who share his disdain for the chosen people.

While they think that they are righteous champions of the disenfranchised, whose land was stolen, they are actually positioning themselves as the opponents of Almighty God, whose intended destiny for his people can never be overruled.

That means that their tireless efforts to deny history, the scriptures, and even the modern-day majority of nations, all of whom agreed that the Jewish homeland should be in *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel), will be nothing more than an exercise in futility, because no one can change what God ordained.

Rather than continuing the fight, they would be well-advised to make peace with what began in 1948, when the restoration of Jewish people to their land became a reality. Now, 78 years later, the country still flourishes, despite every attempt to bring it to an end.

The fact that no one has been able to extinguish the dream already testifies to the divine presence who is also telling his people, "Go back to where you belong."

*The writer is a former Jerusalem elementary and middle school principal. She is the author of Mistake-Proof Parenting, available on Amazon, based on the time-tested wisdom found in the Book of Proverbs.*

# Ministerial bloat

• By ARI TATARKA

By the 1980s, the Soviet Union's attempt to centrally plan every detail of human existence swelled its Council of Ministers to over 100 cabinet-level officials. They had a ministry for everything. There was a Ministry of Heavy Machine Building, a Ministry of General Machine Building, and a Ministry of Medium Machine Building (which, absurdly, was the cover name for the nuclear weapons program).

When the regime inevitably realized that fitting 100 ministers into a single room to make a decision was impossible, their solution was just to invent more bureaucracy: a VIP inner cabinet.

It sounds like peak bureaucratic absurdity – until you realize that, proportionally, Israel's actually worse.

The Soviet parliament had over 1,000 deputies. The Knesset has only 120. Because Israel currently operates with roughly 30 active ministries and a peak headcount of 38 ministers, nearly a third of Israel's parliament has simultaneously served in the executive branch. That is almost three times the number of ministers you will find in some European governments. Even more embarrassingly, in classic Soviet style, roughly 50% of Israel's ministries are entirely made-up portfolios created solely for political patronage.

Unfortunately, this does not translate to 50% more areas addressed by the government, but rather 100% less efficiency, if not more.

In a mere four and a half years, politicians executed 76 structural changes, shuffling 50 different government units across ministries. Some units, like the Authority for the Development and Settlement of the Bedouin, were treated like political footballs, bouncing between seven different ministries.

These administrative transfers are agonizingly slow, dragging out anywhere from three weeks to two and a half years. Beyond



LIKUD MK Galit Distel Atbaryan leads the Special Committee for the Communications Law at the Knesset, last week. Distel Atbaryan resigned and pushed to dissolve her own Public Diplomacy Ministry, openly citing it as a 'waste of public funds,' the writer notes. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

the sheer gridlock – where basic communication is impossible because no one understands where everything is going – this constant shuffling carries a massive financial and operational price tag.

The Finance Ministry estimates that simply streamlining this bloat down to 24 ministries and merging overlapping departments would save roughly NIS 950 million a year.

When the Agriculture Planning Authority was transferred, its entire NIS 40m. budget was completely lost in the bureaucratic friction. Left entirely defunded in 2023, it ultimately required even more taxpayer money just to rebuild the paralyzed

department from scratch the following year.

But the damage doesn't end there; the creation of overtly political ministries minimizes the importance of the very missions they were ostensibly created to serve. When a cabinet grows beyond 20 members, a prime minister cannot effectively manage that many ministers in a single room.

To circumvent the very gridlock they manufactured, prime ministers are forced to create inner cabinets, rendering the majority of ministries functionally irrelevant to the state's core decision-making. This explains the current setup, where

only half of the 24 ministers sit in the security cabinet.

Not only does the prime minister dismiss their value, but sometimes even the ministers themselves cannot pretend to take their jobs seriously. A glaring example was the "heroic" action of Likud MK Galit Distel Atbaryan shortly after October 7, when she resigned and pushed to dissolve her own Public Diplomacy Ministry, openly citing it as a "waste of public funds." After all, if there was one thing Israel didn't lack during the two years of war, it was certainly a coherent public relations strategy.

UNLIKE MUCH of Israel's Kafkaesque bureaucracy, ministerial bloat is not a left-over relic of its socialist past, but rather a direct product of its politically fractured present. The roots of today's crisis can be traced back to 2009. Benjamin Netanyahu had a problem: he refused to form a coalition with his primary rival, Tzipi Livni's Kadima Party. Instead, he was forced to cobble together a governing majority from six different factions.

To secure Avigdor Liberman's loyalty, Netanyahu handed him the highly coveted Foreign Ministry. But to balance the resulting anxiety and aspirations of Liberman's fierce political rival – Shas leader Eli Yishai – Netanyahu had to compensate him with the Interior Ministry and a newly revived Religious Services Ministry.

The absurdity and wastefulness of this era – best highlighted by the decision to fracture the Science, Culture, and Sport Ministry into separate ministries just to manufacture more cabinet seats – was so blatant that it became a major campaign issue in the next election.

In 2013, new parties ran on a platform demanding an end to the absurdity of the bloat. Netanyahu was forced to swallow a strict cap on cabinet size after Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett formed a political pact during coalition negotiations. To secure his mandate, Netanyahu amended the

Basic Law to legally limit the number of ministers.

Predictably, this structural reform was short-lived. The cap only survived until the ensuing political crises required more bargaining chips to balance power, culminating in the bloated unity governments of 2020 and 2021 that ballooned to an absurd 34 ministers.

And so we arrive at the current government, which at its peak boasted 34 ministers across roughly two dozen ministries, and has only been reduced to 24 because of emergency wartime budget cuts and coalition shuffling. Apparently, it takes a multi-front existential war just to trim a little political dead weight.

The temptation to hand out ministries will always dominate coalition negotiations because these portfolios are the ultimate political currency. They allow party leaders to reward loyalists, carve out massive state budgets, and guarantee media exposure – everything needed to ensure their party's survival.

We simply cannot expect politicians to throw away such a powerful tool. Even the men who built their brands on shrinking the cabinet – Bennett and Lapid – eagerly abandoned that moderation the second they needed to form their own government in 2021.

We also cannot rely on Israel's helter-skelter Basic Laws to save us. The legal cap on ministers should undoubtedly be restored, but laws can always be rewritten by a desperate prime minister and a large enough coalition. Ultimately, the only thing that actually forces politicians to cut political dead weight is public demand.

Ultimately, the foundational principle of any democracy still holds true in Israel: no matter how sprawling the government bureaucracy becomes, the single most powerful mechanism for change remains the voter.

The writer serves as the English director of the Ribo Center and the editor of Amit Segal's newsletter, It's Noon in Israel.

## Like in the WWE, Israel's tag team partner turned on us

• By AKIVA LAMM

As the elementary school year came to an end, my son was thrilled to hear that, despite prior threats from Tehran, his school trip would go ahead as planned. After the bitter disappointment of having the trip postponed when it turned into a blitz round of strikes under Operation Epic Fury, his relief was understandable.

Watching the joy on his face, I couldn't shake a pang of dread. The quiet we may be enjoying now will likely give way to a deafening noise later. That is the most painful lesson of October 7.

And as the details of the ceasefire agreement between Iran and the United States come into focus, it's hard not to feel that we are the ones who will pay the price of America's war fatigue.

At a press conference held amid growing public and political criticism in Israel over the deal, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu projected victory: "We built deep security buffers around the State of Israel – in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria – where we destroyed all the weapons of Assad's army, which was a central link in the Axis of Evil," he said.

But in an interview with CBS shortly before, he admitted the proxies themselves are still there: "There are still proxies that Iran supports... we've hit a lot of that, but it's all still there, and there's work to do." Military success, it seems, is obscuring the success of Iran's strategy.

As a bitter lesson from its long war with Iraq, Tehran spent years weaving a strangulation belt of proxy armies around Israel. Hamas, Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and Hezbollah in the north forced Israel to fight on three fronts simultaneously.

By some miracle, we're now militarily stronger than we were on October 6 – but those who were sent by Tehran and killed in battle were replaced by yet another new proxy.

If terror groups once looked to Tehran for resources, the role has now flipped: Washington is the one calculating how to serve Tehran's interests, even if unintentionally. Instead of exhausting Israel militarily, Iran has found a way to paralyze it diplomatically.

And we should be honest about what that means: diplomatic isolation imposed by an enemy that openly calls for Israel's destruction, that is developing a nuclear weapon, and that is rebuilding its strangulation belt to make good on that threat – is not a tactical hurdle. It is a clear existential threat.

In a historical absurdity, the United States is now functioning as Iran's de facto proxy. Whether out of fatigue with Middle East wars, a cold economic calculation about reopening the Strait of Hormuz, or – absurdly enough – the fact that a country hosting the World Cup cannot afford a regional war at the same time, the result is the same.

Where Iran once used terror groups to keep Israel from striking Tehran, it is now using the United States to keep Israel from striking Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran itself. Washington's explicit demand for an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, paired with its refusal to brief Jerusalem on the full terms of the deal, expos-

es the depth of the rift.

The talks in Switzerland only underscore how fragile this all is. Washington is trying to extract from Tehran an agreement to allow international inspectors access to its nuclear sites, dangling financial concessions in return – but Iran has not yet agreed.

US President Trump's threats over Hezbollah and the Strait of Hormuz pushed the Iranian delegation to the brink of walking out, only for talks to resume hours later. This isn't stability. It's a deal held together by duct tape.

TRUMP IS an avowed WWE fan. There was once a wrestler named Eddie Guerrero, whose catchphrase was "I lie, I cheat, I steal."

Perhaps without realizing it, that's exactly the posture guiding Trump in his dealings with Iran: withholding the terms of the deal from Jerusalem, sending contradictory signals on Lebanon, declaring victory before anything is actually signed. But the more fitting WWE storyline here might be an even older staple of the sport: the tag-team partner who turns on you mid-match.

The crowd believes the two of you are fighting side by side – until, in the moment that matters most, your own partner holds you down just long enough for the other team to finish the job.

That, increasingly, is what Washington's posture on Lebanon and on nuclear inspections looks like from Jerusalem: the partner who tagged himself in to help, and then made sure you couldn't get back up.

This isn't the first time we've had to face American abandonment. When Biden threatened to halt weapons shipments during the war against Hamas, Netanyahu declared: "If we have to fight with our fingernails, we will." Even then, behind the tough talk, the US kept supplying most of the weapons Israel needed.

Nor is this the first time Washington's bear hug has kept Israel from defending itself properly: in 1991, during the Gulf War, Washington pressured prime minister Yitzhak Shamir to absorb dozens of Iraqi Scud missiles without firing back.

In 2012, the Obama administration blocked a planned Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear program – a strike Netanyahu himself later confirmed he had intended to carry out. This time, the bitter irony is that Trump, in trying to stop Iran from racing toward a nuclear weapon, may end up pushing Israel to start one.

Despite Washington's efforts to keep Tehran off the nuclear path, Iran's determination to preserve Hezbollah as a threat, its resolve to continue the direct fight against Israel, and America's fatigue all point toward a particularly grim outcome.

Whether under this government, the next one, or by the time my son is old enough to vote, Israel may find itself needing to lean on every deterrent at its disposal – including unconventional weapons, to whatever extent it has access to them – and use it against whoever threatens its destruction. Simply because, this time as before, American interests and Israeli interests have stopped being the same.

The writer is a media consultant and a former spokesman at Israel's National Public Diplomacy Directorate.

## The mikveh belongs to the women of Israel, not to those who yell at them

• By SETH FARBER

The chief rabbi's call this week for mikveh attendants to disregard a ruling of Israel's Supreme Court should concern every Jew who cares about the rule of law, religious freedom, and basic human dignity.

At issue is a Supreme Court decision from almost a decade ago affirming that women using public mikvaot cannot be subjected to intrusive questioning or religious policing by mikveh attendants.

The ruling came after years of complaints from women who described being humiliated and even denied access to publicly funded ritual baths.

Since the decision, halachic writing acknowledging that the way mikvaot were supervised in Israel only represented one dimension of the halachic tradition has increased exponentially. One only needs to read posts this week from Israeli scholars such as Avraham Stav, Yoni Rosensweig, Tirza Kelman, and Eli Reif (just to name a few) to see how much more this is in the consensus than it was a decade ago.

Following ITIM's victory in the Supreme Court, which granted women autonomy in the mikvaot, we have continued to receive calls where women reported being asked deeply personal questions about their observance, and being refused entry to immerse without supervision.

We have filed hundreds of complaints and engaged in our own surveys to ensure that the Supreme Court decision is being implemented.

The Supreme Court rightly recognized

that public mikvaot are public institutions. Women who use them are entitled to dignity, privacy, and respect.

The chief rabbi's statement – to encourage attendants to ignore the Court's ruling – is deeply troubling. In a democratic state governed by law, public employees do not get to decide which court rulings they will follow and which they will disregard.

One does not have to agree with every judicial decision to understand that openly encouraging civil servants to defy the law sets a dangerous precedent.

But there is another aspect of this controversy that deserves attention. Every year, more than 650,000 immersions take place in Israel's mikvaot. The overwhelming majority of the women who use these facilities are not enemies of Judaism. They are not opponents of Torah. They are not seeking to undermine religious life.

Quite the opposite. These women choose to participate. They come from different communities, different levels of observance, and different religious outlooks. Yet they share a desire to connect with a practice that has been central to Jewish life for generations.

To suggest that women seeking a respectful and private immersion experience are somehow acting against Torah values is not merely wrong; it is absurd.

What Torah value is served when a woman is screamed at in a mikveh?

What Torah value is advanced when a woman is publicly shamed?

What Torah value is protected when a woman fears being interrogated before

she can immerse?

The Torah repeatedly commands us to treat people with dignity. Chazal – the Talmudic rabbis – teach that human dignity is so fundamental that it can override significant religious considerations. The mikveh should be a place of *tahara* – ritual purification – not anxiety.

Many, even most mikveh attendants, understand this. Thousands of women have positive experiences every year thanks to dedicated attendants who approach their work with sensitivity and compassion. They help create an environment where women can observe this mitzvah with meaning and dignity.

Those attendants deserve praise. But when women are encouraged to yell or intimidate, something has gone terribly wrong. This debate is not about whether mikvaot should be religious institutions. They are. Nor is it about whether Jewish law matters. It does.

The question is whether publicly funded religious services exist to serve the people of Israel or to judge them.

The Supreme Court's ruling reflects a simple principle: women who enter a public mikveh should be treated with respect. They should not have to surrender their privacy, endure interrogation, or fear humiliation.

That is not a liberal value. It is not a secular value.

It is a Jewish value. And it is time that every woman who enters a mikveh in Israel can expect nothing less.

The writer is the founder and director of ITIM.



A WOMAN is seen at a mikveh in Bat Ayin. Women who enter a public mikveh should be treated with respect, the writer says. (Gershon Elinson/Flash90)

# 'Life is fragile, but love is enduring'

## Miami remembers 98 victims of Surfside condo collapse five years later

• By AMANDA ROSA

Five years ago, Raquel Oliveira had just celebrated her son Lorenzo's fifth birthday. She hosted dozens of children at her home at the Champlain Towers South in Surfside, unaware that the condominium was beginning to fail.

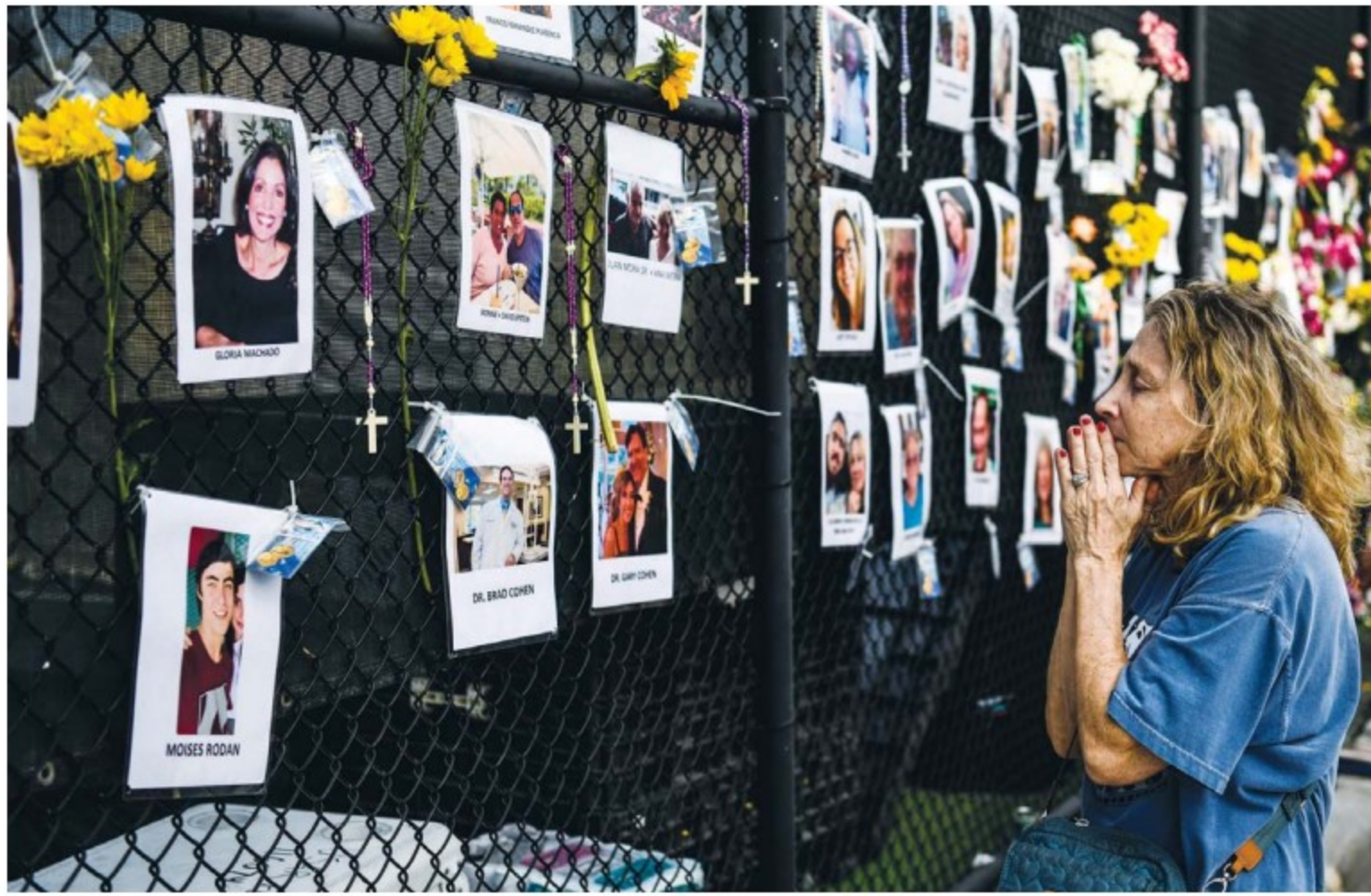
Last Wednesday marked five years since the building's collapse, which killed 98 people, including Oliveira's son and her husband, Alfredo Leone. The Town of Surfside held a remembrance event where victims' families, first responders, elected officials, and community members gathered to pray, grieve, and mark the solemn milestone. The names of each victim was read out loud as people in the audience stood in silence, wiping their tears and embracing each other.

"From now on, I'll have more time without Lorenzo than with him," Oliveira said while speaking on stage at the event. Behind her stood an image of a rendering of a permanent memorial honoring the 98 collapse victims that has yet to materialize, a sore subject that was mentioned several times during the event, along with condolences, family memories, and words of encouragement.

"Five years later, I can tell you that time does not heal. The pain does not get better," she said. "What actually happens is that we are forced to grow around it."

On Monday, the National Institute of Standards and Technology released its report on what caused the catastrophe, pointing to flaws in the design, construction, and maintenance of the building. Following the collapse, state legislators passed new laws to bolster condo safety, another theme touched on by speakers at the event.

"Remembrance is not just looking back, it's about what we do next. The first duty today is to honor the 98 souls. The second duty is to stand with survivors and fami-



A WOMAN prays in front of photos at the makeshift memorial for the victims of the Surfside building collapse in 2021. (Chandan Khanna/AFP via Getty Images)

lies. The third to make sure Florida learns about what happened here," said Florida Lieutenant Governor Jay Collins.

"Condo safety is not just a building issue. It's a people issue. It's a family issue. It is a public trust issue. When someone goes to sleep at night, they should never have to wonder whether that building is going to collapse around them or that it's safe."

Surfside Mayor Shlomo Danzinger was not present, but addressed the audience and thanked first responders in a pre-recorded video message. "Today we continue this sacred tradition to ensure that the memories of those we lost and the strength of the survivors are never forgotten," he said.

Victims' family members who have been advocating for the permanent memorial for years did

not shy away from the issue while speaking at the event. In February, the *Miami Herald* reported that construction was expected to begin before April, but ground has not been broken on the project.

Though designs for the memorial – estimated to cost about \$5.5 million overall – were completed last year, Surfside elected officials split the construction of the memorial into phases in order to keep each phase under \$3.6m., said acting Town Manager Mario Diaz. If the cost was over \$3.6m., the town would be required to hold a town-wide voter referendum to approve it, he said.

The memorial's wall featuring the 98 names will be completed first, and the canopy feature will be completed and funded at a later date, Diaz said.

Danzinger, who was elected in

April, said the design for the memorial is "now nearly complete" and construction will begin in the summer after county approval.

As she spoke about processing grief and the loss of her son and husband, Oliveira said she and other family members involved in the memorial were "blindsided" by the changes regarding the memorial. Fighting to get the memorial done over the last five years has been exhausting and painful, she said.

"To those who wish to alter our project, to those who want to build a memorial without our voices, look at us. Look at our pain," Oliveira said. "You cannot rewrite our history, and you cannot budget away our grief. We have survived the collapse of our world, and we will not let you collapse our tribute to them."

Martin Langesfeld, whose sis-

ter Nicky and brother-in-law Luis Sadovnic died in the collapse, shared similar frustrations as he spoke on stage. He glanced at the elected officials sitting next to the stage before saying, "We are fed up with the politics."

"Too often support is shown at anniversaries, but it disappears when decisions have to be made," he said.

He said families have been "disrespected countless times by the Town of Surfside" with broken promises and criticized the mayor for flying to Dubai to meet with the developer who purchased the condo site.

Langesfeld even called on Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle to open a criminal investigation into the collapse.

"This is bigger than one building. If corrosion and weak oversight contributed to this collapse, how many families across the state and the coast are living in buildings with similar warning signs and do not know it?"

### Life five years later

Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said she still remembers the smoke, the dust, the sirens, and the faces of families waiting for news. "It's like five years have not gone by," she told reporters before the remembrance event.

"You've shown the world what it means to love in loss, to speak out with purpose, and to carry forward the legacies of those who are no longer here," Levine Cava told families.

Families and first responders reflected on what it's like to live after such a profound tragedy. Miami-Dade Fire Chief Ray Jadhah spoke about how the tragedy changed him personally. He remembers people comforting others while needing comfort themselves, the first responders who refused to give up and strangers who became family members.

"Memory is one of the purest forms of love. To remember someone is to insist that their life mattered. That their laughter mattered. That their dreams mattered and that their story did not end beneath concrete and steel," he said.

Rachel Spiegel, who lost her mother Judy Spiegel in the collapse, reflected on the Jewish saying, "May their memory be a blessing." Now, she said, she understands those words are a guide for how to continue living after loss.

"They live in the stories we tell. They live in the traditions we continue. They live in the values they taught us. They live in every heart they touched. Today, five years later, we are still speaking their names. We are still telling their stories. We are still carrying them forward, and because of that they are still here, not in the way we wish but in the way that matters most. Through love."

Spiegel recalled the last time she saw her mother. It was June 20, Father's Day and her brother's birthday. Before the pool party, she was at a Target when she saw a beautiful pink dress that would be perfect for her oldest daughter. But she didn't buy it because she didn't want to be late.

Her parents later encouraged her to buy the dress, but it was sold out in the right size online. Her mother didn't give up. She kept checking the Target website and ordered the dress as soon as it came in stock. She never got to see her granddaughter wear it.

For a while, Spiegel said, she couldn't look at the dress without crying. But now the dress has become a symbol for how life continues despite grief. Over the last five years, her daughters Scarlett and Sloane outgrew the little pink dress.

As their mother spoke, the girls pulled the dress from a bag and held it up together.

"Life is fragile, but love is enduring," Spiegel said. (Miami Herald/TNS)

## Police with a special mission



### GRAPEVINE

• By GREER FAY CASHMAN

■ ON WEDNESDAY of last week, a contingent of some 40 police converged on the President's Residence. No, it wasn't an urgent security situation, nor was it a ceremony for the presentation of awards, nor was it a conference. It was just that President Isaac Herzog and his wife, Michal, wanted to express their appreciation to the volunteer dentists within the police force, who deal with forensic dentistry and thereby helped to identify dismembered victims of Hamas, victims of other acts of terrorism, fallen soldiers whose dog tags had disappeared, and victims of traffic accidents.

Just as the police force has professionally qualified lawyers, it also has professionally qualified doctors and dentists. The latter, who see their work in forensics as an important mission, do their forensic work as volunteers. Their abilities were particularly valued from October 8, 2023, onwards. The president asked each of them to identify themselves and to explain what they actually do and how it helps in the identification process. Some said that it had been particularly meaningful to meet the families of victims and to be able to tell them that a loved one had been identified.

The Herzogs asked a lot of pertinent questions and said that in their frequent meetings with bereaved families, they had heard how grateful many of them were to police forensics. One officer said that before identification was confirmed, some families were living in a state of uncertainty, not knowing whether their loved ones had been kidnapped by Hamas or whether they were dead. Even when the latter proved to be the case, there was a certain relief in knowing the tragic truth.

■ EVENTS RELATED TO America's 250th anniversary of independence began some weeks ago and are likely to continue into the weeks ahead. For example, a post-4th of July event is taking place at Tel Aviv University on Wednesday, July 8, when **Rahm Emanuel**, an influential figure in US politics and diplomacy, will engage in what has been termed "an honest conversation" on the US-Israel relationship – where it stands today, and the road ahead.

It should be remembered that Emanuel is far from being a fan of the present administration.

He was a White House chief of staff during **Barack Obama's** administration; he represented the 5th Congressional District of Illinois in the House of Representatives for six years; and served as mayor of Chicago for eight years. Most recently, during the Biden administration, he

served as US ambassador to Japan. The event, under the auspices of TAU's Center for the Study of the United States, begins at 4:30 p.m. in the Jaglom Auditorium in the Senate building.

The event is open to the public but registration is required. Contact [uscenter@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:uscenter@tauex.tau.ac.il)

■ APROPOS OBAMA, his legacy to his adopted city of Chicago – the Obama Presidential Center – opened on June 18, in the presence of former presidents **Bill Clinton**, **George Bush**, and **Joe Biden** and their wives, along with thousands of the city's population, as well as numerous celebrities and thousands of ordinary citizens from across America. Obama, America's 44th president and the country's first Black president, symbolizes the heights to which any child of any minority group can aspire. President **Donald Trump**, who has frequently made derogatory statements about Obama and has ridiculed the Obama Presidential Center, which is much more than a museum, was not invited.

In his speech, Obama, in reviewing American political history, said: "Democracy can be frustrating, it can be slow, it can be inefficient, and yet more than anything, I hope this center will serve as an affirmation of just how special, how precious our democracy truly is and remind us of what we can achieve when we embrace our shared responsibilities as citizens."

■ DURING A mid-June weekend, Sprint Sea Tel Aviv, which organizers claim was the world's first professional sprint swimming competition of its kind, took place in the calm waters of the marina at Tel Aviv Port. Conceived and initiated by the Israel Swimming Association, Tel Aviv Port, and the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipal Sports Authority, the event brought a pool-based sprint swimming format to the sea, with 96 of Israel's fastest swimmers, including Olympians, national team members, and national champions, competing in 50-meter knockout races, as hundreds of spectators, including executive members of the sponsoring organizations, urged them on.

Among those present were: **Yael Arad**, chair of the Israel Olympic Committee; **Tzipi Brand**, deputy mayor of the city; **Ofir Vagman**, director of the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipal Sports Network; **Hagai Ashlagi**, chairman of the Israel Swimming Association; **Lior Levi**, CPA, general manager of Tel Aviv Port and the Levant Fair; **Yaron Klein**, Adv., CEO of Atarim Group; **Amir Halevi**, chairman of the Board of Atarim Group; and **Yakov Toumarkin**, professional director of the Israel Swimming Association and former Olympian.

■ IT'S COMMON knowledge that gam-

bling is addictive and can ruin families. Yet many countries directly or indirectly encourage gambling through casinos and state-supported lotteries. Israel falls within the latter category. There are and have been illegal casinos in Israel, but all attempts to open a legal casino, including one by the late Sheldon Adelson, have failed.

Nonetheless, Mifal Hapayis, Israel's national lottery, runs a number of gaming options such as Lotto, Chance, Keno, 777, 123, Hish Gad, and subscription lotteries. The latter, which involves a weekly draw, is a boon for people who want to give to charity, but don't always have the time to do so. The tickets are reasonably priced, and annual renewable subscriptions are paid for by credit card.

The problem is that no one supervises how much individual gamblers spend on any of the above. Purchasers of various lottery tickets and cards are helping with the construction and maintenance of many community facilities. Mifal Hapayis profits go towards building schools, community centers, libraries, sports centers, public swimming pools, and more. By law, purchasers of Lotto tickets must punch the last four numbers of their ID cards into a device, but this is mainly to confirm their identity in case of a big win, in which case 25% of the profits of the winner go into the National Treasury.

There is also the Toto lottery based on the result of soccer games.

Just like other industries and professions, there are international gaming organizations – in this case, EL, whose annual conference under the title of "Lotteries Bridging Continents" met in Marrakech, Morocco, for the EL Industry Days Conference 2026.

Of the 300 senior executives from the lottery and public gaming industries throughout Europe and Africa, the Israeli delegation included **Itzik Lari** and **Benny Dreyfus**, chairman and CEO, respectively, of Mifal Hapayis, and **Meir Bardugo**, CEO of Toto. The purpose was to exchange ideas and enhance cooperation.

"Meeting with colleagues from around the world once again demonstrates that sharing knowledge and experience is one of the most important tools for advancing innovation and public responsibility," said Lari.

One of the few positive elements of gambling is that animosities are eliminated at gambling tables. Before the signing of a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, Israelis who were dual nationals went to Cairo to gamble at the casino there. Their country of residence was not exactly a secret, and when the luck of any Israeli player was down to his last chip, another player from an enemy country would throw a couple of his own chips in the loser's direction.



MEIR BARDUGO (from left), Itzik Lari, Romana Girandob, and Benny Dreyfus. (NAHIME)



YARON KLEIN (from left), Yael Arad, and Lior Levy at Sprint Sea Tel Aviv. (Guy Yechieli)

Similarly, when the long-defunct Oasis Casino opened in Jericho in 1998, Israelis – including haredim – flocked to it, and differences between secular and religious and Jews and Arabs were instantly forgotten as they sat shoulder to shoulder at the gambling tables. For various reasons, the project did not last long, and the casino closed down in 2000. But it did prove that casino diplomacy might be worth pursuing.

■ WITHIN THE framework of its ongoing Diplomatic Dialogue series, the Israel branch of the World Jewish Congress (WJC-Israel), in cooperation with Startup Nation Central and the Israel Diplomatic Institute (IDI), hosted diplomats from Europe, North and South America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East for a discussion on Israel's innovation ecosystem and the ever flourishing role of technology and innovation in international relations.

Many countries have similar challenges, causing participants to explore how these could be overcome through shared knowledge and experiences with the use of innovative technology, while creating new opportunities across borders.

The meeting was opened by WJC-Israel Chair **Hadassa Getsztain**, who focused on the evolving nature of diplomacy in an increasingly interconnected world. "Innovation is not only about technology. It is also about building bridges between people, countries, and ideas," she said. "Israel is often called the Start-Up Nation, but what makes me most proud is the way innovation allows us to build partnerships, create opportunities, and strengthen relationships with friends and allies around the world. This is what we call 'Tech Diplomacy.'"

Getsztain also emphasized the importance of innovation for Jewish communities worldwide, noting that technology serves as a powerful tool in advancing community resilience, security, education, and efforts to combat antisemitism.

**Alon Turkaspa**, director of global partnerships at Startup Nation Central, shared insights on Israel's innovation ecosystem and the opportunities it creates for international collaboration.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Jerusalem Post or its affiliates.

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Chicago Tribune

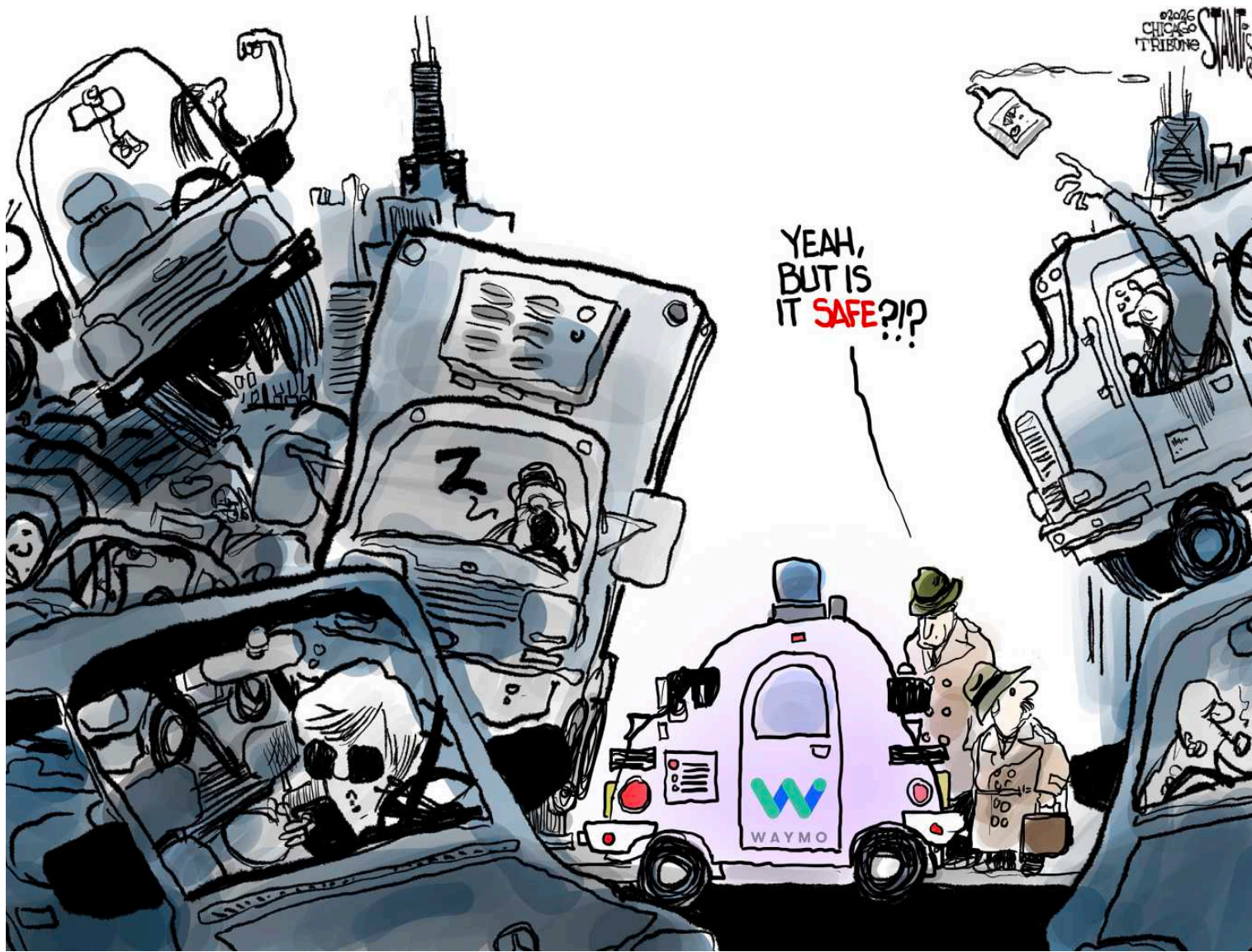
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## EDITORIALS



SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

# Illinois and Chicago should move fast on Waymo approval

On June 5, Riley O'Neil, a 35-year-old cyclist who worked for the Chicago Department of Transportation, was killed in the 3200 block of South Halsted Street in Bridgeport. The driver of a car opened a door into his path. O'Neil then swerved in avoidance, right into an oncoming semi truck. O'Neil was pronounced dead at Stroger Hospital.

Had that car been a Waymo, a fully driverless robotaxi operated by a subsidiary of Alphabet, the Google parent, the evidence is strong that a fatal accident would not have happened. Nor would many other accidents that occur on the streets of Chicago, many involving pedestrians and cyclists vulnerable to human error.

Waymo's custom-built cameras, radars and LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) systems would have "seen" the cyclist long before he arrived and would not have stopped in a dangerous position. Even if it had done so, there would have been no driver to open the door. If an incautious passenger had thought about doing so in this or any other cyclist's path, an alarm would have sounded and a bike graphic shown on the passenger screen that said "cyclist approaching." In plenty of time.

That's a hypothetical example of a very strong case for 17-year-old Waymo, which already operates its robotaxi service in numerous forward-thinking U.S. cities, including Phoenix, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Miami.

Waymo already is up and running in six of the U.S. World Cup host cities. London and Tokyo are following close behind. So is Detroit, the self-styled Motor City.

We met with a group of Waymo executives in recent days. For the record, we sought them out, knowing that Waymo already was "mapping" Chicago (a training phase where cars drive around the city as readers may have seen) and knowing also that Illinois, unlike more than half of the other U.S. states, has yet to take authorizing action for driverless vehicles.

We call upon our legislators in Springfield to do so. As soon as possible. We suspect some legislators don't yet know how many lives expeditious action may save.

Waymo has been taking a cautious approach to new cities, given the size of the investment needed to purchase and maintain a dedicated and consistent fleet of bespoke cars (usually with a fleet-management partner), a very



A Waymo self-driving car navigates the Miraloma Park neighborhood on Dec. 26, 2025, in San Francisco. JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

different proposition from requisitioning privately owned vehicles and independent drivers. It also clearly is in a position of strength, choosing global cities that welcome its arrival and not necessarily sweating places where it is not wanted or jurisdictions that want to heap fees and taxes on its operations. This is in contrast to the early years of ride-sharing companies, which arrived much more suddenly, taking the existing taxi players by surprise and, in short order, coming close to wiping them out.

Aside from offering Chicagoans an alternative to taxis (many of which are reluctant to use their meters when you need them the most) and ride-sharing services (which are becoming more expensive and less reliable than when they first were introduced), the main argument for Waymo is twofold.

The first and most important one is overall safety.

Waymo product management director David Margines told us the company has analytical data covering five cities and more than 220 million fully autonomous miles through the end of March 2026 — the equivalent, the Waymo crew said, of over 250 human lifetimes behind the wheel. The company claims that, compared to human drivers in the same areas over the same period, the Waymo Driver (which is how the company likes to humanize its empty drivers' seats) was involved in 94% fewer crashes causing serious or fatal injuries, 82% fewer crashes in which an airbag deployed, and 82% fewer crashes involving any reported injury. Each comparison is made regardless of who was at fault in a collision. Waymo experienced 93% fewer injury-causing crashes involving pedestrians, 84% fewer involving cyclists, and 84% fewer

involving motorcyclists.

Those are astonishing figures and Margines told us they are gleaned from a variety of road experiences. Waymo's product communications manager Chris Bonelli told us that many accidents are avoided due to the Waymo's ability to react in more ways at once than humans typically manage. For example, avoiding some accidents can mean both braking and swerving at the same time, when humans typically manage only one at once. Often the wrong choice, too.

Waymo operates in large cities where demand is high for its services, but it has now ventured beyond obvious urban centers to, for example, San Francisco International Airport, which means the cars travel on freeways. So one might expect service to O'Hare airport in Chicago's future.

At first, though, Waymo plans a footprint from the South Loop to Wrigleyville, the area in which it predicts demand will be highest. We'd hope for a quick expansion, but we think that would work for a start. Bonelli told us that costs will be similar to rideshares (although no need to tip the robotic mechanisms) and that demand-based pricing would be similar; their justification is that with their fixed fleet, they use cost as a way of limiting demand to avoid excessive wait times. It was also pointed out that wait times will be far more accurate, since Waymo knows the precise location of its vehicles and their exact trajectory. They don't come via the local 7-Eleven and they don't take bathroom breaks.

The second argument is for riders with particular needs or preferences. This can be applied to a group as broad as all women, who may prefer not to have a male Uber driver and enjoy having a safe space to themselves,

to specific situations like blind people, who can benefit from Waymo technology in several ways. We were told by Annabel R. Chang, Waymo's head of state policy and government relations, that the company has discovered many parents with newborns choose to come home from the hospital via Waymo, it being the safest option for a baby's first ride.

Many Chicagoans will, of course, take a while to arrive at that level of trust when that wheel spins alone. And we don't doubt the unfamiliarity of Waymos will be exploited by some; if something goes wrong, Waymos will be in the news, even as people are being killed by human drivers. But the data is clear that these vehicles, which follow traffic rules and make far fewer mistakes, are better drivers than we humans.

What is the downside? The obvious one is a loss of rideshare jobs, although Waymo argues that it is hardly a person-free operation, given the complexity of the support network. It also says it is happy to coexist, acknowledging that some may prefer a human driver in certain scenarios for good reason. We don't doubt that some will see driverless vehicles as a dystopian development or imagine scenarios where things can go wrong.

Waymo vehicles operate in the real world, and so we peppered our guests with questions about what might happen in situations where people interfere with the vehicles (say, during a so-called teen takeover), and we were impressed by the battery of solutions, ranging from the cars instantly calling the police to report an incident to warning announcements to instantly engaged support humans to any number of creative ways for the car to get the heck out of there. About the only thing that Waymo seemed less than 100% confident on was Chicago's extreme winter weather, but they said they'd have that fully prepped before too much longer.

The bottom line is that forward-thinking cities that value human life above protectionism are going to embrace this technology, which has become a tourist attraction in and of itself. "In San Francisco we are the new cable car," Chang told us.

Just another reason, then, for small town Midwesterners to visit us.

Not as safely as humanly possible, but way beyond. Get moving, Springfield.

### Quotes of the Week

*"Chicago can attract new businesses and jobs and invest in the communities that have too often been overlooked. We don't have to choose between economic growth and community investment. The answer is both."*

CHICAGO MAYORAL CANDIDATE MATTHEW BREWER

*"Solidarity forever, abolish ICE, free Palestine, organize your union, and join DSA!"*

NEW YORK ASSEMBLYMEMBER AND DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA CONGRESSIONAL CANDIDATE CLAIRE VALDEZ

*"I think about my daughters. I never would want to think that my daughters would have fewer rights than I had, but here we are, and the reality is that they do."*

LT. GOV. JULIANA STRATTON

*"What freakin' parallel universe did I wake up in? You're telling me — if it's true — damaging the reflecting pool lining is something (Jeanine) Pirro wants to prosecute ... yet they're releasing people who pled guilty to assaulting a police officer?"*

SEN. THOM TILLIS, R-NORTH CAROLINA

*"I don't know where the funding (for the new Department of Gun Violence Reduction) is going to come from. My fear is that the mayor is gonna want to fund this by reducing the police budget. And that is absolutely the wrong thing to do."*

CHICAGO ALD. BRIAN HOPKINS

*"My efforts have been focused on trying to find somebody, recruiting a candidate to run to replace Mayor Biss and be the permanent mayor."*

EVANSTON ALD. JONATHAN NIEUWSMA

## OPINION

# It's time for a constitutional amendment to protect the right to vote

By Dick Durbin  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Do you know where your original birth certificate is? If you're lucky, you might track it down after rummaging through that box in your closet. But most Americans would be hard-pressed to find it.

Well, you had better get on it. Because if President Donald Trump and congressional Republicans have their way, you may need that document to register to vote in the midterm elections later this year.

Why? Because their so-called SAVE America Act would upend how states register voters and maintain voting data — making it harder for Americans to participate in our democracy.

I've been in politics for some time. I've learned a thing or two. So, I know there's always a "good" and a "real" reason for getting something done.

Trump says the SAVE America Act is needed to address voter fraud — instances of noncitizens voting. That is his claimed "good" reason in defense of this bill.

His "real" reason? To cling to power by rigging the results of the midterms.

Here's the truth: Federal criminal law already prohibits noncitizens from voting in federal

elections, and cases of noncitizens voting are extremely rare.

To that, you might say: Durbin, you're a Democrat. You're biased.

Then don't take it from me.

The Bipartisan Policy Center analyzed the conservative Heritage Foundation's Election Fraud Database. Out of millions of votes cast, how many cases of noncitizens illegally voting did the center find in that database between 1999 to 2023?

Was the number 77,000? No. Or 7,700? Try again. Or even 770? Nope.

I'll tell you: It was just 77 cases in a 24-year period, out of the millions and millions of votes cast.

It's clear, then, that the "crisis" of voter fraud that has long been pushed by this president is a manufactured one. But if Trump's bill becomes law, the implications would be very, very real.

A constituent of mine from Hoffman Estates is one of the many Americans without a passport who have taken the last name of their spouse. Under the SAVE America Act, my constituent told me she would have to drive a good distance to gather her marriage license and verify her name change. She said that the cost of gas, thanks to the war in Iran; the time she would spend traveling; and bureaucratic hurdles would pose considerable challenges to



Donna Wooten, right, votes across from her husband, Jerry Wooten, in a vote center during a primary election on May 5 in West Lafayette, Indiana.

CARA PENQUITE/AP

her being able to cast a ballot.

It's not just women. For the elderly voters with mobility issues who now are required to register in-person, the working-class parent who has to shell out \$165 for a passport or the rural voter who must drive multiple towns over to provide proof of citizenship — this bill impacts them.

Republicans claim they addressed these challenges by allowing voters to sign a statement, under penalty of perjury, attesting to their citizenship. But this safeguard falls short — especially given new civil and criminal penalties for election officials that are tucked into this bill.

Thankfully, Senate Democrats have defeated this legislation time

and time again. We will continue to do so if Republicans keep trying to pass this voter suppression bill.

But the SAVE America Act is part of the president's larger scheme to sow doubt in our elections.

I was in the Senate chamber on Jan. 6, 2021. Vice President Mike Pence was presiding over the counting of the electoral votes for the 2020 election. It was roughly 10 minutes after 2 in the afternoon when Secret Service agents escorted Pence away. Not long after, members of Congress were instructed to leave as well.

A mob of insurrectionists, inspired by the president and his "Big Lie," were attacking the U.S. Capitol. Their goal? To stop the peaceful transfer of power.

Despite this, Congress certified Joe Biden's win. But the attacks on free and fair elections have continued.

Since Trump returned to the White House, his administration made the extraordinary move to raid an election office in Fulton County, Georgia, seizing ballots due to baseless claims of fraud in the 2020 election.

His weaponized Justice Department gutted the Civil Rights Division — which enforces laws that protect the right to vote — and eliminated the Election Threats Task Force, which protected poll

workers, candidates, judges and others involved in election administration.

And, in April, the president's hand-picked conservative supermajority on the Supreme Court dealt a fatal blow to the Voting Rights Act, allowing Republican-led states to redraw their congressional maps to gain a partisan edge and dilute the votes of Black Americans.

My friend, the late Congressman John Lewis, once said the right to vote is "precious, almost sacred." Under Trump, that precious, sacred right is under an unprecedented attack.

That's why Congress must pass my John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act to restore and strengthen the Voting Rights Act. But we must also consider additional tools to protect the right to vote. That's why I recently reintroduced a joint resolution that would enshrine an explicit, individual right to vote in the Constitution.

As America celebrates her 250th birthday, we should recommit to the values this nation was founded on and advance measures to push back against voter suppression efforts by this president before it's too late.

U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin is a Democrat from Illinois.

## 'Flyway City' explores how Chicago can create a safer urban center for birds



Edward Keegan

It's not often that an exhibition is broadly visionary and distinctly do-it-yourself. But "Flyway City: Architecture for a Flourishing Ecosystem," on display at the Chicago Architecture Center through Jan. 3, is both.

And it's mostly about birds and their migratory ways — not your typical fare at the CAC's Skyscraper Gallery.

It's largely the brainchild of architect and Studio Gang founding partner Jeanne Gang, who has been obsessed with the relationships between birds and buildings since at least 2003. That's when her firm won an international competition for the Ford Calumet Environmental Center. Gang's design was never built, but the firm's research into and design of "bird-safe" features have continued.

"Flyway City" started with a conversation between Gang and CAC CEO and President Eleanor Esser Gorski around the question of what would cities look like if we designed them from the start with wildlife and people in mind. The exhibit was developed as a collaboration between their two organizations.

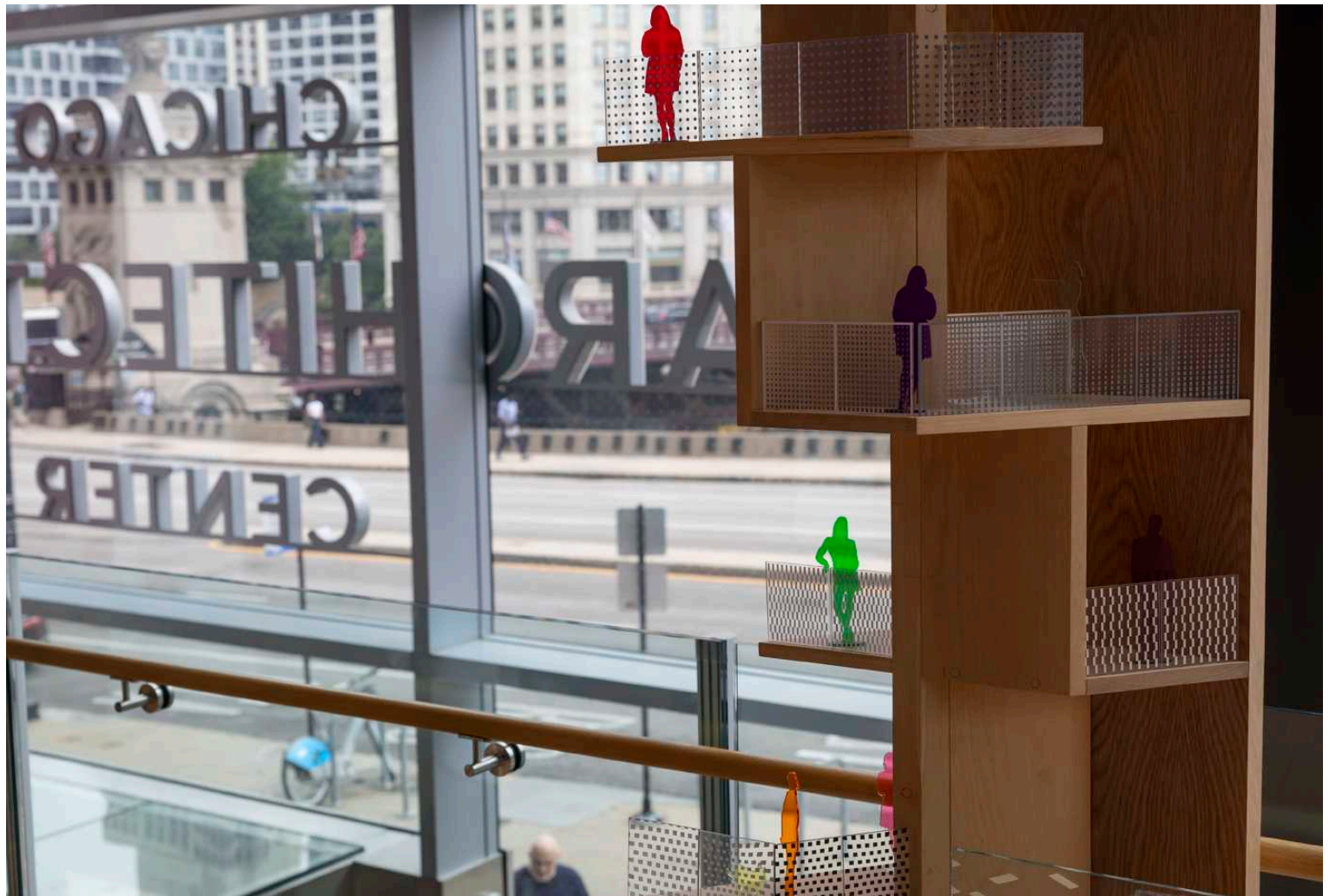
"Chicago's Living Habitat" — curated by the conservation-focused nonprofit Openlands with the CAC — provides a preface for the larger exhibition. It defines five very different habitats — prairie, wetland, woodlands, dunes and swales, and urban — that define the Chicago area. The tidy little exhibit highlights several publicly accessible examples for each.

The birds that traverse our skies over each of these landscapes provide the focus for the larger exhibit. There are four major flyways in North America, the north-south routes that migratory birds take between Canada and Central and South America each year. Chicago's location directly on the Mississippi Flyway makes the city one of the best urban areas to see birds in North America.

Cities are living habitats, and birds play a larger role in this ecosystem than we often realize. "They spread seeds, they're pollinators, they clean up deceased animals, so they stop the spread of disease," Studio Gang principal Alissa Anderson said. "They do a lot of things for human society to keep us healthy and to bring us food."

But there has been a 30% decline in North America's wild bird population over the last 50 years, which affects the economy and our quality of life.

And the contemporary built environment causes carnage among birds. On one infamous night in October 2023, nearly 1,000 birds died after flying into the clear glass walls of McCormick Place's Lakeside Center. Overall, 1 billion birds die colliding with glass each year in North



A model of City Hyde Park shows bird collision avoidance glass on the balconies displayed as visitors tour "Flyway City: Architecture for a Flourishing Ecosystem," a show by Studio Gang, on June 9 during a preview of two new exhibits on wildlife conservation initiatives opening at the Chicago Architecture Center. BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS



Examples of ways to treat windows to avoid bird collisions are displayed as visitors tour "Flyway City: Architecture for a Flourishing Ecosystem."

America. Treating the glass can reduce that figure by up to 95%, according to the exhibit's organizers.

While that's a grim statistic, change is possible.

"We're going to empower you to walk out of the gallery and know how you can take action to help out and make positive change," Anderson said. "We wanted to acknowledge the seriousness of the issue, but balance that with a lot of clear information and a solutions-oriented, optimistic, and proactive approach." In fact, McCormick Place has implemented changes that have prevented a recurrence of that fall night.

The role of cities in creating the carnage can be misunderstood. Birds tend to mistake glazing for open sky, but surprisingly, the peril isn't primarily driven by taller glazed buildings in cities

such as Chicago. In fact, birds tend to fly within the height of the tree canopy that seldom reaches above 100 feet. So, the windows of bungalows, worker cottages, three-flats, and more typical neighborhood-scaled construction can be as dangerous, or more, than the Loop's glazed high-rises.

Much of the show is something of a Studio Gang retrospective that demonstrates just how important these concepts have been throughout Gang's career. Chicagoans will recognize many of the projects, including Aqua Tower (2010), the Nature Boardwalk at Lincoln Park Zoo (2010), Studio Gang Chicago office and rooftop ecosystem (2015) and City Hyde Park (2016).

And the exhibit presents relevant ideas through the work of other architects. John Ronan's Chicago Park District Headquarters & Park 596 (2023) incorpo-

rates extruded aluminum screens across its windows. The Hub at Prairie Shores in Bronzeville by Gensler uses acid-etched glass. And the recently completed DuPage Wildlife Conservation Center in Glen Ellyn by Wight & Co. employs a copper screen, a standard dot pattern, and a pattern that creates oversized graphic leaves across its varied facades.

In Chicago, colleges and universities including Northwestern, the University of Chicago and Loyola University Chicago have become early adopters of bird-safe techniques.

The CAC's Illinois Center home along the Chicago River features 25-foot-tall windows that face north and east — showcasing Chicago's architecture while offering an especially treacherous environment for birds. Much of this glazing has been retrofitted with an ultraviolet dot pattern that's hardly perceptible to us but lifesaving for birds.

Since most Chicagoans live in structures that can be hazardous to birds, the organizers want to demonstrate how any visitor can become part of the solution. And bird-friendly retrofits need not be complicated or expensive.

"We're showing four different DIY techniques that any homeowner or renter can do to make the windows safe," Anderson said. A few double-hung windows have been modified to demonstrate possible applications: hanging vertical strings, paint or decal patterns, exterior insect screens and other mesh materials, or translucent tape. While practical, these solutions are not equally aesthetic; your results may vary.

The organizers are ultimately looking for more than just DIY efforts.

"The biggest thing we can do to make a difference on bird safety in Chicago is to pass a comprehensive ordinance for bird safe design in the city," Anderson said. And we'd hardly be at the forefront of this effort, as New York, Washington, San Francisco, Toronto and even Evanston have already done so.

For a part of the country that's distinctly lacking in topography, "Chicago's Living Habitat" is a strong reminder that Chicago's region is naturally quite diverse. And "Flyway City" uses the prism of birds to bring wildlife into the conversation about how we want to imagine our city.

It's an unexpected topic coming from one of our most recognizable architects and a civic institution dedicated to the built environment. But it's thoughtfully presented and gives us some useful design techniques to consider.

While "Flyway City" may not ever replace "Windy City," there's no reason we can't add the moniker while embracing the relatively simple changes that can make Chicago a safer place for birds — and people.

Edward Keegan writes, broadcasts and teaches on architectural subjects. Keegan's biweekly architecture column is supported by a grant from former Tribune critic Blair Kamin, as administered by the not-for-profit Journalism Funding Partners. The Tribune maintains editorial control over assignments and content.

## OPINION

# What America owes the Fourth of July

By **Otis Moss III,**  
**Michael Pflieger,**  
**Ciera Bates-Chamberlain**  
**and Seth Limmer**  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

America's 250th birthday party is well underway. There was a UFC fight on the South Lawn of the White House. There will be a naval armada in New York Harbor — tall ships, gray-hull military vessels — passing in presidential review past the Statue of Liberty. There will be concerts, but only certain artists need apply — most of those originally booked have already walked out, saying they were misled about the event's political affiliations. There will be fireworks, parades and a great deal of speechifying about American greatness.

What there will not be — if those stage-managing this celebration have their way — is an honest accounting of the history being celebrated. The names and stories that don't fit the mythology are already being quietly erased: from curricula, monuments, museum exhibits and the memory that a nation owes its people.

Abolitionist Frederick Douglass would recognize every bit of this Fourth of July.

In 1852, while standing before an audience in Rochester, New York, after being invited to toast the birthday of American democracy, Douglass offered instead a reckoning: "What, to the American Slave, is your Fourth of July?" He looked at the bombast of national celebration and named it with the precision of a prophet: "Your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy."

The pageantry was real. The liberty it celebrated was not — not for everyone. Consider the enslaved people for whom none of those freedoms existed.

Douglass was not asking America to abandon its ideals. He was demanding that it stop wearing those ideals like a costume while committing crimes against its own people.

After 250 years, the costume is back on.



Abolitionist Frederick Douglass, explorer Sacagawea and nurse Clara Barton are featured on a Wall of American Heroes inside the Freedom Truck, sponsored by Freedom 250, during the Great American State Fair Kickoff Celebration on the National Mall on June 24 in Washington. **AL DRAGO/GETTY**

In our eyes, this national moment is a test of spiritual honesty. America was birthed in genocide and built by slavery, and it has continuously recommitted itself to the project of white supremacy. To enter this anniversary uncritically — wrapped in flags and the mythology of manifest destiny — is to be bamboozled. The cruelest dimension of this is that a Christianity hijacked by the evangelical right now seeks to sanctify that mythology in the name of God.

When religion is made to serve the work of empire rather than the work of liberation, something has gone grievously wrong. The cross was not meant to be a stage prop for strongmen.

In 2026, too many are still waiting. Douglass made his argument when the nation was 76 years old. Now, at 250, we have had time enough to know what the Fourth feels like to those still unprotected by its promises. It's the crack of a cell door replacing the crack of a whip. It's another name added to a

memorial wall in a city that cannot seem to stop burying its children.

What is the Fourth of July to the mother whose 1-year-old son did not survive a traffic stop? To the neighbor detained without warning? To the community whose history has been scrubbed from public view even as the nation throws itself a party in the name of freedom? Consider the removal of exhibit panels on slavery from Independence Hall itself, the very building where the Declaration of Independence was signed. We do not celebrate 250 years of enslavement, mass incarceration, voter suppression and white terror.

We call this anniversary what it is: a moment of mourning and of reckoning. And, if we are willing, of possibility.

For all the searing force of his indictment, Douglass did not abandon hope. He knew what his audience needed to understand: that America was young and that youth contains the capacity to become something greater.

"The eye of the reformer is met with angry flashes, portending disastrous times," he told the crowd. "But his heart may well beat lighter at the thought that America is young, and that she is still in the impressible stage of her existence."

At 250, America is no longer young. The question Douglass posed — whether this nation would choose the full truth of its past over a curated myth designed not to offend — is more urgent, not less. We are being asked to choose between two versions of ourselves. One version sings hymns to a mythic nation always free, always just, always brave, always chosen. The other version dares to face what the great civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois called the yet-to-be United States of America: to reckon with the full weight of sorrow and failed promise alongside what we might yet become.

This second version is harder. It requires what Douglass called the work of the reformer: the will-

ingness to lay another brick in the unfinished cathedral of multiracial democracy, if we are willing to build it with honesty instead of spectacle.

This Fourth of July, the pageant will be loud. The fireworks will be spectacular. And Douglass will be watching, waiting to see whether, at long last, we are ready to mean what we say.

"God speed the year of jubilee," he wrote, speaking of the biblical promise of redemption and freedom for all, "the wide world o'er." May we be the generation that stops waiting for jubilee. May we begin, with head and heart and hand, to build it.

*Chicago faith leaders Rabbi Seth Limmer, the Rev. Otis Moss III, the Rev. Ciera Bates-Chamberlain and the Rev. Michael Pflieger joined the Tribune's opinion section in summer 2022 for a series of columns on potential solutions to Chicago's chronic gun violence problem. The column continues on an occasional basis.*

## Voice of the people

### We need the POWER Act

One hundred and twenty-three. That's the number of new data centers planned for construction in Illinois, a staggering figure that would nearly double the current total.

As these power-hungry facilities multiply, our communities and ratepayers need stronger safeguards and greater transparency. Passing the Protecting Our Water, Energy, and Ratepayers Act (SB4016/HB5513) is an essential first step.

The POWER Act, introduced in February by state Sen. Ram Villivalam and state Rep. Robyn Gabel, would regulate energy and water use for hyperscale data centers and mandate public transparency measures. Notable guardrails include water-use reporting, community benefit agreements with local towns and a requirement that data centers pay for their own renewable-sourced energy.

These guardrails matter because the costs of unchecked data center growth are well documented. Their enormous power demand will keep natural gas and coal-fired power plants online, disincentivizing renewable energy investments and worsening air pollution, a primary driver of climate change. Additionally, their intensive cooling systems require vast amounts of water and produce constant noise and light pollution.

And these burdens aren't shared equally. Data center development sites are disproportionately located near communities of color and under-resourced populations, compounding the public health risks these residents already face, such as respiratory illness and water contamination.

As president of the Link-Mind Foundation, a student-run nonprofit dedicated to public health and sustainability, I have seen the toll data centers can take on communal well-being. One of our current projects is a nationwide survey examining the correlation between data center proximity and environmental risk.



People opposed to the construction of a data center in Joliet attend a hearing and vote on the issue at City Hall on March 16.

**TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

The results: Low-income residents are more likely to live near these facilities and experience pollution concerns.

Yet the POWER Act bill missed the General Assembly's May 31 deadline. Meanwhile, Illinois has already handed out an estimated \$983 million in lifetime tax breaks to at least 27 data centers. It was only on June 5 that Gov. JB Pritzker suspended new tax incentives, and it is still not enough.

Springfield needs to act this fall. Robust evidence supports it. And waiting only means that communities will have to pay the price. — *Renee Ma, president, LinkMind Foundation*

### Solution for abandoned wells

Thank you for the story "Abandoned oil, gas wells burden state" (June 22). While the article does a fine job outlining the safety and water pollution threats these leaking wells present, it doesn't mention that methane is, in the short run, a greenhouse gas that is 80 times more powerful than carbon dioxide. Indeed, reducing methane emissions is an essential goal in reducing the growing threat of climate change.

Illinois is now the leading state for tornadoes, which is a direct result of a changing climate. We need to do more to reduce methane emissions, and plugging aban-

doned gas wells is one important step we can take now.

The article also does a fine job showing how the state is slowly catching up to owners, but that process can take many years, if not decades, time we do not have to waste.

One solution to this slow cat-and-mouse game might be to incentivize investors to cap the wells, even if they were never involved with them in the past. There is a large and growing voluntary carbon credit market, in which companies can claim credit for emission reductions and sell these credits to companies that are hoping to offset their own emissions. New data centers that are fueled by burning natural gas seem to be a likely candidate to buy these credits.

Capping abandoned wells while offsetting new data center emissions looks to be a win-win solution. — *Jonathan Bertram, Elmhurst*

### Bad actors are still hurting us

I have been really enjoying the investigative team's reporting on abandoned wells in Illinois. My career actually focuses on bonding and preventing taxpayers from being on the hook for the failures of bankrupt and corrupt companies. It's been so interesting to hear about plugging and aban-

donment issues from a different perspective.

Other states where oil and gas are larger industries tend to have much stricter requirements to protect the environment and to keep taxpayers from being saddled with the bill. It's a shame that in Illinois, we didn't have the right safeguards in place.

People are still being hurt today by bad actors from decades ago. — *Katie Kahl, Chicago*

### Harmful effects of plastics

Thank you to the Tribune for choosing to conduct a series in the coming weeks on the problem of plastic waste ("Hazards of plastics becoming more clear," June 21). We have long understood and have seen the environmental impacts of plastic production and plastic waste in Chicago, Illinois and our country as well as around the world, even where humans have no regular footprint. You only need go to your local grocery store, coffee shop, bar or fast-food restaurant to bear witness to the extraordinary amount of plastic waste that is suffocating our environment.

Now we know as well, thanks to scientific research, that plastics in micro and nano forms are invading our bodies and causing human health problems including infertility, possibly dementia, "heart and brain diseases and other ailments ... from toxic chemicals leaching out of the particles," as the recent report reveals.

Plastics are in our bodies from the placenta until the grave. We need to create plastic-free environments now to preserve our health.

Industry, like tobacco companies, turns a blind eye to the problem, continues its mass production to achieve maximum profit and blames the consumer for bad choices. We cannot individual-choice our way out of this problem; we cannot recycle our way out of this problem. The only

possible solution is to turn off the spigot, particularly regarding single-use plastics that are everywhere. It is well past time to legislate solutions to this problem.

Organizing for Plastic Alternatives is working with other organizations and networks in Chicago and Illinois to develop and support legislation to limit highly toxic plastic products. Their use may last seconds, but the plastic and its toxins live well beyond us.

While the plastic is here, it is doing an extraordinary amount of damage to our environment and us.

— *Jon Schmidt, Chicago*

### ID requirement for voting

It is difficult to understand the position of many Democrats on voter identification. They argue that requiring a photo ID to vote places an unfair burden on citizens. A photo ID verifies that the person casting the ballot is the individual registered to vote.

Yet is there any objection to requiring a photo ID for an Illinois resident to receive discounted admission to the Obama Presidential Center? Apparently, proving your identity to save money on a ticket is acceptable, but proving your identity when participating in our democracy is considered too much to ask.

If asking for identification is reasonable for a reduced admission price, why is it unreasonable when protecting the integrity of our elections?

— *Al Zvinakis, Lemont*

### Note to readers

Bike lanes in Chicago inspire a lot of passion. We'd like to hear your thoughts. Do you support bike lanes? Or are you opposed? Whether you're for or against, do you have advice for the city on its approach? Send a letter of no more than 400 words to [letters@chicagotribune.com](mailto:letters@chicagotribune.com) by Wednesday, July 1. Include your full name and city/town.


For online-exclusive letters, go to [www.chicagotribune.com/letters](http://www.chicagotribune.com/letters). Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to [letters@chicagotribune.com](mailto:letters@chicagotribune.com). Include your full name, address and phone number.


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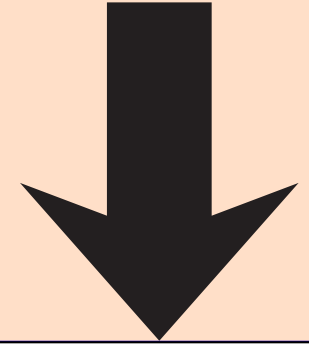
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