Deemed ineligible

The Supreme Court has pointed to the SIR's flaws by design

At Wednesday's hearing of a petition on the Delhi SIR in the Supreme Court, Justice Joymalya Bagchi asked questions that cut to the heart of the Election Commission of India (ECI)'s SIR of electoral rolls. If an existing voter was "lax, inert or did not respond" to enumeration forms, was that a ground for the ECI to "forfeit his or her right to vote forever"? The Bench headed by the Chief Justice of India Surya Kant said that the ECI was in "error" to force such voters, struck off for not returning enumeration forms, to reapply on Form 6 as if they were new voters. It asked why voters who had shifted residences could not just disclose details and why deleted voters could not fill enumeration forms belatedly. This is the central design flaw of the SIR as it shifts the burden of enrolment from the state to the elector, including those who have voted before, and treats a mere change of address as ground for deletion. The share of draft deletions recorded as "shifted" or "absent" rose from 55% in Bihar to 72% in States/Union Territories in Phase 3. In Karnataka, about 84 lakh electors were deleted, marked as "shifted" or "absent" during enumeration. But only a net of 8.2 lakh, including new electors, were added during the claims phase, with the final roll being 64.5 lakh short of the projected adult population. Requiring moved voters to re-register as fresh applicants defeats the ECI's historic mandate of widening the franchise, which was inherent in the 2002-03 intensive revision, where enumerators enrolled shifted voters at their new homes and the Chief Electoral Officer reconciled the old entries.

Justice Bagchi also mentioned that the Bihar judgment was not a "binding precedent" and that the legality of "logical discrepancy" checks, allowed only as an "interim arrangement" in West Bengal, had not been finally adjudicated. No statute or rule provides for judging a voter's eligibility on the basis of family size or the age gap between voters and parents, which were two of the ECI's ludicrous and algorithm-driven "logical discrepancy" checks. In West Bengal these checks resulted in massive disenfranchisement and *The Hindu*'s analysis found that in Delhi, Muslims were disproportionately flagged. But the Court should not merely issue managerial fixes such as extended deadlines or displaying printed lists in blocks, as it has in the past. The final SIR rolls are erroneous as deletions flowed from a flawed design rather than just lapses by the ECI. The dead and duplicate entries that the SIR identified should be removed and newly eligible electors added. Voters wrongly removed from draft rolls must be included again. The larger questions over the Commission's SIR conduct and how its members are appointed must also be settled.

Open to probe

Public functionaries must not use privacy to seek exemption from scrutiny

The Digital News Publishers Association's (DNPA) challenge to the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, and its Rules, has drawn attention to concerns that a law to safeguard informational privacy risks creating a serious chilling effect on the media. The absence of a specific exemption for journalistic activity could subject reporters investigating official misconduct or corruption to the obligations of a "data fiduciary", requiring them to notify and seek consent from the very individuals they are investigating. Such onerous requirements could affect investigations undertaken in the public interest. The implications extend to routine newsgathering too, where personal information is integral to reporting. The omission is particularly consequential because the drafts in 2018, 2019 and 2021 carried a journalistic exemption. The Act already provides exemptions for certain forms of data processing, including for research and statistical purposes, making the denial of similar protection to journalists difficult to justify. Non-compliance can attract penalties of up to ₹250 crore, posing an existential threat to smaller and independent newsrooms. The DNPA petition also challenges Section 44(3), which amended the RTI Act, 2005, removing the earlier public-interest qualification concerning disclosure of personal information. The protection of personal information must not be absolute; an overriding public interest must remain a legitimate ground for disclosure, particularly when the information is held by public authorities. Investigations into corruption often rely on asset disclosures and tender documents containing personal data. Restricting access to these records risks reducing journalism to merely reproducing government releases.

The Supreme Court, while issuing notice on the petition, rightly emphasised the need to balance press freedom with the right to privacy. Although journalists in India enjoy no specific statutory protection for their work, freedom of the press is constitutionally protected under Article 19(1)(a). The Court has also shielded newspapers from arbitrary state restrictions. However, growing mistrust of legacy media and the rise of independent content creators have made it difficult to determine who receives such protection. The Centre has also flagged this concern. Yet, carving out distinct categories is no easy task – a 2026 Reuters Institute report shows that the proportion of 18- to 24-year-olds identifying social media as their primary source of news rose from 21% in 2015 to 39% in 2025. A purely legalistic determination of these competing concerns may perhaps prove too onerous. Stakeholders must build consensus on a mutually acceptable framework where public functionaries and those handling public funds are not insulated from scrutiny under the guise of privacy. Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw's indication that he would meet editors is a welcome step towards consensus.

The examination overload, its enormous cost



Furqan Qamar

Vice Chancellor of the Integral University Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. He was the Secretary General of the Association of Indian Universities (AIU), Vice Chancellor of the Central University of Himachal Pradesh and University of Rajasthan, and Adviser (Education) in the Planning Commission

Once upon a time, not very long ago, students could focus on their education, confident that their academic results would determine admission to higher education and career opportunities. Today, millions of young Indians face not one examination but a cascade of them – a seemingly endless series of entrance examinations. Besides board examinations, aspiring engineers and doctors generally face entrance tests such as the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) and the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET), respectively. Architecture and law aspirants must also navigate examinations such as the National Aptitude Test in Architecture (NATA) and the Common Law Admission Test (CLAT). Others must take the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) or institution-specific examinations. With affordable, quality higher education in short supply, many candidates make repeated attempts. Even a good bachelor's degree does not guarantee postgraduate admission.

Postgraduate aspirants face examinations such as the Graduate Aptitude Test in Engineering (GATE), Common Admission Test (CAT), Common University Entrance Test for Postgraduate Programmes (CUET-PG) and various university-level entrance tests. Research aspirants face further qualifying examinations, including the National Eligibility Test (NET). The ordeal continues during recruitment. Academic qualifications merely establish eligibility, while employment often depends on examinations conducted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), State Public Service Commissions, Staff Selection Commission (SSC) and Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS). The proliferation of entrance and recruitment examinations has turned education and employment into a relentless cycle of competitive testing.

The cost of competition

Each of these layers of examinations demands months of separate preparation, payment of separate coaching fees, and unexplainable suffering and distress. Somewhere in this labyrinthian relay race, the very examinations that were supposed to certify students' learning, abilities and achievements have been rendered irrelevant. It is time to ask a blunt question: why do we need all these additional gates when the school and university leaving examinations already exist to measure merit?

Separate examinations for admission and jobs were declared inevitable because school board and university examinations were argued to suffer from a lack of uniform standards and their susceptibility to manipulation and rampant use of unfair means. The argument assumes that the new layers of examinations would be free from these deficiencies. The on-the-ground experience has only proven that the designed cure is worse than the disease itself.

Public examinations are marred by allegations of paper leaks and other unfair practices, such as dummy candidates, mark manipulation, and merit garbling, leading to repeated cancellations. Each incident wastes public money, delays admissions and recruitment, and erodes faith in the fairness of the system.

India's obsession with layers of examinations must end, and the focus must return to the forgotten value of sustained academic performance

Centralised counselling for seat allotments complicates the process. They also multiply anxiety, stress and mental trauma. Layering examination upon examination rather than distributing this pressure forces students to spend their entire adolescence running an unbroken loop of a preparatory marathon.

Additionally, such examinations entail exorbitant costs that ultimately fall disproportionately on families who can ill afford them. Children from the economically weaker and marginalised sections of society struggle to manage and often cannot. Far from being neutral arbiters of merit, these examinations have come to reward the ability to pay for preparation rather than raw ability or diligence in school.

Youth frustrations may have reached a tipping point, compelling them to take to the streets. Several States have seen protests of varying scales. It remains to be seen whether the proposed strengthening of the law against unfair practices in public examinations and the recommendations of the high-powered committee constituted in July 2026 will address these systemic deficiencies.

The present system of layered examinations suffers from design defects and systemic deficiencies. The National Testing Agency's continuing difficulties, despite a comprehensive review by a committee headed by a former space scientist in 2024, have raised questions about the effectiveness of the reforms. The constitution of another high-powered committee, in 2026, underscores the persistence of these concerns.

We are still thinking only of reforming this broken system without stopping for a moment to ask a critical question: how can we trust centralised public examinations conducted by agencies that have repeatedly failed to fulfil their responsibilities when we cannot trust years of assessment by teachers throughout a student's course of study?

Why bear such a heavy burden when, academically speaking, these layers of examinations cannot possibly substitute for the regular assessment of knowledge acquired over years of study? At most, they can evaluate candidates on a much narrower, often more coachable skill: ticking off the answer choices quickly under pressure in a specific question format, while disregarding years of demonstrated cumulative academic performance.

The result is a strange inversion. Students no longer study to learn; they study to clear filters. Classroom teaching has been relegated in favour of coaching-centre drilling. The board examination becomes a formality, and we have ended up with a system where the credentialing examination that ought to matter most – the one tied to actual classroom learning – now matters the least.

Merit already exists, use it

It makes sense to fix the school and higher education system, which has long been broken and continues to be hammered, causing further damage. Now is the time to focus on restoring the credibility of school and university examinations. Whatever their imperfections, these examinations are not arbitrary, as they assess knowledge acquired over years of study, involve continuous evaluation and are moderated by boards and universities with established standards. With some investment, they can become far better and more reliable measures of merit.

A student's Class XII marks or university Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) already reflect years of consistent performance – a far more holistic and harder-to-game measure of ability and diligence than a single high-stakes examination. If board and university examinations are inconsistent across States or institutions, the answer is to standardise and strengthen them through normalisation, common moderation frameworks, external audits and periodic score equating, rather than building an entirely separate examination system on top of them. If admission committees and employers doubt the rigour of certain boards or universities, those doubts should be addressed by reforming the assessment standards of these institutions, rather than requiring every student in the country to run a second, third or fourth race, regardless of where they studied.

Admissions to higher education institutions ought to be based on standardised and moderated school-leaving examination results. Scholarships and fellowships should be awarded on the basis of academic performance and track records. Recruitment to public services could be based on verified academic records and structured interviews. At most, a single national test at each exit level of the educational hierarchy could be conducted to assess students' scholastic aptitude, with the scores used to moderate board or university examination results.

Global practices

This is not a radical proposal by international standards. Many countries admit students to university primarily based on their school-leaving results, supplemented by references and essays, with marginal weight assigned to scores in language and scholastic aptitude tests. It is India's exceptional layering of tests, often to assess the same competency, tested repeatedly by different bodies, that is the outlier.

The argument for dismantling India's entrance and recruitment examination pyramid is not an argument against standards. It is an argument that standards already exist, embedded in the school and university systems which India has spent enormous public resources building, and that repeatedly re-testing the same students for the same underlying competencies wastes money, invites corruption, and causes real harm to the wellbeing of young people. Reforming and trusting the examinations India already has would do more to promote genuine merit than adding yet another layer of examinations ever could.

A security deal, but not the end of the Arctic contest



Sakti Prasad Srichandan

Assistant Professor, Centre for European Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

The agreement signed between the United States, Denmark and Greenland on September 22, 2026, marks an important moment in the changing geopolitics of the Arctic. Greenland is an autonomous part of the Kingdom of Denmark. Under the 2009 Self-Government Act, it has extensive control over its domestic affairs, while foreign, defence and security policy remain with Denmark. Greenland came into the news this year because of the Trump administration's repeated interest in gaining control over the island. What began as a territorial controversy gradually became a wider debate about sovereignty, security and the future of the Arctic.

The agreement, signed at the United Nations, expands the American military presence in Greenland while reaffirming Danish sovereignty and Greenland's right to self-determination. It brings, at least for now, an end to the unusual tensions between Washington and Copenhagen over the future of the strategically important island. The agreement's entry into force is subject to the completion of the necessary parliamentary procedures in Denmark and Greenland.

Not a territorial deal

The agreement is essentially a security deal, not a territorial deal. The U.S. has, for the moment, moved away from its earlier demand to acquire Greenland. Instead, Washington has secured greater military access to the island. The agreement allows the expansion of the existing Pituffik Space Base and provides for additional American defence facilities at Narsarsuaq in southern Greenland and Mestersvig in the east, subject to mutually agreed arrangements. American aircraft and ships will have wider access to Greenlandic territory and waters for defence purposes. The important point is simple. Greenland has not changed hands. But the American military presence there is likely to become much larger. The agreement shows how quickly the Arctic is becoming a strategic region. Greenland sits in a crucial location between North America and Europe, a geography that matters for missile warning, space surveillance and the security of the North Atlantic. It is becoming more important as Arctic sea routes open up and competition over resources grows. The agreement includes cooperation related to the proposed Golden Dome defence system. It also places restrictions on investments from countries outside the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), NATO partner countries and the European Union (EU) in certain sensitive sectors. Economic activity in the Arctic is therefore increasingly being viewed through the lens of national security.

The Greenland agreement strengthens American security while raising sovereignty concerns

Denmark's balancing act

For Denmark, the challenge was particularly difficult. Copenhagen had to protect its sovereignty over Greenland while avoiding a prolonged confrontation with Washington. The agreement gives Denmark a way to do both.

American military involvement will increase, but within an arrangement that formally recognises Danish sovereignty and Greenlandic self-determination. Greenland's Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen has also stressed the importance of NATO in Arctic security. The deal brings greater American involvement into Greenland without formally changing its political status.

Yet, the question of sovereignty remains complicated. The agreement recognises Greenland's right to self-determination. It refers to respect for Greenlandic society and its traditional way of life. At the same time, it gives the U.S. extensive military access and introduces restrictions on foreign investment in sensitive areas. The agreement has no expiry date. Some of its provisions would also remain in place even if Greenland becomes independent in the future, creating an unusual situation.

The Arctic's transformation

The Greenland episode tells us something about the future of the Arctic. The region is no longer only about climate change, scientific research and polar exploration. It is now closely linked to missile defence, critical minerals, infrastructure, shipping routes and space security. Russia's military presence and China's growing economic and scientific interests have already changed the strategic environment. But Arctic competition can also create tensions among allies themselves.

For Denmark and Greenland, the agreement provides a way out of a difficult diplomatic situation. For the U.S., it provides greater strategic access without formal annexation. For NATO, it underlines the growing importance of the High North.

But the real test will come later. The question is whether greater American military involvement can strengthen Greenland's security without reducing Greenlanders' control over their future. As Greenland is likely to remain important, its people will have to balance the opportunities that greater international attention brings with the risks of becoming the centre of great-power competition. The way Denmark, the U.S. and Greenland manage this balance will shape the island's future. The answer to that question will ultimately determine the real importance of this agreement.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The right to vote

While maintaining an updated electoral database is a administrative necessity, transforming procedural non-compliance into a mechanism for permanent disenfranchisement is inherently punitive. To dictate that an individual's temporary oversight or bureaucratic inertia should result in the absolute forfeiture of their fundamental right to vote is a distortion of the constitutional mandate. The franchise is an unalienable democratic pillar, not a conditional privilege to be revoked under the guise of rectifying a "logical discrepancy". Furthermore, compelling historically validated citizens to reapply under the strictures reserved for completely new electors creates an artificial hurdle that undermines civic participation. The judiciary's timely intervention (Page 1, October 29) serves as a critical reminder that administrative efficiency must never be achieved at the altar of citizen disenfranchisement.

Nagarajamani M.V.,
Hyderabad

Lathering up excuses

The assertion by the Tamil Nadu Environmental Minister that the massive blankets of toxic foam floating on the Noyyal river in Tiruppur are caused by soap and shampoo used in households is not only the height of comedy but also a sign of his ignorance. This bizarre narrative is a desperate, risible deflection from the real culprits: the rampant, unregulated discharge of untreated effluents from local dyeing and textile units (Tamil Nadu, October 29).

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

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

Are youth worried they will be worse off than their parents?

PARLEY



Gilles Verniers

is a political scientist and researcher at CERI Sciences Po, Paris



Rohit Azad

teaches at JNU and specialises in political economy

Europe is seeing a wave of protests against economic inequalities and poor living standards. The immediate causes vary across countries, from the housing crisis in Spain and issues with the education system in France to public anger over perceived corruption in Serbia and Albania. But one thing is common: youth at the vanguard. Europe always had space for democratic dissent and has seen major protests to influence state systems and public policy. But with more and more youth taking the streets across the continent and beyond, are these protests merely reactionary, or is there a generational, existential anxiety at play? Are youth worried they will be worse off than their parents? Gilles Verniers and Rohit Azad discuss in a conversation moderated by **Vighnesh P. Venkitesh**. Edited excerpts:

Is the current wave of protests a cyclical outburst of generational aspirations, and can it be compared to developments in previous generations like the 1968 protests in Paris?

Gilles Verniers: There are, of course, parallels between the May 1968 Paris revolt and the current wave of protests that are happening in France. Like 1968, it started with students protesting about conditions in educational institutions before gradually spreading into a broader revolt. What began in mid-September with a high school student protesting teacher shortages and so forth has become a nationwide movement about inequality and the cost of living. That said, there is a key difference between 1968 and now: one wanted more freedom; the other wants a future.

Is there an economic stagnation happening around the continent and maybe beyond, and is that what is translating into these protests?

Rohit Azad: Unlike 1968, there is a withdrawal of the State now. The Left was in ascendance then; you had Vietnam fighting a war against U.S. imperialism. The 1968 protests were about pushing a welfare state further to the left. Whereas now, forget about the welfare state; people are demanding basic facilities that the state should provide. It is a crisis of the neoliberal model. So, the two contexts are completely different. In France, the unemployment rate among those aged 15 to 24 is slightly above 20%. That, along with the rising cost of living, falling real wages, and severe cutbacks in public expenditure, definitely becomes the backdrop against which today's movement is taking place.



A call for change: French school and university students protest, demanding better school conditions and government action, on October 15. REUTERS

GV: I completely agree with that. The context in which young people have grown has been a succession of crises. It is what one calls a polycrisis mindset. This generation has lived through the 2008 financial crisis, COVID-19, climate disasters, war in Europe, and now AI, and they are yet to turn 25. And so what they are seeking, first and foremost, is more protection from the state and not more freedom from the state, as it used to be the case before.

Several state systems that exist now have been shaped by the post-war situation in Europe and the fall of the Soviet Union. Is there a generation gap that exists between the current system and youth, creating a rift?

GV: There is a generational gap, not just in terms of age, but in terms of values, priorities, and ways of organising. Older institutions are hierarchical. The youth movements now are leaderless. The gap between the age of the political class and the median age in a country is often very wide. In Europe, you have a large majority of voters who are ageing and want to protect the pension system and the welfare state while schools crumble, literally. There is strong divergence in terms of needs.

RA: I would stress the fact that digital life itself amplifies anxiety, because you are constantly comparing across generations, your global peers, and with the elites. The information gap that would have been there when you did not have a digital life versus what you have now – you can see the inequality right in your face.

GV: And it is a good illustration that social media cuts both ways. Obviously, they function as an amplifier of anxieties. But they also provide a space and the instruments for organisation and counter-mobilisation. What is really interesting in this movement is the constant reinvention of new modes of organising and resistance against illiberal regimes, far-right movements, and so forth. The very instrument that sort of generates and amplifies anxieties is also the instrument that allows youth to combat it.

> The context in which young people have grown has been a succession of crises. It is what one calls a polycrisis mindset
> GILLES VERNIERS

Talking about Serbia and the leaderless aspect of the movements, the current wave has seen students or youth coming together at the spur of the moment. How will a leaderless movement fare against the established state systems?

RA: Even though it was a leaderless movement, the Serbian protests continued for two long years in terms of mobilisation. There were ups and downs, like Lenin said, "One step forward, two steps back," but they were at it no matter what. That is not to say leadership does not matter, but I think when people are up in arms, the leadership question kind of recedes into the background.

GV: And being leaderless proves to be an asset way more than a liability, because the moment you have designated leadership, they become targets. The Serbia case is very striking because they succeeded in toppling down democratically a right-wing illiberal regime. It creates a precedent. But every movement is confronted with very specific national context and conditions, and they may not necessarily produce the same outcomes everywhere.

We see there is a pessimism setting in around AI interventions and the looming climate crisis. Every generation has had its own anxieties, like the Cold War or the fear of a nuclear apocalypse in the 1960s and 1970s. Are the anxieties a cycle, or are youth justified in envisioning a bleak future?

GV: The pessimism in some aspects has a factual, scientific basis. We have data about the rise of inequalities, concentration of wealth and power, climate disruption, and so forth. And we know, at least in Europe, many young people expect to do worse than their parents on housing and pensions and job security. As I said before, their experience of the world is that of a polycrisis. What is sort of different today is that even the conventional avenues for upward social and economic mobility are affected. In the current situation, particularly with AI, it is entry-level, white-collar jobs – the traditional first rung of the 'ladder '– that look more exposed. And that sort of adds to that sentiment of bleakness. Now you have the 'elite segment' of the population who have started to struggle as well and use their social capital to build or participate in these movements. But the struggle for people has been very long in the making.

RA: As far as AI is concerned, there is a double whammy for the youth. One, it has come on top of general economic stagnation, which means low employment generation to begin with. Two, whatever little growth is there, it is increasingly becoming capital-intensive. For both these reasons, the youth see a bleak future.

Coming to the climate crisis, I would say that is the biggest example of generational injustice. The older generations have contributed the most to global warming, but it is the young who are going to suffer the most. I think that creates a kind of resentment against the older generation.

In a late-stage capitalist system or structure, is the youth movement acting as what Lenin put it as a vanguard party?

GV: I think the historical conditions are different. Those vanguard parties of the old days had very coherent ideological clarity that these movements do not necessarily have. The movement today has an element of an alliance of students and workers, but we are not talking about factory workers anymore in Europe. We are talking about a completely scattered, anomic, precarious, salaried class, which has been at the wrong end of the effects of neoliberalism. And so, I would say the conditions are a little bit too different for seeing it as a simple repetition of history.

RA: I do not even know why history should be repeated. I would say that vanguardism had a role at that point in time. Maybe we need a different kind of politics, which is more inclusive, which may have the ideology of the left or broad issues that the left would like to raise, but something which is not centralising in terms of either ideology or in terms of organisation.

To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

The changing address of power

TN's search for a new Secretariat has spanned successive governments; TVK's latest proposal to build one near the coast has revived the debate

B. Kolappan

Covering the Secretariat beat and the Assembly proceedings was traditionally reserved for senior journalists in every newspaper. But at *Dinamani*, its editor, RmT Sambandam, did not believe in rigid rules. He sent a bunch of rookies, including me, to Fort St. George, known as *kottai*, which housed the Secretariat, to cover the Assembly proceedings.

He would send us off with one instruction: "Go and introduce yourself to the man sitting in the first seat in the journalists' lobby." He was referring to the *The Hindu* journalist, invariably the seniormost among the organisation's journalists and, in a sense, among those covering the Assembly. The next seat was allotted to *The Indian Express* – now *The New Indian Express* – followed by *Daily Thanthi*, and then *Dinamani*.

I covered the last session of the AIADMK regime in 1995 and started going to the Assembly regularly after the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was elected to power in 1996, with M. Karunanidhi, fondly called Kalaignar, occupying the Chief Minister's seat. Jayalalithaa, who had been defeated, was not in the House. I missed the face-to-face exchanges between Karunanidhi and his political rival, Jayalalithaa. Still, we had a great time.

The Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC), launched by G.K. Moopanar and an ally of the DMK, had occupied the main Opposition benches. The bonhomie between the two parties eventually turned bitter. The TMC launched a new front during the 1999 Lok Sabha elections and joined hands with Jayalalithaa's AIADMK in the 2001 Assembly election.

By then, I was representing *The New Indian Express*, sitting next to *The Hindu* in the Assembly.

It was then that the construction of a new Secretariat became a matter of concern for journalists. When Jayalalithaa announced plans to shift the seat of power to Tiruvidanthai on the ECR, journalists, including me, dreaded the prospect of travelling miles to cover the Assembly proceedings and the Secretariat beat. But she gave up the proposal in the face of opposition and instead sought to build a Secretariat complex on the site where Queen Mary's College now stands. That also met with stiff resistance, and she decided to continue functioning from Fort St. George.

After he won again in 2006, Karunanidhi began looking for a place to construct a new Secretariat and Assembly complex. The DMK government zeroed in on the site where the old Admiralty House and MLA hostels stood, just opposite *The Hindu* on the arterial Anna Salai. By the time I joined *The Hindu*, I had moved into the first seats in the journalists' lobby.

The construction of the new complex progressed at a breakneck pace, as Karunanidhi wanted to occupy it before the 2011 election. The dome crowning the building was not ready in time for the inauguration, so art director Thota Tharani was brought in to create a replica.

The Secretariat proved extremely convenient. But the journalists' lobby was shifted to the first floor.

During the last session of the Assembly, when O. Panneerselvam was functioning as Chief Minister after Jayalalithaa was disqualified by the courts, he declared that his party would return to power and that the new government would function from Fort St. George. His words proved prophetic.

There was no talk of a new Secretariat or Assembly complex for the next 10 years. Even when the DMK returned to power in 2021, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin chose to work from Fort St. George. He planned to move the seat of government to Pooncheri, a place near Mamallapuram. But that did not materialise.

Now, once again, the ruling Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) government has proposed constructing a new Secretariat, this time close to the Chennai seashore. But the proposal has already run into rough weather.

It remains to be seen whether the government will heed the Opposition's objections and shelve the plan or go ahead with it. I, however, will be spared the prospect of travelling to a new building, as I will no longer be in service by the time its construction is completed.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Battling the waves



Disaster response personnel restore a road washed away by waves during Cyclone Arnab at Uppada coastal village in Kakinada district, Andhra Pradesh on Thursday. V. RAJU

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO OCTOBER 30, 1976

Indian Navy Submarine in Madras

Madras, Oct. 29: Even as preparations are under way for the Navy Day celebrations, INS Karanj, one of the larger submarines of the Navy is on a routine visit to Madras.

The Russian-made INS Karanj which is described as an advanced conventional submarine belongs to what is perhaps the most powerful arm of the Indian Navy. It has mine-laying capabilities and with its torpedoes packs a lot of punch. It came into the harbour two days ago.

A submarine is said to be more vulnerable than other ships, and it is essential that all the systems in it are continuously monitored and that any defect is set right immediately.

The crew is kept on their toes throughout with emergency drills.

The boat is powered by diesel engines when it cruises on the surface, but underwater it has to draw power from its batteries. For sighting, it is equipped with a periscope, radar, and sonar equipment.

Going into a submarine through its hatch is like going down into a deep mine. The cigar-shaped boat is divided into watertight segments and is so crammed with machinery that there is hardly any space to move about.

For the crew, life on board is very different from that in other warships. Here they are tightly packed and sleep on bunks placed between pieces of machinery.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO OCTOBER 30, 1926

Depression in cotton industry

Bombay, Oct. 29: Representatives of the Ahmedabad Millowners' Association were examined by the Tariff Board (Cotton Textile).

Replying to the Chairman, they stated that during the last two or three weeks the condition of the textile industry had changed for the worse. Owing to the heavy drop in cotton prices, cloth merchants had lost their confidence. The purchasing power of the agriculturists was also going down and the phenomenal fall in American cotton prices had accentuated depression in the cotton industry, but did not affect textile industries of America and Japan to any extent. On the other hand, they were making profits. The drop in cotton prices during the last two or three years had been gradual, and it was admitted that the bumper cotton crop of America accentuated the depression.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Worth of spices seized by Maharashtra FDA till October 29

19.70 in ₹ crore. The Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has seized 11,963.87 quintals of spices and spice products worth ₹19.70 crore after inspecting 1,057 establishments between April 1 and October 29, officials said on Thursday. The FDA also said it has issued 557 improvement notices during the period. PTI

Special buses to be operated by Himachal ahead of Deepavali

266 The Himachal Road Transport Corporation will operate a total of 266 special buses on November 6 and 7 to help people of the State reach their homes during the Deepavali festival, Deputy Chief Minister Mukesh Agnihotri said on Thursday. The special buses would be run from Delhi, Chandigarh and Baddi to different parts of Himachal Pradesh. PTI

Persons held across Assam in crackdown against child marriage

560 More than 560 people have been arrested in the latest crackdown against child marriage across Assam, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Thursday. He had earlier said the State government's efforts in the past few years led to over 12,000 cases being registered, more than 11,000 arrests, and an 81% drop in child marriages across 20 districts. PTI

Minors rescued from child labour in Delhi's Gandhi Nagar

19 Nineteen children, including five below the age of 14, were rescued from garment and artificial jewellery factories in east Delhi's Gandhi Nagar area, where they were allegedly made to work for as little as ₹10 a day, an official said on Thursday. Nine factory owners have been apprehended and nine factories sealed following the crackdown. PTI

Amount received by Rajasthan farmers in crop insurance claims

345 in ₹ crore. The Rajasthan government has facilitated the payment of nearly ₹345 crore in pending crop insurance claims to farmers across nine districts, officials said on Thursday. Agriculture Commissioner Naresh Kumar Goyal said around ₹318 crore was given to farmers in six western districts. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Concerns over the collegium system

Retired SC judge Justice Sanjay Kaul has shared that former CJI D.Y. Chandrachud may have discussed proposed judicial appointments with the Centre before the collegium met to discuss them, prompting a broader debate on the evolution of the collegium system and ways to improve transparency in judicial appointments

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R.

The Story so far:

Retired judge of the Supreme Court Justice Sanjay Kaul has shared that former Chief Justice of India (CJI) D.Y. Chandrachud may have discussed proposed names for judgeship with the Union Government even before the collegium met to discuss them. He characterised this as seeking the government's 'pre-approval', which erodes the judiciary's autonomy.

Provisions in the Constitution

Article 124 of the Constitution provides that judges of the Supreme Court shall be appointed by the President after consulting the Chief Justice of India (CJI). Similarly, Article 217 provides that judges of a High Court shall be appointed by the President after consulting CJI, Chief Justice of the High Court and Governor of the State. The original Constitution provided for consultation by the executive with the judiciary before appointments to safeguard judicial independence as well as to ensure quality, as judges are best equipped to assess the professional and technical merits of proposed candidates.

The collegium system

As per process laid down in the Constitution, judges were appointed by the government after consultation with the judiciary till 1980s. In the First Judges case (1981), the Supreme Court had upheld the primacy of executive in judicial appointments since it is accountable to the people. However, considering the need to maintain independence of judiciary and insulate it from political favouritism, the Supreme Court in Second Judges case (1993) created the collegium system for appointment of judges. This was reaffirmed by the Supreme Court's opinion in Third Judges case (1998). The collegium currently comprises the CJI and four senior-most Supreme Court judges for appointments to the Supreme Court, and the CJI and two senior-most judges for appointments to High Courts.



The collegium system for judicial appointments is a unique process devised by the SC. FILE PHOTO

The detailed procedure for appointment, as per the guidelines of the Supreme Court in Second and Third Judge cases, is captured in the Memorandum of Procedure (MoP) for appointment of Judges prepared by the Union Law Ministry in 1998. As per the MoP, the collegium initiates the proposal for appointment of judges to the higher judiciary and sends the recommendation to the Central government. The Centre may return a recommendation in case of any objection or reservation with respect to any of the proposed names. However, if the collegium reiterates the recommendation, the appointment should be made.

The Parliament through the 99th Constitutional Amendment in 2014 had set up the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) to provide recommendations to the executive for the appointment of judges. The NJAC was to consist of the CJI, two senior judges, Union Law Minister and two eminent persons. This was however struck down by the Supreme Court in 2015 as it violated the basic structure of independence of the judiciary. Hence, the collegium process continues till date for appointments.

After the NJAC judgement, the government and the judiciary agreed to revise the MoP to usher in more transparency into the appointment process. However, owing to differences of opinion on some of the aspects of revised MoP drafted by the executive, it has not been finalised even after 11 years.

International practices

The collegium procedure for judicial appointments is a unique process that has been devised by the Indian Supreme Court, that has no parallel in any other democracy.

In the U.S., judges to the Federal Supreme Court are nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate.

In the United Kingdom, the independent Judicial Appointments Commission comprises 15 commissioners appointed from the judiciary, the legal profession, and the public. This JAC selects candidates for judicial office in courts and tribunals. Appointment of Judges to the U.K. Supreme Court (UKSC) is based on a selection commission that consists of President of the UKSC, a Senior U.K. judge, and three other members that includes a member of JAC.

In South Africa, there is a Judicial Service Commission (JSC) that consists of 23 members, including the Chief Justice and representatives from the judiciary, legislature, executive, lawyers and academia. This JSC recommends names to President for appointment of Judges.

The way forward

The collegium system has ensured the independence of the judiciary from the executive, in the matter of appointments. Nevertheless, it has its own drawbacks like the lack of transparency and accountability. There is also resentment on account of alleged nepotism in this process whereby kith and kin of sitting judges are favoured for appointment to higher judiciary. The immediate reform would be to finalise the revised MoP that would bring in the required transparency and consultative process in appointments.

The long-term reform could be to revive the NJAC with a broader composition. It can include representatives from the legislature, the Bar Council and academia, like in South Africa and the U.K. This would make the consultation process more broad-based and inclusive. The judiciary could still be provided with a veto over the final recommendation to protect its independence.

(Rangarajan R. is a former IAS officer and author of 'Courseware on Polity Simplified.' He currently trains at Officers IAS academy. Views expressed are personal.)

THE GIST

- The collegium system, devised by the Supreme Court, has ensured judicial independence from the executive in the matter of appointments. However, it has drawbacks, including a lack of transparency and accountability
- The long-term reform could be to revive the NJAC with a broader composition. It can include representatives from the legislature, the Bar Council and academia, like in South Africa and the U.K.

Assessing the outcome of MLC elections

The electorate for these polls represents only a section of voters, unlike in general and Assembly elections

Sanjay Kumar
Arindam Kabir

Discussions highlight too much emphasis being given to the recent Legislative Council (MLC) elections across States. Even a sweeping victory or defeat does not necessarily indicate a party's loss or gain in popular support. This is because the electorate in these polls represents only a section of voters, unlike in general and Assembly elections.

Across Uttar Pradesh, 11 constituencies went to polls while Bihar saw eight seats up for grabs. Maharashtra and Karnataka went to the polls in five and four constituencies, respectively.

MLC elections are held for the Vidhan Parishad, the Upper House of a State legislature, which exists in only six of the 28 States – Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. A council can have no more than one-third of the Assembly's strength and never fewer than 40 members. It is a permanent house that cannot be dissolved. Members serve six-year terms and one-third retire every two years, so elections are staggered rather than held all at once.

Members reach the Council by five routes. One-third are elected by MLAs, one-third by local bodies such as municipalities and district boards, one-twelfth by graduates and one-twelfth by teachers. The remaining one-sixth are nominated by the Governor from among people with distinguished work. Voting is by secret ballot under proportional representation by single transferable vote.

Graduate and teacher constituencies are territorial, and the Election Commission conducts the polls. A graduate voter must have held a degree for at least three years, and a teacher must have taught for at least three years in a secondary school or higher institution. Both must live or work in the constituency, and neither is enrolled automatically, since each has to apply to be placed on a separate roll. This is why these electorates are so small. The Council has limited powers, it cannot vote on money bills, and the Assembly can override its recommendations on ordinary legislation. That is another reason these results say little about who governs the State.

Although these elections do not reflect a party's overall electoral performance, their outcomes offer some insight into its organisational functioning and strength. Winning these seats requires identifying candidates, registering voters months in advance and mobilising a small electorate to turn out – tasks that depend on the party machinery, not a wave.

Congress opens account in Nagpur

With its win in one Nagpur seat, the Congress managed to gain some headlines and open its tally. But the party should take this as a lesson, having failed to open its tally even in Karnataka, where it is in power. The BJP-JD(S) alliance swept all four seats there. A ruling party is expected to have the State machinery, cadre and local connect to win at least a seat or two. Failing to do so suggests a gap between the government's position in Bengaluru and the party's organisational presence on the ground. Congress leaders may rightly say that the result is no verdict on the government. But a clean sweep in a State where the party is in power cannot be brushed aside.

BJP's victory and cause for concern

It is fair for the BJP to celebrate winning 13 out of the 28 seats, which does reflect the strong organisational strength of the party across States. What can be seen as a setback for the party is that the graduate voters' constituency has been BJP's stronghold. In the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, according to the Lokniti-CSDS National Election Studies 2024 post-poll survey, BJP alone enjoyed 38% support among graduates and above, while it was 45% for the NDA. A party that has long counted on the educated, urban voter will be concerned to see that cushion thinning.

The loss in five seats in Uttar Pradesh, particularly Varanasi, should be a warning bell for the BJP as the State goes to polls next year. The party's performance in Uttar Pradesh in the 2024 Lok Sabha election left it short of a majority on its own at the national level, forcing it to depend on allies. Varanasi is the Prime Minister's own constituency, making the symbolism hard to ignore, even though the stakes are modest. The BJP cannot afford a repeat in 2027, and any sign that educated, middle-class voters are drifting away will worry its strategists.

Jan Suraaj gains ground in Bihar

The party opening its tally in Bihar can be seen as a sign of its growing organisational strength, especially after its founder, Prashant Kishor, won the Bankipur by-election in August, defeating BJP's Neeraj Kumar by 19,324 votes in a seat the BJP had never lost since 1995. Jan Suraaj had failed to win a single seat in the 2025 Assembly election. Two wins in three months show a party that is converting its campaigning into votes. Whether that carries over to a general election, where it must reach a far larger and more varied electorate, remains an open question.

On that count, the Congress has work to do, the BJP has reason to be careful, and Jan Suraaj Party has reason to feel encouraged. The sensible reading of these results is a modest one; as a rule of thumb in studying elections, we should not overread the data. These elections do not show the will of the entire electorate, but they do indicate a party's organisational strength and mark an important move in boosting the morale of the party cadre.

(Sanjay Kumar is a Professor at CSDS and an election analyst; Arindam Kabir is currently a researcher with Sanjay Kumar at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). Views are personal.)

IN THE LIMELIGHT



A scene from the 2026 Tamil film *Dorothy*. SONY MUSIC SOUTH/YOUTUBE

Animals as symbols of caste, masculinity and human relations in *Dorothy*

The animals in Karthik Subbaraj's period drama appear in moments of vulnerability and violence; fighting roosters and rams mirror male aggression, while dung beetles guided by the cosmos contrast with people who have clearly lost their moral bearings

Vasudevan Mukunth

Dorothy, the Tamil film written and directed by Karthik Subbaraj, was released in theatres on September 25 and has taken viewers by storm. It is set in rural Madurai in the 1990s. It follows two young men, Subbu and Karthi, and the rigid ideas of masculinity and caste that test their friendship. When Dorothy arrives in their village, her presence challenges all their assumptions. Sananth, Rishikanth, and Keerthy Suresh play the principal roles, alongside Muthukumar as a powerful moneylender.

But as the humans of *Dorothy* impose their systems of domination and control on one another, try as they might, the natural world itself remains indifferent to the social hierarchies they consider so crucial.

Understanding the motifs

In a recent interview, Mr. Subbaraj said he based the motif of the rooster in the film – which Subbu names and nurtures – on his research into Bahuchara Mata, a Hindu goddess associated with transgender communities and whose mount is a rooster. A festival centred on this deity is a guiding light in the film. Mr. Subbaraj also said the motif inspired the cockfighting scenes, and that he included it both to represent a piece of the Madurai landscape and to connote a higher meaning.

Many of the other animals of *Dorothy* are similarly a part of the material world of rural Tamil Nadu, even as they represent the human relationships unfolding within it. Some of the animals people capture and slaughter, force to fight, or turn into weapons against other people.

On the other hand, the scorpion and the dung beetle act independently of human concerns, and in one serendipitous moment, set Karthi's and Subbu's shared journey on a very different path.

The skinned hare suspended from the ceiling in the house of Veeraiya, the local moneylender and Subbu's father, paints an obvious picture of vulnerability stripped of protection, not coincidentally displayed in the home of a man who controls other people through economic dependence and caste power. There is also a disturbing parallel between the hare and Dorothy herself. The house is not just a place where people destroy vulnerable bodies but also normalise the cruelty of such actions.

Masculinity and dominance

Members of Veeraiya's community also breed, train, and pit roosters and rams against one another for their entertainment. The visual meaning is obvious: it is the men that are really aggressive and territorial, seeking dominance over others. Their masculinity is animalistic. Yet all the cruelty we see on screen, especially all that matters to *Dorothy*, is entirely human, arising as it does from caste, property, honour, and gender expectations, rather than anything imposed by nature.

When the ram headbutts that poor man to death, an animal is becoming an instrument of human judgment. The violence is organised and conferred a social purpose, turning the scene into a commentary on the men, who have also conditioned themselves to fight and prove their masculinity.

But then there are also the dung beetle and the scorpion, and the expansive verdant backdrop.

Significance of the landscape

The animals in the film were computer-generated, and what the audience is asked to take away from their presence and actions in certain scenes is what the filmmakers have intended. That said, they themselves are not out of sorts with what we expect.

The landscape itself, from hilltop grasses to weeds in the dilapidated pond, from overgrown shrubs to forests in the distance, are real in both senses and just as important. As cinematographer Tirru said in an interview, the filmmakers deliberately placed people against these views to reveal the smallness of the men's egos and the irrelevance of their prejudices within the larger world.

The scorpion is mindless of human authority and, by being itself, accidentally frustrates Karthi's plan for a murder. When Karthi is treated for the sting, Subbu asks the doctor whether the poison has left his body – a question as much about the literal poison as the foul ideas filling his head and heart. The scorpion has thus become an agent of redemption.

Lost bearings

The dung beetle, finally, made a curious, even amusing, appearance. It has nothing to do with the plot yet it cuts perhaps the most memorable figure. It appears rolling a dungball as three men brawl in the background. The choice reverses our usual hierarchy of attention, which is to put ourselves and our needs first. But as the men risk their lives over their pernicious social expectations, rolling around in the figurative excrement they themselves have laid, the beetle simply gets on with its own, thoroughly unbothered.

Dung beetles also find their way using the moon and stars, being guided by the cosmos itself, whereas the people nearby have evidently lost their moral bearings.

Overall, the animals of *Dorothy* do not create a unified allegory. The cattle, for instance, are just there to reinforce the film's rural locale.

But even though they were simulated on a computer, many of the animals that do make an appearance, especially in moments of violence and vulnerability, deserve our attention.

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

Video game publisher Electronic Arts announced the closure of the beloved RPG studio BioWare last week. A quiz on their celebrated space-faring series Mass Effect

Mohammed Hidhayat

QUESTION 1
Banshees are Reaper-indoctrinated versions of which species?

QUESTION 2
Which composer, known for Requiem for a Dream, led ME3's score?

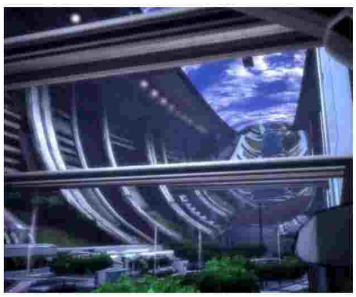
QUESTION 3
What is Garrus Vakarian's favourite activity?
a. Staring into the unknown b. Calibrations c. Dancing

QUESTION 4
Name the biological weapon developed to control Krogan population.

QUESTION 5
Fill in the blank. Quarians wear environmental suits because of a _____.

QUESTION 6
Who is the primary human antagonist that Shepard confronts near the ending? Name the actor who voiced the character.

QUESTION 7
Fill in the blank. The _____is a gigantic, worm-like creature believed to be inspired by Frank Herbert's Dune.



Visual question: Identify this enormous space station that serves as a central hub for galactic politics. BIOWARE

Questions and answers to the previous daily quiz: 1. The Workers' Party or the Partido dos Trabalhadores was formed in this year. **Ans: 1980**

2. Reason for Brazil's Congress and Supreme Court buildings being stormed in 2022. **Ans: Far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro, the principal opponent of Lula, refused to concede the election and claimed that it was stolen/illegitimate. This led to his supporters storming the buildings**

3. Brazil's top political leaders were hit by scandal when this anti-corruption investigation exposed money laundering and corruption. **Ans: Operation Car Wash**

4. Significance of the number '13' in association with Lula. **Ans: In Brazil, voters punch in a two-digit number to cast their vote. Lula's official ballot number is 13**

5. In 2004, a New York Times article on President Lula infuriated him. Name the reporter and what the article said. **Ans: Larry Rohter; he said that President Lula had a drinking problem**

Visual: Here, Lula is seen with another global leftist leader and icon. Name the revolutionary leader. **Ans: Fidel Castro**

Early birds: Tito Shiladitya| Sudhir Thapa| Sunil Madhavan| Baburam Sapre| Suchit Narottam



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the difference between "dinner" and "supper"? (Nellai S. Murugan, Chennai)

The word "dinner" is normally used by Indians to refer to the meal that is eaten in the evening. Native speakers of English, on the other hand, use the word to refer to the main meal of the day. Some people have their main meal in the afternoon, while others have it in the evening. So what we call "lunch" may be referred to as "dinner" by native speakers of English. The important thing to remember here is that "dinner" is considered by some to be the most important meal of the day. "Supper", on the other hand, is something that is had only in the evening. And unlike "dinner", it is usually a very light meal. One can have it early in the evening or just before going to bed. Americans tend to use the word "supper" quite often. It is usually a meal eaten at home with members of the family. When you invite someone to have a meal with you in the evening, you usually ask them to have "dinner" with you, not supper.

How is the word "tete-a-tete" pronounced? (K. Sankara Narayana, Kurnool)

"Tete" rhymes with the words "date", "hate", and "late". In other words, the final "e" in the word is silent. The "a" which occurs in between is pronounced like the "a" in "bath", "path", and "mask"; the main stress is on the second "tete". Any idea what the word means? When you have a "tete-a-tete" with someone, you have a chat with him/her. A "tete-a-tete" is usually a private conversation between two individuals. Here are a few examples:

The Principal had a tete-a-tete with the Head of the English Department.

Rahul has a regular tete-a-tete with Shoba.

What is the meaning of the idiom "to be all thumbs"? (Keshav Murthy, Uduvalli)

When you say that someone is "all thumbs" what you are implying is that the individual is very clumsy when it comes to working with his hands. He is very awkward and keeps making many mistakes. A person who is all thumbs will not be good at things like painting, stitching, and sewing. Here are a few examples.

I never ask Govind to dust those expensive vases. He's all thumbs.

When it comes to catching, Das is all thumbs.

What is the meaning of "double whammy"? (K.P. Pillai, Kochi)

The expression "double whammy" first appeared in a cartoon strip, which was quite popular in America in the 1920s. Al Capp, the author of the comic strip "Li'l Abner" used this expression to refer to an intense stare, which had a withering effect on its victims. It's meaning has undergone a considerable amount of change since then. This is how slang dictionaries define "double whammy" – double the portion of something, especially something troublesome. When you get a "double whammy" of something, it is usually something really bad. Here is an example:

We thought he'd come alone, but he gave us a double whammy by bringing his wife and children.

Published in The Hindu on May 28, 2002

Word of the day

Fugacious:
lasting a very short time

Synonyms: ephemeral, passing, short-lived, transient

Usage: *The peace between the two countries proved fugacious as tensions soon resurfaced.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/fugacious

International Phonetic Alphabet: /fjuːˈgeɪʃəs/

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

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explained@indianexpress.com

• SCIENCE

India's 'own GPS', which new ISRO satellite can restore

Anonna Dutt
New Delhi, October 29

THE INDIAN Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is slated to launch the much-awaited NVS-03 — its third new-generation navigation satellite — on Friday. The satellite is likely to restore the functioning of India's satellite-based positioning system, NavIC, which had stopped providing location data after the end of life and failure of atomic clocks, and recent failed launches of its satellites.

The new satellite's launch has been in the pipeline since late 2025 but has been delayed by multiple factors.

What is NavIC?

NavIC, which stands for Navigation with Indian Constellation, is the operational name for the Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS). A seven-satellite constellation that covers the Indian subcontinent and a region up to 1,500 km around it, NavIC is a regional satellite-based navigation system similar to the US's Global Positioning System (GPS). India is the only country with a regional navigation system.

With all seven satellites functional, the system was designed to provide location accurately up to 10 metres, which would be open to the public. A more accurate restrictive service would also be available for a fee to select users, such as those undertaking massive construction projects or the military. The system, when functional, can provide better coverage over the Indian landmass compared with the GPS, whose signals are received in India at an angle that makes it difficult to access in certain areas such as valleys and forests.

Why did the system stop working?

The NavIC system has had a choppy track record. Although ISRO has launched 11 navigation satellites since July 2013 for the nearly Rs 2,250-crore system, six satellites have failed primarily because of defective imported atomic clocks and, on a few recent occasions, owing to orbital issues.

Earlier this year, the Centre told Parliament that the constellation was no longer providing positioning data.

The first satellite, IRNSS-1A, was launched in 2013 — with three other satellites mandatorily needed for providing positioning data placed in orbit by 2015. Yet, a 2018 report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India said that the development of the consumer-end receivers — which can be used by devices such as cell phones to access location data — began only in 2017. By then, several years of the mission life of the satellites had been wasted.

GLOBAL COVERAGE

- There are four global navigation systems: the US's Global Positioning System, the Russian GLONASS, the European Galileo, and the Chinese Beidou.
- India is the only country with a regional navigation system in NavIC.

To provide positioning data, a navigation satellite uses atomic clocks to precisely measure the time it takes for a signal to travel to and from an object on Earth. But the atomic clocks on some of the initial satellites failed, rendering them ineffective.

Two replacement satellites — for the ones whose atomic clocks had malfunctioned or whose mission life had come to an end — also failed to reach orbit. First, IRNSS-1H couldn't be placed in orbit by ISRO's dependable Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle, as the shield protecting the satellite from heat generated owing to atmospheric friction failed to open up. Then, the second-generation satellite, NVS-02, was precisely launched into a highly elliptical transfer orbit, but its propulsion system failed to perform the manoeuvres required to get into the final orbit. Moreover, the mission life of 10 years has come to a close for most of the constellation's initial satellites.

What changes have been made since then?

More thorough checks have been conducted to ensure that the satellite's propulsion system doesn't fail (as it did for NVS-02), according to sources.

The second generation of navigation satellites, commencing with NVS-01, carry indigenously developed atomic clocks with a longer mission life of 12 years. Importantly, they send signals in a third frequency, L1, besides the L5 and S frequency signals that the existing satellites provide. This improves interoperability with other positioning systems, as L1 frequency is most commonly used by GPS. This band also helps in using the NavIC data in wearable devices such as smartwatches that use low-power, single-frequency chips.

• SOCIETY

The geography & economy of Punjab's long drug crisis

Drugs are emerging as the major poll issue in Punjab. Over the years, the state has tried several approaches to tackle the scrouge, with little success

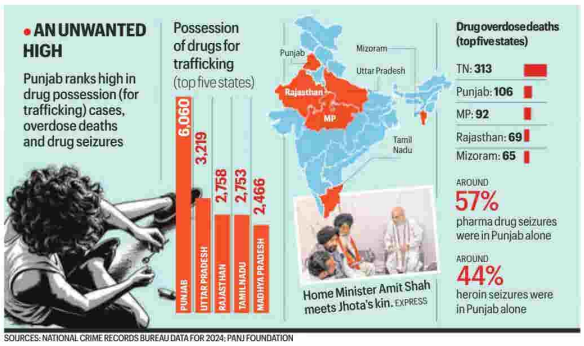


MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA

PUNJAB'S DRUG crisis has heaped fresh pressure on the state government after police Wednesday "seized" the body of a man who had died of suspected overdose and whose family was planning a protest. The body of 35-year-old Daljit Singh was being taken to the site in Mansa where the family of activist Parvinder Singh Jhota was already protesting. Jhota was killed by a medicine shop owner whom he accused of selling drugs.

Punjab has been battling drugs for almost a decade and a half, but there seems to be no let-up in the scourge. According to the National Crime Records Bureau's latest data, Punjab led the country with 6,060 cases of drug possession for trafficking in 2024. It also recorded 106 drug overdose deaths, second only to Tamil Nadu (313), in that year.

With Assembly elections due next year, the issue of drugs is being raised loudly. It is central to the BJP's poll pitch, putting the AAP government on the backfoot. No major AAP leader has been able to set foot in Mansa since Jhota's killing, even as Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Congress Punjab in-charge Sachin Pilot and Akali leaders visited the family.



SOURCES: NATIONAL CRIME RECORDS BUREAU DATA FOR 2024; PANJ FOUNDATION

Before Independence

Opium and poppy husk were prevalent in pre-Independence Punjab and had social acceptance. Prof Ranjit Singh Ghuman, author of the book *Dynamics of Drug Abuse and Addiction in India*, said Punjabis consumed *afeem* (opium) in very small quantities, often prescribed by doctors. The Royal Commission on Opium in 1894 observed: "The consumption of opium by the people of India generally is infinitesimally small; it has been consumed for centuries by certain classes in Northern India."

Ghuman says *desi daru* (home-brewed alcohol) was long the favoured form of *nasha* (intoxication) and socially acceptable.

Opium use continued after Independence despite a ban in the state. Since Rajasthan had legal opium *thekas* (outlets), people crossed over to buy it. A 1979 study, "Patterns and prevalence of opium use in rural Punjab (India)", found that opium was widely used by Punjab's rural population, despite being smuggled from neighbouring states at the risk of prosecution.

Vulnerable by geography

Punjab's 553-km border with Pakistan makes it vulnerable to smuggling. The mountainous parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran form the Golden Crescent, one of three major global centres of heroin processing. The other two major drug hubs are the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Thailand and Laos) and South America.

A senior police officer said Pakistan began pumping drugs into Punjab to weaken the border state after militancy ebbed, terming it "narco-terrorism".

While heroin, locally called *chitta*, is smuggled across the porous border, opium and poppy husk come from Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, where cultivation is legal for medical, scientific and export purposes. *Charas* and *hashish* (both made from cannabis) come from Himachal Pradesh.

Officials suspect high-quality heroin from Delhi is routed through Gujarat, Rajasthan's Ganganagar and Hanumangarh districts, or Jammu and Kathua in the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir.

The global drug trail

Mountainous parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran form the Golden Crescent, one of three major global centres of heroin processing.

•

The other two major drug hubs are the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Thailand and Laos) and South America.

Pharma drugs

As the state and Centre stepped up border enforcement, abuse of pharmaceutical drugs increased sharply. In 2021, the Centre extended the Border Security Force's jurisdiction from 15 km to 50 km inland. Of the 5.13 crore pharmaceutical drug units seized across India in 2024, Punjab accounted for 2.94 crore. Around 25% of NDPS (Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances) Act FIRs filed by Punjab Police in 2022 involved pharma drugs. Around 80% of these drugs enter Punjab from manufacturing hubs in Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan.

The latest outrage is linked to pharma drugs: Jhota was shot dead by a chemist on October 13 when he confronted him over the alleged sale of prohibited drugs to addicts.

The role of drones

Drone-based smuggling has surged in recent years, with drones now landing in daylight. Most are small Chinese quadcopters carrying heroin and arms. BSF data shows drone droppings rose from three in 2021 to over 200 in 2025. The Amritsar-Tarn Taran-Ferozepur-Gurdaspur belt forms the operational core of this corridor. The BSF has set up a anti-drone intelligence wing, and Punjab Police has procured anti-drone guns, but smugglers continue to evade the forces.

A lucrative business

One reason the trade flourishes despite crackdowns is its profitability. A gram of *chitta* can fetch Rs 1,000 to Rs 5,000, while a single run as a drug mule can earn a lakh. This is matters in a state where job opportunities have lagged behind the aspirations of the youth. "Also, you can't discount the changing social mores, where underhand means to earn wealth are increasingly accepted," said Pramod Kumar of the Institute for Development and Communication.

An alleged nexus between traffickers, police and politicians also sustains the trade. This came to the fore with the 2013 arrest of Punjab Police DSP Jagdish Singh Bhola in a multimillion-rupee drug racket. He was convicted in 2019 and is out on bail.

Women in the fray

Punjab Assembly data from March 2023 showed that arrests of women under the NDPS Act rose 85% in 2022 from 2015. Entire families can be drawn into the trade, which is why mothers and sons or couples are often booked together. Traffickers use women because they are less likely to be frisked and can ferry drugs by bus. Many women addicts also turn peddlers to fund their addiction.

State govts' approach

Since the Akali-BJP government declared a "war on drugs" in 2014, the state has followed the EDP (Enforcement, De-addiction and Prevention) approach. DGP Gaurav Yadav said the police changed strategy in August 2022, around six months after AAP came to power. "We decided that on one hand we will choke the supply by catching the big fish and on the other launch a mammoth outreach programme..." he told *The Indian Express* then.

When this failed to yield results, the AAP government launched Yudh Nasheyan Virudh in March 2025 to choke traffickers' finances and demolish houses built with illicit proceeds. This year, its second phase shifted towards community-driven action, deploying over 1.5 lakh village volunteers. Yet drugs remain available.

The Congress government had earlier introduced measures like dope tests for arms licences and new government recruitment.

Observers such as Kumar point to flaws in the EDP approach. He says prevention and rehabilitation should precede enforcement.

• GLOBAL

Protests to power in 2 yrs: How Serbia student movement won polls



EXPERT EXPLAINS

GULSHAN SACHDEVA

PROFESSOR AND JEAN MONNET CHAIR AT THE CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES, JNU

A STUDENT-LED movement in Serbia won a clear majority in parliamentary elections on Sunday, unseating President Aleksandar Vučić after over a decade. The development comes as many countries, including in Europe, witness student-led movements calling for fixing systemic issues, from corruption to education. How did Serbia go from a student movement to unseating the president in two years, and what effect could this have on the region?

What led to the student movement?

The student movement was triggered by the collapse of a canopy at a railway station in Novi Sad city in November 2024, which killed 16 people. The disaster soon became a symbol of alleged institutional corruption and lack of accountability.

It was followed by campus blockades that gradually escalated into mass protests. Students made decisions about the movement through open campus assemblies, where they debated and approved their course of action. What began as weekly protests and campus blockades soon became a national movement, as other parts of society, including teachers, actors, and farmers, joined the demonstrations. Allegations of collusion between the ruling party and organised crime also gained prominence, inspiring one of the movement's slogans: "Serbia or the Mafia?"

In September, after nearly two years of protests, Vučić announced snap polls and resigned as President, five months before the end of his second and final term. With control over the media and state institutions, he appeared confident of returning to power as Prime Minister.

The movement, meanwhile, sought to translate the protests into an organised electoral platform: "Student List – Students Win." The List brought together 250 candidates from diverse backgrounds, including more than 160 PhD holders. It excluded individuals previously associated with political parties. Its candidates included university teachers, actors, farmers and singers. Collectively, they developed a programme outlining their vision for the country.

To broaden its appeal and avoid internal divisions, the movement prioritised domestic issues, including media freedom, anti-corruption measures, institutional reform and education. It called on all opposition parties to support its candidates rather than field their own. The List won 141 of the 250 seats, forcing Vučić to concede defeat.

Survival strategy

- The decentralised decision-making within the movement made it difficult for Vučić's administration to discredit it or arrest a key figure.
- Its independence from established parties helped preserve public trust.
- Students went beyond campus protests, engaging in door-to-door canvassing and reaching out to villages that supported Vučić.
- The movement remained peaceful and focused on domestic issues. By using national symbols rather than EU flags, the protesters made it harder for the administration to paint the movement as externally funded.

The movement adopted a cautious approach to contentious foreign policy questions. The List maintained that Kosovo remained part of Serbia, despite its declaration of independence in 2008. While around 100 countries have recognised Kosovo's independence, India, China, Russia and five European Union (EU) member states continue to withhold recognition. It also proposed holding a referendum on Serbia's EU membership, and opposed sanctions on Russia over the Ukraine war.

Why is Vučić's defeat significant?

Vučić has dominated Serbian politics since 2014, first as Prime Minister and later as President. He emerged as a prominent ultranationalist leader during the Yugoslav wars and NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999. He later co-founded the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and repositioned himself as a more pragmatic leader.

In power, Vučić pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, engaging with the EU while maintaining close ties with Russia. He also opened Serbia to Chinese investment, including the Belt and Road Initiative.

What does this mean for Europe?

The students' victory could provide a significant boost to student movements across Europe. It could inspire other movements, demonstrating how sustained, peaceful mobilisation can challenge deeply entrenched political regimes and bring about political change without violence.

It also has implications for the Russia-Ukraine War. No government in Belgrade can afford to ignore Serbia's deep historical, cultural, religious and economic ties with Russia. Both countries share the Orthodox Christian tradition. The List has announced that Serbia will halt arms supplies to all conflict zones, including to those western countries that subsequently supply weapons to Ukraine.

Serbia's European integration remains a major challenge. Accession progress has been held back by concerns over the rule of law, judicial independence, media freedom, the normalisation of relations with Kosovo and Serbia's limited alignment with EU foreign policy, particularly its refusal to align fully with sanctions against Russia. This may change, depending on the new government.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: "We stand ready to support reforms on the rule of law, media freedom, the fight against corruption and strong democratic institutions, and to work together to advance Serbia's future in the European Union." The new government may adopt a more cautious approach towards Chinese infrastructure investments.

• INFRASTRUCTURE

Siang dam: Why the project to counter China faces opposition in Arunachal

Shinjini Ghosh
New Delhi, October 29

TENSIONS ARE rising in Arunachal Pradesh's Siang belt, with sections of the indigenous Adi community, youth leaders and residents objecting to the proposed Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP).

A 12-hour shutdown was called last Friday; reports of vandalism and violence emerged soon after it ended. On Thursday, several groups held a rally in state capital Itanagar, protesting the project and demanding the release of protesters and activists detained in connection with the agitation.

According to local residents, the project threatens them economically and socially, and also impinges upon the sentimental and cultural heritage attached to their ancestral land. Even as the government goes ahead with the pre-feasibility survey (PFR), apprehensions have only grown. The state government maintains that the SUMP is essential to counter China's proposed upstream dam and is a national security issue.

What is the Siang Project?

At 11,200 MW, the SUMP is touted to be India's largest hydropower project. Plans to harness the Siang and Subansiri rivers date back to 1982, when the Brahmaputra Board proposed three smaller projects; countering Chinese projects was not a primary concern then. In 2013, however, the central government raised concerns over Chinese projects on the Yarlung Tsangpo — as the Siang is known in upstream Tibet — and expressed interest in being a downstream user.

In 2017, the proposed Siang Upper Stage-I and Stage-II were merged under one umbrella, which eventually took shape as the SUMP. The project gained further prominence after China approved its 60,000 MW lower Yarlung Tsangpo hydropower project in December 2024.

Speaking to *The Indian Express*, Ninog Ering, Pasighat West MLA, said, "It is a national interest project. What if China purposely releases water and uses it [its dam] as a water bomb? We need checks and balances in place. This is why the Centre emphasised that we need this project."



Experts, however, have questioned this argument. Himanshu Thakkar, coordinator of the South Asia Network on Dams, told *The Indian Express*: "The government is trying to say that the SUMP is required to counter China. But the problem is that we don't even know the basic dimensions of the Chinese project. Only when we know the operational SOP of the project will we know what kind of impact it will have on India and what needs to be done to take care of it."

Thakkar said it was essential for India to seek public details of the project from Beijing. "As a downstream country we have the right to that information. India is pushing for the project by just assuming that it will help counter the Chinese project. Even if India wants to go ahead with the project, it will not be possible without the full cooperation of the local community," he said.

What is the project's current status?

The SUMP is currently at the pre-feasibility survey stage. In September, Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu said the project would not be "rushed beyond the feasibility stage."

Khandu said that if experts found the project not feasible, "there will be no further progress". The Chief Minister also assured extensive consultations with affected communities if the SUMP progresses beyond the feasibility stage, including a social impact assessment, an environmental assessment and preparation of a detailed project report.

Ering added, "The Chief Minister has already given the assurance that even after the PFR if villagers do not want the project to go ahead, then it will not be done. However, it should be kept in mind that the government will look into all aspects for the affected residents, including proper compensation and rehabilitation."

Dubit Siram, a resident of Geku village along the Siang, said it was unlikely that the government would step back once the PFR is completed. "It is unlikely that the PFR will say that the project is not feasible. When has it ever happened? The authorities should give it to us in writing that even after the PFR, the dam will not be built. Even if the PFR is done, we will not allow the construction of the dam," said Siram, a member of the Siang Indigenous Farmers' Forum.

What do communities stand to lose?

Condemning the recent vandalism reported from Pasighat, Ering said: "People have the right to be angry, but we are ready to hold conversations. Maybe we could have implemented the awareness programmes sooner. But there are elements that are instigating the protestors."

For the indigenous communities, the loss of ancestral land and livelihood are at the core of the issue. "We will be refugees in our own land," Siram said. Thakkar also stressed that for indigenous communities and residents along the riverbank, the Siang is like a "mother for them culturally, economically, socially and on religious terms."

WEB EXCLUSIVE
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RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

CPC plenum narrows focus to purges, discipline

THE CLOSED-DOOR plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) is held, typically, seven times in the period between successive party congresses that take place every five years. In the past, the calendar has been such that the fifth plenum has set the priorities for the country's next five-year economic plan. This time, however, the economic blueprint — the 15th Five-Year Plan — had already been taken up at the fourth plenum last year, after the customary sequence was disrupted by the delayed third plenum in 2024. The meeting held from October 26 to 29 was devoted, instead, to what the Politburo described as "major issues concerning the sustained advancement of full and rigorous Party self-governance". That the ruling party of the world's second-largest economy appears to be shifting its focus from economic planning to the discipline of its own governing apparatus is significant.

The apparent shift in agenda comes against the backdrop of President Xi Jinping's long-running anti-corruption campaign and sweeping purges. These have reduced the Central Military Commission, China's top military decision-making body, which normally has seven members, to just two. At last year's plenum, 37 Central Committee members were absent, 27 of them from the military. With the 21st Party Congress due next year, where Xi is widely expected to seek a fourth term as party chief, the plenum framed the effort to consolidate control over the party-state. Xi has made his intolerance of disloyalty explicit, including in a speech in January this year when he warned against "two-faced people". Part of the explanation lies in the different foundations of Xi's power compared with that of Mao Zedong, the only other leader of Communist China to have amassed a comparable degree of personal authority. Mao's dominance rested heavily on a personality cult and his willingness to override institutional constraints. Xi, by contrast, has consolidated authority through the formal structures of the party. So while Mao could mobilise his personal authority against the party apparatus, Xi's rule depends on that apparatus functioning as an effective instrument of his will. Hence the continued focus on discipline in the plenum's communique: "We will build up the ranks of high-calibre officials with firm political commitment, outstanding professional competence, excellent work conduct, and strict discipline."

The implications of the plenum extend well beyond Xi's political fortunes, as questions loom over the 2027 leadership shuffle and his succession plan. In a system where the Party effectively subsumes the state, the way it governs itself has far-reaching consequences. It will shape how China makes decisions and projects its power abroad, impacting global markets, supply chains, the technology race and strategic calculations of other powers.

For affordable cancer care, go beyond price caps

THE GOVERNMENT'S decision to regulate trade margins on non-scheduled cancer drugs is a response to an urgent public-health concern. In recent years, new therapies have offered hope for cancer patients. At the same time, unaffordable drugs are known to be a major cause for patients delaying treatment, skipping doses or even stopping medication. According to the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority, intermediaries between manufacturers and patients — stockists, distributors, hospital pharmacies, and wholesale agents — add an average profit mark-up of around 170 per cent to the prices of these medicines. Now, the government has capped the seller's profit at 30 per cent of the MRP. The intervention's litmus test will be in making treatment more accessible.

Regulating trade margins is not the same as controlling prices set by manufacturers. The cap does not apply only to the price at which companies sell medicines to distributors or hospitals. If the initial price is too high, the treatment may remain unaffordable even after the trade margin limit comes into force. Patented drugs face little competition from generic alternatives, giving manufacturers greater control over their prices. The price trajectory of medicines already subject to caps underlines the limitations of this approach. The monthly cost of ribociclib reportedly rose from Rs 58,000 to Rs 78,000, despite the restrictions placed on profits on the breast cancer drug in 2019. Another challenge is the use of artificial discounts to distort the apparent market price. Manufacturers may offer steep discounts on a small number of units to select corporate hospitals while selling most of their stock at much higher prices. This could make it difficult for regulators to determine the medicine's actual market price. Trade margin regulation must therefore be backed by closer scrutiny of manufacturers' prices and transparent reporting of sales and discounts.

At the same time, regulation must be designed and enforced with care. Pharmacies have legitimate costs, including those related to storage and handling. A blanket approach could disrupt supplies to underserved areas and affect the quality of care. There are also fears that hospitals will pass on costs to patients through means such as increasing room rents. Price control needs to work in concert with measures such as stronger public-health services, wider insurance coverage and more research on generics.

Put your phone away and tuck in

IN HIS book of manners, *Urbanus Magnus*, the 13th-century English courtier Daniel of Beccles wrote: "One can have a meal without a table, but not without a tablecloth." In the 21st century, one might say that it is not possible to have a meal without a smartphone — or so it would seem by the number of diners who seem loath to look up from their screens.

In the early years of the smartphone, several restaurants tried to ban the device, in order to discourage customers from taking photos of their food and disrupting the experience for others. They gave up partly because it was becoming a losing battle, and partly because social media-enabled discovery changed the stakes for them. In Sardinia, however, a group of restaurants has plunged once more unto the breach, barring families from using smartphones at the table in an attempt to get them to talk to each other and connect. What sets this initiative apart from other similar attempts is that the Sardinian eateries are not simply asking people to put away their phones — they're offering alternatives like games and drawing kits that encourage interactions.

Could this strategy work where all previous attempts — such as asking diners to surrender their phones before entering the premises — have failed? Commensality has been an important way in which humans have built relationships. And while one initiative in Sardinia isn't going to solve the growing global crisis of loneliness, perhaps it can show the way, one hot meal at a time.

Reforms 3.0 underline a credibility gap. First, reform the reformer



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THE CABINET secretary recently announced that India was about to embark on Administrative Reforms 3.0. Normally, such an announcement would spark anticipation, if not excitement. The next stage of reforms is coming. India badly needs reforms to meet the impending headwinds in the global economy, the fragility of its external sector, and lopsided domestic growth. But for a government in its 12th year of power, Reforms 3.0 does not signal the next stage. It is almost an admission of the failures of the previous attempts. We need to understand the constitutive structural reasons related to the nature of this government that place a binding constraint on reform.

But let us look at the context. IMF reports should be read critically. But the 2025 Article Four Consultation Report has lines most would concur with. "Firms report longer customs delays in India compared to peers and senior management spend more time on regulatory compliance." In an annexure, it says, "Firm dynamism, a key potential engine for productivity, remains subdued in India. The entry and exit rates for firms are below one per cent compared to 8 to 13 per cent in comparator economies. Fifteen per cent of firms in its sample qualify as zombie firms." But it is our own Economic Survey 2025-26 that provides the most damning indictment. Curiously, these lines are framed as a critique of Indian capital — its propensity to seek rents rather than invest in long-term capital. But they are the clearest indictment of the current regime cloaked in a discussion of Indian capital. Paragraph 16.132 says, "Regulatory arbitrage, protected margins, and firm-specific accommodations often dominate productivity enhancement, scale competition, or learning-by-doing". Who creates the conditions for this?

Or, even more candidly, in 16.131, the Indian corporate sector is described as operating in "a hybrid zone where rents are available, enforcement is uneven, and political mediation substitutes for market discipline". In plain terms, the Chief Economic Advisor is hinting at the political economy of influence and corruption at the heart of the problem. This is a brave and candid admission from an official of the government 12 years in power. This political economy subverts any kind of administrative reform, and with the perception that the government clearly favours particular business groups, this problem has become worse.

The first attempt at "Ease of Doing Business" was such an eyewash, in part because the World Bank's index, in which we were trying to climb up, was something of a farce. The government has often been successful in changing the formal rules of business to send a message: It consolidated parts of the tax system; some would argue for the labour reforms as an achievement; some regulations, like the incorporation of companies, have been simplified; environmental regulations have been unconscionably gutted; many offences have been decriminalised. But these apparent simplifications have been undermined by complexity elsewhere: Unclear quality control orders, less clear tax enforcement, repeated use of retrospective taxation, and the expansion of a whole range of minute regulations that affect ordinary citizens. We are back in an era of maximum government, minimum governance. India remains a difficult place to do business or set up organisations, as even the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Commerce noted.

So why has reform been so ineffective in unleashing dynamism? The political economy is certainly at the heart of the problem. There was a view that changing the structure of rents, centralising it rather than doing away with rents altogether, would help. But it is increasingly clear that more and more actors are extracting rents at different levels of government; they have even found a bypass for digitised solutions. Then there are other, standard fallacies of reform. Changing the formal rules of administration or business is not the same thing as changing the institutional conditions under which these rules operate. China showed the opposite: The institutional environment meant more than the rules. Changing the rules does not by itself remove the obstacles and frictions businesses and citizens face. But the government measures its success by those. Apparently, the cabinet secretary identified 11 types of bureaucrats, whose different orientations might affect institutional performance. It is a backhanded way of acknowledging an HR problem even at the highest levels of bureaucracy.

> There can be no lasting reform unless the state machinery is committed to presumptive trust in citizens, decentralisation, and a hostility to unnecessary surveillance and control

With this government, there is a more fundamental problem: Its ideology of governance. There can be no lasting reform unless the state machinery, on principle and by instinct, is committed to three propositions: Presumptive trust in citizens, decentralisation to appropriate levels of governance, and a hostility to unnecessary surveillance and control. This government is off the charts on all fronts.

This government refuses to treat citizens as autonomous agents capable of conducting their own affairs. Instead, even more so than previously, it treats them as sources of disorder, evasion or anti-national activity. Paradoxically, the more information it collects on citizens and businesses, the more it gets the discretionary power to intervene. "Logical discrepancies" are not confined to the SIR process; they have become a mode of governance. For years, it was common sense that India's biggest reform would be decentralisation. But this is the most centralised government in modern history — fiscally, administratively, politically. Instead of serious reforms on the lines of the 73rd , 74th Amendments, even many state governments have been reduced to central tutelage. The cabinet structure is more dependent on the PMO. And finally, the political philosophy of this government is, by instinct, committed to control. In mission mode, and when the political economy incentives align, it can do things well: Highways, small pockets of industrial policy. But even by Indian standards, the control it exercises, even on the corporate sector, is unprecedented. If the government is serious about reform, it has to reckon with its core ideology. Otherwise, we will be in another top-down bureaucratic exercise. Reforms 3.0 underscore the credibility gap this government faces. We are dying of too much reform, without any reform of the reformer.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

In season of protests, price of speaking up, costs of silence



PAROMITA CHAKRABARTI

IN THIS season of global protests, the politics of dissent is unfolding in unexpected places, including in book stores across Britain. Faber and Faber recently announced that Sally Rooney's books will no longer be available in the United Kingdom in any format. The Irish writer has pledged to donate her royalties to Palestine Action, a group proscribed by the British government. Faber's statement read, "Current legislation in the UK has led to circumstances where Faber cannot pass on UK earnings to Sally Rooney for her work. To sell a writer's work and not be able to pass on earnings is an unconscionable situation for a publisher. As such, and in full agreement with Sally, we have taken the decision..."

It is an episode with implicit lessons about our reaction to famous people when they take a stand — and just as revealingly, when they refuse to speak up.

There is, to begin with, the business of commerce: What happens when a writer's political convictions collide with the legal and financial structures through which her work reaches readers? Or, when a musician expresses political views on stage? There is the old, insistent chorus that art and politics must remain separate, that their coming together is in some way an overreach, to be censured in the only way that money knows: By withholding support, as it happened last month with rapper Macklemore who was removed under pressure from sponsors and stadium owners from Ed Sheeran's US Loop Tour for voicing support for Palestine.

In Rooney's case, the decision to withdraw was mutually taken by the writer and the publisher, but the boundaries of dissent are often drawn without an explicit intervention from the state; it is enough to make the counterparty anxious about the consequences of association: The publisher, the promoter, the producer, the venue, each acts to protect itself, and the result is lost deals, professional isolation, threats — a censorship by other means that nobody owns.

In India, where the silence of Bollywood stars has grown deafening over the years, the possibility of personal and professional backlash creates incentives for caution. In 2015, for instance, when actor Aamir Khan spoke of rising intolerance in the country, he was met with swift backlash from sections of the ruling party, his colleagues and fans. The cumulative effect of such majoritarian pushback is that public figures can become conspicuously absent from conversations in which their influence might otherwise matter.

> If we welcome the emotional and intellectual experience that art offers, we must also reckon with the possibility that its makers will hold convictions that challenge, unsettle or even offend us

What does it mean when a beloved writer, musician or actor becomes entangled in a political dispute, and what does our response to that entanglement reveal about the purposes for which we consume culture?

Rooney's fiction — from *Conversations with Friends* (2017) to *Normal People* (2018) to Intermezzo (2024) — grapples with intimacy, class, power and the uneasy moral negotiations of contemporary life. They invite readers to examine the relationship between private emotions and the public structures that shape them. The reader who values a writer's capacity to illuminate the world might reasonably be expected to recognise that this does not end when the novel ends.

In a 2019 interview with Louisiana Channel, Rooney observed that our engagement with the world is "not just optional, you can't just opt out of the rest of humankind". Perhaps this is also what art asks of us: To remain open to lives beyond our own, to recognise something of ourselves in others. To insist that artistes abandon these capacities when they speak publicly is to value their ability to move us while denying them the right to be moved themselves. If we welcome the emotional and intellectual experience that art offers, we must also reckon with the possibility that its makers will hold convictions that challenge, unsettle or even offend us. And when celebrities remain silent on matters of public consequence while readily lending themselves to commercial campaigns, it is fair to question the terms on which that visibility is offered.

The withdrawal of Rooney's books from the UK does not require readers to endorse her position on Palestine Action, whose proscription and methods remain contested. One can disagree with her decision while still asking whether a legal and commercial arrangement that makes publication untenable should trouble us. It asks us to consider the systems that govern cultural production and circulation: Who gets to speak, what causes are acceptable and who is penalised for speaking out. After all, the cost of dissent may be borne by those who speak, but the consequences of silence belong to us all.

The writer is senior associate editor, The Indian Express. paromita.chakrabarti@expressindia.com

India must set a higher bar on clean energy targets



RITWICK GEORGE

AT THE Paris Agreement in 2015, India promised that by 2030, 40 per cent of its power capacity would come from non-fossil sources. It got there nine years early. It also pledged to cut the emissions intensity of its economy, the carbon emitted per rupee of GDP, by 33-35 per cent from 2005 levels. It met that goal too, with a decade to spare. The problem is that India's pledges ask little more than what the country is already on track to do.

With the Hormuz crisis sending oil above $100 a barrel, and ahead of COP31, it's time for India to set ambitious climate targets and deliver on them — because this is now the cheaper and safer path. In September, the UN announced the failure to limit global warming to 1.5°C, calling for mass carbon removal, with no actual feasible ways to do so. NDCs were supposed to be aimed at reducing GHG emissions. India's targets have routinely been weak and not aligned with the aim of staying below 1.5°C. The March pledge raises similar concerns about scope and ambition. India now promises 60 per cent clean energy capacity by 2035, despite already reaching nearly 53 per cent in February. It also promises to cut emissions intensity by 47 per cent by 2035. Intensity as a metric is skewed because it measures emissions relative to economic output. If an economy doubles while cutting intensity by 40 per cent, it will still emit 20 per cent more. Focusing on intensity also allows India to report steady reductions on paper while keeping emissions rising. Most major economies have committed to absolute limits, including China. India is the largest emitter still in the Paris Agreement without one.

What India's pledges leave out is also telling. It plans to grow coal capacity 46 per cent by 2035. Coal still generates more than two-thirds of India's electricity, and clean sources supplied just 29 per cent of India's power last year, despite a capacity of over 50 per cent. Since the Iran war began, India's crude imports through Hormuz have been disrupted. Coal cannot solve this; oil and gas fuel India's cars and kitchens. The way out is to electrify. Increasingly, the cheapest way to do that is the sun. In a national auction for round-the-clock clean power, winning bids came in at Rs 5.25, fixed for 25 years, while coal contracts signed in 2025 started at Rs 5.38 to Rs 6.30 and are projected to rise with fuel costs.

India should set more ambitious targets. It should name the year its power-sector emissions will peak and set an absolute limit (rather than its current intensity goals), the kind the Paris Agreement encourages developing countries to do. Second, measure what matters. Set targets for clean electricity actually generated, not just installed capacity. Chile has done this: Its renewables law required 20 per cent of its electricity generation to come from new renewables like wind and solar by 2025. It hit the target six years early and raised its goal to 70 per cent renewable electricity by 2030. Third, build the grid. India's problem is no longer generating clean power; it's delivering it. The country curbed clean power output in most months of 2025 because the grid couldn't absorb it. Over the past five years, it built only about 80 per cent of its planned transmission capacity, and on a single day this March, it lost enough renewable power to supply 5 million urban households because transmission lines couldn't carry it.

> India should name the year its power-sector emissions will peak and set an absolute limit (rather than its current intensity goals), the kind the Paris Agreement encourages

The writer is MPP candidate at Harvard, former researcher at ISB's Bharti Institute of Public Policy, and co-author of research for IPCC's Special Report on Climate Change and Cities

40 YEARS AGO

October 30, 1986


INDIAN EXPRESS
PM attacks labour, industry
Take-over of sick units ruled out

PM attacks labour, industry

PRIME MINISTER Rajiv Gandhi blamed Indian labour and large industry for the stagnation and poor performance of the sector. Inaugurating a three-day national conference on "productivity through people in the age of changing technology" , he said unless the situation was corrected urgently, the country's independence would be imperilled. "What we need is the will to do it."

In Punjab, bid for unity

THE CHIEF Minister, Surjit Singh Barnala, and the dissident Akali leaders, Parkash Singh Badal and Amarinder Singh, called on the Sikh head priests who recently initiated steps to bring about unity in the Akali Dal. While Barnala met the head priests at Anandpur Sahib in the morning, Badal, Amarinder Singh and some other dissident leaders called on them in the evening.

Law panel recommendations

THE LAW Commission has made far-reaching recommendations on "grassroot-level justice" and tax courts for the speedy disposal of cases. The Law Commission headed by Justice D A Desai, a retired Judge of the Supreme Court, has submitted two reports to the government. Two more reports, on an all-India judicial service and training of judicial officers at all levels, are being given final touches by the Commission.

Technology cooperation

THE US is willing to give India a prized technology for a modern quadruplex flight control system, avionics and other specific aspects of aircraft design. It is willing to sell it for the manufacture of graphite composites, a modern material for aircraft design.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY
Netanyahu lost his mandate. If opponents unite, he'll lose power too.
— The Guardian

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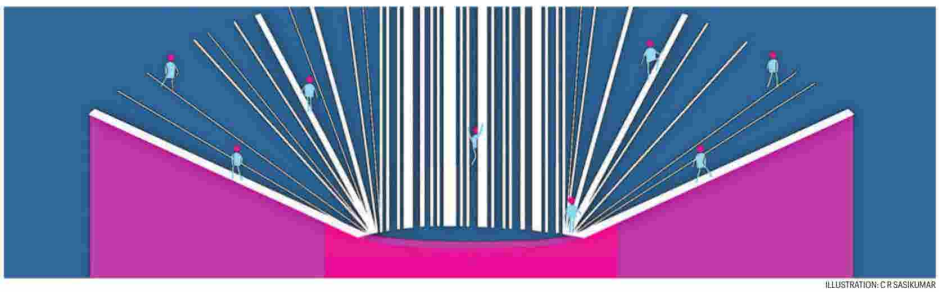


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

Four years later, is Delhi University's Four-Year Undergraduate Programme an unfulfilled promise?

FYUP is widening opportunities



MAMIDALA JAGADESH KUMAR

STUDENTS PURSUING the four-year undergraduate programme (FYUP) face important choices both at the end of the third year and on completing the fourth year. Should they leave after three years with a recognised degree or continue into the fourth year? After completing four years, should they pursue a one-year master's degree, seek employment or apply for a PhD programme? The central question, therefore, is how these pathways can be made meaningful and beneficial to students.

One concern is that multidisciplinary course requirements in FYUP may dilute students' grounding in their major discipline. Under the UGC undergraduate curriculum framework, to earn a major in the FYUP, one must complete a minimum of 80 credits in the chosen discipline; in the three-year structure, the requirement is a minimum of 60 credits. FYUP, therefore, provides scope for greater depth alongside breadth, although the quality of learning depends on course content, teaching and assessment.

Not every student will want to continue for the fourth year. That may be due to different academic or career plans and other constraints. Fees, living expenses, and personal circumstances can influence decisions. We must respect the decision of FYUP students who choose to leave with a recognised three-year undergraduate degree. Opting for this route is not the same as discontinuing without a qualification.

For new programmes to succeed, sustained academic effort and institutional patience are essential. There are illustrative Indian examples. The Indian Institute of Science (IISc) introduced its four-year BS (Research) degree in 2011. Over the past 15 years, it has grown into an interdisciplinary and research-intensive undergraduate programme. Another example is IIT Madras's four-year BS degree in Data Science and Applications. This programme is conducted in online mode, but the assessments are conducted in person. Launched in 2022, it has gained substantial popularity. These examples, however, do not establish that FYUP will succeed automatically across institutions with differing resources and capabilities.

FYUP also has built-in flexibility. A student can exit after earning a minimum of 120 credits and receive a three-year degree subject to completion requirements. In addition, institutions can also offer either an Accelerated Degree Programme (ADP) or an Extended Degree Programme (EDP). In ADP, an eligible student can complete the FYUP in six or seven semesters, and EDP allows up to two additional semesters to complete the degree. In both cases, students complete the same prescribed curriculum and total credits. The EDP could be a useful option for students who need additional time.

FYUP provides routes to Honours and Honours with Research. The UGC's 2025 Apprenticeship Embedded Degree Programme (AEDP) guidelines permit up to four semesters of apprenticeship in eligible establishments, including industries, MSMEs and start-ups within a four-year degree. The guidelines also permit up to three semesters of apprenticeship embedding in three-year degrees. Where an institution offers AEDP, students gain experience in production, services, and enterprise as part of their study. Some universities, such as the University of Mumbai and Kannur University, have begun offering these AEDPs, making them an alternative option that can enhance work opportunities.

A student may become eligible to apply for admission in a one-year postgraduate programme after a four-year degree. Completing the FYUP provides eligibility, and, as with any other postgraduate route, admission depends on selection requirements and seat availability. In the national capital, Dr B R Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD), Jamia Millia Islamia, JNU and IGNOU also offer one-year postgraduate degrees in addition to the University of Delhi. Some other central and state universities across the country have begun introducing one-year postgraduate options in different disciplines for FYUP students.

If students have requisite preparation and research aptitude, they can consider pursuing a PhD to prepare for careers in research and academia. The UGC's 2022 regulations allow four-year/eight-semester bachelor's degree holders with 75 per cent marks and an institution's selection process to seek admission to a PhD. Eligibility alone does not mean that a student is ready for doctoral research. Institutions must still assess their research preparation and support their transition to do independent research.

The success of FYUP should not be judged solely by the number of students who continue into the fourth year, enter a one-year master's programme, pursue a PhD or take up employment after graduation. The real value of FYUP lies in making these opportunities widely available through sustained investment in faculty, research infrastructure and industry collaboration, so that students can pursue their varied aspirations.

The writer is chairman, Review Committee for NEP 2020, Ministry of Education and chairman, BoG, IIM Calcutta. He was formerly vice chancellor, JNU and chairman, UGC. Views are personal

Students bear brunt of policy chaos



DEBRAJ MOOKERJEE

THE Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) bears the twin burden of ambition and ideology. On the one hand, it is tight-jacketed by a narrow and deterministic set of principles on how higher education should be guardrailed. On the other, it is imagined as a stage where a decolonised knowledge system can be performatively enacted to reorient future generations into a certain version of *Bharatiya*-ness. The former encodes compliance; the latter seeks alignment.

This newspaper recently reported ("The Fourth-Year Trap', *IE*, October 26) on yet another imbroglio involving the FYUP's implementation in the University of Delhi, centred this time on the problems faced by fourth-year pass-outs who thought they had a last-minute ticket to embark the one-year PG programme, but were turned away at the boarding gate. That report analyses merely one symptom. The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 and its carrier pigeon, the FYUP, are beset with a slew of problems.

To blame the university and its officials is to shrink the problem into visible targets. The bigger picture is in fact older than both the NEP and the FYUP. It gathers shape from the Ambani-Birla report, the *Report on a Policy Framework for Reforms in Education*, submitted in 2000, and readily championed by Congress after it came to power in 2004. The report hinges on commerce (privatisation and corporatisation, higher student fees, and so on), positing that education ought not to be thought of as something that exists apart from the commercial interests of society. It also suggested, perhaps even more troublingly, that higher education should align strictly with skills, be depoliticised and attend supinely to the exigencies of the knowledge economy. Many critics have argued that this older policy document segued into the NEP.

The present iteration of the grand design, infused with the extraneous demand for the cultural reorientation of higher education, is a difficult project. On the one hand, there is a desire to align university education with the demands of the market, foreground STEM-oriented learning, promote interdisciplinary approaches, and eventually enhance the employability of students. On the other, there is the compulsion to introduce gratuitous course models like the value addition course (VAC), which really are, at best, self-learning modules. Additionally, various courses have been made to bear the ideological burden of what is thought appropriate for inclusion in syllabi. There is also a stacking of courses to build up quantitative heft (leading to the dilution of a student's core discipline). Students need to secure about 45 per cent of their scores from internal assessment, which in turn leads to a mad rush to turn in work to obtain credits, minus any meaningful effort. Meanwhile, real effort at sharpening the intellect with respect to the core discipline suffers.

Higher education is most productive when it is untethered. It is not untrue that the fruits of research have fuelled the engines of commerce. After all, we compound the words "science" and "technology", do we not? That science which fuels technology must not, however, be controlled by the exigencies of technology, if it is to be meaningful, creative and most significantly, path-breaking. Knowledge forms where there is freedom. On a ship you need strict systems and protocols inside the engine room. Processes are important and necessary in certain types of functions, and even in education: Standardisation in grading, well thought-out syllabi, responsive administration, and so on. However, if you over-schematise education itself, you make it lose its core purpose — to foster a love for knowledge, and provide the environment for the formation of new knowledge (research).

The FYUP is burdened by arcane principles that contribute little to the development of critical thinking and original research output. Moreover, the overloading of the programme with peripheral courses in the name of interdisciplinary studies results eventually in the erosion of meaningful learning, leading to the accretion of little value via the additional fourth year.

Regardless of whether the NEP has merit or otherwise (it works very well for engineering colleges, for example), its implementation across India's universities has experienced roadblocks. Guidelines and rules are often formulated after programmes are started, unclear rules of engagement leave teachers and students clueless about requirements and entitlements, frequent changes and exacting requirements in the face of weak infrastructure result in cutting corners to meet timelines, and most disturbingly, students are insecure in the absence of clarity.

As a teacher with decades of experience, I try and make the best of whatever system is in place. I know how all of us have been bending over backwards to make the FYUP effective, even when we have not always agreed with various facets of the programme. The reason should be abundantly clear — we owe our students the best possible education, and they deserve no less. However, the constant stumbles, and the gathering mess that results from each misstep, have given cause for deep disquiet.

The writer teaches at Ramjas College, University of Delhi

Why I stopped doomscrolling



NALINI SORENSEN

AS A mother of two teenagers, I've had a front-row seat to comparisons in action. Why just our teens? It plays out in all our lives every day. You just need a social media account. Someone's spotlight moment is right there, in your face, while you might be having an off day. You are comparing someone's curated highlight to your own unfiltered, behind-the-scenes reality. Social media, the great leveller in reverse.

I couldn't sleep one night, doomscrolling, feeling as though my life lacked the zing I could see in everyone else's, when I stumbled upon a quote by James Clear: "Comparison is useful as a point and destructive as a loop. When you compare for a point in time, you can identify a gap in your approach and then shift your attention back to what you can control. When you compare on a repeated loop, you can get locked into a cycle of envy and disappointment."

When do we cross over from point to loop, from useful to destructive? Can we do anything to halt the slide? How do we teach this to ourselves, to our teenagers on social media, even to younger children who aren't? How do we stop comparing and start living on our own terms? Because, let's face it, comparison erodes confidence. It keeps us small and makes us feel we aren't good enough. And that's not how we want ourselves or our children to be.

So much for sleep. I started digging into these questions with an enthusiasm I rarely muster these days.

What I quickly realised was that many parents of today's teenagers themselves grew up being compared to other children in the family or neighbourhood. Comparison was how my generation's parents motivated us: Setting the bar high, expecting us to stretch. An inherited problem, then, perhaps rooted in scarcity. One had to be better than the rest to succeed.

So, what can we do? The first step is to stop and name it when it happens. Just a simple "I am comparing now", said aloud or silently, is enough. Naming it puts the brakes on the loop. It creates distance.

The next step is to audit the content we consume, or, to train our social-media algorithms. If you linger on a post that makes you feel small, your algorithm smells it and serves you more of it. So be ruthless. Be like my editor with her red pen when going through your feed. Unfollow or mute content that makes you compare. Curate a digital space that feeds you rather than drains you. This goes for people in real life too. Recognise how a meeting, a phone call or a WhatsApp message makes you feel — there's your cue.

Sometimes, and this is a tricky one, something stings because it hints at hidden potential within us. This is where comparison can become useful. It might help to use it as a mirror, and ask: What is this showing me about myself? Seeing someone succeed can reveal a possibility we already sense in ourselves. With a little nudge, someone's success can make us think, I'd love to do that too. Or, it can make us think, I'll never be that good. The trigger is the same; what changes is the story we tell ourselves.

The last step is to measure our progress against who we were six months or a year ago, rather than against someone else. Your path, your pace, the trajectory of your life with its own hurdles and blessings are yours alone. You are a perpetual work in progress, constantly evolving, and who better to measure your progress against than your past self?

There will always be someone running faster, someone living bigger. Their story is not the measure of ours. The only person to outgrow is who we were yesterday. That's the race worth running.

Sorensen is a Mumbai-based children's author

When disruption replaces argument, deepest damage is to young



SIGNAL TO NOISE
BY RAJEEV CHANDRASEKHAR

THIS WEEK, I am departing from my usual thoughts about the future of technology. There is another question on my mind — one that matters equally to India's future: Whether the next generation of Indians understands what good governance produces, and what its absence costs. The signal versus the noise.

I have spent two decades in public life. In that time, I have watched political discourse become progressively noisier and less connected to the question that determines the quality of a citizen's life: Is their elected government doing its job? The most important audience for an honest answer is the 150 million Indians who have joined the electorate since 2014, and the hundreds of millions more who will join over the next decade.

The key question is this: What is the difference between India in the lost decade (2004-2014) and the India being built now?

The answer is not a list of schemes. It is a change in the fundamental relationship between a citizen and the state. During the lost decade, the question that decided a young person's life was not "What can you do?" It was "Whom do you know?" Contracts were not won on merit. Capital did not flow to the best idea. It flowed to the best connection. In 2012, a Credit Suisse report disclosed that 10 business groups had borrowed the equivalent of roughly 98 per cent of the net worth of the Indian banking system — while a woman in Thrissur with a shop, or a young engineer in Surat with an MSME, was turned away.



ILLUSTRATION: VIKAS AGARWAL

A former PM himself acknowledged that less than 15 paise of every welfare rupee reached the intended beneficiary. The JAM Trinity — Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, mobile — was not a technology story. It was a governance story. It removed the middleman from the transaction. Over Rs 53 lakh crore has been transferred directly to citizens' bank accounts since 2014. The 15-paise system was not reformed. It was shut down.

NITI Aayog data shows nearly 250 million Indians were lifted out of multidimensional poverty in just nine years. The number of people classified as such plummeted from 29.17 per cent in 2013-14 to 11.28 per cent in 2022-23. Rs 4.47 lakh crore to farmers, nearly 95 million in the latest instalment, with no intermediary taking a cut. Good governance compounds. A family lifted from poverty most likely does not go back. A farmer whose income no longer depends on the generosity of a scheme acquires a dignity that cannot be reversed.

But compounding works in both directions. Look at Karnataka: Borrowings climbed from Rs 90,280 crore to Rs 1,04,000 crore in a single year to fund Rs 52,000 crore in leaky guarantee spending. The intentions are not in question. But capital expenditure — the money that builds roads, hospitals, and industrial capacity — has been crowded out.

Keralam's new government tabled a White Paper in June 2026 documenting Rs 5.07 lakh crore in debt from a decade of Left governance. The state was in RBI overdraft for 84 days in 2025. Capital expenditure: 1.3 per cent of GSDP, less than half the national average.

Genuine protest against genuine injustice is the lifeblood of democracy. India's history is full of it. I have participated in many. A citizen's right to challenge power is non-negotiable.

What I am describing is different: The systematic, manufactured disruption of governance as a political strategy — the deliberate creation of the appearance of crisis to mask the absence of a credible alternative programme. Parliament disrupted not to raise a specific grievance but to prevent the passage of legislation. Highways blocked as a pressure tactic.

This is not accountability. It is the substitution of noise for argument. And its deepest damage is to young people: A political culture in which the ability to create chaos is mistaken for the ability to govern. That produces the most dangerous democratic outcome: A generation of cynics who neither participate nor hold leaders accountable.

India has the largest youth population in the world. The political values this generation develops will shape Indian democracy for the next 50 years.

Look at UP: from BIMARU state to Rs 36 lakh crore economy in nine years, revenue surplus, riots eliminated, investor confidence transformed. Look at Maharashtra topping India's FDI rankings with more than half of all foreign investment in a single quarter. Then look at what the alternative has produced in Keralam and Karnataka: Debt constraining future investment, reckless spending crowding out capital formation, corruption diverting money meant for welfare.

The question for a young Indian is not ideological. It is personal. Which system gives you a better chance? The one where your success depends on what you can do — your skill, your idea, your work ethic? Or, the one where it depends on whom you know and which party you are connected to? The one that builds the road to your village and the industrial park that might employ you? Or, the one that borrows to pay today's expenses and leaves tomorrow's infrastructure unfunded?

On reflection, this article is not such a departure from technology. The argument for good governance is the same I make for technology governance: Systems designed to work for the citizen, transparently and accountably, produce better outcomes than systems designed to serve those running them.

The democratic choice is always this: Which government actually builds something — and which one leaves the next generation poorer than it found them.

That is the signal. Everything else is noise.

The writer, former MP, former minister of state for Electronics & Information Technology and Skill Development, Government of India, is BJP Kerala state president and MLA for Nemom. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Silver economy

KERALAM'S PROPOSED senior citizens' legislation poses a fundamental governance challenge: How elderly-care rights can be guaranteed without creating unsustainable fiscal liabilities or displacing essential public expenditure ('On care for elderly, Keralam sets an example', *IE*, October 29). Implementing care-facility registration, caregiver certification, mandatory abuse reporting and protection units requires investment in personnel, healthcare infrastructure and regulatory oversight. International models offer lessons. Singapore's community-based care promotes independent living, while Japan's Long-Term Care Insurance system distributes costs through public funding, premiums and user contributions.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

THE BILL is a landmark and unusually broad attempt to make elder care a matter of enforceable rights, institutional accountability, and economic participation ('On care for elderly, Keralam sets an example', *IE*, October 29). Its strongest contribution is the combination of anti-abuse enforcement, regulated care markets, home-based ageing, digital safety, and autonomy protections. Its main test will be administrative: Whether Keralam can fund the protection units, register and monitor care providers effectively, train and retain caregivers. Other states can surely take a leaf out of Keralam's experience.

Bal Govind, Noida

Oil dependency

ENERGY SECURITY requires policy, not dependence on another country's signals ('On oil, the US keeps India guessing', *IE*, October 29). India must weigh diplomatic ties against the need for affordable oil. Diversifying suppliers, maintaining reserves and communicating decisions clearly would reduce vulnerability to external pressure. Yet autonomy should not excuse ignoring sanctions risks or energy transition goals. The sensible course is to assess each purchase on national interest, legal exposure and price, while reducing dependence on imported fossil fuels.

K P Muthukumar, Chennai

Jio & Let Jio, India's Crackling Telco Space

Telecom will provide the backbone for AI

The hugely successful IPO of Reliance Jio Platforms has made it the world's 5th-most-valued telecom company. So, with Bharti Airtel close on its heels, India now has two telcos in the global top 10 rankings. This speaks to the enormous transformation the country's telecom industry has undergone with considerable hand-holding by the government. The turnaround is timely because telecom provides the somewhat overlooked, yet vital, backbone for AI. Latest-generation telecom networks provide the high-speed low-latency infrastructure to move massive amounts of data between users and the cloud. Alongside, telcos build the institutional trust for enterprises to deploy AI services involving sensitive data. Both Reliance and Bharti are invested in satellite communication and data centres, widening their AI footprint. AI hyperscalers Alphabet and Meta have significant minority stakes in Jio.



The telecom industry globally is transitioning from providing 'dumb' grids to offer AI-enabled services, cloud solutions and network-derived intelligence. Network architecture is also changing from download to upload-intensive traffic as AI prompts climb. Smarter grids are relying on edge-computing, where storage and processing happens closer to where the data is created. Telecom companies are becoming AI-native digital enterprises. But this comes with its own set of challenges like siloed data and brittle software.

Convergence of AI and telecom creates a strong base for India's digital economy. The new business coming in works on both ends of the traditional squeeze Indian telcos have faced — low tariffs and high spectrum prices. They get to deploy AI to bring down operating costs as the consumer market saturates. AI agents now handle network optimisation, customer interaction, and security and fraud detection. AI use cases in telecom could unleash a global economic impact of up to $100 bn. Valuations of India's leading telecom firms would suggest that they will be seizing some of that opportunity.

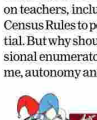
Depoliticise Teachers, A Good, Careful Start

West Bengal's decision to bar newly joining government schoolteachers from direct political activity and contesting elections may sound debilitating. But its premise — depoliticising aspects of life that have been notoriously politicised for decades — makes it a welcome step. In a state where education has been hardwired to party loyalty, insulating schools is a good start. The real test, however, will be whether the measure improves primary learning, rather than merely curbing political participation and the accompanying 'rewards' that such participation brings in jobs, postings, etc.

But let this 'depoliticisation' not turn into a spree to erect selective barriers. Barring, say, state doctors from contesting polls just because there is a shortage of physicians hardly behoves a state that had at least one distinguished politician in the form of chief minister Bidhan Chandra Roy. Separating professional responsibilities from partisan politics is admirable, and ambitious. Suvendu Adhikari's administration must ensure that this is a consistent institutional move, not a selective restriction. Its legal basis, too, needs scrutiny.



Depoliticisation must extend beyond teachers' personal choices. All governments routinely deploy them for 'administrative' duties that take them away from their primary duty: teaching. NEP 2020 calls for teachers to be spared work unrelated to education, subject to statutory exceptions. Yet, Census 2027 will draw on teachers, including from private schools, after GoI amended Census Rules to permit their deployment. Census work is essential. But why should the burden fall on educators, and not professional enumerators? Depoliticisation means giving teachers time, autonomy and institutional incentive to teach.



JUST IN JEST

If you need to be assured of India's supremacy, watch the right movies

Dhurandhar Doctrine Of National Security

India's strategic establishment has been overlooking an important instrument of national security: the mighty multiplex. Arunachal Pradesh minister Balo Raja has helpfully corrected this oversight. Responding to ITBP DG Shatrujeet Singh Kapoor's observations about continuing face-offs with Chinese troops, Raja suggested watching Aditya Dhar's Dhurandhar movies to appreciate India's formidable intelligence capabilities. Why consult military intelligence when one can consult the box office? The two Dhurandhars have achieved what decades of military modernisation, diplomatic negotiations and defence procurement have struggled to accomplish: establishing beyond reasonable cinematic doubt that India is no pushover. China should consider itself warned, preferably through a subtitled screening in the Forbidden City.

Like everything post-Nehruvian, there's, of course, historical precedent. Shekhar Kapur's 1987 Mr India demonstrated India's ability to defeat its Mogambos through invisibility, ingenuity and hirsute Anil Kapoor grit. The subsequent relative absence from India's security discourse of Pakistan or China, at least till the Kargil war more than a decade later, suggests the deterrent worked spectacularly. It wouldn't be too presumptuous of us to suggest that India's next defence budget should include a substantial allocation for popcorn.

AI synergies are real, but the proposed SpaceX-Tesla merger has red flags for shareholders

X Factor in Musk Cocktail



Krishnan Ranganathan



Easy with the mix

In mythology, devas and asuras churned the cosmic ocean for amrit, the nectar of immortality. First came halahal, a deadly poison, which Shiv swallowed. When the pot of amrit finally emerged, Vishnu, disguised as a beautiful woman Mohini, took charge of the pot and chose who would drink from it. Dazzled, the asuras never checked who was pouring.

Elon Musk has begun a churning of his own. Earlier this month, a Tesla Roadster flipped through the air on SpaceX thrusters. Five days later, the two firms formed independent committees to study a possible merger.

SpaceX is valued at $2.1 tn, Tesla at $1.5 tn. A decade ago, Musk called their ties 'tenuous'. Now he sees 'merit'. What changed? Two letters: AI.

Both firms are ravenous for chips and are co-building Terafab that could cost $119 bn. Musk says Tesla's AI chips will cost a tenth as much as Nvidia's. Tesla's robotaxis and robots would form the body of 'physical AI', with SpaceX's satellites and data centres as its brain. Markets cheered: SpaceX rose 8% and Tesla 3%, adding $200 bn to their combined market value.

The nectar is real. But so is the poison:

▶ **Price pain** Tesla earned $3.2 bn over the past 4 quarters. Add a 30% takeover premium, the highest RBC Capital Markets has modelled, and SpaceX would pay nearly $2 tn in its own shares — about $600 for every $1 of Tesla profit, almost doubling SpaceX's share count. The market is not pricing a merger but a rescue.

The rescuer is hungry too. In 9 mths, SpaceX generated $15 bn in operating cash, but spent $48 bn on capex, with another $35-40 bn planned for Q4. Tesla has trimmed this year's capex to $20 bn, but says spending on robotaxis, robots and AI computing will climb for years.



China accounted for 22% of Tesla's revenue last year. SpaceX won $6.5 bn in US missile-shield contracts in May. Beijing will baulk at a Pentagon supplier owning factories that collect Chinese drivers' data. Washington may object to the reverse

Even last quarter's $1.5 bn free cash flow came from delaying supplier payments. Strip out that working capital boost and Tesla burnt about $1 bn. Together, the two could spend $45 bn on capex this quarter, with Musk effectively on both sides of the till.

▶ **Synergies need no wedding** Terafab is a joint project. Tesla booked $430 mn in sales to xAI last year, mostly Megapack batteries, and $143 mn to SpaceX, mostly Cybertrucks. It has also invested $2 bn in xAI, a stake that became SpaceX shares. You don't need a wedding to share a kitchen.

Ronald Coase argued in 1937 that firms exist because markets can be costly to use. Here, the market works: every battery and truck sold between the firms has a price that Tesla's audit committee must defend as an arm's-length transaction. A merger erases that price — and a rare outside check on Musk's judgement.

Kautilya warned in the Arthashastra that spotting an official dipping into funds is as hard as telling when a fish underwater is drinking. Merged books spanning rockets, robots, chatbots and a social network would make scrutiny harder still.



Together, Tesla and SpaceX could spend $45 bn on capex this quarter, with Musk effectively on both sides of the till

▶ **Mohini holds the pot** Musk owns about a fifth of Tesla, but controls 82% of SpaceX's votes through super-voting shares. At current valuations, Barclays estimates a merger would give him 37% of the shares and 56% of the votes, before any premium.

The special committees are meant to protect outside shareholders. But who guards the guards? Their membership remains undisclosed, and apart from Musk and his brother Kimbal, venture capitalist and Tesla director Ira Ehrenpreis also sits on SpaceX's board.

Majority of all Tesla shares must approve the deal, including Musk's fifth, leaving him needing fewer than 2 in 5 of the remaining votes. Tesla, now incorporated in Texas, also restricts derivative suits to shareholders with at least 3% of its stock — a threshold only 4 investors, including Musk, appeared to meet at last count.

Musk's public endorsement had reportedly made 'a mess' of the process. It recalls SolarCity, his cousins' firm, which Tesla bought in 2016 in a process a Delaware judge called 'far from perfect', partly because Musk never properly stepped aside. And, in a takeover, his Tesla pay deal ($824 bn after dilution) waives many operational targets and pays out on the deal price or Tesla's pre-deal value, whichever is higher.

▶ **Two priests and a funeral?** China accounted for 22% of Tesla's revenue last year. Its Shanghai factory delivered more than half its cars. SpaceX, meanwhile, builds US military satellites and won $6.5 bn in missile-shield contracts in May.

Beijing will baulk at a Pentagon supplier owning factories that collect Chinese drivers' data. Washington may object to the reverse. Tesla may have to ring-fence its China business. If Democrats gain ground in next week's midterms, Washington may be less obliging. A deal needing both Beijing's and Washington's blessings is a political bet, not an industrial one.

If gains come without a merger and bear only costs with it, the deal is not about synergy. A vote by Tesla shareholders other than Musk — a 'majority of the minority' — and a scrapped pay clause might change that verdict.

Musk says he feels as if he is 'tap dancing through a minefield'. The mines are under shareholders' feet. The asuras lost out on the amrit because they let Mohini do the pouring. Tesla shareholders should insist on holding the pot.

The writer is former executive director, Nomura

Affordable, But Sustainable



Kewal Handa

A cheap medicine that isn't available doesn't help anyone. Neither does a well-stocked med that patients can't afford. Pricing policy must solve for both. GoI's move to cap trade margins on non-scheduled anti-cancer medicines at 30% has reopened an important debate.

India has one of the most comprehensive drug-pricing frameworks. The task now is to make it work harder. Drugs (Prices Control) Order (DPCO), 2013, provides multiple layers of oversight. Essential meds are subject to government-determined ceiling prices, while annual price increases for non-scheduled formulations are restricted. GoI also retains the power to intervene in exceptional circumstances when public interest demands it.

The scope of direct regulation has expanded considerably, from 74 bulk drugs under DPCO, 1995, to hundreds of essential medicines and over 1,000 specified formulations today. National List of Essential Medicines is reviewed periodically to reflect evolving treatment needs, disease burdens and clinical priorities.

Medicines outside direct price controls remain regulated through market monitoring and limits on annual price increases. A stable regulatory framework supports long-term investment in manufacturing, quality and research, while allowing government intervention where affordability concerns arise.

India's pharma success has been driven as much by competition as by regulation. Across numerous therapeutic categories, multiple manufacturers offer medicines containing the same molecule. Competition encourages manufacturing efficiency, price differentiation and wider availability. It has helped India build a globally competitive generic medicines industry. But pharma markets are not uniform. A widely prescribed generic with several competing brands operates differently from a specialised therapy with limited alternatives.

Applying identical regulatory measures across these categories may not produce identical outcomes. Where competition delivers affordable prices and reliable supply, it should be preserved. Where specific products or distribution practices create unreasonable prices, targeted intervention is justified. Competition and regulation should complement each other rather than be treated as competing approaches.

The current debate also requires clarity on how medicine prices are structured. Manufacturer's selling price, retailer's purchase price and printed MRP are different. The gap between these includes margins earned across the distribution chain and shouldn't automatically be treated as manufacturer's profit. The focus should be on identifying where excessive margins arise and how they affect patients.

Hospitals also incur costs in storing and handling medicines, including cold storage, staff training and ensuring safe administration. Medicine revenues can also help support subsidised treatment for government-referred and economically weaker patients. A uniform margin cap, without considering these costs, could affect hospitals' ability to provide affordable care, particularly as they expand into tier-2 and -3 cities.

The solution is in identifying excessive margins at specific points in the supply chain, while accounting for genuine hospital operating costs. Greater pricing transparency and targeted intervention under the existing regulatory framework can protect patients without affecting affordable treatment or healthcare expansion. Greater transparency across the supply chain would help regulators identify excessive margins and address them where they arise.

The existing framework has shown that focused intervention can address affordability concerns. In Feb 2019, National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) capped trade margins at 30% for 42 non-scheduled anti-cancer medicines, resulting in reductions in MRPs across several brands. The experience provides a useful precedent. However, lower printed prices should not be the only measure of regulatory success.

Did patients pay less? Did medicine availability improve? Were treatment volumes sustained? Did the intervention affect new launches or supply over time? These outcomes should inform future decisions, particularly when considering whether similar measures should extend to other therapeutic categories. Evidence-based intervention is not weaker regulation, but more effective.

India's pharma industry is entering a phase where competitiveness will depend increasingly on complex generics, biologics, advanced manufacturing and innovative therapies. These capabilities require sustained investment in research, technology, quality systems and regulatory compliance.

A predictable pricing environment supports such investments. This does not mean protecting excessive profits. It means ensuring that affordability measures don't inadvertently weaken manufacturing capabilities and reliable supply that patients depend upon.

India must balance medicine affordability with a sustainable pharma industry by strengthening its existing regulatory framework through greater transparency and targeted, evidence-based intervention. Priority should be ensuring patients have access to quality medicines at reasonable prices, while supporting continued investment and innovation.

The writer is former MD, Pfizer India

Let Evidence Set the Price



C K Mishra

GoI's decision to regulate trade margins on non-scheduled anti-cancer medicines is welcome. It has a responsibility to ensure that healthcare is both accessible and affordable, while creating an environment in which quality care can be delivered sustainably. But a good first step should not be mistaken for a complete solution.

The present debate raises 3 questions:

- Is the exercise comprehensive enough?
- Is it based on adequate evidence?
- Can it be implemented effectively across a healthcare market as large and varied as India's?

GoI has informed Supreme Court that trade margins on specified anti-cancer medicines will be capped at 30%. An expert committee will identify the medicines to be covered, after which NPPA will examine its recommendations. The top court has also asked why similar scrutiny should not extend to other medicines and medical products.

That's a legitimate question. If excessive trade margins are the problem, India should examine the issue comprehensively rather than regulate one category at a time. A fragmented approach can shift distortions from one part of the market to another, create uncertainty and make enforcement needlessly difficult.

Price controls should be there wherever they are legitimate. When credible evidence establishes that margins are unreasonable and patients are carrying an unfair burden, intervention is justified. But evidence must come before the prescription.

The same medicine or medical product can cost different amounts to administer at hospitals in the same city. Differences may reflect the patient's condition, treatment complexity, clinical expertise, infrastructure, infection control, monitoring and emergency support. A routine outpatient dose is not equivalent to a complex therapy requiring specialist supervision.

Procurement price of a med or device tells only part of the story. A robust framework must distinguish trade margins from legitimate costs of storing, handling and safely administering products, while accounting for the infrastructure needed to maintain quality and patient safety. It must also weigh the impact on availability and access.

Medicine Price Cap



Need just the right dose

Without this distinction, curbs on excessive margins could inadvertently compromise care.

GoI's experience supports this approach. The 2019 trade-margin rationalisation pilot covered 42 selected non-scheduled anti-cancer medicines. Since then, consultations have raised concerns about production costs, viability of smaller manufacturers, and cost of maintaining supplies in remote areas.

These concerns underline the need to evaluate the earlier intervention before widening its scope. Did price cuts reach patients consistently? Were medicines readily available? Did outcomes vary across metros, smaller cities and remote areas? Could smaller manufacturers and distributors remain viable?

The answers should shape future policy. India should examine trade margins across medicines, medical devices and consumables using a common, scientifically credible method — not a one-size-fits-all formula — to identify where and how intervention is needed. Meaningful stakeholder consultation must form part of this exercise to help design a framework that is both effective and workable. It can ensure that unjustified margins are addressed while recognising legitimate differences in clinical settings, infrastructure, safety requirements, geographical reach and the cost of delivering quality care.

The healthcare industry should be a constructive partner in this process. Hospitals can provide evidence on the clinical and operational costs of administering treatments in different settings. Manufacturers and distributors can contribute data on production, storage, logistics and supply. Clinicians can help assess implications for treatment decisions, availability and patient safety.

The success of any policy will ultimately depend on whether it can be implemented consistently across India's diverse healthcare market. Success cannot be measured merely by the number of products brought under control. The more meaningful test is whether patients pay fairer prices without experiencing shortages, reduced access or any compromise in the quality and safety of care.

Blanket controls that don't recognise legitimate differences in cost and complexity could discourage precisely this investment. They could also make it harder for hospitals to maintain quality and safety standards or adopt medical advances that can improve patient outcomes.

India should regulate wherever credible evidence establishes a legitimate need. The larger argument is for a more transparent, accountable and evidence-based approach that protects patients and addresses unjustified pricing, without compromising access, quality, innovation or the long-term sustainability of healthcare delivery. Good regulation must protect the patient today without weakening India's healthcare capacity for tomorrow.

The writer is former health secretary, GoI

THE SPEAKING TREE

AI and Wisdom

REUBEN RAY

In cricket, football or hockey, merit and performance determine a player's place in the team. A player who repeatedly fails to perform may be replaced. People accept this competition because the objective is collective excellence and the pursuit of victory.

But can we apply the same replacement principle to our lives? In government, business, engineering, manufacturing and construction, AI increasingly performs tasks once carried out by human beings. It can process enormous amounts of information, recognise patterns and assist in decision-making with remarkable speed. Yet, human worth can't be measured only by efficiency.

The rapid growth of AI has raised a profound question: if machines become increasingly capable, will they eventually replace human beings? Some tech leaders and researchers have warned about the risks of advanced AI, while others emphasise its potential to transform human life. The deeper question: what we must never surrender to machines.

Human beings are endowed with something beyond computation: consciousness, compassion, intuition, imagination, moral responsibility and the capacity to love. A robot may reproduce a mother's actions, but it cannot recreate the sacred bond between a mother and her newborn.

On the playing field, a player may be replaced when performance falls. In life, however, a human being can't be reduced to a performance statistic. We must think more deeply, because intelligence should always lead to wisdom.

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Waiting for Winter

Waiting for winter may actually be even more pleasurable than winter itself. The first hints arrive discreetly. You notice one day the air conditioner's stopped, and then the ceiling fan's turned down low. The morning air acquires a faint nip, and the bedsheet, till now a polite accessory, begins to justify its existence. It's time to air those sweaters wearing which will finally earn their keep.

By anticipating, and not just contemplating sweaters, quilts, afternoon sunshine, and *not* sweating. Tea becomes more desirable, fried snacks acquire legitimacy, and the idea of sitting outdoors ceases to resemble a punishment posting.



Blankets emerge from cupboards smelling faintly of mothballs and wisdom. Woollens are inspected, often with the discovery that their owners have expanded since last February. The prospect of sleeping under a heavy quilt becomes a private ambition, more compelling than professional advancement.

Best of all, winter's approach lends ordinary days a sense of impending reward. Each slightly cooler evening is treated as a diplomatic breakthrough. The season may eventually disappoint with spiking AQI levels. But anticipation, that most economical of pleasures, charges nothing and delivers.

Chat Room

Mandate Mirrors Messy Milieu

Apropos 'It's the Same Old Testament' by Kingshuk Chatterjee (Oct 29), with no possibility of a decisive mandate, Israel is heading for a hung Knesset. Unless Bibi manoeuvres to secure support from smaller parties, government formation faces a huge conundrum. The Eisenkot-led coalition lacks the gravitas to mobilise anti-Bibi support to gain power. Though frustration against Bibi is scaling new heights after the egregious Hamas attack in Oct 2023, he can garner support to form government by exploiting anti-Palestinian sentiments. The surprising growth of Arab parties causes concern to the entire rightist forces but their outreach remains limited as of now. The real challenge for the new government lies in alleviating economic distress caused by prolonged war, apart from effectively tackling growing militant attacks.

Rajarao Kumar
Bengaluru

Opinion

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2026



DECODING INDO-US DEAL

Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal

On the contrary, India will stand at a very strong comparative advantage. And trade is about comparative advantage. Absolute numbers are not as important as your competitiveness to those you compete with

The layoff economy

India needs employers and govt to share responsibility for reskilling the workforce

THE PINK SLIP has become a feature of employment in Big Tech. Microsoft's latest voluntary buyout offer and Amazon's fresh job cuts underline how even the world's most profitable technology companies are reconsidering their workforces. This is hardly an isolated episode. Since 2022, Amazon, Microsoft, Google, Meta, and smaller technology companies have announced repeated rounds of retrenchment. Initially, these were explained as corrections to excessive hiring during the pandemic, when digital demand surged and companies assumed the boom would endure. That explanation has steadily lost its force. The layoffs have continued despite healthier balance sheets, rising share prices, and investment commitments. What is unfolding is not simply a cyclical adjustment but a structural change in how technology businesses expect to grow.

Several forces are at work. Investors have rewarded tighter cost controls and higher margins, while managements have sought to remove layers of bureaucracy and abandon projects offering uncertain returns. Artificial intelligence (AI) has accelerated the rethink. Companies are spending heavily on chips, data centres, and computing capacity, even as they question the need for large teams performing routine coding, customer support, testing, and administrative functions. Yet it would be simplistic to blame every lost job on AI. Some cuts reflect restructuring, changing customer demand, or earlier management mistakes. The distinction matters because technological progress should not become a convenient excuse for indiscriminate downsizing. There is a contradiction: businesses that once competed aggressively for talent now treat employment as a variable to be adjusted rapidly. Repeated layoffs damage morale, weaken institutional memory, and erode the trust on which innovation depends.

For India, the implications are serious. The country's information technology services industry has long linked revenue expansion with recruitment, offering millions of graduates a route into the formal workforce. That model is under pressure as global clients demand productivity improvements and seek to retain more of the savings from automation. Global capability centres, startups, and technology operations elsewhere face similar pressures. The greatest risk may be to fresh graduates: entry-level assignments in programming, testing, and support have traditionally served as training grounds, but many of those tasks are susceptible to automation. Companies cannot merely announce ambitious AI strategies while leaving workers to finance their own transition. Large employers should commit measurable budgets to continuous skilling, paid learning time, internal mobility, and credible certification. Industry associations can create shared programmes for smaller firms, while universities must update curricula with employers rather than teach yesterday's tools.

Government has a responsibility, though not to preserve every existing job. India's skilling architecture needs focus on emerging roles, from cybersecurity and data engineering to industrial automation and AI oversight. Public funding should reward verified placements and wage gains, not simply enrolment or certificates issued. Apprenticeships, tax incentives for employer-funded retraining, and portable learning accounts could help workers move between occupations. States should work with industry clusters to identify demand before commissioning courses, while stronger unemployment assistance and placement services would make transitions less punishing. None of this absolves corporate boards of accountability. Workforce plans should be examined as seriously as capital expenditure, with transparent disclosures on job creation, displacement, and retraining outcomes. The industry cannot celebrate record investment in intelligent machines while treating human capabilities as disposable. Innovation will alter employment; whether it produces wider prosperity or deeper insecurity depends on choices companies and governments make now, especially for a young and rapidly expanding workforce.

Australia pops the data centre bubble

NOT IN MY backyard or in my retirement fund. Australia is giving us a chilling preview of how fast the trillion-dollar AI data centre buildout can unwind.

Public announcements of new projects have gone into overdrive this year. Builders are planning to add around 23 gigawatts of compute capacity, up from just 6 gigawatts in February, according to the Commonwealth Bank of Australia. The country is seen as a prime destination: It's priced competitively—rental rates in Sydney are half of those in Singapore—and the biggest cities have more space, unlike crowded urban centres like Hong Kong and Tokyo.

But odds are that most of these won't materialise. Local communities are increasingly vocal, and successful pushback by one emboldens campaigning by others.

Projects have been halted at an alarming speed. In late September, Goodman Group, Australia's biggest property developer, scrapped a plan to build a 90-megawatt facility in a Sydney suburb. In early October, Firmus Grid's 288-megawatt Bell Bay site in Tasmania was hit with appeals just weeks after receiving local council approval.

Then the most damaging news came last week. Data centre manager Nextdc slashed its earnings forecast and placed development plans for one of its major facilities in Melbourne on hold. Electricity provider Jemena had suspended work to deliver more power to the M3 facility, which already has 60 megawatts in operation, because of opposition to the installation of 22-m-high power poles.



SHULI REN

Bloomberg

Only about one-third of planned developments in the pipeline can be delivered by 2030, according to Goldman Sachs Group, which tracks 7.5 gigawatts of projects that are mostly located in Sydney and Melbourne. Nextdc's M4 facility, also in Melbourne, for instance, has only a 13% chance of success, according to Goldman. The 150-megawatt campus, approved by the state government at the start of 2026, is facing fierce backlash from residents.

Project withdrawals have occurred at all stages, including more advanced ones when data centre connection requests have been completed. The median probability of a development progressing to completion is only 28%, according to the CBA, using data from the Australian Energy Market Operator. In some ways, these builders resemble biotech firms, risking vast sums to develop one product, only to have nothing to show for it in the end.

From data centre hotspot to unexpected failures, a drastic shift in Australia's business conditions perhaps explains why capital markets have reacted so violently. Firmus had to pull a much-anticipated IPO in October despite being a venture capital's darling just two months earlier. Similarly, Nextdc's A$1.1 billion ($773 million) convertible bond, issued in September at a meagre 1.75% coupon, is now yielding a whopping 12%. Nextdc's shares have tumbled more than 40% since the hybrid's issue.

UniSuper, one of Australia's top pension funds, decided not to take part in Firmus' IPO and is steering clear of direct investments in data centres. In hindsight, it's a good call. As we've seen with Nextdc, using valuation metrics more suited to fast-growing firms, such as comparing a company's enterprise value to its revenue, or EBITDA, exposes investors to sudden event-driven shocks.

It's clear by now that having permits alone doesn't necessarily give developers the social licence to operate. We need to look at each project separately—including its location, timing, financing, and local political dynamics—before saying with confidence that it will be a cash-generating asset. Are investors prepared to get their hands dirty?

It's easy for these unicorns to lose their shirt over opposition from a tightly knit community. Their business model is not only capital intensive, but precarious.

PLATFORM OVERHAUL

SEBI SHOULD SEQUENCE PROPOSED REFORMS TO REWRITE IPO RULES FOR THE SEGMENT

SME sector coming of age

THE SME PLATFORM has grown up. That, at least, is the premise of Sebi's consultation paper of October 14 which proposes a near-complete rewrite of the rules for initial public offerings (IPOs) by small and medium enterprises. Most of the proposals point in the right direction. The difficulty lies in making all of them at once.

SANDEEP PAREKH

Managing Partner, Finsec Law Advisors



As of July 31, 1,496 companies had listed on the SME Platform, raising ₹40,222 crore, with a combined market capitalisation of about ₹4.7 lakh crore. Of these, 365 have since migrated to the Main Board. A window for small businesses has become a market in its own right. Its rules should reflect that scale, and the differences in size and maturity among the companies listed on it.

The most overdue proposal concerns eligibility, which today turns on post-issue paid-up capital. Sebi proposes to use post-issue market capitalisation at the offer price instead. An issuer valued at up to ₹1,000 crore would have to list on the SME Platform. Issuers valued above ₹1,000 crore and up to ₹4,000 crore would have the option to do so, if their restated consolidated financial statements follow Ind AS (Indian Accounting Standards).

Paid-up capital measures the face value of shares, not the size of a business, so the principle is sound. The thresholds are another matter. In the last three financial years, at least 40 Main Board IPOs were valued at ₹1,000 crore or less, while the largest SME IPO was valued at ₹748 crore. An issuer that qualifies for the Main Board should not be compelled onto the SME Platform merely because of its size. A Main Board issuer whose valuation falls to ₹1,000 crore or below by the red herring prospectus stage would have to re-file under the SME framework. Conversely, letting an issuer worth five times the largest SME IPO list as an SME invites regulatory arbitrage. And since the offer price is set by the issuer and its bankers, the threshold is, to a degree, one the issuer chooses.

The profitability test would be tightened. Today, an issuer must have an operating profit (EBITDA) of at least ₹1 crore in at least two of the preceding three financial years. Sebi would replace this with an average operating profit of not less than ₹3 crore per year over the same period. The higher figure is welcome; the averaging is not. Unlike the Main Board test in Regulation 6(1)(b) of the Issue of Capital and Disclosure Requirements (ICDR) Regulations, it does not require a profit in each year. One strong year could carry two weak ones.

> **Issuers have been paying for insurance that almost never paid out. A minimum subscription test, backed by a refund, is a more honest signal of demand**

An issuer that fails this test would not be shut out. It could still list through book building if at least 75% of the net offer is allotted to qualified institutional buyers (QIBs). Retail investors would be capped at 10%, and the subscription refunded if the QIB portion is not met. As under Regulation 6(2) for the Main Board, the premise is that institutional judgement can stand in for a profit record. That holds only where institutional demand is deep and discerning, which Sebi should test in the SME segment rather than assume.

Today, an offer for sale in an SME IPO cannot exceed 20% of the issue size, and a selling shareholder cannot offer more than 50% of its pre-issue shareholding. Sebi now proposes a one-year holding period for shares offered for sale, as on the Main Board, while exempting QIB selling shareholders from both limits. The exemption would not extend to the alternative route, sensibly so. A route built on institutional validation should not double as an institutional exit. Otherwise, a cleaner exit could encourage pre-IPO investment by QIBs.

The underwriting proposal is the easiest to support. Currently, every SME IPO must be 100% underwritten, with the lead manager underwriting at least 15% of the issue on its own account. Sebi proposes to remove both requirements and adopt the Main Board underwriting framework, alongside a minimum subscription requirement of 90% of the offer, failing which application money is refunded.

Underwriting fees accounted for nearly half of the total issue expenses of SME IPOs on NSE in 2024-25. Yet the working group found that underwriters had to take up shares in only four SME IPOs in three years. Issuers have been paying for insurance that almost never paid out. A minimum subscription test, backed by a refund, is a more honest signal of demand.

The retail proposals call for the most caution. In March 2025, Sebi raised the minimum application to above ₹2 lakh to limit participation by smaller investors in a high-risk segment. Nineteen months later, it proposes to bring this back to ₹1 lakh, in four lots of ₹25,000. The trading lot would fall to one share, compulsory market making would go, and the lock-in on non-promoter pre-issue capital would be halved to six months. The IPO gate would stay at ₹1 lakh. On listing day, it would be the price of a single share.

The proposals do two different things. Replacing paid-up capital with market capitalisation, raising the profitability bar, and rationalising underwriting improve the structure of the market. Widening retail entry, easing exits for pre-IPO investors, and removing market makers change who bears the risk in it. Each is defensible on its own. Introduced together, they could alter the risk profile of the segment far more than any one reform suggests, and leave no way of telling afterwards which change caused what.

Sebi should sequence the reforms. The structural changes can go first. The retail relaxations should follow once the new eligibility filter has operated for at least a year and Sebi has seen the quality of the issuers it lets through. The platform may have grown up. Its newest investors should not be the ones to find out whether its issuers have.

Co-authored with ***Purva Mandale****, Associate, Finsec Law Advisors*

The thorium test for energy security

VP SINGH, PRADEEP S MEHTA, & SOHOM BANERJEE

Singh is a BJP leader and former Governor of Punjab; Mehta is Secretary General of CUTS International; and Banerjee is associated with the Jaipuria Institute of Management

Realising its advantages will require sustained investment in technologies and industrial systems that turn mineral wealth into affordable power

A PART OF India's nergy future may lie beneath its own coastal sands. The Atomic Minerals Directorate for Exploration and Research has identified 1.18 million tonnes of thorium oxide within 13.15 million tonnes of monazite. A commercially viable domestic thorium fuel cycle could diversify India's fuel options, reduce exposure to overseas supplies, and support reliable low-carbon electricity. Realising such benefits requires sustained investment in the technologies and industrial systems that turn mineral wealth into affordable power.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) expects India's electricity demand to expand by 6.4% annually during 2026-2030, adding over 570 terawatt-hours (TWh) to annual consumption. India's 24 nuclear reactors account for 8.78 gigawatts (Gw) and around 3.1% of electricity generation. Their commercial output reached 55.19 TWh in 2025-26, at a 79% plant load factor. The ambition of reaching 100 Gwby 2047 encompasses several nuclear technologies. Thorium cannot be assumed to supply that expansion.

The constraint begins with physics. Thorium-232 is fertile, and it must be converted into fissile uranium-233 before it can sustain the relevant chain reaction. Starting the process requires another fissile material; expanding it requires adequate fuel inventories and recycling facilities. India's three-stage programme addresses these dependencies through uranium-fuelled heavy-water reactors, plutonium-fuelled fast breeders, and, eventually, systems using uranium-233 bred from thorium.

The 500-megawatt (Mw) Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor's first criticality on April 6 advanced this strategy. A parliamentary reply in July indicated full commissioning was expected by March 2027. Establishing a sustained chain reaction precedes the harder test of reliable commercial operation and fuel production. India has also recovered uranium-233 and designed the 300-Mw Advanced Heavy Water Reactor, but neither achievement establishes the economics of a thorium fleet.

China offers another lesson. Its experimental molten-salt reactor demonstrated thorium-to-uranium conversion, announced in November 2025, at a thermal rating of 2 Mw. India's government acknowledged in March that thorium molten-salt technology remained immature and its economics required demonstration.

An established uranium industry has reduced incentives to change fuel systems. Thorium processing involves chemically resistant fuels, while recycled fuel can require remote manufacture. Molten-salt systems add demanding questions about corrosion, materials, and salt chemistry. Domestic mineral abundance acquires strategic value only when these capabilities operate together at an acceptable cost.

> **Its contribution to energy security will ultimately be established through electricity delivered reliably at a price consumers can afford**

Kaiga's two new 700-Mw units carried a reported ₹21,000 crore cost, under revision, equivalent to approximately ₹15 crore per Mw. The Nuclear Power Corporation of India's average tariff, net of levies, was ₹3.90 per kilowatt-hour in 2025-26. These conventional nuclear benchmarks offer context, rather than a thorium price. The OECD Nuclear Energy Agency's 2015 assessment placed the entire fuel cycle at roughly 15-20% of nuclear electricity costs. Cheap feedstock has limited scope to compensate for costly finance, construction delays, or poor availability.

Consider the scale involved. A hypothetical 10-Gw fleet operating at an 85% capacity factor would generate 74.5 TWh annually, approximately 13% of the additional annual demand projected by the IEA for 2030. This establishes the potential contribution without suggesting that India can deploy such thorium capacity within that period.

India should therefore establish a funded demonstration programme with independently reviewed milestones. The department of atomic energy should publish a coordinated plan linking fuel qualification, reactor commissioning, recycling readiness, and waste treatment. Subsequent funding should depend on demonstrated availability, material recovery, and operating costs. Publishing non-sensitive results would make progress assessable and strengthen investor confidence. Successful demonstrations would justify larger commitments and create opportunities for domestic manufacturers.

A parallel route deserves testing in existing heavy-water reactor platforms. Advanced Nuclear Energy for Enriched Life combines thorium with enriched uranium; Canadian Nuclear Laboratories announced demonstration-bundle manufacturing in April. NTPC and Clean Core are exploring Indian deployment, subject to approvals. Bounded irradiation trials and regulatory review should establish performance before procurement. Enrichment costs and fuel-supply guarantees must enter the assessment, since imported enriched uranium would preserve an external dependency.

The industrial groundwork needs equal attention. Tarapur's Integrated Nuclear Recycle Plant and Kalpakkam's Fast Reactor Fuel Cycle Facility were under construction in July, supporting the uranium-plutonium programme. Their progress strengthens India's wider recycling capabilities; industrial thorium recycling will require additional development and qualification. Reactor and fuel-cycle schedules should advance together, while testing facilities, Indian universities, and manufacturers build expertise in specialised components and remote handling.

Public research funding should cover experiments whose benefits extend across the industry. Commercial plants should face independent cost appraisal, construction contingencies, and explicit allocation of delay risks. Tariffs must account for processing, waste, and decommissioning. Comparisons with renewable alternatives should include the storage and grid investments needed to deliver equivalent reliability.

Industrial customers could eventually anchor demand through long-term purchase agreements once operating performance supports credible pricing. Such contracts should reward availability and predictable delivery. The government must also preserve independent regulatory scrutiny as investment expands, so that commercial urgency does not compromise the safety standards on which public confidence and financing depend.

Siting decisions should address cooling, grid access, emergency preparedness, and local acceptance early. Environmental disclosure and financed waste arrangements can reduce disputes. Diversified uranium supplies, appropriate fuel inventories, and completion of proven nuclear projects should accompany investment in grids, storage, and efficiency. Thorium deserves sustained investment governed by measurable results. Its contribution to energy security will ultimately be established through electricity delivered reliably at a price consumers can afford.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Capital seeks credibility

Apropos of "Capital gains" (*FE*, October 29), the landmark Jio IPO, alongside other major offerings, shows that access to capital is never a bottleneck for businesses with strong fundamentals and reasonable valuations. The enthusiastic participation of FPIs highlights the depth and maturity of India's primary market. FPI net selling in the secondary market shouldn't be misinterpreted as a loss of confidence in India's growth story. Rebalancing portfolios towards high-quality, scarcity-value primary listings is a rational investment approach. Viewing successful IPOs as a threat that drains liquidity from secondary bourses misses the broader picture. What is dampening secondary market performance is subdued corporate earnings growth, further constrained by macroeconomic pressures. To reignite momentum there, India Inc needs stronger, consistent profitability rather than fewer primary issuances.

—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

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Making sense of street signs

FPI selling is driven mostly by global factors

The performance of the Indian stock markets is being intensely debated. The benchmark Nifty 50 is down over 12 per cent since the beginning of the year. Expectedly, various aspects of the issue were extensively discussed at the annual Business Standard BFSI Insight Summit, which ended on Wednesday. One of the biggest reasons for the Indian stock markets' underperformance is relentless selling by foreign portfolio investors (FPIs). At a net level, they sold stocks worth over ₹2.9 trillion so far this year. There are several reasons why FPIs are selling Indian stocks, the biggest being the artificial-intelligence (AI) trade. Some analysts have also pointed out the difficulties that FPIs tend to face in the Indian markets.

In this regard, Securities and Exchange Board of India Chairman Tuhin Kanta Pandey noted at the summit that the regulator was engaged with FPIs from across the world. There are some issues, and the regulator is working on them. The time taken for registering an FPI, for instance, has declined significantly. In the broader context, Mr Pandey also highlighted that market capitalisation as a share of gross domestic product had increased from about 69 per cent in 2015-16 to about 130 per cent this financial year. Clearly, the increase has been driven mostly by new listings and not necessarily by valuation expansion. In fact, valuations have been significantly compressed in recent periods.

As was pointed out at the summit, in terms of the number of initial public offerings (IPOs), India was at the top of the charts globally in 2025 and ranked number three in terms of value. Significant activity is being witnessed this year as well. Notably, Jio Platforms, which had the biggest IPO, was listed this week at a significant premium and became the second-most valuable company on the Indian exchanges. The Jio IPO and its listing highlight another layer in the ongoing market debate. Despite the broader trend, demand for the IPO, including from FPIs, and its successful listing clearly show that the Indian market is capable of providing risk capital at scale to strong businesses. This has been made possible partly by sustained increases in participation by domestic investors, including through mutual funds. Domestic institutional investors have bought stocks worth over ₹7 trillion since the beginning of this year.

At a fundamental level, as analysts have rightly pointed out, not much has changed for the Indian markets. The economy is growing strongly and there isn't much to complain about the incoming corporate results for the second quarter this financial year. Thus, FPI selling is being driven largely by global factors. Besides the increased investment in AI-related companies, risk aversion owing to geopolitical uncertainties has also affected foreign flows. Further, rising bond yields in developed countries and currency-market volatility are complicating investment calculations for global fund managers. Nonetheless, there are issues that India must debate and address. FPIs compare post-tax dollar returns in various jurisdictions, which tends to adversely affect India allocation. Thus, there is a need to align India's tax policy with global best practices. While the stock markets have gained depth, India still needs foreign capital to supplement domestic savings. Another aspect worth debating is how different instruments are taxed for resident Indian investors. It is being argued that lower taxes on equity are pushing households to the stock markets. There are various ways of bringing parity.

Building empowered cities

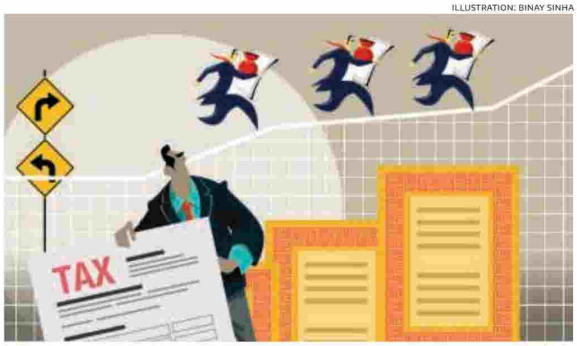
Strong local governments are essential for sustained growth

India's ability to sustain rapid economic growth will increasingly depend on how well its cities are governed. With the urban population projected to rise from around 500 million currently to 850 million by 2050, the pressure on housing, transport and basic services will intensify. In this context, NITI Aayog member Rajiv Gauba recently argued for a fundamental change in how cities were planned, governed and financed. His observation that cities cannot be governed from state capitals underlines a fundamental weakness in India's urban governance framework — the lack of autonomy for urban local bodies (ULBs). A recent NITI Aayog report titled "Moving Towards Effective City Government" highlighted weak devolution, fragmented responsibilities, and inadequate municipal finances. The 74th constitutional amendment, which intended to strengthen local self-government, remains incomplete. Although the Constitution lists 18 functions for possible devolution, responsibilities such as urban planning, water supply, transport and sanitation are often divided among municipal corporations, state departments, and specialised agencies.

Political leadership is equally constrained. Mayors often lack executive and financial powers, while municipal commissioners exercise substantial administrative authority and may be transferred frequently. Besides, as a Comptroller and Auditor General study published in 2024 has found, municipal elections were delayed in more than 61 per cent of ULBs across 17 audited states. Short mayoral tenures and delayed elections weaken continuity, making long-term planning difficult. This is a serious drawback and must be addressed. India has increased investment in urban infrastructure in recent years. The budgetary outlay for the urban sector has grown substantially over the years. The ₹1 trillion Urban Challenge Fund, announced in the 2025-26 Union Budget, and allocations of ₹5,000 crore each for seven city-economic regions over five years seek to strengthen cities as growth hubs. However, infrastructure spending alone cannot deliver better outcomes without capable local institutions. Municipalities need trained personnel, effective coordination among service agencies, and greater authority to respond to local needs.

Further, weak finances restrict municipal autonomy. A Reserve Bank of India report (2024), covering 232 municipal corporations, found that their own revenues remained inadequate to meet routine expenditure. Improving property-tax assessments, expanding digital land records, and strengthening user-charge collection can help cities mobilise their own resources. State Finance Commissions must be constituted on time, and their recommendations implemented transparently. The 16th Finance Commission's increased grants to urban local governments provide an opportunity, but transfers alone cannot improve service delivery unless municipalities have the capacity to use funds effectively. Reforms can begin with million-plus cities before being extended to smaller urban centres. These cities have established institutions and a greater capacity to implement changes, making them suitable starting points. India's urban challenge is not simply to build more infrastructure but to ensure that cities can manage it effectively. States must devolve responsibilities along with adequate funds, staff and decision-making powers. Empowered and accountable municipal governments are essential in improving living standards, attracting investment, and ensuring that urbanisation supports sustained economic growth.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Revisiting taxation of capital incomes

Tax reform must be guided by durable, long-term economic objectives rather than panic-driven responses to temporary external shocks



R KAVITA RAO

There is a lot of chatter on the need to revisit taxing capital incomes in India, especially incomes from trading in equity. The present regime includes two components — a securities transactions tax (STT) and a capital gains tax. The former is applicable to both purchasing and selling equity while the latter applies to gains from trade in equity, with gains being recognised as long-term if held for more than 12 months. The immediate driver for the conversation stems from a sharp increase in the withdrawal of foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) from equity markets in India. This process has two separate but related consequences — a dramatic drop in returns on investment in equities and a consistent depreciation of the currency. What is the context for this review of policy and how can one think about such a demand for review?

What about the macrofundamentals

The Indian economy is expected to grow at over 7 per cent this financial year. This assessment of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) as well as the International Monetary Fund is expected to have factored in the impact of the myriad disturbances to the world economy — the impact of El Nino, stress in the oil markets as well as uncertainties in the tariff outlook. Inflationary pressures have induced a rate increase in the latest monetary policy review. The current-account deficit (CAD) has remained less than 2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in the past few years, and less than 1 per cent in three of these years. This moderation, alongside a 7 per cent real growth rate, suggests some structural changes supporting a lower net dependence on global resources. A sharp rise in services exports is one such change in recent times. An increase in the India basket of crude oil, alongside the global increase in prices of the fuel, does add an element of concern by the worsened CAD from below 1 per cent to above 1 per cent in 2026.

Corporate revenues and profits overall appear to show good performance. Analysis by *Moneycontrol* suggests that Nifty 50 companies report an average growth rate of revenue of 18 per cent in both the first and second quarters. Net profits too grew by 18 per cent in the first quarter and about 15 per cent in the second quarter. Clearly, equity markets appear to be disconnected with the performance of companies in recent quarters.

Context for tax reforms being sought

It has been argued that global factors are playing a considerable role in influencing flows of FPIs into and out of India. An increase in interest rates in the United States (US), with a corresponding increase in yields of US treasuries, would raise the risk-free rate of return for global investors, inducing a move of resources back to the US. This momentum is further supported by expanding investment in artificial intelligence (AI), a sector primarily led by the US, followed by China, South Korea, and Taiwan. While the Indian ecosystem is gearing up to expand its interests in the AI space, given the differential interests of the domestic economy, it cannot be at a scale and pace that the global leaders have established. There are, therefore, emerging and sustained pressures for capital to leave the Indian economy in the short run. This trend, however, creates pressure on the currency to depreciate, which lowers returns on equity markets and induces a further round of exits. It is being argued that in this context, dollar returns on investment in India are more adversely affected than the returns in rupee terms. Hence the call to revisit taxing capital gains.

How to think about responding to shocks

Lower taxes are always attractive for all taxpayers. However, any change in the tax structure should be predicated on clear outcomes. The country has experimented with a reduction in corporate tax rates in the last decade as a tool to stimulate private investment. But the evidence of success of such an intervention has been limited. The argument for tax-based corrections to broader policy challenges should be reviewed carefully.

For Indian capital markets, two arguments can be credibly made: One, a review of the need for both capital gains tax and STT at the same time, and, second, the need for and commitment to stability in policy over time.

In the context of capital gains, the regime in India withdrew taxing capital gains and replaced it with STT to increase transparency in the context of then prevailing double tax avoidance agreements and the loopholes for avoiding the taxation of capital gains. In more recent times, long-term capital gains tax has returned. However, STT stays. One possible reform to consider could be withdrawing STT on equity transactions. STT has often been criticised as being an irritant, since it is a transactions tax that does not apply to incomes or to values added.

Turning to a broader question, do FPI flows help render long-term stability to the domestic economy? Foreign capital inflows are important for bridging the CAD, and providing a tool for deepening capital markets. When FPIs liquidate holdings during global market shifts, the resulting currency strain and market drops often generate intense political pressure for state support. This raises a fundamental policy question: Does over-reliance on short-term foreign portfolio flows enhance economic resilience, or does it risk orienting national economic policymaking towards short-term preferences of foreign-asset managers?

Let us consider the case of withdrawing long-term capital gains tax for foreign investors. Do we then create incentives for domestic investors, especially large investors, to undertake round-tripping and re-enter the domestic economy as foreign investors?

Tax reform must be guided by durable, long-term economic objectives rather than panic-driven responses to temporary external shocks. Tax alterations enacted during crises are notoriously difficult to reverse once market conditions normalise, entrenching structural distortions and imposing high political and economic costs. India's optimal path lies in maintaining macroeconomic stability, eliminating inefficient transaction frictions like STT, and committing itself to a transparent, consistent capital-taxation framework that serves national economic priorities.

The writer is director, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy

Durable liquidity needs durable solutions



JANAK RAJ

For effective monetary transmission, it is important that the operating target remains aligned with the policy rate. The corridor is only a safety valve for extreme situations.

Following the three schemes under the special dollar-rupee forex-swap facility, introduced on June 8, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) mobilised over $140 billion, leaving the banking system flush with durable liquidity of over ₹14 trillion. Consequently, the weighted average call rate (WACR) — the operating target — went well below the lower bound of the corridor. Apart from the regular liquidity adjustment facility (LAF), the RBI absorbed about ₹2 trillion through sales under open market operations (OMOs) and sell-buy swaps in September, lifting the WACR above the lower bound, but it still remained well below the policy rate. On October 8, the WACR was at 5.30 per cent even as the RBI had raised the policy repo rate to 5.5 per cent on October 7. To further lift the WACR, banks were required to maintain 99 per cent of the cash reserve ratio (CRR) on a daily basis, up from 90 per cent effective the fortnight beginning October 16. Anticipating this, banks began building CRR balances, pushing up the WACR above the policy rate to 5.55 per cent on October 14 and above the ceiling of the corridor to 5.81 per cent on October 26. Notably, some banks have been accessing the marginal standing facility (MSF).

With the inflation rate above the RBI's target and the central bank in tightening mode, it was imperative to swiftly align the operating target with the policy rate and the RBI deserves credit for acting promptly. Now that the WACR has crossed the ceiling, there is a case to restore daily CRR maintenance to 90 per cent because the continuation of the 99 per cent requirement has serious side effects.

Banks in the normal course use the flexibility of CRR maintenance to arbitrage with the call-money market. When the WACR goes up, they maintain lower CRR balances and lend in the call market, and vice versa. This arbitrage helps align the operating target endogenously, reducing the need for frequent central bank intervention.

With banks now required to maintain 99 per cent of CRR every day, the vital arbitrage sustaining the call-money market has effectively broken down. This is inimical to the smooth functioning of the call market, whose volumes have shrunk over the years. The 99 per cent rule takes away the incentive to trade, makes the WACR thin, pushes banks into building precautionary excess reserves, and forces more recourse to the MSF window. Some may argue that a 99 per cent daily floor is justified since banks, on average, maintain CRR balances significantly above the prescribed requirement. This, in fact, makes a case for a lower daily requirement, not higher. The issue is not how much banks maintain on average, but how best to ensure smooth arbitrage between the call-money market and CRR maintenance.

The last occasion when the RBI raised the minimum daily CRR maintenance to 99 per cent (from 70 per cent) was in July 2013. Then, however, it was a temporary squeeze to tighten liquidity conditions amid heightened volatility during the taper tantrum. Now it is to absorb a large surplus.

The current reduction in surplus is largely due to government cash balances of close to ₹7 trillion. Once the government spends, the surplus will rise again and the WACR may moderate from the current elevated level and possibly move below the policy rate. Hence the solution lies in addressing the durable liquidity surplus, which is expected to persist, through durable measures. Notably, there are limits to OMO sales and sell-buy swaps.

Though the Foreign Currency Non-Resident (Bank) scheme had stipulated that incremental deposits mobilised under the swap window would be exempt from the CRR/statutory liquidity ratio requirements, this does not prevent the RBI from subjecting all incremental net demand and time liabilities (NDTL) to the CRR or even raising the CRR on outstanding NDTL. A CRR increase is transparent, and it preserves price discovery and drains durable liquidity, leaving call volumes and the averaging mechanism intact.

Admittedly, the CRR is a cost to the banking system because the RBI does not pay any interest on its balances. However, we are in a period of large liquidity surplus and the cost of managing it also needs to be shared by the banking system. As of now, the RBI is bearing the entire cost. It would not be unreasonable if the banking system also bears a part of it.

Beyond cost sharing, there is a macroprudential case for a CRR increase. The CRR is now at a record low of 3.0 per cent. It is no longer a tool for day-to-day liquidity management. It is now a prudential buffer that can be deployed at short notice, even retrospectively, to inject liquidity in difficult times. It will also help build a buffer for future use.

In sum, it is important to durably align the WACR with the repo rate while preserving activity in the call-money market. If a durable surplus persists, as appears likely, raising the CRR from its historic low would be the most transparent and effective signal of durable tightening.

The writer is senior fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress, New Delhi.
The views are personal

Building an army of brain warriors

BOOK REVIEW

NEHA BHATT

As a practising neurologist, author Dr David Perlmutter was used to focusing entirely on diagnosing and managing brain diseases using standardised therapies. But the medicines generally prescribed to treat these devastating conditions, he underlines in his new book, *Brain Defenders*, worked only on the symptoms. "Neurologists have had no choice but to treat the smoke and ignore the fire," he writes. Over time, Dr Perlmutter felt compelled to question this reactive approach and focus instead on the prevention and reversal of brain disorders.

It's a fine balance to strike, especially when research to understand the causes and treat them is still emerging. It also means battling the deluge of the latest brain-focused pills from pharma companies. Some of them do provide temporary relief from symptoms of, say, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, but they do not address the root causes. Conventional medications, according to him, fail to calm overactive immune cells or reduce neuroinflammation. Billions of dollars are being spent to refine medications, but not nearly enough is going deeper into the growing problem of neurological disorders around the world to prevent them, he writes.

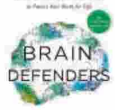
As in most matters related to health, while you can't change your genetic code, you can control its expression: "The 88 keys of the genetic piano remain the same, but you can decide to play a different song." When it comes to the brain, the heroes are microglia, the brain's immune cells. When "metabolically hijacked, they go rogue and attack the neurons they are meant to protect". The book makes the case that our focus, therefore, should be on fixing malfunctioning microglia.

Step by step, the book details how we can take a more proactive approach to protect brain health early in our lives by harnessing the power of these specialised immune cells. Metabolic issues related to brain conditions begin 20 to 30 years before cognitive changes present themselves, so Dr Perlmutter advises paying attention to brain health when we are 40, not 70 years old.

He has written extensively about this subject before in books such as *Grain Brain*, *Brain Maker*, and *Drop Acid*, in which he explores how carb-heavy, highly processed diets contribute to neurological issues, along with the link between hormones, gut-produced neurotransmitters, and brain function. *Brain Defenders* too touches on several of these aspects, but it is much updated to reflect the current public health landscape. Its primary contribution lies in fitting a vital missing piece into the puzzle — unlocking the mystery of why healthy brains deteriorate, the role of microglia in that process, and how cutting-edge research may offer answers to prevent or reverse it.

While microglia have been known for over a century, they were long thought to be passive support structures in the brain. More recently, a deeper understanding of microglia as dynamic regulators of emotion, cognition, and inflammation has marked a major shift in neuroscience.

The book tells us to think of microglia as twins with the unique ability to shape-shift depending on several factors: M2, the healing twin, is the phenotype that takes care of repair, cleaning up dead cells, and maintaining neural health. M1, meanwhile, is the inflammatory "evil" twin — beneficial during injury and infection, but when unregulated, it becomes problematic, leading to chronic inflammation, gene mutations, and cellular breakdown. For a healthy brain, we need a balance of the two, between states of rest. Common conditions like anxiety, brain fog, and depression are the result of a chronic, low-grade M1 state. Although often quite technical, the book is structured in a way that allows you to read as deeply into it as you like, with helpful summaries along the way.



Brain Defenders: Harness the Power of Your Immune Cells to Protect Your Brain for Life
by David Perlmutter
Published by Hachette
375 pages ₹799

Over four detailed sections, Dr Perlmutter examines the paradigm shift in the expanding spectrum of brain disorders and the changes in our immunometabolism that take a brain from good to bad. Metabolic issues, poor diet, alcohol, certain medications, toxins, stress hormones, and sleep disruption — factors that are closely linked to other health conditions as well — contribute in a major way. Much of the book highlights how clean lifestyle choices, including the Mediterranean and ketogenic diets, mental stimulation, exercise, and regular periodontal care, can help.

Where the book pushes into more provocative territory is in Dr Perlmutter's discussion of brain-defending supplements and experimental therapies to restore damaged neural networks — most notably Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy (HBOT), which remains controversial due to safety risks and challenges with standardisation. He also examines emerging pharmaceuticals designed to directly target microglial function. Despite several repetitive sections, overall, *Brain Defenders* is a thought-provoking read, breaking down science into digestible concepts while drawing attention to exciting new developments in a fascinating area of medical research.

The reviewer is a journalist and author



CONTRAPUNTO

It is easier to rob by setting up a bank than by holding up a bank clerk

– BERTOLT BRECHT

MOUNTEBANKING

Branch-level fraud dents customers' trust in banking services, which are the backbone of a modern economy

Banks pay interest, advise on investments, provide lockers, but for ordinary folk they are first and foremost a safe place to park funds. A PNB branch in Greater Noida, outside Delhi, has broken this trust. Its rural customers, newly enriched through sale of land, have been allegedly conned out of ₹35cr. The culprits appear to be bank staff, who closed FDs and transferred funds to unrelated accounts without authorisation. Mountebank is an old-fashioned synonym for charlatans. We christen this breach of basic trust by a bank, mountebanking. Unfortunately, mountebanking isn't rare.

Recall the case from Kota, Rajasthan, last year when a former ICICI Bank relationship manager was accused of siphoning ₹4.6cr from customer accounts over two years. How? She changed the phone numbers linked to accounts, so customers never got transaction alerts. There was a case from Delhi in 2024, when an ICICI branch manager allegedly duped an NRI out of ₹13.5cr. He created fake accounts, issued debit cards and cheque books for them, and diverted her money. In 2023, Bank of Baroda staff reportedly stole ₹22L from 362 customers by linking unauthorised numbers to their accounts.



None of these is a high-tech scam. Rather, they're confidence tricks or failures of banks' internal systems. They happen when the so-called "maker-checker" system, which requires two different persons to authorise a sensitive transaction, breaks down. It may happen, among other things, due to collusion, or when banks use offline processes meant for network outages, or when a staffer misuses login credentials of a former employee.

Often, the intention isn't to rob customers, but to profit from their money and return it unnoticed. The ICICI Kota RM bought shares with embezzled funds, but ran up losses. Sometimes, performance pressure from banks leads to such cheating. In the BoB case, staff were pushed to onboard customers to the bank's mobile app, which gave them a chance to introduce unauthorised numbers. It's true that banks repay customers after such frauds, but every such case shakes people's faith in the banking system. And usually, it's newly banked rural folk, or senior citizens – these are the most vulnerable groups – who are affected. RBI and Department of Financial Services must do more to curb such fraud, with stronger checks and stricter punishments.

Cruise And Effect

Villa Vie Odyssey gets grounded by the reality it was escaping, the sea's indifference is ancient

Cruises are no longer the preserve of the ultra-wealthy. Mega ships and economies of scale have made this holiday accessible to upper middle classes too. But a cruise that's pledged passengers a 3.5 year voyage, like the Villa Vie Odyssey did, is pretty exclusive. It was marketed as a multi-year escape from Trumpism. Ironically, it's Trumpism that's done in the cruise. The monthly fuel cost per cabin in parts of Asia rose from $1,800 to $8,000. As the whole thing gets grounded just 750 days into the voyage, it feels like déjà vu. For ever and ever, humans have set out to sea to escape their reality, but things have often not gone to plan.

Some of you won't like the word 'escape'. It's true that sea voyages are also about becoming. About exploration and discoveries. Like the sea itself, travel on it has never been just one thing. Cruise life itself is full of dramatic contradictions. For the paying passengers, there's freedom from their ordinary responsibilities. They can experiment with a different version of themselves, maybe more sociable, or glamorous. But the staff who make all this possible, removing every possible inconvenience, with a 24x7 smile, they don't get to toast the sunset with a margarita. The happiness factory on sea, like all factories, is built on unequal labour. Yet, there's a larger shared reality, where the same sea surrounds staff and passengers alike. Nature's indifference makes no difference between those who pay and those who get paid. It's the same mirror of the soul. Find your anxieties or ambitions reflected in it as you will.

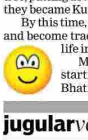


Cruise Lines International Association says that more than 37mn passengers stepped aboard ocean-going cruise ships last year. That's a record, plus 25% higher than pre-pandemic. And that's despite the fact that every time a cruise hits the headlines, something bad has happened, like a virus outbreak or backed up toilets. The danger that sea voyages were once associated with, is still there, but it's gotten super sanitised. Standing on the rail, watching the land recede, and then the horizon drop off, and the sea widening out with you at its centre, nobody knows what that will do to you. Maybe the stillness will be restful, maybe horribly unsettling. The sea gives nothing away in advance.

Bustards and Bhatias

Where have all the Kutchis gone, long time passing?

Jug Suraiya



The Great Indian Bustard and Kutchi Bhatias both come from Kutch and both are a vanishing species.

This was brought home to me recently when my long-time friend, Mahendra, who like me is a Kutchi Bhatia, sent me a scholarly treatise on the origins of our widely dispersed community.

Bhatias can trace their lineage to the Bhatti warrior clan of Rajputs. Being warriors, Bhattis seem to have been a restless lot, moving hither and yon wherever there were battles going on. So Bhattis spread like a giant banyan tree, putting down roots in Punjab, Sindh (now in Pakistan), and Kutch, wherein they became Kutchi Bhatias, forebears of Mahendra and myself.

By this time, the Bhattis-turned-Bhatias had given up their martial pursuits and become traders and merchants, occupations more conducive to getting a life insurance policy.



Mahendra and I didn't take up trade, but became journalists, starting our careers in Calcutta, which at the time was full of Kutchi Bhatias who'd migrated *en masse* there, there not being much by way of trading or merchandising to do in Kutch.

jugularvein

The Bhatia Mandal in Calcutta was a popular meeting point for juvenile Kutchis who'd foregather there to play Scrabble, the top player of which, Paddu, was accorded the illustrious title of 'Light of Asia'.

On the day after Diwali, the community would congregate in a school compound obligingly loaned to us for the occasion to wish each other Saal Mobarak, invariably compressed into an exclamatory 'Salmoobarak!'

I haven't been to what is now Kolkata for a long while. I wonder if the Bhatia Mandal still exists, and if Salmoobaraks are annually exchanged.

I hope they are. For while there are Bhatias everywhere, there are few left of my ilk, or Mahendra's. Perhaps it's because having departed our nominal place of origin long ago we no longer think of ourselves as Kutchi Bhatias but as Kolkata Bhatias, or NCR Bhatias, or Mumbai Bhatias. That's our Kutch-22.

Not So Lame Duck For India

If, as expected, Republicans lose the House in US polls, Trump will find it tough to pass bills. So, foreign policy will be his focus. New Delhi's best bet is status quo, and for Trump to concentrate on China & Iran

Amit Gupta



The Nov 3 US midterms are not as acrimonious as Trump's three runs for the presidency, but they come close. Rising inflation, an unpopular war with Iran, and a K-shaped economy – where the upper arm of the letter K signifies the small percentage doing well in US, while the much larger lower arm is that of those who are economically struggling – have soured the national mood, and made it tough going for Republicans. They are expected to lose House of Representatives, but may still stave off a Democratic victory in Senate.

Trump is rallying followers by saying that if Republicans lose, Democrats will carry out a vendetta against him and his team. Even if Democrats win only the House, some of this will certainly happen. Investigations will be launched against Trump, and Democrats will, certainly, want to inspect the battle damage to American bases in the Gulf, hit by Iran.

The latter would embarrass Trump and Department of War, which have downplayed the destruction. But will an adverse result check Trump's current domestic policies? Hardly.

Crackdown on immigrants will continue, Trump'll build his ballroom, and, despite all the anger, Democrats lack the fortitude to cut off spending on the Iran war

The crackdown on immigrants will continue, he will have his renovations, and build a ballroom, and, despite all the anger, Democrats lack the fortitude to cut off spending on the Iran war. On the other hand, getting new legislation, through a Democrat-led Congress, on issues of healthcare, or tax cuts, will be difficult. Trump will be a lame duck, and like all such presidents, he will shift his focus to foreign policy.

He has already agreed to a meeting with Xi and Putin to discuss Ukraine. He would like a grand bargain with China. A grand bargain is difficult since Beijing would expect Washington to accept that the international system is bipolar – no American president can concede that unipolarity is over. It is more likely that some kind of nuclear arms control deal is cut by the three nations, which could also potentially attempt to limit use of AI in the nuclear realm.



Image: AI

A more promising approach would be, as Xi suggested in Beijing, for the two powers to discuss ways to manage their adversarial relationship. Trump is capable of taking such a foreign policy initiative. If the focus is on the great powers, what then of the relationship with New Delhi?

Trump's Washington is not going to attempt any major breakthrough with India, and New Delhi is tired of the roller-coaster relationship that has defined the second term of this American president. If one looks at the four possible areas of engagement with a lame-duck administration only one, energy, looks promising.

Trump needs to have Venezuelan oil processed and sold around the world and India has the refineries to do that. The problem is, Venezuelan oil is difficult to refine and supplies may be affected by future domestic unrest in that country. Further, in the end, it is inevitable that New Delhi will buy more Russian oil, much to the chagrin of Washington.

Defense procurements also make little sense. Backlogs in production of both F-16 and F-35 mean that even if India signed a deal this week, it would take seven to eight years to clear the existing backlog of orders, and sell planes to the Indian Air Force. Moreover, no one in Washington is going to allow New Delhi to put nuclear weapons on these aircraft – something the French and Russians allow.

A general trade agreement has evaporated because New Delhi is reluctant to make the concessions Washington wants, and there is the larger issue of

If one looks at the four possible areas of engagement for New Delhi, with a lame duck administration in Washington, only one – energy – looks promising

whether, even if such an agreement were to be reached, would Trump abide by the terms, in the long run?

Which leaves H-1B visas and the greater access of Indian tech workers to US market. AI has dramatically removed the need for low-level workers. US will certainly take skilled workers, who add substantial value, to their corporations – which explains the $100,000 fee for companies to sponsor only the best. But those will be in far fewer numbers than in the past. On a related note, educational visas will continue to be restricted, much in the same way as they are now being restricted in Canada.

The best thing India can hope for is that Trump's energies stay focused on China and Iran, since this takes away the need to respond every time the American president comes up with another imaginative proposal. Realistically speaking it is okay for the two countries to not have any dramatic breakthroughs, and for the relationship to continue at the current level of stability, with little progress. Sometimes boring is good.

The writer is a Senior Fellow in National Institute for Deterrence Studies, US. Views are personal

It's Time India Inc Hires Future Consumers

Firms are doing well. Orders, revenues & profits are up. But new hiring is down. This will hurt future demand as middle class becomes smaller & less prosperous

Siddharth Roy



At first glance, Oct's flash PMI numbers may convey festive cheer. Private sector activity rose to a four-month high, the composite index touched an impressive 56.7, assembly lines hummed, domestic demand remained buoyant, and export orders rose to their highest level since June 2025. Better still for balance sheets, input cost inflation cooled. For a textbook economist, this combination of full order books, widening profit margins, and lower operating costs should trigger a hiring spree.

Instead, boardrooms across India are quietly freezing recruitment. Overall job creation across manufacturing and services has hit its slowest pace this year. Services recorded zero net job additions in Oct, snapping a nine-month streak of employment growth, all because of a worrying contradiction that hasn't become a talking point yet.

White-collar automation

For well over a decade, economists and politicians explained India's jobless growth as a consequence of the economy not growing fast enough, and anaemic private capital expenditure that couldn't absorb the millions of young Indians entering the labour market each year. We were told jobs would follow once the economic engine fired up. The Oct data shatters this illusion by demonstrating that the link between business growth and payroll expansion is broken.

Why aren't companies hiring amid a festive surge? This is what business managers across the 800 manufacturing and services firms polled told PMI surveyors. They said their existing workforce was more than enough to handle the flood of new orders. Unlike previous years, when a seasonal business spike left companies scrambling to recruit temporary staff and trainees, firms today effortlessly absorb the extra workload without adding a single new desk.

It's all thanks to workplace automation. A closer look at the Oct data reveals that work backlogs across private firms fell at their fastest rate since Aug 2021. In the past, a mounting pile of unfinished tasks was a signal for HR teams to start hiring entry-level executives from colleges. Today, that backlog is quickly cleared by existing staff, using advanced software and AI tools. Work that required a team of five junior analysts or customer support associates is now done by two mid-level managers using automated workflows. Tech is doing not only repetitive factory labour but also the extra white-collar work generated by economic expansion.

Ladder without rungs

Good for business, but this structural shift represents a severe crisis for young educated Indians. For 30 years, the services sector has lifted millions of aspiring graduates into the middle class. IT, banking, financial services, and back-office operations were the great absorbers of young talent from small towns and big cities alike. When service sector output jumps sharply, while net hiring drops to zero, it signals that the lower rungs of the corporate ladder are being sawed off. Entry-level roles in coding, data processing, financial reconciliation, and routine customer management are quietly vanishing.

If this trend persists, the macroeconomic consequences for India will be severe. An economy cannot sustain high growth on the back of corporate efficiency alone. Young graduates without a monthly salary do not buy two-wheelers, rent urban apartments, or spend money on consumer goods. By squeezing out fresh recruits in favour of software-driven productivity, corporate India risks undermining domestic consumer demand that fuels its order books. You cannot sell products to algorithms.

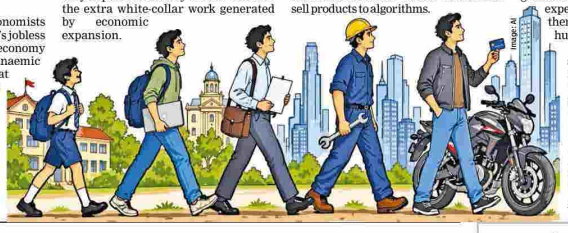


Image: AI

Two remedies

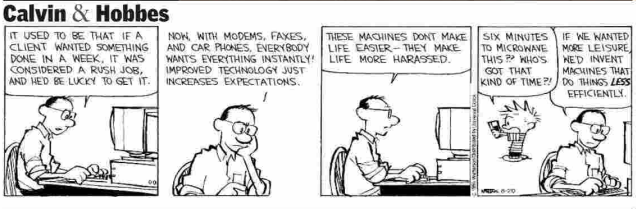
Addressing this disconnect requires an urgent rethink of both govt policy and higher education. First, central and state govts must immediately reconsider corporate incentives. Currently, production-linked incentives and state-level tax breaks are largely tied to capital investment and total output targets. Instead, future public subsidies must be strictly linked to verifiable payroll additions. Taxpayers should not be subsidising corporate capital expenditure if that money is merely used to buy machinery and software that bypass workers.

Universities must also confront the harsh market reality that corporate managers view fresh Indian graduates as an expensive liability rather than a ready asset. In a business environment where an AI licence costs a fraction of a junior employee's salary, and requires zero training time, companies are unwilling to spend six months teaching basic office skills to a new recruit. Undergraduate degree programmes must include mandatory, paid industrial apprenticeships. If students graduate with two years of practical floor experience, the cost of onboarding them drops dramatically, making human talent competitive again.

The Oct economic data should serve as a wake-up call. Celebrating high output numbers while ignoring the recruitment freeze is a dangerous blind spot. True economic progress is not measured merely by how fast factories and offices can clear their backlogs, but by how many young citizens are invited to participate in prosperity.

The writer is a consultant to Rashtriya Raksha University

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



This, dear Phaedrus, is the most important point: no geometry without the word. Without it, figures are accidents, and neither make manifest nor serve the power of the mind.

Paul Valéry, Dialogues

Who Takes Rebirth When There Is No Passenger?

XIV The Dalai Lama

Often, people ask me what reincarnation means. Most imagine a soul leaving one body and entering another, like a passenger changing trains. But in Buddhism, we speak of rebirth without a passenger. People find this puzzling, but it's not a contradiction. To understand this, we must investigate three simple questions: What is reborn? What is consciousness? And what do we really mean when we say 'I'?

First, what is reborn is neither an eternal soul nor an independent person. The Buddha taught that no permanent, unchanging self hides in us. Instead, our mental life is an unbroken continuum – a stream of moments of consciousness, each arising from the one before. When physical death comes, the coarse levels of mind cease. Sensory perceptions stop, and the everyday thinking mind that plans, worries, and dreams dissolves.

At the deepest level lies what our Tibetan tradition calls the 'clear light mind' – the most fundamental awareness. Ordinarily, it reveals itself only in deep, dreamless sleep or at the moment of death. Only this subtle continuum passes forward into a new life, carrying the imprints of our actions, which we call karma. Our everyday memories, personality, and habits dissolve, which is why we do not remember previous lives. Continuity exists without an enduring entity.

All of this hinges on what consciousness truly is. For decades, I have spoken with modern scientists. While I respect empirical science deeply, Buddhist philosophy offers a distinct perspective. In our tradition, consciousness is defined as 'clear and knowing': it has no physical shape, colour, weight, or location; its very nature is simply to be aware. In Buddhist logic, everything arises from a cause of its own kind. Similarly, a moment of awareness can only arise from a prior moment of awareness.





The brain is an indispensable condition for thought, but it creates awareness no more than a lamp that creates electricity. If that holds true, the first moment of consciousness in a newborn must have an earlier mental cause. Conception provides the biological vessel but cannot manufacture the subjective spark of mind. Rebirth is not mystical dogma but a logical deduction. Brain scans show correlation between brain states and mental states, but correlation is not identity.

Then comes the most intimate question: If there is no soul, does 'I' refer to an illusion? Not at all. The self exists, but not as it appears. Each of us instinctively feels a solid 'I' sitting like a sovereign ruler inside body and mind. This feeling flares up sharply when we are insulted, criticised, or frightened: something solid rises to defend its ground!

Yet when we search for this independent self, we cannot find it. It is not the changing body, any fleeting thought, or their sum. What remains is what we call the 'mere I' – a convenient label. It is real enough to act, suffer, and shoulder moral responsibility. Psychologists observe that people who dwell heavily on 'i, me, and mine' tend to be unhappier. When we cultivate warm-heartedness, this tight sense of 'i' thins, and with it, the suffering that clings to it.

When people ask about my own rebirth, i do not claim to be the XIII Dalai Lama in the sense of a soul moving into a new house. I see only a continuity of consciousness and altruistic purpose taking a fresh form – and in this life, i had to learn my alphabet and prayers from the very beginning. I ask only that we investigate the mind with open curiosity, where genuine inquiry belongs.

As told to Rajiv Mehrotra

The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

India's message to US offers cues

India raising its Pakistan concerns with the US may appear routine, but the timing is significant for multiple reasons

On the sidelines of the ASEAN defence ministers' meet in Cebu, Philippines, Rajnath Singh used his bilateral meeting with US counterpart Pete Hegseth to raise India's concerns over continued American support for Pakistan's military. Though such an exchange may look routine, its timing is significant for two reasons.

First, the Framework for the US-India Major Defence Partnership, a 10-year policy road map signed by Singh and Hegseth, has completed one year, and the two countries have recently concluded the joint exercise Yudh Abhyas to enhance interoperability and tactical exchanges. Since India's security challenges come from its neighbourhood, its concern is reasonable: A defence partner should not technologically strengthen an adversary's forces. Washington cannot expect deeper cooperation from India while upgrading the military India may be most likely to face. Within the India-US reset, this is straight talk meant to smoothen fissures before they widen.

The second reason lies beyond India-US ties. In recent months, India-Pakistan engagement has increased. At the UN, exchanges have been sharp: India attacked Pakistan over minority rights violations and military control of various territories, while Islamabad wrote to the Security Council about the arbitration panel's Indus Waters Treaty ruling. Yet, there are also hints of a thaw in some long-suspended engagements: SCO coordinator Alok Dimri visited Islamabad for an SCO meeting ahead of Pakistan's presidency; and India invited Pakistan, for the first time since Operation Sindoor, to the inaugural Civilisational Dialogue Forum in New Delhi. Multilateral summits are not the place to negotiate bilateral issues, but willing delegates often use the ice-breaking opportunities they offer.

So the defence minister's raising of the $686 million F-16 upgrade package and cross-border terrorism was an important nudge to a common partner. Washington appears positioned to steer Pakistan so that India's security concerns, including the warrants Indian agencies hold for UN-designated terrorists Masood Azhar and Hafiz Saeed, are no longer dismissed. It should link its military support for Pakistan to authentic and verifiable action against terrorism. Whether India-Pakistan relations can gradually improve depends on several factors. These signals deserve close watching.

Cheaper cancer drugs, half the cure

From November 9, a pack of 21 capsules of one brand of palbociclib, a breast cancer drug, will cost ₹2,720 instead of ₹40,421. It is one of hundreds of cuts in the revised prices the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) published on Wednesday, all the result of the Centre's decision to cap the share that distributors, chemists and hospitals can take on 137 cancer medicines at 30% of the maximum retail price.

According to the World Health Organization's Global Status Report on Cancer, released in July, about half of cancer patients and their families face catastrophic health spending. In India, researchers who surveyed more than 12,000 patients at seven cancer centres for a 2023 study funded by the Union health ministry found that 80% of those treated as outpatients incurred catastrophic costs. Two in three of them were left with too little to meet their basic needs once treatment was paid for. Medicines were the biggest item in families' hospital bills.

To be sure, the cap reaches only part of the bill. Nearly a quarter of the products in NPPA's revised price list keep their old price, including some of the costliest drugs. The immunotherapy drug Keytruda still costs ₹2,16,500 a vial, and the lung cancer drug Tagrisso more than ₹4 lakh for 30 tablets. The cap trims only the supply chain's share; for the newest treatments, most of the cost is the manufacturer's own price.

Much of the supply of cancer drugs goes directly to hospitals, so the government must make their pharmacies honour the new prices. It also needs a separate answer on the prices of patented medicines. A cancer diagnosis should not also be a sentence of debt.

Institutions' autonomy is not about technocracy

What is needed is a form of functioning that is free of executive control, but nonetheless answerable and responsive to democratic oversight

Recent debates around the working and functioning of the Election Commission of India (ECI) have once again stirred a debate around the role of autonomous bodies as elements of constitutional governance. Often, however, this debate suffers from a lack of clarity as its terms are loosely defined.

The modern regulatory and administrative State performs a vast range of functions, which are carried out through a number of bodies. Some of these are of a specialised and technical nature, such as the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI). Others, such as the ECI — the subject of ongoing controversy — have the task of actualising democratic processes. And then there are bodies that fit uneasily between these two kinds, such as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

The relationship that these bodies have to the elected government — or the political executive — remains the primary subject of debate. Consider, for example, RBI. The status of RBI came under sharp scrutiny during the demonetisation exercise of 2016. The central bank was accused of having rubber-stamped the government's decision to demonetise the currency without any independent application of mind.

Underlying this argument, however, was the assumption that a country's central bank should — in some sense — be independent of the government when it comes to questions of policy within its regulatory remit.

As scholars such as Canadian historian Quinn Slobodian note, the independence of central banks has long been an essential element of modern neoliberal dogma, according to which certain decisions about the economy should be insulated and separated from democratic contestation.



Gautam Bhatia

While this argument is treated as self-evident, it is by no means clear that it is indeed self-evident, as it rests upon what is often argued to be an artificial separation between the economic and the political. At the same time, however, direct executive control over the central bank appears to throw up problems of its own, especially in a polity such as India's, where Parliament has long been subordinated to the political executive.

This dilemma was evident in the judgment of the Supreme Court that — six years after the fact — upheld demonetisation. The Court went back and forth on central bank independence, claiming to endorse it as a principle, but simultaneously undermining it by also endorsing a vague doctrine of consultation between the central bank and the government. This led to an incoherent approach, which this author has previously called Schrodinger's independence.

The dissenting opinion of Justice Nagarathna was, at least, consistent in endorsing the principle of independence, and then applying it to the facts to hold that independence had been violated.

The story of demonetisation and RBI suggests that the starting point of the debate needs to be about the relationship between a so-called autonomous body and the larger democratic context in which it operates, which — in turn — should inform the nature, scope, and degree of "autonomy" that the body should enjoy.

If we think, for example, that decisions about the economy are not merely technocratic in nature, but should be subject to democratic oversight, then the central bank ought not to be made independent of representative organs, but — in some way — accountable to the larger polity. What form this accountability may take is a different question.

Similarly, when we think of ECI, there are calls to turn the body into a purely technocratic commission, shorn of political commission. This would make sense if we think of elections purely as matters of administration.



If we think of elections as expressions of democratic will, then the regulatory body should also be structured in a way that renders it impartial but accountable. BLOOMBERG

However, if we think of elections as expressions of democratic will, then the regulatory body should also be structured in a way that renders it impartial but accountable (for reasons cited here, the simple remedy of having its actions scrutinised by Parliament would not suffice).

So, this may take the form, for example, of a multi-partisan structure instead of a non-partisan one, where all major contesting parties have an equal say in how the commission is appointed (a model followed in several countries).

The point about citing the examples of RBI and ECI is to warn that the rhetoric of autonomy and independence can easily slip into a call for technocratic bodies where all that matters is instrumental expertise.

In other words, what is needed is a form of functioning that is free of executive control, but nonetheless answerable and responsive to democratic oversight.

Models of independence and accountability, therefore, must take these principles into account, and steer between the Scylla of executive dominance and the Charybdis of an autonomy that ossifies into an end in itself, rather than as a means to deepening democracy.

Gautam Bhatia, a Delhi-based advocate, is the author of Offend, Shock or Disturb: Free Speech Under the Indian Constitution. The views expressed are personal



IS 100% ETHANOL THE RIGHT PIVOT FOR INDIA?

{ AMITABH KANT } FORMER BUREAUCRAT

Energy security must not compromise food security

India's ethanol programme is one of its clearest energy security successes, reaching 20% blending (E20) five years ahead of the 2030 target and cutting the crude import bill. The government has now notified rules allowing flex-fuel vehicles to be certified to run on E85 and E100. The notification enables these fuels rather than mandating them.

Any meaningful uptake would raise demand substantially, as an E100 vehicle runs almost entirely on ethanol and, because ethanol carries less energy, needs more fuel per kilometre than an E20 vehicle. Meeting this demand would depend heavily on sugarcane, rice and maize, which will compete for the land, water, and grain India needs for food and animal feed.

The question is how much the country can afford to divert. Events over the past month suggest the margin is already thin.

Earlier this month, the government directed oil marketing companies to bring sugar diversion for ethanol down to zero for the 2026-27 supply year, amid concerns over sugar output after weak rains.

The same tender, seeking around 11 billion litres, cut the price for maize-based ethanol by ₹3 a litre. Maize was already the largest feedstock in 2024-25, supplying nearly half of India's ethanol, and with cane juice and B-heavy molasses excluded this year, distilleries will need considerably more of it. The pressure on maize is already reshaping what farmers grow.

The Economic Survey 2025-26 warns that ethanol's price signals are pulling farmland towards maize and away from pulses and oilseeds, which risks entrenching India's dependence on edible oil imports. The Survey calls this an emerging tension between Aatmanirbharta in energy and Aatmanirbharta in food.

Rice tells a similar story where between June 2025 and June 2026, the Food Corporation of India (FCI) supplied 6.35 million tonnes of rice to distilleries at nearly 40% below its acquisition cost, effectively extending economic support to ethanol through the food system.

A further 7.2 million tonnes has been allocated for 2026-27. With central stocks in July at nearly three times the buffer norm, this is surplus grain for now. But surplus depends on good monsoons and open-ended procurement.

Water is an equally serious constraint, one that ethanol procurement ignores. Distilleries themselves use little water, but the real footprint lies in cultivation. The industry argues, with some merit, that estimates overstate the problem by counting rainfall. Yet much of India's cane and distillery capacity sits in states where groundwater is already under severe stress.

Brazil is often cited as the model for running transport on ethanol. Its standard petrol carries 30% ethanol but most Brazilian sugarcane is rainfed, and much of its corn ethanol comes from a second crop sown after the soybean harvest.

India's cane, by contrast, has historically been more than 90% irrigated, and the country's grain-based ethanol draws on crops that would otherwise feed people and livestock.

India must stop expanding ethanol from first-generation feedstocks (sugarcane, maize and rice) beyond what E20 requires. Rice-based ethanol should be phased out first, while maize and cane allocations should follow feed availability and genuine sugar surpluses. Demand beyond E20 should be met through second-generation (2G) ethanol from non-food biomass such as crop residues and bamboo.

Ethanol has a legitimate place in India's energy mix, but its expansion must be governed by the limits of the country's land and water



And, 2G ethanol must be run as a national technology mission. Seven years after PM JI-VAN Yojana was launched, only a handful of plants have been commissioned, costs remain well above first-generation ethanol, and even the flagship Panipat plant is not running at design capacity.

Savings from phasing out subsidised rice should fund indigenous conversion technology and a paid biomass collection network. Research institutes should also develop high-yielding, low-water energy crops for degraded land; guaranteed offtake at a premium price would give investors the certainty to build at scale.

Water must be priced into procurement. New cane and grain distilleries should not come up in over-exploited groundwater blocks, procurement prices should reward lower-water feedstocks, and drip irrigation should become a condition for cane supplied to distilleries.

The food-fuel trade-off also must be made transparent. Any support to ethanol routed through the food system should be budgeted and reported annually.

Lastly, ethanol must go where it adds the most value. For cars and two-wheelers, electrification is the more efficient long-term pathway; a parallel E100 retail network risks slowing that shift. Ethanol's stronger case lies in hybrids and, in time, as a feedstock for sustainable aviation fuel.

Ethanol has a legitimate place in India's energy mix, but its expansion must be governed by the limits of the country's land and water.

Amitabh Kant is chancellor, NIIT University, chairman, Fairfax, Centre for Free Enterprise and ex-G20 Sherpa & ex-CEO, NITI Aayog. The views expressed are personal

HT DEBATE

{ RAHUL TONGIA } RESEARCHER

Consider the objectives ethanol can help meet

Science alone makes ethanol seem like an inefficient fuel. The conversion efficiency of sunlight-to-biomass-energy is a low percentage figure for sugarcane, compared to around 20% for sunlight-to-electricity through solar panels. And food security is sacrosanct. So, why go for ethanol?

The typical reason why a fuel is chosen is economics: People always want a cheaper alternative. But this isn't always a sufficient driver. Energy security is another consideration. A third factor, especially in the case of ethanol in India, is what we can call human-fiscal equilibrium. Even if ethanol doesn't save us money, it changes the recipient of this money — from foreign sellers of oil to India's farmers.

These are the reasons why ethanol should remain on the table as a component of our energy portfolio. More so, when it is in the form of vehicles capable of running on ethanol alone — the E100 category, for which the Centre has just released rules — which is distinct from a goal of 100%, economy-wide replacement of petroleum by ethanol.

The conventional argument against ethanol is that it comes from sugarcane, but India must prioritise sugar for food rather than divert cane for ethanol production. That doesn't always hold.

There are three routes of ethanol production from sugarcane: One, from cane juice (which impacts sugar production), from B-heavy molasses (which marginally impacts sugar production), and from C-heavy, residual molasses (which doesn't impact sugar production). India has shifted ethanol production away from the first type based on national needs.

Now, there is another aspect to the debate: the shift away from sugarcane to grains for ethanol production. In recent times, about two-thirds of India's ethanol need for 20% blending with petroleum has come from grains. This has involved fresh, fit-for-human-consumption grains and, crucially, reject-grains both.

Grain-based ethanol production not only reduced dependence on sugarcane but also resolved the seasonality challenge of extraction from the cane crop. Thus, the diversity of inputs already partly mitigates the impact on food security. Throw in technology-aided improvements in productivity and new farming techniques such as precision and vertical farming, and the pressures on land and food supply ease to a fair degree. In case of a bumper harvest exceeding food security needs, the excess grains can be directed towards fuel production.

That said, how much ethanol is optimal is a complex question. Complete substitution of imported fuels isn't the goal even though blending offers both direct savings and increased financial value as a hedge-fuel against swings of the oil market.

Against such a backdrop, a blending range offering, based on macroeconomic and agricultural realities, would perhaps offer more flexibility than a static blend mandate, with accompanying innovation in vehicle technology to facilitate different levels of blended-fuel uptake. Flexible vehicles that tolerate different levels of blending will also be instrumental in addressing several concerns of owners about vehicle fitness that have arisen (though not always founded in science) after ethanol substitution was rolled out.

The ethanol question for India boils down to all the objectives it can meet, not the blending-mandate-versus-food-security one alone



Powering agri-R&D also must be made concurrent with ethanol-based substitution: The holy grail isn't just better conversion of starches into sugars but the ability to use cellulosic agricultural products and wastes; this would dramatically increase fuel availability without impacting food security. To that end, there is a long enough window for us to act. Higher ethanol use will not happen overnight, and needs a large ecosystem to align.

Consumers need to be compensated for the lower energy density (per litre) of ethanol, which brings us to a key challenge for ethanol substitution: the impact on government finances. India heavily depends on taxes on fossil fuels, and ethanol may or may not get taxed similarly. But read against oil price volatility, the savings on the import front from blending may compensate for the losses on the tax front. Additionally, in the case of petrol (not diesel), the larger risk to government revenue comes from electric vehicles.

Thus, any conversation on ethanol has to be more holistic than it currently is. There are issues that need to be worked out — which, in turn, need a range of stakeholders to align (if not always on solutions, then at least on the larger objectives) — but this most certainly doesn't obviate the value of ethanol substitution.

It is also important to consider the second-order gains for the economy: Once the pressure to meet transport fuel needs from crude refining is lowered, it will free up crude supply for other petrochemicals of higher-value-add or production of larger volumes of refined fuel for exports.

Ultimately, the ethanol question for India boils down to all the objectives it can meet, not the blending-mandate-versus-food-security one alone.

Rahul Tongia is a senior fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP). The views expressed are personal

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OUR VIEW



AFP

Creating a deep-tech ecosystem in India

India's attention to deep-tech is welcome amid a tech arms race but we must do more than just subsidizing startups. Research labs working with private players can drive innovation

The technological arms race between the US and China has forced Indian policymakers to finally confront India's limited deep-tech abilities. Policymakers acknowledge that deep-tech innovation in India requires significant support from the Indian state. The policy focus on the deep-tech sector is welcome. But we need to ask if the current model of subsidizing select startups is the right way to develop deep-tech capabilities.

Historically, India has spent very little on research and development (R&D). Gross spending on R&D has always been below 1% of gross domestic product (GDP), compared to about 3% in China and above 5% in Korea. Most of that expenditure comes from the Indian state. In 2023, the government set up the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) to fund labs by pooling resources from the public and private sectors. However, private sector participation remains weak.

The state has now stepped on the gas by providing public funds to startups directly. In 2025, the government launched the Research, Development and Innovation Fund (RDIF) with a corpus of ₹1 trillion. The RDIF, operated by ANRF, has sanctioned sizeable funds to several startups. The support to high-risk ventures is aimed at quickly catalysing innovation and deep-tech product development.

When public funds flow to private firms, we must be sure that the outcomes will serve the public good. If an RDIF-funded startup is acquired by an American or Chinese deep-tech firm a few years later, it is not clear how our national interest would be served. The founders of such startups would of course get richer, and hopefully contribute to the local economy. But the acquired firm would no longer be a 'strategic asset' for the country. It is not clear whether our policymakers have considered such possibilities. It is also not clear whether RDIF funds are flowing to sectors or firms with the greatest societal benefits. For a private sector venture fund, a startup developing flying taxis may be more valuable than one developing green mobility solutions for small towns. But from a wider societal perspective, the latter may have greater value.

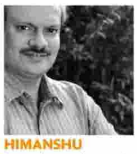
India needs a more sophisticated strategy for promoting innovation in the private sector. ANRF should aim to make it easier for our research labs and scientists to co-develop innovative products with private partners. The R&D ecosystem will acquire deeper roots in the country when research labs have a strong stake in the success of deep-tech startups, and these startups in turn collaborate actively with researchers, and are provided preferential treatment in public procurement.

The collaboration between SpaceX and Nasa is a classic case, with the two organizations pooling technical and financial resources to develop next-gen technologies. India's biotechnology-led vaccine industry is also a story of successful collaboration between the government and vaccine manufacturers. In the 1990s, the government helped Bharat Biotech and Shantha Biotechnics scale up their Hepatitis B vaccine production, and assured them of government procurement. The larger gain was the growth of an indigenous biotech industry. The government should promote fundamental research, public-private partnerships and projects with long gestation cycles. There are no shortcuts.

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS

India needs better and frequent statistics on incomes and wages

This is key to frame effective policy responses to shield the vulnerable sections from external shocks



HIMANSHU
is associate professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University and visiting fellow at the Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi.

Notwithstanding the better-than-expected growth of 7.8%, India's economy remains vulnerable to multiple threats. Monsoon rainfall was 13% below normal because of El Niño, which is likely to strengthen until early next year. The global environment is uncertain, both because of the war in West Asia, which has pushed up oil prices, and rising inflation in the developed world. The trade and tariff uncertainty have not helped. Also, how artificial intelligence will affect employment and productivity is unclear.

India is not insulated from any of these. The Reserve Bank of India and finance ministry have sounded caution. The long-term impact is unclear but some of these will create problems in the short-term, with spillovers to the broader economy. Any response then requires a short-term strategy to shield the livelihoods of the majority of the population, which is vulnerable to these shocks, but also steps to ensure the long-term sustainability of growth. This requires more frequent assessment of how the households, particularly the vulnerable, are affected. The data must capture the impact of economic shocks in real-time or at a high frequency. This is particularly true for data on employment, incomes and wages, which are the cornerstone for any evaluation of the level of distress and also indicate aggregate demand.

Take incomes. Despite agriculture being highly vulnerable, there is no regular source of data on the income of farmers. The Situation Assessment Surveys (SAS) of the National Statistics Office (NSO) are available on a decennial basis. The only other source is the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices, whose data, although available with a lag of 3-4 years, is by crops and not farm households. Recently, farmers have suffered from production uncertainty and rising energy as well as fertilizer prices. They also face an El Niño that is the worst in recent history. But there is no way to assess the impact of rising input prices and production shortfall on farm incomes. Note that agriculture is still the source of livelihood for almost 45% of workers.

This is also true for wages. The only monthly source is the Labour Bureau's wage data of casual labourers in agricultural and non-agricultural occupations. Unfortunately, the sudden and unexplained changes in the collection and compilation of this data from July 2025 have resulted in an abnormally high jump in nominal wages. This not only distorts the long-term series, but the absence of any linking factor makes any analysis of wages and their relationship with drought, public policy or any other change difficult, if not impossible. However, what's worse is the lack of any information on wages and earnings in urban areas, either for casual or regular workers, on a monthly or even quarterly basis. The only source for urban wages is the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), which is available annually.

Though the NSO has been releasing monthly estimates of employment since 2025, these are only at a broad level. They represent an improvement over the quarterly report available for urban areas since 2017-18. But any analysis of short-term trends is limited by the absence of wage and earnings data. Further, even though the monthly report is released, the unit-level data, which allows disaggregated analysis, is only released after the annual report, thus defeating the purpose of a monthly series. The revision in PLFS proposed by the statistics ministry to better capture platform and gig workers will help. What is also needed, though, is a revision of the definitions and categories used to collect information on employment. A good example is the measurement of unemployment and the categorization of workers as self-employed, regular and casual, more so given the massive rise in unpaid workers.

Any policy response requires a proper diagnosis of the underlying trends and factors behind the distress in the economy, more so when the challenges are multifaceted and driven by natural calamities or international factors beyond the control of domestic policy. The statistical system has been agile and aware of the challenges, bringing multiple changes in recent years that have improved the frequency of surveys and data release. However, given India's dynamic economy, the nature of statistical data and the corresponding categories also require revision. This is necessary for existing surveys and instruments. But we also need discussions on new surveys and instruments that can be introduced to capture the emerging trends and patterns on a reliable and frequent basis.

QUICK READ

The strong growth of India's economy notwithstanding, we face multiple external shocks that are threatening livelihoods. Unfortunately, there is little data to understand their full impact.

A better policy response calls for reliable data on incomes and wages but also data on a more frequent basis. This means improving existing surveys and introducing newer ones.

10 YEARS AGO


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JUST A THOUGHT

No research without action, no action without research.

KURT LEWIN

GUEST VIEW

The GST regime has stepped into a new enforcement era

JITENDRA MOTWANI



is partner, Trilegal.

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council in its latest meeting has recommended omitting Section 69 of the Central GST Act, which lets GST officers arrest before any tax liability is established. The reform keeps every tool needed to pursue genuine fraud, but moves the decision to jail someone from the investigating officer to a criminal court.

"Personal liberty is an important aspect of our constitutional mandate." These words of the Supreme Court in *Siddharth v. State* (2021) echo the Council's aim of "a progressive and trust-based tax regime, while retaining effective deterrence against fraud and evasion." The government is moving from regulating the power of arrest through safeguards to removing that power altogether. This is not a retreat but a recalibration of how the fight against tax evasion is waged, and an assurance of accountability without personal liberty as its casualty.

What is 69? It empowers a commissioner to arrest a person for specified offences under Section 132 even before a showcause notice is issued. It was intended for large-scale fraud such as fake invoicing, bogus input tax credit and circular trading, not as an ordinary instrument of investigation. Its existence cast a shadow over routine probes.

To be sure, safeguards exist. The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs' instructions of 17 August 2022 and 1 September 2022 require officers to weigh the evidence, the person's role and the necessity of arrest. The instruction of 13 January 2025 requires written grounds with the arrest memo. Still, ongoing litigation raises a larger question: is stricter compliance enough or is it time to reconsider the power itself?

Why now? The revenue department told the Supreme Court in *Radhika Agarwal v. Union of India* (2025) that between July 2017 and March 2024, officers probed 79,763 cases and made 1,640 arrests, roughly 2% of the cases. These figures do not prove arbitrariness. But even a small proportion deserves scrutiny when the consequence is loss of liberty before establishing guilt.

The Supreme Court upheld the arrest provisions as constitutionally valid while stressing strict statutory compliance. Recent rulings show why that emphasis matters. In multiple cases such as *Kshitij Ghildiyal v. Directorate General of GST Intelligence* (2025), the courts held arrests or detention unlawful where statutory requirements, including written grounds of arrest and proper documentation, were not met. In *Amit Mehra v. Union of India* (2026), the Supreme Court granted bail after more than eight months in custody without the trial having begun, underlining the dangers of prolonged pre-trial detention. These decisions are not an indictment of officers generally, but show how procedural lapses can curtail liberty.

Not a free pass: The reform does not abolish investigation, searches and seizures, summons, assessment, adjudication, recovery, civil penalties or prosecution for offences that remain punishable. Nor does it grant immunity to evaders. Criminal proceedings can still be pursued, sometimes even before a showcase notice. What changes is the path to jail.

Punishment is also being made proportionate. The prosecution threshold has been raised from ₹1 crore to ₹5 crore, the list of offences in Section 132 has been pruned and the minimum imprisonment term of six months is being removed so that a court may impose only a fine where that is just.

Going soft on fraud? Sceptics may argue that this weakens the state's hands against sophisticated input tax credit rackets. But effective enforcement is not measured by how easily an agency can arrest. Rather, by its ability to establish wrongdoing, recover legitimate dues and secure convictions where warranted. A process grounded in evidence and tested in court may take longer, but offers a far stronger check against misuse.

From fear to discipline: For the business owner, director or chief financial officer, the message is simple. The fear of a knock at the door during an investigation is giving way to the ordinary discipline of law. Keep your records clean, respond to summons, pay what is due on time, and the system is designed to leave you alone. For the fraudster, the court-room door remains wide open, and the department now has the time to walk through it.

The last word—trust extended, accountability intact: The government and the GST Council deserve credit for this reform. Few administrations voluntarily give up a power as potent as arrest, and fewer do so while keeping intact every tool needed to catch fraud. It is the act of a confident state, one that chooses evidence over intimidation. It also sends a signal to industry and investors: India's tax system now extends trust first and asks for proof before it punishes.

Trust runs both ways. Taxpayers must keep their records clean, their vendors genuine and their dues paid on time. The department, in turn, must build cases that stand to judicial scrutiny. Much will depend on how these recommendations are enacted but the direction is unmistakable.

A strong tax administration is not one that arrests most readily but one that can prove wrongdoing, recover legitimate dues and deliver timely justice. The goal is neither leniency nor fear. It is the rule of law.

Ginita Bodani and Sachin Mishra of Trilegal contributed to this article.

QUICK READ

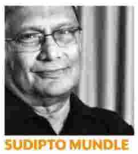
The GST Council deserves credit for removing the powers of officers to arrest even without a showcause notice. This does not mean the law is going soft. Only the path to jail is changing.

For business leaders, the message is clear. One needn't fear a knock on the door during an investigation. Just keep your dealings clean and the agencies will be out of your hair.

THEIR VIEW

India's economic activity faces an 'unequal geography' problem

Productive activity is concentrated in a few states, and regions within them, thus driving income inequality in the country



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PTI

There are breathtaking differences in the scale of economic activity across and within the states of India, and policymakers need to address this unequal geography.

Among the major states, the two richest, Goa and Gujarat, have per capita incomes 10 times and six times that of Bihar, respectively. The top ranked five states account for as much as 50% of India's total gross domestic product (GDP) while the bottom five account for only about 10%. In exports, the top ranked three states—Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu—account for 55% of total exports. The 10 states ranked at the bottom account for less than half-a-percent each.

In investment projects, just three states—Maharashtra, Gujarat and Karnataka—account for over 41% of the total number of projects. The same three states, along with Tamil Nadu, also account for over 62% of total bank credit and 52% of bank deposits. At the opposite end, each of the lowest-ranked 10 states accounts for less than 1% of total bank credit and seven of them have less than 1% of bank deposits.

This sharp concentration of economic activity is also visible at a more granular level when comparing districts within states. Among the better-off states, the district of Bengaluru Urban alone accounts for 40% of Karnataka's gross state domestic product (GSDP). In Telangana, just two districts—Rangareddy and Hyderabad Metropolitan district—account for 35% of the state's GSDP. Similarly, Mumbai and Thane together account for 35% of the GSDP of Maharashtra. Among the poorer states, just three districts in Uttar Pradesh—Gautam Buddha Nagar, Lucknow and Ghaziabad—together account for nearly a quarter of the state's total GSDP. In Rajasthan, Jaipur alone accounts for 15% of GSDP.

In exports, while Gujarat accounts for 77% of total petroleum exports, Jamnagar district accounts for 67%. The world's largest refinery, owned by Reliance Industries, is located there. In electronics, Tamil Nadu accounts for 42% of total exports while the single district of Kanchipuram accounts for 35%. In gems and jewellery exports, Maharashtra accounts for 46% of total exports while the Mumbai Suburban district alone accounts for 38%.

Investment projects also demonstrate extreme concentration. Of the districts currently having investment projects, 115 of them have only one project in 2025-26. Districts having 1-10 projects, the norm, account for 86% of all investment projects. But at the top-end, Mumbai alone has 152 projects, Pune has 127, Bengaluru 87 and Bharuch and Dhar 81 each. Credit flows are similarly concentrated.

Paul Krugman won the Nobel prize for his new theory of economic geography, that competitive market forces would lead to spatial concentration of economic activity, or divergence rather than convergence across regions. The evidence presented demonstrates how this market-driven process of spatial concentration of economic activity is powerfully at work in India.

Much of the wealth and income inequality in the country stems from this unequal geography of economic activity. Since market forces are driving this rising inequality across space, public policy needs to "lean against the wind" and reverse or contain such rising spatial inequality. What policy instruments do we have to deploy such a strategy?

The flow of bank credit, bank deposits, state government revenues and expenditure are all highly correlated with the spatial distribution of economic activity. Conventional monetary or fiscal policy instruments, thus, tend to reinforce rather than contain concentration. Here, the role of the Finance Commissions is important. The Constitution mandates the Finance Commission to address the horizontal imbalance across states, and Finance Commission awards have indeed had an equalizing effect. However, this impact has been very limited compared to the strong impact of market forces in the opposite direction.

Thus, it is likely that the concentration of economic activity will persist, divergence between the advanced and less-developed states will increase and there will be a growing flow of workers from the less-developed states to the advanced. Many village studies confirm this. Urban local governments in the advanced states need to be adequately empowered and resourced to create the infrastructure to absorb such migration: housing, water supply and sanitation, power supply, public transport and communications.

QUICK READ

Strong market forces driving this concentration indicate the skew will stay and so lead to migration to developed states. Urban local bodies must be empowered and funded to absorb their flows.

The Finance Commissions have a role. They can't fund local bodies directly under their mandate but can incentivize states to work on preventing economic concentration.

There is a sharp contrast here between India and China. The provincial governments in China are not as important as the urban local governments, which are very powerful bodies, raise their own resources and are highly competitive with one another in order to attract private investment. In India, in contrast, a conflict of interest in power sharing between elected legislators of state governments and local bodies has left the latter with very little power and weak capacity.

Constitutionally, the Finance Commissions cannot directly assist local governments. However, the horizontal devolution formula can be used, with adequate weights, wherein the states are incentivized to contain the concentration of economic activity within their territories by empowering the local governments.

These are the author's personal views.

MINT CURATOR

Starlink vs Jio: Match national priorities to win Indian favour

Foreign firms must understand what the country wants from them



SRINIVASAN SIVABALAN
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The government can't finance the country's transformation alone. BLOOMBERG

When Jio began trading on Wednesday, its $107 billion valuation put a price on several bets at once: Mukesh Ambani's wager that cheap data could underpin the digital economy of 1.5 billion people; Google and Meta's decision to back him; and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's digital push.

Elon Musk should watch closely. The SpaceX CEO has suggested Ambani's rise owes something to crony capitalism. That misses the more useful lesson for any global firm trying to crack a market that's long been hard to read and harder to profit from: In India, the surest route to commercial success increasingly runs through the government's strategic priorities.

Jio understood that early. Making connectivity cheap and ubiquitous wasn't just a commercial proposition; it served one of New Delhi's central development goals. Reliance deployed billions of dollars in capital, drove data prices to among the world's lowest and in the process amassed more than 500 million customers. The government got infrastructure it could never have financed as quickly on its own. Reliance got a market of extraordinary scale. That symbiosis shows how Indian capitalism works.

Over 12 years, the old idea that government has no business in business has given way to a muscular partnership between the state and private capital. Industrial policy has shifted from protecting small firms towards cultivating firms big enough to make big bets. The logic is that the state can't finance India's transformation alone, so it uses incentives, procurement, strategic investment, regulation and even coercion to draw private capital behind its goals.

The deal isn't without risks. When commercial success depends heavily on alignment with government priorities, the line between industrial policy and favouritism becomes harder to ascertain. Firms with the capital, political access and patience to help New Delhi achieve its goals can acquire advantages rivals struggle to match. That's why Musk's complaint resonates. But moaning about the system isn't a strategy.

Foreign firms aren't shut out. They simply have to understand what the people of India want from them. One route is to back a company already positioned at the centre of a national priority. Meta, Google and other investors put about $20 billion into Jio in 2020, while covid was inflicting a massive economic cost and its cheap-data model was still being tested. They were betting on India's digital transformation.

The other route is harder: Behave like a national champion yourself. That means bringing enough capital, technology and staying power to solve a problem the government considers important. And doing it at a price that works.

Foreign firms have long understood one part of that equation. McDonald's created the McAloo Tikki Burger. Hyundai designed cars with Indian consumers in mind. Samsung adapted appliances to local habits. Chevrolet, Datsun and Carrefour, by contrast, are reminders that global scale and a famous brand don't guarantee success. A product with cult status elsewhere doesn't amount to much if it doesn't solve an Indian problem at a local price.

Under the current government, however, localization isn't enough. The more consequential question is which national priority your investment serves. For Jio, the answer was digital connectivity. For other firms it might be electronics manufacturing, semiconductors, AI, renewable energy or defence. New Delhi has made it increasingly clear where it wants capital and technology deployed. Companies that can align their commercial ambitions with those goals start with an advantage.

Alignment only gets you started, though. Jio's next phase—rolling out its digital offering and launching 1,600 satellites—will expose it to market realities no national-champion status can shield it from: technological disruption, changing consumer behaviour and regulatory setbacks. It must deliver margins that satisfy shareholders without abandoning the cheap data prices on which its empire was built. A public listing will only increase that pressure.

Which brings us back to Musk. Could SpaceX's Starlink succeed in India? Certainly. But permission to sell satellite broadband won't be enough. Starlink would need to convince both New Delhi and Indian customers that its commitment is durable rather than transactional. It would need an Indian operation capable of delivering even if US policy shifts. And it would have to pair high-quality service with Indian-level prices and sustain that commitment for years, perhaps on negligible profits.

If Starlink can do all that, it can compete with Jio. But that would require the company to stop treating India simply as a market to enter and start treating it as a national project. ©BLOOMBERG

GUEST VIEW

We need economic growth with Indian characteristics

SALMAN SOZ



is an author, economist and member of the Indian National Congress.

Imagine a young woman walking into a gleaming office tower in Bengaluru. She has an offer letter to join a top company in India's celebrated information technology industry, which earned revenues of about $283 billion in 2024-25 and employs 5.8 million Indians. Her starting salary is ₹3.6 lakh a year. Given India's notoriously difficult job market, she counts herself lucky.

What she probably doesn't know is that in 2010, the same company offered freshers ₹3.25 lakh a year. Her pay is marginally higher than what her predecessors earned 15 years ago. Prices, meanwhile, have more than doubled. In real terms, her starting salary is half of what it was in 2010.

Stagnant real wages for large sections of India's workforce have become a feature of the economy. The government's own Economic Survey concedes that for salaried and self-employed workers, real earnings in 2023-24 had still not recovered to their 2017-18 level. Every month, the government's Labour Bureau records wages for myriad occupations, from ploughing and harvesting to carpentry and construction. Adjusted for inflation, those wages have barely moved in a decade. Economists Arindam Das and Jean Drèze, using Labour Bureau data, found that inflation-adjusted rural wages grew barely above zero percent a year over the decade to 2023-24.

The situation has worsened lately. Between 2019 and 2024, rural wages rose 5.2% a year in rupees but fell 0.4% a year once inflation is taken into account. But it was not always like this. Between October 2007 and October 2013, a Reserve Bank of India working paper found that average growth in nominal agricultural and non-agricultural wages outpaced inflation by about 7 percentage points. Such high real wage growth has not been seen since.

The plight of the Indian worker stands in stark contrast to the fortunes of corporate India. In 2025-26, profits of the Nifty 500 companies rose to 5.2% of GDP, an all-time high. The government's Economic Survey reports that listed companies' profits nearly tripled between 2020-21 and 2024-25, from ₹2.5 trillion to ₹7.1 trillion (roughly $34 billion to $84 billion).

How does this compare to China? In 2008, migrant workers earned about 1,340 yuan a month. By 2024, they earned 5,634 yuan. That is about three times as much after adjusting for inflation. Further, the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that Chinese urban wages more than tripled in the decade to 2010. That means the wage growth in recent times has been on the back of already growing incomes. The Chinese economy grew and incomes of workers grew with it, while India's economy grew but worker incomes stagnated.

The government is not unaware of any of this. Speaking at the All India Management Association in September, the chief economic advisor told corporate India that "growth changes the country only when it is shared honestly between those who do the work and those who put up the money." He went on to argue that "...if we held down wages, delay paying suppliers, and keep the difference as profit, that becomes self-defeating." The finance minister, addressing the same convention later, said India's next phase of consumption growth would be driven by wage growth and upward mobility, and cautioned companies against building their strategy around affluent urban buyers alone.

QUICK READ

India's flashy headline GDP figures don't reveal the pain underneath. Real incomes haven't risen in years even as corporate profits have swollen thanks to tax cuts.

In contrast, competing economies such as Vietnam have seen real incomes rise. India could follow their model and adjust wages regularly based on living costs to benefit workers.

But these comments are no substitute for policy. And they come without the balm of acknowledgment of a lost decade of wage stagnation. Instead of exhortations that make them sound helpless, perhaps our policymakers should reflect on their policy choices. In 2019, the government gave corporate India one of the biggest tax cuts ever, with ₹1.45 trillion a year in forgone revenue. The Prime Minister tweeted that "The step to cut corporate tax is historic. It will give a great stimulus to #MakeInIndia, attract private investment from across the globe, improve competitiveness of our private sector, create more jobs and result in a win-win for 130 crore Indians." The promised broad-based investment boom did not follow on anything like the scale advertised, and the mixed evidence on corporate tax cuts did not justify the certainty with which those claims were made.

The lesson from other countries is that wage growth is a policy choice. Vietnam, which competes with India for factories leaving China, offers the clearest example. Every year, it revises the minimum wage, keeping in mind living costs and inflation. It raised the floor by 6% in 2024 and 7.2% in 2026, and has recommended a 7.8% increase for 2027. Meanwhile, investment has been strong. China's Communist Party has written into its latest five-year plan that a greater share of national income should go to those who work, and that wages should rise at a reasonable rate. This in a country where the average factory worker is far better-off than their Indian counterpart. Meanwhile, India's government asks its companies to be fair and leaves it at that. Exhortation is not policy.

Following the release of the gross domestic product data for the first-quarter of 2026-27, the Prime Minister asked the country to celebrate India's 7.8% growth rate. But a growth rate is not an end, and it is time we looked at India's growth model more critically. We must ask what use is the economic growth that is disconnected from personal growth.

the hindu businessline.
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Stock against shock

India should move fast to boost strategic oil reserves

For more than six years after December 2014, oil prices were below $65 a barrel, touching $19 a barrel in April 2020, coinciding with the outbreak of Covid. Prices have ruled firm since the Ukraine war which began in February 2022. In terms of creating storage and buying up for adverse times, India could have fared better. However, a course correction is in progress.

India's current strategic petroleum reserve (SPR) capacity stands at a modest 5.33 million tonnes (MT) across underground caverns in Visakhapatnam, Mangaluru, and Padur. This provides barely a week's worth of current daily consumption, even as commercial stocks with oil companies account for over two months' demand. These capacities are inadequate to cope with geopolitical risk. The government had granted in-principle approval for Phase II expansion of the SPR by 6.5 MT in 2018 — comprising Padur (2.5 MT) and a new facility at Chandikhol in Odisha (4 MT). The Padur project was awarded to a private concessionaire only in 2025, while Chandikhol is yet to see progress. This delay is surprising. The government must expedite Phase II execution and initiate Phase III greenfield site selections. Industry estimates peg Beijing's strategic oil reserve capacity at roughly 360 million barrels — almost 10 times India's. While China's economic size justifies such large reserves, these provide energy security in times of global risk. To boot, India's modest strategic oil reserve facilities are often part-empty. In December last, the Comptroller and Auditor General pulled up the government for chronic underutilisation, given that capacity usage had hovered between 8.74 per cent and 58.41 per cent from FY18 to FY24, except in FY21.

While procuring crude to ramp up reserves imposes a heavy fiscal strain, India's 2018 commercial model with Abu Dhabi's national oil company ADNOC offers a proven template. ADNOC stores its oil in ISPRL's caverns in Padur. Amid escalating regional volatility, Saudi Aramco is reportedly exploring arrangements with other nations to store its crude. India did sign an MoU with the oil firm in 2018, but execution was stalled as priorities changed for the oil producer. The government must seal such storage arrangements with foreign producers. Commercial leasing to refiners — as demonstrated by HPCL and MRPL — frees locked-up sovereign capital while preserving India's absolute first right of refusal during supply emergencies. Waiting for the crisis to worsen in order to build infrastructure is a hazardous ploy.

Finally, state oil marketing companies should maintain a fixed minimum percentage of crude stocks within ISPRL caverns. India should actively bring to fruition overseas storage strategies across the world — such as the UAE/Fujairah framework signed in May this year. It could potentially store oil in Abu Dhabi, counting it as part of India's reserves. Oil vulnerability is too serious to be ignored.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH





Operationalise life cover for delivery workers

CRITICAL GAP. An easy, initial fix would be to compulsorily make PMJJBY and PMSBY as anchor risk covers for gig workers

MURALI KUMAR K



TC SUSEEL KUMAR
R SUDHAKAR

Visualise a narrative. At 11.30 pm on a Saturday night in Banjara Hills in Hyderabad, a young delivery rider completed his last order. He had been working non-stop since noon and he was all set to go to his room. He was 33 years old, earning between ₹18,000 and ₹25,000 a month across two platforms. He had a severe chest pain and died of a cardiac arrest en route back to his room. His wife reached the platform's office two days later. She was told the insurance covered only accidents and heart attack is not an accident. She left with tearful eyes and his helmet, carrying nothing else but her grief and a broken future. This is not fiction — these are disturbing, stark realities. A ride-hailing gig worker dies of a natural cause and his family discovers that the insurance cover his company provided does not cover the way he died. Variants of this nature recur across major platforms and locations.

Sections 113 and 114 of the Code on Social Security, 2020, require the Central and State Governments to frame schemes for gig and platform workers covering, "life and disability cover, accident insurance, health and maternity benefits." Life cover is the first item mentioned. The code came into force on November 21, 2025. Draft rules under the code were notified on December 30, 2025, proposing eligibility after 90 days after being engaged by the platform. The accident benefit has been introduced: yet the provision of life cover to gig workers has not been operationalised.

The Motor Vehicle Aggregator Guidelines 2020, notified by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways on November 26, 2020, specified that ₹10 lakh term life assurance must be provided by every aggregator to their registered drivers. This is a pre-condition for commencing operations by the aggregators. As of May 2026, almost six years after the notification, there appears to be no public record of any such compliance nor an enforcement action by the MoRTH. The July 2025 revised Motor Vehicle Aggregator Guidelines reassert the same ₹10 lakh term life cover. And the gap continues to exist.

WHAT ACTUALLY EXISTS

The major quick-commerce, food delivery, and ride-hailing platforms are increasingly providing insurance covers for their workers. Most of these are group personal accident policies that cover deaths or disability due to accidents. The risk cover that is missing is the any-cause death cover which is precisely what term life assurance covers. Karnataka enacted the Platform Based Gig workers (Social Security and Welfare) Act, 2025, which provides a statutory life cover of ₹2 lakh — the only State law that provides a life cover payable on natural death. The ₹2 lakh cover is nominal as compared to the ₹10 lakh term benefit which is prescribed for the ride-hailing app's drivers, though yet to be operationalised, and separately nothing is prescribed nor operationalised for delivery workers. With this sole exception of Karnataka, the other States, though having their respective welfare boards, have not included the provision of term life insurance in any of their Acts.

The Ministry of Labour must move its Code on Social Security from draft rules to an operational scheme with life cover as a defined, non-discretionary benefit for delivery riders.

An easy fix could be riding on what is already available. Both the Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (age 18 to 50 and extendable to 55) and Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (age 18 to 70) are available for every Indian through the banks. The PMJJBY covers ₹2 lakh for any-cause death cover for ₹436 and the PMSBY ₹2 lakh accidental death cover for ₹20. The covers are underwritten by commercial life as well as general insurance companies. Presently these are voluntary. For the gig workers it can be made compulsory with the premiums either borne by the platforms or deducted from the first-time earnings of the platform workers from the point of onboarding.

TERM INSURANCE STILL CRUCIAL

Delivery riders carry significant additional risks due to various factors. Night time deliveries, the quick delivery stress, constant app interaction, frequent use of mobiles while driving, an unwieldy bag that changes the centre of gravity, riding without timely meals and financial insecurity all lead to stress and lifestyle diseases and consequently increased mortality. The hours of duty, night shift frequency, accident history, city and traffic zones, and telematics — all are data logged and held by the platforms that can form the very basis of risk assessment. Insurance markets exist precisely to convert emerging risks into measurable pools of homogenous categories. Present non-availability of proper assessment does not eliminate the obligation towards the risk takers.

DECISIONS THAT WILL HELP

The MoRTH should enforce the Motor Vehicle Aggregator Guidelines for ride-hailing platforms in letter and spirit. The renewal of licence of the platforms should be conditional on provision of term life insurance to the drivers. The Ministry of Labour must move its Code on Social Security from draft rules to an operational scheme with life cover as a defined, non-discretionary benefit for delivery riders.

The IRDAI should issue product circulars specific to the category for platform workers, with rules and regulations specifying the master policyholder, the terms of enrolment and the sum insured for each category of insurance under life and general.

Platforms must take up matters with both the ministries and IRDAI for bringing the PMJJBY and PMSBY risk covers as the anchor risk cover as a beginning.

The 1.2 crore workers today, a number expected to reach 2.3 crore by 2030, per NITI Aayog study, Not one of them, if he dies tonight of causes unrelated to an accident, has a life insurance claim his family can bank upon. The distance between intent and action is what this article asks the authorities to act upon.

Suseel is former Managing Director, and Sudhakar is former Executive Director, LIC. Views are personal. All data are from publicly available sources

HDFC Bank — many questions unanswered

Recent developments raise concerns over whether the Bank's systems are above board

Rajasekhar VK

On October 27, Anup Bagchi took charge as HDFC Bank's managing director and CEO. He inherits a bank that has investigated, disclosed and disciplined. He also inherits questions it has not answered.

An institution capable of identifying its own shortcomings and acting on them should receive credit. But the existence of an investigation cannot, by itself, establish the adequacy of the arrangements that preceded it. Governance must be assessed across the entire spectrum: approval, monitoring, detection, escalation, accountability and correction, not merely at the point of disclosure.

Atanu Chakraborty's resignation letter of March 17 expressed concern about practices he considered inconsistent with his values and ethics. It did not identify a particular transaction or individual. It appreciated several control functions, though. The ethical objection and the appreciation coexist; neither cancels the other.

The external legal review disagreed. The June 26 disclosure said the firms had examined documents and conducted interviews and found that the statement and its implications were not substantiated. This was a substantive conclusion. Separately, the bank's July 27 disclosure recorded disciplinary action concerning arrangements with the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC). It described business overreach, distinguished it from *mala fide* action, personal enrichment and improper motive, and referred to potential divergence from RBI directions. Warnings and monetary discipline were disclosed. Whether the review examined MSRDC at all is still not known.

There are three possible explanations. One is deliberate circumvention: individuals may have bypassed safeguards that were otherwise adequate. Another is deficient implementation: suitable controls may have existed but were not applied effectively. A third is defective design: the prescribed procedures may themselves have left an important risk insufficiently addressed.

REMEDIES DIFFER

Why does this matter? It matters because the remedies differ. A rule deliberately evaded may require enforcement and better detection. A rule routinely ignored may require changes in supervision and incentives. A rule followed faithfully but incapable of addressing the risk may require redesign. Adding another committee would accomplish little if the actual problem lay elsewhere.

A review is only as good as its brief. The June 26 findings deserve weight within the scope of what the firms were asked to examine, but that scope is not the whole story. The review says it invited Chakraborty again and again. He says he asked for the remit and legal framework and never refused. Both cannot be fully verified without the correspondence.



THE BOARD. Must explain the question an inquiry addressed ISTOCKPHOTO

What we can say is this: his non-participation is not a confession, and his objection is not proof of a sham. But could he have cooperated without those terms? That question is still open.

A US class action suit has been filed by investors alleging that the bank failed to disclose the MSRDC matter adequately. Whatever its merits, it raises the same questions in a different forum: what did the bank know, when did it know it, and what did it tell the market? Those questions have not been answered.

Public explanation matters. Shareholders should be able to understand, at a useful level, what an inquiry examined, what responsibility it established and what changed as a result. Confidentiality does have a legitimate place: personnel information, customer records and unfinished inquiries may require protection. But a board can nevertheless explain the question an inquiry addressed, the broad basis of its conclusions, the responsibility established and the correction undertaken, without exposing protected information.

Bagchi inherits more than these questions. He takes charge of a bank whose low-cost deposit ratio reportedly has fallen to 32.3 per cent, whose net interest margin has touched a record low of 3.26 per cent, and whose credit-deposit ratio remains near 96 per cent three years after the merger. Its shares have fallen 27 per cent this year. The reported strategy — rebuild brand and trust, optimise the balance sheet, prepare for the future — suggests that the board understands the two are connected. Trust is not a soft asset in banking. It is the very foundation.

The record so far justifies asking harder questions about how HDFC Bank's governance actually worked. It does not establish individual concealment or a systemic defect. The existence of safeguards cannot settle their adequacy, just as the occurrence of a problem cannot settle their failure.

The test for the new leadership is whether the institution can connect its rules to decisions, its decisions to responsibility, and its response to demonstrable correction.

The writer is a lawyer and former Judicial Member of National Company Law Tribunal

LETTERS TO EDITOR

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Rising bond yields

This refers to 'Bond blues' (October 29). The hardening of bond yields reflects the double whammy facing the RBI from global and domestic factors. Persistent inflation and elevated debt-to-GDP ratios in the US and Europe have kept global bond markets under pressure. India, in turn, faces inflationary risks from the El Niño effect and rising crude oil prices, which could push up food, fuel and other input costs. Liquidity conditions arising from the special FCNR(B) mobilisation drive have added to the RBI's challenges, while OMO sales can exert upward pressure on bond yields. This could increase the government's borrowing costs in H2 FY27.

Srinivasan Velamur
Chennai

CBAM deal

This refers to 'India pushes for more talks with UK on CBAM rules ahead of Jan 1 rollout' (October 29). The UK had earlier recognised India's Carbon Credit Trading Scheme as a qualifying scheme. The mechanism looks simple. If an Indian producer has already paid a verified carbon price for the five items manufactured in India which attract CBAM charge, namely cement, aluminium, steel, fertilizer and hydrogen, the UK importer can claim credit or relief under UK's CBAM. The difference between the carbon price recognised as relief and the actual CBAM charge shall alone be payable by the Indian exporter. India hopes to get fair deal on CBAM.

RV Baskaran
Pune

Threat to journalism

The Digital News Publishers Association's (DNPA's) warning that the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 will "shut down news rooms" deserves serious attention. Requiring prior consent and compelled erasure for journalistic work is unworkable and strikes at Article 19(1)(a). Journalism is already regulated by the Press Council. The Act's failure to exempt *bona fide* journalistic activity contradicts the Puttaswamy judgment. The CJI's call to balance privacy with public's right to information is welcome.

Shanti Prasad
Bengaluru

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Layoffs are now routine

Indian tech should stop waiting for them to pass

Pravin Kaushal

Earlier, a big layoff meant that the company was in trouble.

But now companies cut jobs in in the same quarter they report record profits and announce share buybacks. Layoffs have become a routine part of how companies are run.

Just look at the last few days. Microsoft has offered about 60,000 people, more than a quarter of its workforce, money to leave.

Though the company says its voluntary, for the staff on the list, it doesn't feel like that.

In the Netherlands, the government reportedly wants to cut around 25,000 civil service jobs and use AI to do the work. When governments, not just startups, start planning their payrolls around AI, the idea is clearly here to stay.

By August, one tracker had counted over 126,000 tech workers laid off this year, more than in the whole of 2025.

Over a third of those cuts were blamed on AI. Last year it was about one in six.

But a lot of these cuts would have happened anyway. Tech companies hired far too many people in 2021 and 2022, and now they're spending tens of billions on data centres. Salaries are the easiest cost to cut. It's also much easier to tell shareholders "AI did it" than "we hired too many people".

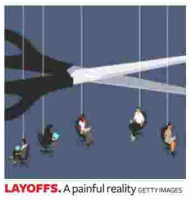
A large survey of senior executives for the US National Bureau of Economic Research found that about nine in ten haven't seen any productivity gain from AI yet.

But the AI tools are getting better fast. They already write much of the code junior engineers used to write. Investors are pricing AI companies as if a lot of office work will soon be almost free. If AI starts to deliver on even part of that, this year's cuts will look small.

What bothers me most is what happens to young people. Earlier waves of automation took away boring, repetitive work, but people still had a way to learn on the job. You started with simple tasks, made mistakes, got better and moved up.

AI is now taking over those simple tasks, and with them goes the training ground. Companies are hiring fewer freshers but still need experienced people to check what the AI produces.

India has more to lose than most countries. Our IT services industry was built on a simple idea: more work needs more people, and more people means more billing. Clients abroad now want smaller teams and lower bills, and they want a share of whatever AI saves them. That idea is breaking, and I don't think it comes back when the American economy picks up.



LAYOFFS. A painful reality GETTY IMAGES

We also love to celebrate global capability centres as the future of Indian tech. They may well be. But for the parent company, they're a cost. When the head office needs to save money, these offices are often the first place it looks.

The effects won't stay inside tech. Think of a mid-career engineer in Hyderabad or Pune with a home loan and two children in a private school. If that salary stops, the family stops spending.

Builders and banks in our tech cities have planned big projects on the assumption that these salaries will keep coming.

ACTION PLAN

So what should we do? IT companies need to stop selling hours and start charging for results.

They need to build their own products instead of only renting out engineers. They should also rethink the fresher's job, so that young engineers learn by working alongside AI tools rather than being replaced by them.

The government can soften the blow by raising the ₹5 lakh tax exemption on exit payouts. People must also learn to save enough to get through a year or two without salary.

Think twice before taking on a big new loan. Get properly good at using AI tools, because the people who can get real work done with them will be the ones who stay.

New kinds of work will come out of this, as they always have. But getting there will be hard, and some families will go through difficult years.

The worst thing Indian tech can do is assume this is a bad patch that will pass on its own.

The writer is a tech entrepreneur, public policy commentator & columnist



RAJIB DASGUPTA
RISHIRAJ BHAGAWATI

Paying for India's typhoid burden



HEALTHY NATION. Vaccination is crucial for the prevention of typhoid. It must be complemented by safe water, sanitation and food hygiene

GETTY IMAGES

A modelling study published in The Lancet Regional Health Southeast Asia estimated 4.9 million typhoid fever cases and 7,850 deaths in India in 2023. Worryingly, upwards of 80 per cent were resistant to common antibiotics. Typhoid fever related economic burden was put at ₹12,300 crore. Around 70,000 households were estimated to face catastrophic health spending, placing other basic needs at risk. Children under 10 accounted for more than half the economic burden.

The risks are substantially higher in urban, specifically low-income settlements, than rural settings. An Indian cohort study of 24,062 children (6 months to 14 years) found an incidence per 100,000 child-years of 576 to 1,173 cases in the urban and 35 in rural sites.

Typhoid fever, or enteric fever, is a bacterial infection caused by Salmonella typhi (S. typhi). The classical symptoms include high fever (undiagnosed, it can last for weeks), pain in the abdomen, diarrhoea and vomiting. Untreated enteric fever may result in serious complications such as perforation of the intestines and complications in heart, lungs and the neurological system. Apart from sporadic cases, focal outbreaks have been reported from most Indian towns and cities.

This would typically mean a child with a persistent fever who needs care. For a parent paid by the day, accompanying that child to a clinic can also mean losing the day's earnings. Tests, medicines and travel add to the bill. If hospitalisation follows, a household must find more money just as less is coming in. About 2-5 per cent of the patients become chronic carriers of the infection, a state that can persist for years, acting as a reservoir. They intermittently shed the bacteria in stool or urine which in turn gets transmitted to other humans.

On the other hand, up to a quarter of the of asymptomatic chronic carriers may not have any clinical history of the disease. Typhoid fever makes this predicament familiar in India. Spread through contaminated food and water, typhoid highlights the limits of asking families to manage health risks through personal precautions. A parent can wash a child's hands, but ensuring that the neighbourhood's water supply is safe requires public action.

The estimates of this disease burden should change how we think about the cost of prevention. A vaccination budget records expenditure on doses and delivery. The costs of leaving children exposed are scattered across household accounts, in the forms of consultation fees, transport, missed work and care. Their absence from a government balance sheet does not make them disappear.

The question, beyond what it costs the state to vaccinate children, is also what it costs families and society when prevention is delayed. Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) adds to the stakes. Another study estimated that over four-fifths of India's typhoid hospitalisations in 2023 involved infections resistant to fluoroquinolones, an important antibiotic class. Vaccination can prevent susceptible and resistant infections alike, reducing the need for antibiotics and helping preserve their effectiveness. That benefit reaches beyond the vaccinated child.

CONJUGATE VACCINE

India has an effective preventive tool. Trials of an Indian-made typhoid conjugate vaccine in Nepal, Malawi and Bangladesh demonstrated 79 to 85 per cent protection in children over 18-24 months of follow-up. India's national immunisation advisory group recommended including typhoid conjugate vaccine in the Universal Immunisation Programme in 2022.

The World Health Organization's August 2026 guidance recommends typhoid conjugate vaccination in settings with high disease incidence or a high burden of drug-resistant typhoid. India's manufacturing capacity gives it the means to act on that advice. Public financing and delivery should ensure that protection reaches children according to need, whatever their parents earn.

Much of the economic case depends on who benefits or stands to benefit. Public vaccination could reduce treatment expenses and protect earnings that families would otherwise lose. Those benefits deserve weight in spending decisions. Financial protection is a legitimate and crucial return on public investment.

An Indian modelling study from 2021 found that routine vaccination and catch-up campaigns could save society money by averting illness costs. Such findings support investment, but depend on assumptions about disease incidence, vaccine prices, coverage and duration of protection. Another Indian analysis found less favourable economics in rural settings where incidence is low.

The appropriate response is a rollout designed around local burden, with transparent costs. WHO's updated guidance this year also addresses waning protection and the possible need for boosters in certain settings. Procurement and delivery plans must reflect the protection children need over time.

Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation's public typhoid vaccination campaign in 2018 administered more than 1,13,000 doses to children. Its costing study documented the resources needed for community mobilisation and delivery, including the value of existing staff time. A vaccine's purchase price captures only part of the investment.

A phased programme could begin in high burden districts, pairing routine vaccination with catch-up campaigns. The Union Ministry should support procurement planning and establish common reporting standards, while State governments should publish costed implementation plans covering staffing, outreach and delivery. Municipal health services can help identify and reach underserved communities, including children in informal settlements, migrants and those outside school.

An accountability framework should be built into the rollout. States should provide for laboratory diagnosis and antimicrobial resistance surveillance, with Central support where needed. Annual public reporting should track expenditure, vaccine coverage, district-level reach, confirmed typhoid cases, resistance patterns and household spending on treatment. These indicators would allow governments to assess programme performance and financial protection.

NEED FOR SURVEILLANCE

Then comes surveillance; prioritisation needs better surveillance alongside it. Areas with fewer laboratories can appear to have little typhoid simply because infections are not confirmed. Funding diagnosis and resistance monitoring would help direct vaccination and judge its impact. Programme evaluation should track household expenditure and antibiotic use alongside cases and coverage.

Along with these, safe water, sanitation and food hygiene remain indispensable. Public vaccination belongs alongside investment in these services. Where unsafe living conditions expose children to infection, making protection depend on a family's ability to purchase a vaccine compounds the disadvantage. Prevention should reach people according to need.

Vaccination must complement a citizen's core entitlements: accountable municipal services that deliver safe water, sanitation and food hygiene, not substitute for them. But preventing typhoid also means preventing the loss of earnings and savings that illness imposes on families. Those costs belong in the national economic calculation, and in the decisions about how India finances prevention.

Public vaccination could reduce treatment expenses and protect earnings that families would otherwise lose. Those benefits deserve weight in spending decisions

Dasgupta is Chairperson, Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Member, One Health Working Group, World Federation of Public Health Associations; Bhagawati is Senior Research Analyst, One Health Trust. Views expressed are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

October 30, 2006

Insurance cos to be allowed to invest in SEZs
Insurance companies can invest in special economic zones (SEZs), particularly in infrastructure such as roads and power plants and other facilities. Mr C.S. Rao, Chairman of the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDA), said that the regulator would not make an exception for SEZs.

Ethanol supply: Oil cos to start price talks this week
The public sector oil marketing companies will initiate final price negotiations for sourcing ethanol from sugar mills during the coming week. It is learnt that the technical and financial bids for tenders floated by the oil marketing companies– for an aggregate quantity of 580 million litres – have so far been opened in all States, barring Punjab.

Reliance launches 'Reliance Fresh', 'Reliance Select'
Reliance Industries has unveiled the much-talked about Reliance Fresh brand, the first format of the company's Rs 25,000-crore retail initiative, here on Sunday. Simultaneously, it launched its 'Reliance Select', an exclusive grocery products brand. The store at Banjara Hills will be among a set of pilot stores the company is opening in Hyderabad on November 3.

US economy posts strong growth on spending, investment boost

Mark Niquette

The US economy expanded in the third quarter at the fastest pace in a year, supercharged by feverish business investment and a resilient American consumer.

Inflation-adjusted gross domestic product increased an annualized 3.4 per cent in the three months through September after growing 2.2 per cent in the second quarter, according to an initial estimate issued Thursday by the Bureau of Economic Analysis. That exceeded the median projection in a Bloomberg survey of economists.

The world's largest economy continued to be energized by vibrant business spending, largely tied to investment in artificial intelligence. Outlays for equipment contributed more to GDP in the third quarter than at any time since 2011 outside of the pandemic rebound.

Household spending was similarly robust, increasing an annualised 3.8 per cent for a second straight quarter, even as rising prices erode paychecks and keep consumer sentiment depressed.

"The print shows an economy that's performing pretty well under the surface," said Andrew Husby, a senior US economist at BNP Paribas. "The numbers also reinforce that the economy is supported by the AI buildout and the accompanying tailwinds, though it's not the only thing driving economic growth."



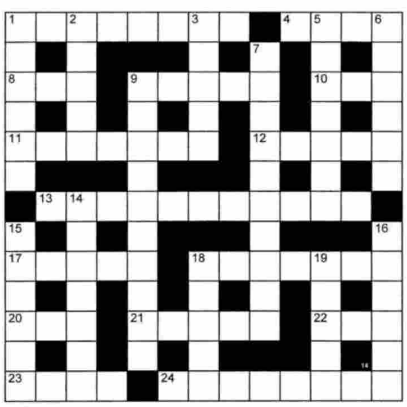
US ECONOMY. Robust show REUTERS

The report is the last major reading on the health of the US economy before next week's mid-term elections. The results will determine who controls Congress for US President Donald Trump's final two years in office, with many campaigns targeting concerns around affordability and high prices.

Business investment climbed an annualised 12.7 per cent, the most since 2020. Outlays on information processing equipment and software remained strong, but there were also signs of broadening beyond that: Contributions to growth from other categories of investment over the last two quarters were the strongest in three years after a stretch of weakness in 2025 and early 2026.

Net exports subtracted 3.3 percentage points from the calculation of third-quarter GDP, the most since early last year. BLOOMBERG

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2767



EASY

ACROSS

01. To number pages of book (8)
04. Select (4)
08. Record of voyage (3)
09. A jointure, endowment (5)
10. Become solid (3)
11. Marked in folds (7)
12. Dig deeply into (5)
13. Spy working for both sides (6-5)
17. Wary, cautious (5)
18. Raise an objection (7)
20. Be ill (3)
21. 5th or 7th of Roman month (5)
22. Instrument for boring small holes (3)
23. Enumeration, catalogue (4)
24. A slut, an untidy woman (8)

DOWN

01. Course of action (6)
02. Lively old triple-time dance (5)
03. Hauled along by rope (5)
05. An extract from the pancreas (7)
06. Young feline (6)
07. Monstrous; astonishing (10)
09. Failing to follow an order (10)
14. They were mouthpieces for the gods (7)
15. Hasty, untidy handwriting (6)
16. Hot (pinched) (6)
18. Instrument-board (5)
19. Rub, scrape out (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. How to number the pages of book for pet again (8)
04. Choose something that's ground-breaking (4)
08. Record the progress of an insensitive person (3)
09. A jointure one drew nothing out of (5)
10. It will begin to form where filming is taking place (3)
11. Got rumpled as one doubled oneself up with laughter (7)
12. Rummage deep inside a model vessel (5)
13. Spy, counter-spy, in a word that's hyphenated (6-5)
17. The cautious cleaner has yen for it (5)
18. Object to a non-amateur trial (7)
20. Influenza, illness that shows one how to be poorly (3)
21. A Roman date when one could nose around the North first (5)
22. It bores everybody, by the sound of it (3)
23. There is a selvage in the catalogue (4)
24. A slovenly woman might startle nervous beginner (8)

DOWN

01. There is documentary evidence of insurance in statecraft (6)
02. In passing, I guess it's a dance from the past (5)
03. Being given a hitch to get hitched (5)
05. A protein hormone one will almost abuse when at home (7)
06. Coming from Kent, it might be a little Persian (6)
07. The astonishing way I do group is wrong (10)
09. Boy I signed like this for not doing as he was told (10)
14. They speak for the gods, so clear out! (7)
15. Law's about to give one credit for bad writing (6)
16. Lets on how hot it can be (6)
18. Board that shows the list of patients (5)
19. In Winter, a seafarer may wipe it out (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2766

ACROSS 1. Langouste 5. Cod 7. Cave 8. Paradigm 10. Serenade 11. Spur 13. Saloon 15. Charms 18. Buck 19. Credible 22. Usufruct 23. Barb 24. Hoe 25. Pertinent

DOWN 1. Locusts 2. Never 3. Shandy 4. Elan 5. Clipper 6. Demur 9. Snoop 12. Shady 14. Lecture 16. Sherbet 17. Grocer 18. Blush 20. Blaze 21. Crop

Editor's TAKE

Beyond evacuation: What cyclone Arnab demands

Better forecasting and timely evacuations have reduced casualties, but climate change is raising the stakes. India must be prepared for future cyclones

Cyclone Arnab hit the Indian coast, causing death and destruction that go with the fury of cyclones. Of late, the frequency of cyclones has increased, thanks to climate change. The repetition is a warning: India's eastern seaboard no longer faces the occasional storm; it lives inside a season of them.

The early evidence suggests the machinery of preparedness worked. The India Meteorological Department tracked the system for days and forecast landfall between Bapatla and Visakhapatnam well in advance. Tens of thousands of people were moved into shelters.

Compare this with the 1999 super cyclone, which claimed close to 10,000 lives in Odisha. That tragedy forced a rethink: hundreds of cyclone shelters, institutionalised early warnings and large-scale evacuations. The shift from relief to prevention is India's quiet disaster-management success story. Even this time, fishing was suspended, schools were shut and trains were cancelled in advance, while Odisha readied shelters despite landfall occurring in a neighbouring state. Yet success must not breed complacency.

Four things must change. First, protect the lifelines. Fallen poles and exposed cables kill after the storm has passed. Dense coastal towns need underground cabling, pre-emptive shutdowns accompanied by clear public warnings, and crews trained to make lines safe before restoration begins.

Second, defend livelihoods as seriously as lives. Arnab has damaged crops, houses and roads, and the Chief Minister has asked for a central assessment team. Losses fall hardest on tenant farmers, fishers and families in kutcha homes.

India needs cyclone-resilient housing standards that are actually enforced, faster crop-insurance payouts, and compensation that reaches people in days, not months.

Third, plan for the storms we are actually getting. Warming seas help cyclones intensify faster, and slow-moving systems like Arnab, which crawled at barely 3 km/h near landfall, dump enormous amounts of rain: over 300 mm in Visakhapatnam.

Mitigation funds must be spent before disasters, not after, and states with proven models, Odisha's above all, should share them with their neighbours. The measure of a cyclone response is no longer merely how many were evacuated. It is how few died, how quickly lives were rebuilt, and how much safer the coast is before the next storm forms. Arnab was survived. The next one must be mastered.

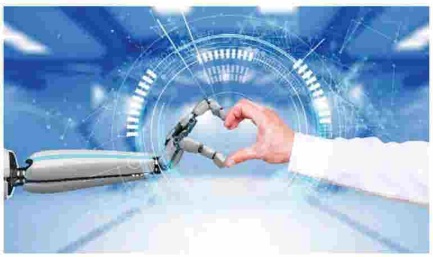
Indeed, investments in technology and better disaster management have paid off, but there is a long way to go before we can say that we have nullified natural disasters. The key is to remain vigilant and prepare for such eventualities before they occur.

India must turn disruption into opportunity

Every technological revolution has sparked fears of job losses, yet many have created new industries and livelihoods. As artificial intelligence reshapes the world of work, India must invest in skills, innovation and infrastructure to turn disruption into an engine of growth and shared prosperity



SANTHOSH MATHEW



"Technology cannot be stopped, even if God wills it" is a popular saying that captures the dilemma of our times. Every technological revolution generates anxiety about its consequences, particularly among those who fear losing their livelihoods or traditional ways of life. History offers a powerful lesson: technologies once viewed with suspicion often become indispensable instruments of progress. Artificial intelligence (AI), the latest stage of this transformation, should be seen not merely as a threat to employment but as an opportunity for India to create new industries, livelihoods and prosperity.

Resistance to technological change is not new. Around 2,500 years ago, the Greek philosopher Socrates reportedly expressed concern that writing would weaken human memory and encourage people to depend on written records rather than their own minds. Centuries later, when the printing press transformed the circulation of knowledge, some religious authorities feared that printing sacred texts would diminish their sanctity and undermine established authority. The spread of printed books, instead, expanded literacy, encouraged debate and made knowledge accessible to millions. What was once considered a threat eventually became one of humanity's greatest instruments of intellectual progress. The Industrial Revolution produced similar apprehensions. When machines began transforming production, fears grew that human labour would become redundant. In the late sixteenth century, Queen Elizabeth I of England reportedly opposed a patent for a knitting machine because it could threaten the livelihoods of hand-knitters. The concern reflected the tension between technological innovation and the protection of existing occupations. Industrialisation eventually transformed economies, created new industries and changed the nature of work, although its benefits were unevenly distributed and many workers experienced hardship during the transition.

Economists and social commentators also warned that mechanisation and computerisation could eliminate employment on a massive scale. During the twentieth century, the arrival of computers revived fears that machines would replace office workers and make many conventional occupations unnecessary. Automation intensified these concerns by enabling machines to perform tasks previously carried out by people. Nevertheless, computerisation also created new professions in software development, information technology, telecommunications, digital services and systems management. India's IT industry is a striking example of how a technology initially associated with disruption can become a source of economic growth and employment.

EDUCATION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT WILL DETERMINE HOW SUCCESSFULLY INDIA BENEFITS FROM THIS TRANSFORMATION. UNIVERSITIES SHOULD INTEGRATE AI LITERACY INTO UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION, WHILE SCHOOLS CAN INTRODUCE AGE-APPROPRIATE DIGITAL SKILLS AND COMPUTATIONAL THINKING

The writer is a Professor at the Centre for South Asian Studies, School of International Studies and Social Sciences, Pondicherry Central University

Kerala provides an especially interesting illustration. In the 1980s, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Democratic Front organised a statewide bandh against computerisation. Computers were seen as instruments that could destroy jobs and undermine workers' security. Trade unions feared that machines would make employees redundant, while many people were uncertain about the future of work. These concerns reflected genuine anxieties in a society where employment was central to economic security.

Today, computers are indispensable across political parties, government offices and educational institutions. Even Communist parties that once opposed computerisation now rely on it. Yesterday's symbol of job destruction has become an everyday tool, showing that permanent resistance to technological change is rarely effective. AI has revived these anxieties. Its ability to perform language, data analysis and decision-making tasks threatens jobs in customer service, programming and data entry, putting entry-level employment under pressure. These risks must be acknowledged rather than dismissed.

At the same time, focusing exclusively on job losses means overlooking the new opportunities emerging around AI. Data centres require engineers, electricians, cooling-system specialists, cybersecurity professionals and network technicians. The manufacture of microchips, robots, drones and advanced machinery will generate demand for hardware engineers and skilled technicians. AI development also creates opportunities in data management, algorithm design, energy infrastructure, ethical oversight and specialised technical services. The benefits extend beyond software companies to construction, manufacturing, logistics and maintenance. India has an opportunity to build on its established strengths in information and communication technology. The growth of the IT industry has supported millions of livelihoods and strengthened the country's position in the global services economy. AI could open another chapter in this journey. Global investment in computing infrastructure, digital services and advanced manufacturing can create employment, encourage research and strengthen India's technological capabilities. These outcomes are not guaranteed, though. They require reliable infrastructure, investment, innovation and policies that encourage domestic enterprises to participate in the emerging economy.

Education and skill development will determine how successfully India benefits from AI. Universities and schools must promote AI literacy and digital skills, while technical institutions should offer practical training in emerging technologies. Workers affected by automation need opportunities to reskill. The aim is to equip young people to use technology effectively in their chosen professions.

The government must also ensure that the benefits of AI are widely shared. New technologies should not deepen inequality or concentrate wealth in a handful of corporations. Small businesses, farmers, local enterprises and rural communities should be able to use digital tools to improve productivity and access markets. Social protection and retraining programmes will be essential for workers who face displacement. Technological progress becomes meaningful when it improves human welfare and creates opportunities for people across social and economic backgrounds.

From Socrates' concerns about writing to the anxieties surrounding printing, industrial machinery, computers and artificial intelligence, history repeatedly demonstrates that new technologies challenge established habits and institutions. The answer is neither blind celebration nor unconditional resistance. It is informed adaptation, responsible regulation and the development of human capabilities.

India must learn from the computer revolution and prepare for the AI revolution. Instead of allowing fear to dominate the debate, we should invest in skills, encourage innovation and create an environment in which new industries can flourish. Technology may change the nature of work, but our response will determine whether that change becomes a burden or an opportunity. The time has come for India not merely to witness the AI revolution, but to reap its harvest.

Daiv Vani

WISDOM FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Fear and the Art of Letting Go

Fear is often at its greatest around things that are not even there.

A traveller, walking home at dusk, sees a snake lying across the path. His heart pounds, his legs freeze, and he turns back by a longer road, shaken for hours. In the morning light, he returns and finds that it was only a coil of rope. The snake never existed. Yet the fear, the sweat and the lost hours were entirely real, and he had paid for each of them. The Vedantic teachers use this very picture, the rope mistaken for a snake, to show how the mind creates what it then dreads. We do the same with an uncertain diagnosis, a difficult conversation, a result not yet announced. The mind paints the worst picture in the dark, and we spend our strength resisting it.

The Taittiriya Upanishad offers the remedy: "Anandam brahmano vidvan na bibheti kutashchana", one who knows the bliss of the Divine fears nothing, from any quarter. The Gita begins its list of divine qualities with abhayam, fearlessness (16.1). Letting go does not require defeating the snake. It requires bringing light to see what is actually there. Today, name one fear that has been following you, and write it on paper. Ask plainly what is the rope here, and what is the actual, present fact. Then repeat quietly, three times, "Abhayam", and take one practical step you have been postponing.

—DAIV

The world we have lost and the one we can create



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

2ND OPINION



Many of our scriptures are known to have described the Golden Age, heaven, swarg, in detail as a period of peace, prosperity and happiness that is said to have existed thousands of years ago. However, if this is true, then a practical question that comes to mind is: if the Golden Age was such a good period, why and how did it come to an end?

Well, to begin with, there are several opinions on whether there ever existed something called paradise. Is it a mere figment of wishful imagination or a reality? There are people who believe that paradise is nothing but a utopian dream. In reality, such a place is unachievable, as grief and suffering are part and parcel of life. Then there are those who believe that both heaven and hell co-exist at the same time. According to them, a person is in heaven when all is fine and can be in hell the very next moment. Secondly, when one is basking in heavenly pleasures, others could simultaneously be bearing the wrath of hellish suffering. Then there is a third category: the rich and the accomplished, who feel that heaven is right here, right now, because there is no comfort beyond their reach. So, the above three opinions about the existence of paradise run contrary to its defining characteristics.

Now let us look at the world today and find out whether we are living in heaven or have been banished to hell. With the mounting global problems, irresolvable national issues and countless emotional upheavals, the present times in no way qualify to be called heaven. Since this world is certainly not heaven, it must be the veritable hell. Isn't it? So, if this is hell, where is heaven?

It is only the Creator who can reveal the truth about the world He first created. He tells us that Earth was first a paradise where humans, perfect with sixteen celestial qualities, lived and enjoyed the riches of the most bountiful nature. After several rebirths, these souls lost their original sheen and power and ate the forbidden fruit of body consciousness. This opened Pandora's box, and human weaknesses in the form of lust, anger, greed, attachment and ego became a part of the originally virtuous human nature. This further gave rise to sinful actions that caused suffering in return. With the passage of time, suffering became so unbearable that souls started to long for salvation. It is at this time that the Creator is once again here to re-create the perfect world order.

Remember that the day is not far when we will see a world where every being will be divine and will co-exist in harmony with nature. There will be no form of violence. People will enjoy perfect health, natural beauty and a long lifespan, and there will be no sign of sickness or untimely death. After hearing all this, one would say, "Is this all a myth?" Not really! We need to understand that the new world is the harvesting period for the fruits of the pure actions that are performed by us in the present age. It is actually now that we get an opportunity to create our best destiny. So, do not ever think that heaven is a myth. It is indeed a reality that is as close as tomorrow.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a popular columnist

PIC TALK



Children take part in a cycle race titled 'Pedal Through Paradise' organised by the Jammu and Kashmir Police, in Srinagar PHOTO: PTI

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ECI's logical discrepancies under scrutiny?

Observations by Supreme Court judges increasingly make news, sometimes more than their judgments. On Wednesday, October 28, Justice Joymalya Bagchi clarified that the court had not adjudicated on the validity of 'logical discrepancies' flagged by the Election Commission of India (ECI) during the special intensive revision (SIR) in West Bengal.

The court had permitted this category only as an interim arrangement in West Bengal, unlike Bihar, where it was not used. The ECI flagged 1.2 crore voters, asking them to prove their eligibility. Of the 60 lakh cases referred for adjudication, 33 lakh voters were restored to electoral rolls, while 27 lakh were excluded without speaking orders or stated reasons.

The ECI subsequently reported 38 lakh pending appeals before 19 appellate tribunals. These included 22 lakh appeals seeking inclusion and 16 lakh seeking exclusion. The latter were reportedly filed by officers in the West Bengal Chief Electoral Officer's office, raising questions about their authorisation.

The Supreme Court's observation raises serious concerns about the legality of this category and its use across states. The ECI must clarify its legal basis and ensure transparency, accountability and fairness in electoral revision.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

Medi claim or medi loot

Health insurance, intended to protect people from medical expenses, may also contribute to rising healthcare costs. Insurance companies increase premiums and coverage amounts, while hospitals and doctors raise their charges, leaving patients struggling to meet expenses.

Third-party payment systems can weaken cost controls, as patients may not always know the actual cost of treatment. Hospitals may also face financial incentives to recommend additional tests, procedures or prolonged stays, increasing insurance claims. Insurance companies, hospitals, doctors and pharmaceutical manufacturers must be held accountable for their roles in healthcare delivery. Doctors should be answerable for negligence, improper prescriptions and failure to follow established medical protocols. Pharmaceutical companies must also be accountable for defective products and inadequate disclosure of side-effects. However, insurance companies alone cannot be blamed for rising medical bills. Treatment costs are influenced by several factors, including expensive technology, medicines, hospital infrastructure and administrative expenses.The government must ensure transparent billing and protect patients from unnecessary procedures. Health insurance should protect patients, not fuel medical inflation.

JAYANTHY CK SUBRAMANIAM | COIMBATORE

Students as agents of change

Social unrest has gripped Europe, from France to Albania, with students increasingly raising their voices against public grievances. In a Paris suburb, students at Lycée Saint-Exupéry in Créteil began protests over dilapidated buildings, leaking roofs, clogged toilets, cockroach infestations and shortages of nurses and teachers.

In Serbia, the student-led movement demanded justice after the collapse of a railway station canopy in Novi Sad killed 16 people. The protests also sought accountability and the fulfilment of other demands.

In Uttar Pradesh, schoolchildren recently protested against poor school infrastructure, potholes, waterlogging, inadequate drinking water, non-functional toilets, substandard midday meals and teacher shortages. Students are increasingly participating in movements addressing public concerns. In *To Students*, Mahatma Gandhi wrote, "I think it is their clear duty to take a leading part in the political movement of their country..."

His words remain relevant today. Peaceful student protests can draw attention to neglected issues, demand accountability and encourage meaningful reforms. When guided by democratic values and a commitment to the public good, young people can help transform India into a better place to live.

HARIDASAN RAJAN | KERALAM

Nobel-winning chemistry unlocks the secret of mirror-image molecules

The Nobel-winning research by Kenso Soai and Henri B Kagan advances the understanding of mirror-image molecules, offering new possibilities for developing safer medicines. Their work on asymmetric chemical reactions could also help explain why life favours one molecular form over another



BK SINGH



Kenso Soai, Japanese, and Henri B Kagan, French, both Chemistry professors, have built on a discovery by 19th-century French chemist Louis Pasteur and solved a long-standing riddle of asymmetric mirror-image molecules. This discovery, which is hugely important for pharmaceutical manufacturing, earned them the 2026 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. While Soai is 76 years old, Kagan is 95 years of age, making him the third-oldest person to be awarded a Nobel Prize.

Henri Kagan, who is at the University of Paris-Sud, first discovered a new way of manipulating chemical reactions in 1986. This allowed him to create a greater excess of one of the mirror images than had previously been thought possible. He had already missed out on the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2001, as he was fourth on the list and, at most, three chemists can share the award in a year. Kenso Soai, from the Tokyo University of Science, took the next step in 1995. He published a scientific paper in the journal Nature, describing the first-ever chemical reaction that had the potential to produce one of the mirror-image molecules desired for pharmaceuticals. Soai ultimately achieved success in 2003.

The Nobel Committee recalled that, in the 1950s, the drug thalidomide was prescribed for pregnant women to sedate them and help them overcome morning sickness. Thousands of children were affected by birth defects caused by the sedative. Thalidomide is a chiral molecule; the right-handed version provides an effective treatment, while the left-handed version is toxic. Researchers found that it was the active substance's mirror image, i.e. the left-handed version, that caused the harm. It was always a challenge to create the right form of a chiral substance, and Kagan and Soai succeeded in creating an excess of one form through asymmetric reactions.

Several molecules essential to life exist in 'left-handed' and 'right-handed' forms, which are mirror images of each other. For example, amino acid molecules, the building blocks of proteins, exist in two forms, both of which are mirror images of each other, yet only one is found in the proteins of our cells. Another example is the sugar molecule, a constituent of DNA in living organisms. Amino acids are all left-handed, and sugars are all right-handed in living organisms. When products are manufactured in a laboratory, both left-handed and right-handed versions normally mix and are similar and difficult to distinguish, as quite a few properties, such as weight, boiling point and solubility, are identical. Living organisms depend upon only one version, and this phenomenon of one-handedness in organic chemistry is known as 'homochirality'. Chemical reactions in a laboratory usually create a 50-50 mix of both left- and right-handed molecules. Between the two, one might have disease-fighting properties, while the other can be ineffective or can even harm the body.

Think of a handshake. A right hand fits neatly into another right hand, but if a handshake is offered to a left hand, the grip goes wrong. The body works in a similar way. Its cells are full of structures that can treat the two mirror-image forms very differently. One form of the molecule may do the job it was meant for, while the other version may do little or cause unwanted effects.

Similarly, the left-handed version of a drug can have one effect, while the right-handed version can have another. The laureates provided important and powerful tools to selectively prepare drugs in either of the two versions. The discovery has made it possible to understand how chemical reactions can be driven to favour a single molecular mirror image. In 1986, the Frenchman Kagan cracked the problem with non-linear effects, using catalysts to make products in which the two versions would not maintain proportionality in their left- and right-handed mix. Thus, the non-linear effect occurs when the product can come out purer than the catalyst would suggest.

Cancer survivor Soai, in 1995, with asymmetric autocatalysis, a reaction that can copy itself and become purer at every stage, like compound interest, boosted the hope of making pure medicines with compounds of the desired version. Asymmetric organic synthesis means building carbon-based molecules so that one mirror-image form is made in preference to the other. It is a non-linear effect when the product can come out purer than the catalyst would suggest. When the reaction's product also acts as a helper, speeding up its own production, it is autocatalysis.

> LIFE ON EARTH WAS CREATED FOUR BILLION YEARS AGO, AND HOW AND WHEN A MIRROR IMAGE IS CREATED IS THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION IN LIFE, BUT NOW, FOR THE FIRST TIME, IT IS MIMICKED IN THE LABORATORY. EXPERTS IN THE BIOLOGY OF CHIRALITY ARE OF THE OPINION THAT NOBEL-WINNING CHEMISTRY COULD HELP REVEAL HOW AND WHY LIFE FAVOURS ONE-HANDEDNESS

In 1996, Soai started with 51% left-handed and 49% right-handed ingredients and succeeded in achieving 87% of the former in the product. In 2003, he succeeded in achieving 99% of the left-handed molecule of the medicine. He began with ingredients that had no handedness at all. Both forms appeared at first; chance gave one a slight lead, and that lead was enough. In one version, a head start of 0.00005%, roughly one extra molecule of the favoured form in every two million, grew to more than 99.5% in three runs. That is an amplification of 630,000 times, according to the Nobel Committee's scientific background.

To understand how catalysts really work, they are built from metal atoms that hold on to two helper molecules, giving three pairs: right with right, left with left, and mismatched right with left. Kagan found that only matching pairs do the job, while mismatched pairs are ineffective. The Nobel Committee gave a simple example: if 75% is right-handed and 25% is left-handed, most matching pairs in the product would be right-right, and the left-left pair would be rare. The reaction behaves as 90% right-handed and 10% left-handed. This showed how tiny molecular imbalances can be magnified and offered a new way of making pure medicines. Indian chemists find this work extremely useful, as it helps save the costs of medicines and provides direction for young researchers to proceed further.

French chemist Louis Pasteur had looked at tartaric acid, which was important in wine production, and had found that bacteria fermented only one form, which was naturally found in grapes, of the two forms of tartaric acid. There was no fermentation possible with the other form, which proved that some substances occur in two forms with different properties, one of which can have a damaging effect on health. A few years before the Nobel Prize awards started in 1901, Louis Pasteur had died.

Advances in chiral technology and synthesis are driving innovations and opening up new possibilities in pharmaceuticals, material sciences and the manufacture of agrochemicals useful for agriculture and beyond. It is not just pharmaceuticals; chemists are now learning to build that preference into materials, too. Current research and promising developments highlight the transformative potential of chiral science; future directions offer exciting opportunities for continued progress.

Life on Earth was created four billion years ago, and how and when a mirror image is created is the most fundamental question in life, but now, for the first time, it is mimicked in the laboratory. Experts in the biology of chirality are of the opinion that Nobel-winning chemistry could help reveal how and why life favours one-handedness. Professor Robert Mokaya, President of the UK's Royal Society of Chemistry, said, "Powerful example of how fundamental Chemistry can underpin solutions to some of the biggest challenges facing society. Different isomers (or versions of molecules) can have completely different biological and physical effects, so they are crucial in finding effective medicines to treat all sorts of illnesses."

B K Singh is the retired Head of Forest Force, Karnataka

Are we indeed measuring India's growth right?



TUHIN A SINHA | STEVE RAJPUROHIT

There has been a lot of hullabaloo over India's GDP numbers lately. What began as questions about the methodology of India's GDP estimates, when fact-checked, has turned into a rejection of GDP itself as a measure of living standards. But perhaps they are partly right. GDP is not, after all, a perfect measure of living standards.

GDP is designed to measure the market value of goods and services produced in an economy. GDP today measures the market ingredients you bought to prepare your meal. Its foundations were laid in the 1930s through Simon Kuznets' pioneering work on national income.

However, in 1965, Gary Becker, in *A Theory of the Allocation of Time*, argued that time is as scarce a resource as income. The true cost of a meal, therefore, also includes the opportunity cost of the time spent preparing it. And what has fundamentally changed since 2014 is not simply the level of income, but the economisation of time — doing more with the same hour, spending less of it on necessary tasks, and extracting greater welfare from it.

The first way to understand this is through the utility of work. India's digital transformation is a good example. The significance of the JAM trinity is not simply that India has created a large digital payments industry. Today, Gen Alpha visits bank branches so rarely that they write viral blogs when they visit one. An autorickshaw is at your doorstep whenever you need one. These gains in time and productive efficiency are real improvements in economic welfare, but they are not fully captured by GDP.

Digitisation has also weakened Baumol's cost disease-the tendency for labour-intensive services to become relatively more expensive because their productivity is difficult to raise. Today, a singer does not have to perform four concerts to reach four different audiences. As a result, singers performing in local dialects can achieve national virality, while music and films have become accessible to a far wider audience rather than remaining forms of luxury consumption.



Robert Gordon added a second layer to productivity: the reduction in the disutility of work-the effort, fatigue and physical discomfort associated with earning an income. India's growing access to appliances shows this playing out on the ground.

Among the bottom 40 per cent of households, AC and air-cooler ownership rose from 2.1 per cent to 16.9 per cent in rural India and from 11.4 per cent to 32.4 per cent in urban India between 2011-12 and 2023-24. Washing machine ownership rose from 0.5 per cent to 6.1 per cent in rural areas and from 5 per cent to 24.1 per cent in urban areas. GDP counts the appliances purchased, but not fully the physical effort, discomfort and household burden they remove.

Once productivity rises and the burden of work falls, a third benefit follows: people can allocate their limited time differently. India's infrastructure expansion has a huge role to play in this. India's operational metro network grew from 248 km across five cities in 2014 to 1,095 km across 26 cities in 2025. A CRRI study found that Delhi Metro commuters who reported time savings saved 28 minutes on average per journey.

The WHO estimates that improved household access to safe water under the Jal Jeevan Mission could save 66.6 million hours of water-collection time every day, much of it for women and children. GDP captures the construction and operation of the infrastructure; it captures far less of the value created when millions of people simply stop losing their time to commuting or collecting water.

What people do with this released time matters just as much. India's Time Use Survey shows that between 2019 and 2024, average time spent on employment and related activities rose from 164 to 180 minutes a day, while own-use production fell from 26 to 20 minutes and culture, leisure, mass media and sports rose from 143 to 159 minutes. The same finite resource, time, is being reallocated towards both productive activity and leisure, which increases productivity.

Another major consequence of these changes is greater welfare from the same rupee. This is related to the idea of consumer surplus-the difference between what a consumer is willing to pay for a good or service and what they actually pay. An economy can therefore make households better off even without a proportionate increase in their nominal income if competition, technology and better distribution allow the same rupee to buy more.

India's shift towards supermarkets, e-commerce and quick commerce illustrates this. Consumers can compare prices, access greater variety and search without travelling between shops. The same product can be cheaper and arrive without a trip to the market. The rupee has effectively become more valuable, even though its denomination has not changed. This becomes even more significant when we consider quality improvements. A smartphone bought today for a price comparable to that of one bought a decade ago is vastly more capable. The value consumers derive from innovation can therefore rise much faster than the amount they actually pay for it.

This brings us back to the original question: what should we expect GDP to measure? If the question is the value of goods and services produced through market activity, GDP remains indispensable. But if the question is whether people's economic lives have improved, GDP is necessarily incomplete.

It does not fully capture the value of time saved, physical effort avoided, greater comfort or better consumption choices. In that sense, expecting GDP alone to measure economic progress is an oxymoron: an indicator of economic output is being asked to measure the entirety of economic well-being.

Yet these limitations do not diminish GDP's importance; they merely remind us of what it was designed to measure. GDP may not be a perfect measure of economic progress, but it remains the least imperfect one we have.

Tuhin A. Sinha is a national spokesperson for the BJP and an acclaimed author; Steve Rajpurohit is a public policy analyst

Victim compensation: Justice delayed, relief denied



SWAPNA MAJUMDAR



A little over a year ago, in August 2025, an intellectually disabled rape survivor passed away after waiting for years to receive the full monetary compensation legally due to her. Despite a strong framework in place, backed by the judicial interpretation of Article 21 (right to life and personal liberty), together with the Directive Principles (Articles 38 and 41) to enable compensation, as well as the institution of the Central Victim Compensation Fund (CVCF) under the Nirbhaya Fund, the survivor was not able to receive her remaining dues before her death. Ironically, the Nirbhaya Fund was created to provide support by way of financial assistance to help tide over the immediate and long-term harm caused by violence. Constituted in 2013, in the aftermath of the horrific Delhi gang rape, the Fund covers medical treatment, psychological counselling, loss of income, relocation costs, legal expenses and other rehabilitation needs.

This case received attention thanks to the Supreme Court, which took cognisance of the tragedy and passed a comprehensive judgment in July this year to address the systemic delays and administrative apathy in ensuring and disbursing compensation. It remains to be seen how soon and how sincerely the Court's directives are implemented.

But what about the thousands of cases that go under the radar? How many more deaths will be needed to expedite the huge number of cases awaiting compensation? The sharp and alarming rise in such cases over the period from 2022 to 2024 underlines the malaise. The pending cases doubled from 17,085 in 2022-2023 to 33,257 in 2023-2024, according to the latest National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) data.

One of the primary reasons why many survivors are unable to access financial compensation despite the legal guarantees is the chronic underutilisation of the Nirbhaya Fund, states a new study by the South Asian Movement for Accessing Justice (SAMAJ). With several states spending less than half of their allocations, disbursal timelines are slow, and fund governance lacks transparency, the report reveals. Consequently, these implementation gaps directly affect compensation pathways, as many state-level Victim Compensation Schemes rely on Nirbhaya Fund-linked resources.

Worryingly, victims/survivors from marginalised groups face greater obstacles in accessing compensation. As the SAMAJ research points out, Dalit women and women with disabilities face prejudicial treatment and institutional apathy. The exclusionary attitude, more often than not, leads to less reporting by survivors and thus further reduces the likelihood of their receiving compensation or services. Data shows that fewer than one in seven cases involving survivors of sexual assault even reach the stage of seeking compensation.

Considering the arduous process of seeking compensation, it is no wonder that survivors are wary of pursuing it. After a trial judge recommends compensation in the case of an adult rape victim, the application is forwarded to the secretary of the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA). The DLSA then examines it alongside various documentary proofs before deciding on the quantum of compensation to be recommended. After approval, the application is sent to the member-secretary of the State Legal Services Authority, who orders the release of funds.

However, in practice, as the Supreme Court's July 2026 judgment also noted, trial and sessions courts routinely fail to include mandatory compensation directions in their final judgments, whether convicting or acquitting the alleged perpetrator. Further, there is widespread general indifference and a lack of institutional awareness regarding statutory victim compensation provisions. Judicial and administrative lapses place the burden on vulnerable survivors to navigate bureaucratic channels in pursuit of the compensation due to them.

Now, all Special, Sessions and POCSO courts have been directed by the Supreme Court to mandatorily issue appropriate directions for prompt financial compensation under statutory frameworks such as Section 357-A of the old CrPC and the corresponding Section 396 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita. While these provisions give survivors the legal right to compensation, unfortunately, the financial aid provided is often too late and too minimal to offer meaningful support. Additionally, monetary compensation is not uniform across the country, even for the same crime against women. In this scenario, introducing interim disbursal mechanisms that enable emergency grants to cover medical, psychosocial and transportation costs would ensure that survivors do not have to wait for the final adjudication. This would provide immediate relief, not only to pre-empt and prevent economic coercion for out-of-court settlements but also to give survivors the financial confidence to pursue their legal right to compensation.

The writer is a journalist writing on development and gender

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Strategic Costs

India's rise as a global power depends not merely on economic growth, military strength or diplomatic reach, but also on the credibility of its institutions. When allegations of foreign interference are made without convincing evidence, the damage may extend well beyond domestic politics, complicating relationships that New Delhi has spent decades building. The current controversy surrounding protests against electoral-roll revisions illustrates the danger. Political leaders have invoked foreign forces to explain opposition mobilisation, yet publicly available evidence has not established that overseas actors created or directed the protests. International organisations sharing political messages or expressing solidarity do not, by themselves, demonstrate a foreign-sponsored operation to destabilise India.

Genuine interference must never be dismissed. Intelligence agencies, governments and political networks can exploit domestic divisions for strategic advantage. But responsible statecraft requires distinguishing documented interference from conjecture. Where credible evidence exists, India should investigate it and raise concerns through appropriate diplomatic channels. Public speculation about unidentified foreign conspirators, without substantiation, risks creating suspicion without producing security. The consequences could reach into India's economic and technological ambitions. The Election Commission's ECINET platform, launched in January 2026, reflects India's ambition to share electoral expertise and digital capabilities internationally.

Other countries considering similar systems will naturally examine their reliability, data safeguards and accountability mechanisms. Questions surrounding electoral-roll revisions and automated identification of discrepancies therefore deserve transparent answers. India's technological achievements cannot substitute for public confidence in how its institutions use them. The stakes extend to trade and strategic cooperation. India's agreements with Britain and the European Union reflect an effort to deepen economic relationships while preserving room for independent foreign-policy choices. Its partnerships with the United States, Europe and other powers serve interests ranging from technology and investment to maritime security.

Unfounded accusations against foreign governments could complicate these relationships unnecessarily, particularly if partners are left guessing whether ordinary diplomatic engagement is being interpreted as interference. Strategic autonomy does not mean strategic isolation. India must remain free to disagree with powerful countries, resist coercion and defend its interests. But autonomy is strengthened by sound judgement, not by assuming hostile intent whenever political difficulties arise. A country confident in its position can distinguish an adversary's demonstrable actions from a partner's legitimate criticism. The same principle applies to India's democratic standing. New Delhi is entitled to challenge selective or politically motivated criticism of its domestic affairs. Yet its international credibility also depends on how it handles peaceful dissent, electoral complaints and allegations against public institutions. Dismissing every concern as foreign-inspired cannot resolve the underlying questions; it may instead invite greater scrutiny. India should neither ignore genuine foreign interference nor manufacture it through political rhetoric. Evidence must determine the response. Domestic grievances must be addressed on their merits, and diplomatic channels should carry sensitive allegations before public accusations harden into confrontation. A rising power needs partners, technological credibility and resilient institutions. Preserving these assets requires vigilance against real threats – but also the restraint to recognise imagined ones.

Serbia's Awakening

Serbia's election has delivered a message that entrenched power ignores at its peril: public anger, when organised and sustained, can defeat even a government that appears firmly in control. A student-led movement has inflicted a decisive electoral defeat on Aleksandar Vučić's political establishment, turning outrage over a fatal infrastructure disaster into a demand for political accountability. The result is more than a change of government. It is a challenge to the belief that institutional influence, nationalist rhetoric and economic promises can indefinitely shield those in power from the consequences of public distrust.

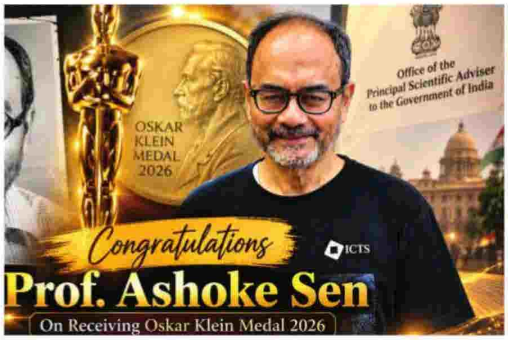
The catalyst was the collapse of a concrete canopy at Novi Sad railway station in November 2024, which killed 16 people. What might have remained an episode of public mourning and demands for an investigation became a national reckoning with corruption, negligence and political accountability. Students sustained the protests, eventually drawing support from citizens well beyond university campuses. Their electoral success demonstrates the potential of civic mobilisation to overcome the fragmentation that often weakens conventional opposition politics. Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party had dominated national politics since 2012. Although he could not seek a third presidential term, he sought to retain power through a return to the premiership.

His defeat exposes the limits of a political model that combines nationalist rhetoric, centralised authority and material inducements while leaving persistent questions about institutional independence and accountability. Promises of higher pensions, public-sector salaries and healthcare investment could not neutralise the demand for a more trustworthy system of government. That breadth helped turn a protest movement into an electoral force. It could, however, become a liability in government, where disagreements over economic policy, foreign relations and institutional reform will demand difficult compromises. The immediate test is whether the movement can translate its anti-corruption commitments into durable institutional change. Investigations into wrongdoing must follow evidence and due process, not become instruments of political revenge. Public broadcasting must be insulated from partisan control, state enterprises must cease to function as repositories of political patronage, and law-enforcement agencies must apply the rules impartially. Replacing one network of loyalists with another would betray the movement's central promise.

Serbia's international position presents another challenge. Its pursuit of European Union membership has coexisted with close ties to Russia and a refusal to align fully with Western policy towards Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. A new government will have to decide how far it is prepared to translate democratic reform into a more consistent European orientation. Brussels, meanwhile, should judge the new leadership by institutional progress rather than political symbolism. The broader lesson is that elections can open the door to democratic renewal, but cannot guarantee it. Students have shown that sustained civic resistance can defeat an entrenched ruling party through the ballot box. Their harder task begins now: proving that accountability applies to the victors as firmly as it must apply to the vanquished. Serbia's awakening will be consequential only if it produces institutions stronger than the politicians who once controlled them.

Just a simple researcher

Whether or not Sen wins the Nobel Prize does not matter much to him for, as his mother herself wrote, neither money nor any lucrative job ever mattered to her son. Sen's whole life is a testament to his passion for theoretical sciences irrespective of the returns they bring to him. Like other great Bengali scientists of yore like Satyendranath Bose, Meghnad Saha, Jagadish Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Roy, Sen never ran after money or medals





He is noted as much for his knowledge as for his simplicity. He hails from a Bengali medium school in North Kolkata. He chooses Indian institutions for working and doing research in his field instead migrating to the USA or a European country in spite of his stunning academic performance right from the school level. He is now the man of the moment. He is Ashoke Sen, the first Indian to get the highly prestigious Oskar Klein medal for his pioneering work on S-duality, the precise counting of black-hole entropy and string field theory which have helped shape modern string theory.

The prestigious award recognises outstanding contributions to theoretical physics and honours scientists whose work has advanced our understanding of the universe. Sen is widely known for his remarkable research in string theory, black holes and quantum gravity. The Oskar Klein prize is named after the Swedish theoretical physicist from the famous Klein-Gordon Equation one studies or uses in Relativistic Quantum Mechanics. The previous recipients include Stephen Hawking and Nobel laureates such as Che-Ning Yang, Steven Weinberg and Hans Bethe.

But awards are nothing new in Sen's life. Among the countless ones, we may the mention G.D. Birla Award for Scientific Research (1996), TWAS Prize (1997), Padma Shri (2001), Infosys Prize for Mathematical Sciences (2009), Breakthrough Prize in Fundamental Physics (2012), Padma Bhushan (2013) and the Dirac Medal in 2014. It is to be noted that the Breakthrough Prize which Sen won has a monetary value of three million dollars which is more than twice the amount of a Nobel Prize. To be precise, he has bagged all the illustrious prizes except the Nobel.

But money and honours have not been able to take Sen's feet off the ground. Both he and his wife Dr Sumathi Rao are brilliant physicists and they had millions in prize money which they gave away for scientific research. A photo has gone viral on social media where Sen is found to be walking down in humble attire after purchasing groceries. This simplicity was also witnessed a few years ago by the teachers and students of Sailendra Sircar Vidyalaya, Sen's alma mater, where the stellar scientist mixed and talked freely with everyone around and walked the full stretch of the *padayatra* (foot-march) taken out as part of the centenary celebration of the institution. He also donated handsomely for the upgradation of a science laboratory of the school.

In her reminiscence *Jawkhon Jemon Mone Porey (Random Recollections)*, Ashoke Sen's mother, Gouri Sen narrates how Moni (as Sen was called by her parents and members of his family and friends) loved to go to school even on days when the weather was inclement.

The then Headmaster of the school was Jyotirbikash Mitra, a legendary teacher with a very simple lifestyle who later got the 'National Teacher' award for his dedication and tireless service for his school and his students. Sen loved and respected this man greatly and the seeds of his sincere dedication to studies and work were sown in this period. Even the turbulence of the Naxal movement could not hamper his focus and concentration.

After school education, Sen joined Presidency College to study Physics and got his B.Sc. degree in 1975 under the University of Calcutta. His passion for physics was so strong that even after getting selected to study Statistics at the prestigious I.S.I., Sen refused to take admission there and worked hard to get selected in the admission test at Presidency College.

At Presidency, he was vastly inspired by the work and teaching of Prof. Amal Kumar Raychaudhuri. In 1978, Sen completed his M.Sc. in Physics from IIT Kanpur and later obtained his Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Sen's academic achievements did not end here. He conducted doctoral and post-doctoral work in physics at renowned particle physics laboratories including the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory (Fermilab) in Batavia and the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC) at Stanford University.

Sen worked in a number of internationally reputed Indian institutions like Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Harish-Chandra Research Institute (HRI) and NISER at Bhubaneswar. Presently, he is at the International Centre for Theoretical Sciences (ICTS) at Bengaluru.



MANAS DAS

The writer, a Ph D in English from Calcutta University, is a freelance writer and teaches English at the Govt.-sponsored Sailendra Sircar Vidyalaya, Shyambazar, Kolkata

If we want to truly respect the talent and work of Sen, we have to take a look at the field he has been researching on for so many years and with such patience and perseverance. By now, we all know that he is known mainly for his foundational contributions to string theory, quantum gravity and the study of black holes. To the layman, the whole thing is pure Greek and even to the knowledgeable, these theories are difficult to understand.

To simplify matters, Sen bridged the gap between quantum mechanics and gravity by showing how tiny vibrating strings can account for the internal heat and disorder (entropy) of black holes. Sen was a pioneer in the study of S-Duality (Strong-Weak Coupling Duality) in string theory.

He proved that strongly coupled string theories can be equivalent to weakly coupled ones. His pioneering work showed that five distinct string theories were different limits of a single underlying framework (M-theory).

The renowned physicist also formulated the famous Sen Conjecture regarding open string tachyon condensation on unstable D-branes (Dirichlet membranes), predicting how these systems decay to a vacuum with no open strings. Sen's theoretical descriptions of rolling tachyons gave a crucial framework applied to string cosmology and early-universe inflation models.

In the field of black holes, Sen pioneered the entropy function formalism for external black holes, enabling the microscopic calculation of Bekenstein-Hawking entropy using string theory microstate counts.

Sen has earned a great number of prestigious prizes and honours. But does he have a chance to win the Nobel Prize in Physics? That is not easy to answer. Although the global physics community considers his work Nobel-worthy, winning the prize for string theory faces a major experimental hurdle. The Nobel Committee in Physics demands experimental or observational evidence to verify a scientific theory before awarding a prize whereas string theory remains mathematically consistent but largely unverified by experiment.

For this reason, Stephen Hawking was also not awarded this prize. Einstein is globally known for his work on relativity, yet he won the prize not for this work, but for his discovery of the law of photoelectric effect. The Nobel Committee deliberately omitted relativity out of the citation because the theory was still heavily debated and lacked complete experimental verification.

Whether or not Sen wins the Nobel Prize does not matter much to him for, as his mother wrote, neither money nor any lucrative job ever mattered to her son.

Sen's whole life is a testament to his passion for theoretical sciences irrespective of the returns they bring to him. Like other great Bengali scientists of yore like Satyendranath Bose, Meghnad Saha, Jagadish Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Roy, Sen never ran after money or medals. They are the dedicated souls born for service to humanity at large.

Apart from science, Sen's two great passions are walking and cooking. When he was at HRI at Allahabad or today's Prayagraj, he used to take his lunch at the institute's canteen and cooked dinner himself at home. Before retiring from HRI, Sen owned neither a flat nor a car, and in spite of becoming the richest physicist, Sen has remained till date the same simple man focused on solving the most abstruse problems in the field of theoretical sciences.

THE KATHMANDU POST

Restore hope for Bhotekoshi flood victims

As Nepal marks two months since the catastrophic Bhotekoshi flash flood, conditions on the ground remain largely unchanged. While some displaced families have rented rooms, others have returned to the ruins of their homes as makeshift shelters become uninhabitable. Those living in holding centres across Rasuwa and Nuwakot, and in monasteries in Kathmandu, are eagerly awaiting resettlement in their own communities. The country moved on and celebrated Dashain, but many flood survivors could not. The festival only brought back memories of the past, traumatic experiences during the flood and a longing for a better future.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the government made its presence felt at the site. It deployed rescue teams who provided relief to many. But a state's responsibility doesn't end when the waters recede. Its role remains just as crucial in the days that follow. Yet, aside from restoring connectivity by installing bridges and building roads in a few places, assessing areas for temporary housing and marking areas where waters reached extreme heights as danger zones, the government has failed to provide survivors even the bare minimum.

A Member Of The ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

Soon after the disaster, the government promised to pay Rs15,000 per month for six months, but survivors still haven't received that assistance, let alone the money to perform funeral rites for the family members they lost to the flood. The tents they were given to settle in temporarily leaked during rainfall, and with the winter approaching, they are bound to endure the biting cold.

In an interview with the Post last month, Minister for Infrastructure Development said that before the survivors are permanently resettled, they would be provided with temporary homes – capsule houses with toilets and kitchens that can be assembled in a day. But this plan has yet to kick off.

Those on the ground complain that they are unaware of what kind of houses the government will build or where they will be located. After the floods, people generously contributed more than Rs18 billion to the Prime Minister's Disaster Relief Fund. However, it is unclear how the government will spend this money.

Successive governments have often left natural disaster survivors in limbo. It has already been three years since an earthquake struck parts of western Nepal, including Jajarkot, Rukum West and Salyan, and people still live in temporary shelters. In Malagaun, Alital Rural Municipality, in Dadeldhura, 24 landslide-displaced families still await a permanent home. Nepal cannot afford to let Bhotekoshi flood survivors face the same fate.

Whether it's Jajarkot, Dadeldhura or Rasuwa, no one should be left without permanent housing. It is not only crucial to restore their lives and livelihoods but also to provide relief from the trauma they endured. Nepal received global attention following the Bhotekoshi flood.

PERSONAL

ATHENA Eye Care and Drs. Paromita & Supratik thank all patients and well wishers on the 33rd Anniversary of the Clinic: 24640232/24660122/7044473534. Visit us at: www.athenaeye.com Email: athenaeye@gmail.com

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Unfair

Sir, Through the columns of your daily, I wish to draw the attention of the Consumer Affairs Department to a widespread and deceptive practice adopted by major e-commerce platforms, notably Amazon, under the garb of paid subscription models.

Lured by advertised benefits, I opted for the annual Prime membership. However, the ground reality reflects a systemic deficiency in service.

Promised perks – such as unlimited free same-day or 1-day delivery – are routinely flouted, with orders experiencing unexplained delays. Furthermore, despite holding a paid membership, customers are arbitrarily slapped with unexpected delivery charges on routine purchases, rendering the core subscription promise hollow.

Department of Consumer Affairs
Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution

Compounding this exploitation, members are increasingly denied expected benefits such as special promotional discounts or reliable early access to major sales events, which are prominently advertised to draw subscriptions but fail to materialize.

What we are witnessing is a classic case of an unfair trade practice, where consumers pay an upfront fee only to face hidden costs and broken commitments.

I earnestly urge the Consumer Affairs Department to take immediate cognizance of these misleading subscription models, investigate these arbitrary shipping fees, and protect everyday consumers from systemic exploitation.

Yours, etc., Prabir Kumar Pal,
Kolkata, 27 October.

Encashed

Sir, The humble "like" may soon acquire a price tag. Elon Musk's X has unveiled a money feature enabling users to send $1 by long-pressing the like button, potentially transforming appreciation into instantaneous micro-philanthropy.

The innovation could prove consequential for content creators who struggle to monetise attention. By allowing users to tip without leaving the platform, X may streamline patronage, reduce transactional friction and incentivise original content.

For fledgling writers, musicians and independent commentators, such micropayments could gradually add up and provide a modest financial bulwark.

Yet, every silver lining has a cloud. Frictionless payments can also trigger impulsive spending, while repeated micro-transactions may cumulatively become a fiscal drain. Questions surrounding fraud, platform fees, privacy, refunds and regulatory oversight must therefore be ironed out before the feature gains traction.

If implemented transparently, X Money could turn digital applause into tangible support. But technology must not merely cash in on human impulse; it should build trust. In the digital economy, convenience may open the door, but credibility keeps users coming back.

Yours, etc., Dipen Gogoi,
Jorhat, 26 October.

Why India should counter Pakistan's nuclear stance

PRABHU DAYAL

Lt. Gen. (Retd) Khalid Ahmed Kidwai's keynote address at the Islamabad Non-Proliferation Conference on 20 October 2026 (INC 2026) marked a sharp pivot in Pakistan's strategic signalling toward India. As a senior adviser to Pakistan's National Command Authority (NCA) and the long-time former architect of the Strategic Plans Division (SPD), Kidwai's statements serve as the authoritative framework for Pakistan's nuclear doctrine.

His recent speech focused intensely on a reported shift in the South Asian strategic balance, specifically targeting India's expanding second-strike capabilities and modernised nuclear posture.

A critical analysis of Kidwai's speech and its multifaceted implications for India's national security, defence posturing, and regional stability reveals a calculated escalatory tone wrapped in the language of strategic deterrence.

Kidwai's speech relied heavily on data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook 2026 to build a case against India's defence modernization. His core arguments centred on three main pillars.

The first pillar is operationalization of India's Sea-Based Deterrent. Citing SIPRI data, Kidwai highlighted that India has deployed approximately 12 nuclear warheads aboard a nuclear-powered submarine for deterrence patrols. He argued this indicates India has "mated" its nuclear warheads with Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), keeping them in a ready-to-launch operational state.

The second pillar is undermining of "No-First-Use" (NFU). Kidwai asserted that India's move toward "canisterization" (storing missiles in a pre-mated, ready-to-fire state) and continuous at-sea deterrence effectively invalidates New Delhi's declared No-First-Use policy. He characterized this as an "irresponsible escalatory transition" creating strategic asymmetry.

The third pillar is shifting nuclear inventory metrics. Kidwai explicitly noted statistical shifts, stating that India has overtaken Pakistan's nuclear weapons inventory by a margin of roughly 190 to 170. Warning that Islamabad will not accept a "strategic imbalance," Kidwai explicitly threatened that Pakistan would retain its policy of "strategic ambiguity" while actively reviewing and reconsidering its own deployment options to restore equilibrium.

While Kidwai framed his speech as a cautionary warning against Indian aggression, a deeper strategic analysis reveals a deliberate effort to alter the regional narrative. By definition, sea-based nuclear deterrents (SSBNs) are considered the most stabilizing component of a nuclear triad because of their survivability, and securing assured second-strike capability. Kidwai inverted this standard nuclear logic by framing India's submarine patrols as an "offensive posture" and a first-strike threat.

It also marked deflection from Pakistan's "Full Spectrum Deterrence" (FSD). For over a decade, Pakistan has lowered the nuclear threshold by developing tactical (battlefield) nuclear weapons under its FSD doctrine, famously dubbed by Kidwai in past speeches as "weapons of peace". This speech acts as an intellectual cover-up. By painting India's standard triad completion as "destabilizing," Islamabad seeks to legitimize its own asymmetric reliance on early-use battlefield nuclear options.

Kidwai's reliance on western open-source intelligence (SIPRI) rather than Pakistani state intelligence was a calculated move designed to validate his claims before a global audience at a non-proliferation conference. The underlying goal is to trigger international anxiety over South Asia's nuclear stability, thereby casting India - rather than Pakistan - as the irresponsible nuclear actor.

Kidwai's address has direct, actionable implications for India's strategic planners across military, diplomatic, and doctrinal domains.

First, it places pressure on India's "No-First-Use" (NFU) credibility. Pakistan is actively weaponizing India's technological advancements - such as Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs), canisterized systems like the Agni-V, and operational SSBNs - to convince the international community that India's NFU policy is a facade. India will face increased pressure to either robustly reaffirm its NFU through transparency or accept that its deterrence posture is being viewed globally as increasingly preemptive.

Next, there is horizontal escalation and the naval domain. Kidwai's explicit warning regarding "appropriate deployments" to counter India's naval edge strongly indicates that Pakistan will seek to nuclearize the Indian Ocean rapidly. India must anticipate an accelerated push by Pakistan to deploy nuclear-armed cruise missiles (like the Babur-3) on its conventional, Agosta-class



or newly acquired Chinese Type 039B submarines, and an increased risk of miscalculation at sea, where command-and-control structures are historically more difficult to maintain than on land.

By reiterating Pakistan's reliance on "strategic ambiguity" and Full Spectrum Deterrence, Kidwai is signalling that Pakistan will continue to use its nuclear shield to underwrite sub-conventional warfare (terrorism or hybrid proxies). Believing that India's conventional edge is entirely neutralized by Pakistan's readiness, Islamabad may feel emboldened, raising the stakes for India's counter-terrorism strategies.

To mitigate the fallout of Pakistan's evolving posture, India's strategic calculus must take some necessary steps.

Enhance Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA): India must heavily invest in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities, maritime patrol aircraft, and underwater sensor networks in the Arabian Sea to track potential Pakistani sea-based nuclear assets.

Refine the Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) Shield: As Pakistan threatens to ramp up deployments or adopt MIRV technologies to bypass defence systems, India must accelerate the operational deployment of its indigenous two-tier BMD system.

Counter-Narrative Management: India's Ministry of External Affairs needs to proactively counter Pakistan's narrative at international forums, reinforcing that India's nuclear modernization is built entirely around achieving a Credible Minimum Deterrent against a complex two-front threat (including China), rather than initiating an arms race with Islamabad.

Kidwai's speeches underscore that Pakistan views its nuclear weapons not merely as political tools of last resort, but as highly integrated "weapons of peace" (nuclear deterrence) meant to checkmate Indian military options. For India, this reinforces the need to continually evaluate the flexibility of its own nuclear doctrine, invest heavily in ballistic missile defence (BMD) systems, and maintain robust conventional edge capabilities that can operate effectively below Pakistan's perceived nuclear thresholds.

The writer, a retired IFS officer, served as India's Ambassador to Kuwait and Morocco and as Consul-General in New York.

Degrees everywhere, jobs nowhere

R.K. UPPAL

India's problem is no longer merely a shortage of educated people; it is the growing disconnect between education, employability and the needs of the economy. India is producing graduates at an unprecedented scale, but meaningful employment remains beyond the reach of millions. Classrooms are expanding, universities are awarding degrees, and young people are investing years of their lives in education.

Yet, after graduation, many discover a disturbing reality: their qualifications do not guarantee a job, their degrees do not ensure dignity, and their years of study do not necessarily translate into economic security.

Over the past few decades, India has significantly expanded access to higher education. Universities, colleges, professional institutions and private educational establishments have multiplied. More young people from diverse economic backgrounds can now pursue degrees that were once beyond their reach. This expansion represents genuine progress.

A degree was traditionally regarded as a pathway to professional mobility and a better standard of living. Today, for many young Indians, it has become only an entry ticket to an increasingly competitive employment market. Graduates with bachelor's and master's degrees frequently compete for positions that require much lower formal qualifications. Some accept temporary, contractual or low-paid jobs unrelated to their education.

The employment crisis cannot be attributed entirely to universities, nor can employers or policymakers escape responsibility. It reflects a structural mismatch between the education system and the wider economy.

First, curricula in many institutions are insufficiently connected to contemporary workplace requirements. Students may acquire theoretical knowledge but receive limited exposure to internships, practical assignments, industry projects and real-world problem-solving.

Second, the assessment system frequently rewards memorization rather than independent thinking, creativity, communication and analytical ability. Students learn to reproduce information in examinations but may struggle to apply it in unfamiliar situations.

Third, career guidance and labor-market information remain inadequate in many educational institutions. Students often select courses without a clear understanding of employment prospects, emerging occupations or the skills required in particular industries.

Fourth, the quality of education varies considerably across institutions. A degree bearing the same title does not necessarily represent the same level of competence. Employers therefore increasingly look beyond formal qualifications to assess practical skills, experience and demonstrated performance. India must reform both sides of the equation: the ability of education to produce capable graduates and the ability of the economy to create meaningful work.

Artificial intelligence is transforming occupations, business processes and the skills demanded by employers. Routine administrative tasks, basic data processing and some entry-level activities are increasingly exposed to automation. At the same time, AI is creating opportunities in technology, healthcare, finance, education, manufacturing and other sectors. The answer is neither to fear technological change nor to assume that acquiring a short-term digital certificate will guarantee employment. Students need strong foundations in their disciplines, digital literacy, critical thinking, communication, adaptability and the ability to use AI responsibly.

India requires a coordinated employment-oriented reform agenda.

First, make learning outcomes measurable. Institutions should assess what students can actually do, not merely whether they have passed examinations. Practical competence, communication, analytical reasoning and problem-solving must become integral to academic evaluation.

Second, strengthen industry-institution partnerships. Internships, apprenticeships, live projects and workplace exposure should be embedded in suitable programmes. Employers should help institutions identify emerging skill requirements without compromising academic independence.

Third, introduce credible career counseling. Students and parents need reliable information about occupational demand, realistic salary expectations, further-study options and alternative career pathways before choosing expensive or unsuitable courses.

Fourth, strengthen vocational and technical education. India must overcome the social prejudice that treats vocational work as inferior to conventional academic



qualifications. Skilled technicians, healthcare workers, logistics professionals, advanced manufacturing workers and other trained specialists are essential to economic development.

Fifth, promote entrepreneurship and innovation. Educational institutions should help students develop business ideas, access mentorship and understand the practical requirements of starting enterprises. Entrepreneurship cannot be promoted through slogans alone; it requires finance, market access, supportive regulation and a willingness to learn from failure.

Transparent reporting of learning outcomes, and graduate employment make institutions accountable for educational quality. Salaries where available, further-study rates and student experiences can help prospective students make informed choices. Employment statistics should be independently verifiable, and institutions must not exaggerate placement claims.

The purpose of education is broader than employment alone. Universities must cultivate knowledge, democratic values, scientific temper, ethical judgment, creativity and social responsibility. Not every graduate will immediately find a job, and not every educational programme should be judged solely by starting salaries. India stands at a critical crossroads. Its young population can become a powerful engine of productivity, innovation and economic growth, but that outcome is not guaranteed by demographic size or the number of degrees awarded. It depends on whether education develops genuine capabilities and whether the economy creates opportunities to use them.

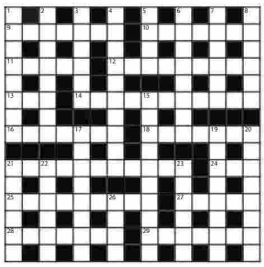
A degree without relevant knowledge is an incomplete promise; education without employment opportunities is an economic loss; and a growing educated workforce without productive work is a national warning.

India must move beyond counting colleges, enrolments and certificates to measuring learning, competence, productivity and opportunity. Universities must become centers of capability-building rather than mere degree-distribution systems, while economic policy must place productive employment at the heart of development.

The ultimate test of India's education system is not the number of graduates it produces, but the number of lives it enables them to build. Until degrees translate more consistently into dignity, productivity and opportunity, the troubling reality will remain: degrees everywhere, jobs nowhere.

The writer is Principal, SPS Badal College of Management and Technology, Gidderbaha, Punjab.

Crossword | No. 293621



Yesterday's Solution



ACROSS

9 Serenade briefly interrupted by cheers after sailor's refrain (7)
10 Baker perhaps follows short cut to do decorative work (7)
11 Parent caught fish (5)
12 Worst hospital is involved in public dispute (9)
13/24 Begin to date vacuous upper-class twit? (3,3)
14 Designer drug cut with crushed silica (11)
16 Suspect due bail in hearing (7)
18 Clamour about sealing off derelict pit is difficult to understand (7)
21 Current time could be time to take on staff (11)
24 See 13
25 Awareness of crime essentially accommodated by court's punishment (9)
27 Computing device mainly provides means of summarising information (5)
28 Appropriate assertion of modernist poet? (7)
29 Deal with business issue (7)

DOWN

1 Fanatical gunmen destroyed SAS training establishment (8)
2 Helped out when relative almost died (8)
3 Terms of reference sometimes limited by vehicles in bill (6)
4 Rambling company has essential cover (10)
5 Wonderful nurses name condition one has to face? (4)
6 Perhaps local bank's run down by huge number of people (8)
7 Refrain from tasks requiring English to be universal (6)
8 Put away heads of syndicate that got into debt (6)
15 Men cycle in unusual and unforgiving position (10)
17 Book published that is without question catering to niche market (8)
19 Worried Russia's ready to invade Thailand's borders (8)
20 Face fine after distributing legal high? (8)
21 Having suit inside out in church is uncouth (6)
22 Cover article plugs something newsworthy (6)
23 Outstanding figures reportedly make firm leader in sector (6)
26 English academic revolutionised device connected to internet? (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with **The Independent, London**)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 30 October 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

We published yesterday the revised fixture list of the M.C.C. The lightened programme for Calcutta—eight days instead of ten—will cause a natural disappointment but little cavilling. The visitors have come out only thirteen strong—Mercer of Glamorgan is on his way to be a fourteenth—and must insure themselves against excessive wear and tear on India's hard grounds. There will be one-day matches with Bengal schools (Indian and Europeans combined) and with the British in Bengal, most of whom are likely to be Home school products; also three-day matches against Europeans in the East and against All India. The programme carries the team nearly through February; after Calcutta they visit Rangoon, Madras, Ceylon, Aligarh, and Delhi. When the tour is over they will be glad of a short rest before the season begins at Home. Mr. Gilligan's readiness to meet the wishes of the cricketing public in India and play on Sundays will be widely appreciated. Sunday cricket is established, and many who love the game have no other opportunity of seeing it.

News Items

CROP PEST HAVOC

AN EMPIRE CAMPAIGN SUGGESTED

(Special Cable.)
LONDON, OCT.

A CAMPAIGN all over the Empire against insect and weed pests was advocated by Professor Tillyard, chief of the Biological Department of the Cawthron Institute, New Zealand, in a lecture at the Royal Society of Arts.

He declared that one of the most pressing problems of to-day was the devastation of the food supply and forests by insects, in connexion with which Professor Tillyard favoured the method of biological control—by the introduction of hostile insects to fight the pests rather than the chemical method of spraying or fumigation, which, he said, was merely temporary and also costly.

It was estimated, he added, that 10 per cent of the world's crops were lost annually through the depredations of insects, while, as regards the amount of crops lost annually through the encroachments of noxious weeds, the menace was most serious in many parts of the Empire.—Copyright.

INDIA'S CURRENCY PROBLEM

"FULL-VALUE" RUPEE SOLUTION

(Special Cable.)
LONDON, OCT.

NOT until the silver rupee is restored to its full value will the permanent solution of the Indian currency problem be found, is the opinion of Mr. J. F. Darling, a Director of the Midland Bank, in an article in the National Review criticising the Currency Commission's report.

He fears that the world tendency to abandon silver and embrace gold will lead to a fall in world prices. He considers that England in her own interests ought to take the initiative towards the establishment of international bimetallism.

Mr. Darling suggests that members of the League of Nations who have adopted bimetallism might place their stocks of gold and silver in the custody of the League, and thus effect economy in the handling of bullion, and, incidentally, give valuable hostages for their future good behaviour and bring the reduction of armaments within the region of practical politics.—Copyright.

"SOLID AS ROCK"

MUSSOLINI AND THE FASCIST REGIME

ROME, OCT.

THE fourth anniversary of the Fascist Revolution was celebrated all over Italy to-day. Ceremonies were held at which a speech of Mussolini was read glorifying Fascismo and declaring that the Fascist regime was as solid as granite rock.

Reviewing the work of the year he dwells on legal and constitutional re-forms, and declares that the armed forces of Italy are ready for any even-tuality. Public works have been developed on a very large scale.

The Italian merchant marine, he says, is now the second largest in Europe and the fourth largest in the world. Sixty million quintals of grain have been garnered.

He claims for Fascism a vast revolution destined to influence the course of civilization.—Reuter.

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Bengal killings

Police 'encounters' must be probed independently

THE killing of two murder accused in alleged encounters with the police in West Bengal raises questions about accountability and the rule of law. The incidents, which occurred within 12 hours of each other during crime-scene reconstruction, have sparked public outrage. According to the police, both accused snatched service revolvers and opened fire, prompting retaliatory shooting. These claims must be investigated independently, not accepted unquestioningly. The recurrence of similar circumstances — a rape-murder accused was killed by cops in July — makes transparent scrutiny all the more necessary.

Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari has adopted a tough approach to crime, taking a cue from his counterparts in other BJP-ruled states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. However, the state government must remember that its promise to restore law and order cannot be fulfilled merely through force. Genuine public confidence comes from professional policing, timely trials and convictions based on evidence. Celebrating encounters — genuine or fake — as instant justice risks normalising extrajudicial punishment and weakening democratic institutions.

The Supreme Court's 2014 guidelines in *People's Union for Civil Liberties versus State of Maharashtra* stipulate independent investigations, magisterial inquiries and proper preservation of evidence in deaths caused by police action. These safeguards protect citizens from possible abuse of power while ensuring that officers acting lawfully are not unfairly targeted. West Bengal needs firm policing, not trigger-happy governance. Citizens rightly expect the police to act swiftly against violent crime. However, the State's strength lies not in its ability to kill suspects, but in its commitment to uphold the law, even under intense public pressure.

Substandard drugs

Regular alerts expose gaps in regulation

DESPITE regular alerts by the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation, drug-quality failures continue to plague Himachal Pradesh, one of India's major pharmaceutical manufacturing hubs. The latest alert flagged 330 drug samples as not of standard quality (NSQ), including 95 manufactured by 70 units in the hill state. The recurrence raises a troubling question: why are regulatory warnings failing to ensure compliance?

The problem cannot be assessed merely by counting failed samples. Himachal accounts for a substantial share of pharmaceutical supplies and the proportion of failures must be measured against the number of samples tested and production volumes. The finding that several samples failed important parameters, including assay and dissolution, is particularly concerning. Such defects can affect the quantity of active ingredients or the body's ability to absorb a medicine. The distinction between labelling deficiencies and serious quality failures is equally important. Both require corrective action. Regulators must disclose the nature of violations, identify repeat offenders and make enforcement outcomes transparent. A monthly alert that identifies a defective batch is useful only if the product is promptly withdrawn and patients are protected from further exposure.

India has strengthened manufacturing standards, expanded risk-based inspections and introduced measures to improve drug traceability. However, recurring failures point to the need for more consistent implementation. Inspections must lead to credible deterrence, including licence suspension, manufacturing stoppages and prosecution wherever warranted. Manufacturers, too, must treat quality control as a non-negotiable obligation rather than a compliance formality. Patients cannot be expected to distinguish between a compliant manufacturer and one whose products repeatedly fail laboratory tests. Nor should they bear the consequences of regulatory lapses. The priority must shift from announcing failures to preventing their recurrence.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 30, 1926

Reforms in Punjab

WE owed it to the courtesy of His Excellency in attempting, in his recent speech at the Punjab Legislative Council, a specific reply to our comments on the part of the Viceroy's Durbar speech in which he spoke of "the harmonious working of the Reforms" in this province, no less than to the intrinsic importance of the subject to make a few further observations in regard to it. The position taken up by His Excellency may be summed up in his own words: "Ministers must work together and if the Government finds in the Council a body whether constituted on communal or other lines which appears sufficiently united to present on ordinary occasions a working majority in the House, it is proper that on questions relating to ministerial action it should give reasonable support to that party. Its officers cannot serve Ministers loyally in their departments and vote against them in the lobby. If ministers develop policies which appear detrimental to the interests of the province, then action lies primarily with the Governor, and not with the representatives of Government in the Legislature." In plain English, this means three things. In the first place, the Governor must choose his ministers from among the majority party in the Legislature, no matter whether that party is constituted on communal or other lines. Secondly, the ministers so chosen must work together with something of a common policy. Thirdly, it is the duty of the Government to see that the official members support them with their votes in the lobby. Of these propositions, only the second appears to us to be sound.

The decimation of J&K cadre

An instrument of integration and a mediating institution on the ground has been considerably weakened



HASEEB DRABU
FORMER FINANCE MINISTER, J&K



AUTHORITY: The return of cadre autonomy is the necessary starting point for the change of guard. ANI

THE merger of the Jammu and Kashmir cadre into AGMUT (Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Mizoram and Union Territories) in 2021 and the recent appointment of the first AGMUT-cadre officer as Chief Secretary denote more than a change of personnel or the supersession of many senior officers. An institution that had long mediated access to State authority and resources in the Valley stands replaced.

The overhaul of the bureaucracy forms part of a wider effort to change the local configurations of power and influence. The J&K cadre functioned not only as an administrative tier but also as a network of personal ties, political affiliations and institutional memory.

This network was shaped by decades of interaction with the region's political class. It facilitated and even enabled the reproduction of local power structures at the interface between society and the State. The bureaucracy wielded an embedded influence through which regional elites reinforced prevailing power hierarchies.

By superseding almost all seniormost officers of that cadre, decisive authority has been shifted to those drawn from outside its ranks. By doing so, the Centre has effectively mutated the administrative DNA of J&K. In a way, it completes the institutional eclipse of the J&K cadre.

This cadre was a consequence of the Presidential Order issued in 1958 under Article 370 of the Constitution. It specifically modified the application of Article 312 to bring J&K within the All-India Services framework and enabled recruitment and service conditions for the IAS (and IPS). The J&K Reorganisation Act of 2019 initially allowed the J&K cadre, but the 2021 ordinance merged it into AGMUT.

The J&K cadre structure of the local bureaucratic framework was rooted in domain knowledge, a certain continuity of administrative practice and personal networks. These have been now displaced by a more externally directed apparatus. It is a reconfiguration of the institutions through which power is exercised and legitimacy is mediated in the region.

The IAS officers, mostly outsiders, were a crucial link between the Centre and the state. While these officers were the eyes, ears and hands of New Delhi, they also played the role of intermediaries. With their feet on the ground in Kashmir, many of them conveyed the local sentiment in their communication to Delhi. Over time, representing the Kashmir sentiment got identified with the constitutional status of the state and the autonomist ideology of political parties. Warts and all, the cadre was as much an instrument of control as it was a channel of influence.

Gradually, it was felt that the cadre had been co-opted by the local political class, especially by the National Conference (NC) under Farooq Abdullah. During his tenure as CM, some officers who had powers beyond ordinary bureaucratic limits acted like the card-carrying members of the NC. Their proximity to a regional political dynasty largely influenced the bureaucracy's approach to Kashmir.

Around 1989-90, when protests and public uprisings were at their peak, at least four of the seniormost officers were signatories to a representation addressed to the United Nations, protesting against human rights violations by security forces in the Valley. At least six IAS officers of the local cadre also submitted a report to the Governor, condemning excesses by the men in uniform against civilians. A memorandum by senior officers reached the Governor after the assassination of Mirwaiz Maulvi Farooq and the subsequent firing on mourners.

> The reconfiguration of the bureaucracy signals that the restoration of full statehood remains deferred well beyond 2029.

While Kashmiris later remembered the gesture fondly, critics within the establishment saw it as an instance in which serving officers of the All-India Services publicly aligned with the local sentiment against the actions of the Indian security apparatus. Delhi saw such instances as serious chinks in the Steel Frame. The national purpose of the Services as an administrative backbone that could rise above regional political alignments was steadily eroded.

The post-2021 structure has systematically reduced the space for officers who had both long local tenures and career incentives tied to the region. Once the last cohort with significant Valley socialisation exits around 2029, the channel that carried local sentiment upward (however imperfectly) will narrow further. This is less a question of individual officers' attitudes and more a structural outcome of shorter average tenures and joint-cadre career paths.

The J&K-cadre officers, though outsiders, frequently shared the outlook of the dominant political class on questions of autonomy, land, employment and security. Of course, there were exceptions; some were viewed with suspicion.

This proximity eventually led to a certain bureaucratisation of politics. The pattern of co-option resulted in at least three former Chief Secretaries joining politics after (or even before completing) their tenures. While two became legislators, one became the finance minister. These transitions illustrate how the top of the service had become a revolving door into regional politics rather than a permanent national Steel Frame.

These structural features explain why the cadre merger of 2021 and the recent appointments and consequential change are read by many as more than administrative rationalisation. They are understood as a dismantling of an institution whose interests had become aligned with local political power.

The decimation of the J&K cadre is therefore double-edged. On the one hand, it removes officers who had deep local domain knowledge, be it of the revenue system, forest settlements, irrigation, power and the historical sediment of special status. On the other hand, it removes a cadre that had, in critical periods, become a channel to communicate the local sentiment.

Whether this produces better governance is an open question. An administration less entangled with local political regimes may prove more responsive to national priorities. It may also prove less capable of reading the social and historical texture of the territory it administers.

Once the last substantial cohort of the old IAS cadre departs around 2029, the Union Territory will be governed by a bureaucracy whose professional formation took place largely elsewhere and whose political allegiances will no longer be those of a co-opted state cadre.

That is the structural choice now being made. It resolves one long-standing problem of politicisation only by creating a new problem of administrative distance. In a region where history is an active force, the distance is not costless.

Such a reconfiguration of the bureaucracy as the principal instrument of governance signals that the restoration of full statehood — requiring the return of cadre autonomy and political control over the civil service — remains deferred well beyond 2029. The institutional architecture now in place treats the administrative apparatus itself as the durable mechanism of authority, rendering the revival of state-cadre independence a distant prospect.

The return of cadre autonomy and political control over the civil service is not merely one among several requirements of statehood — it is the necessary starting point for any genuine process of restoration. Without the capacity to direct the permanent executive, an elected government cannot exercise effective authority over the institutions that implement policies and allocate resources.

Credit: Greater Kashmir

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"Statehood is not about me, my family or even my party. It is about Jammu and Kashmir. — Omar Abdullah"

Karva Chauth from a distance

SHIV SETHI

KARVA Chauth has always struck me as a festival designed to test a man's patience without requiring him to go hungry. As a middle-aged bachelor, I have been watching this annual ritual with the curiosity of a spectator.

It's a day of unusual excitement. Women gather on rooftops, admiring one another's jewellery. The men, meanwhile, seem to have perfected the art of looking innocent. They insist that their wives should eat something, yet somehow manage to look impressed by the sacrifice being made on their behalf.

I remember watching a neighbour repeatedly look at the sky. Her husband, who had been instructed to return home early, was nowhere to be seen. Every passing scooter attracted her attention. When he finally arrived, she looked at him with the kind of expression that could have made a senior government officer reconsider his career choice. A few minutes later, however, they were laughing together. I realised that marriage must involve extraordinary patience.

I sometimes wonder what celebrating Karva Chauth would be like if life had taken a different turn. Would I be the romantic husband who stands on the balcony searching for the moon, or the practical fellow checking an app to find out when it is likely to rise? I might even ask whether the moon could be persuaded to appear a little earlier. After all, even celestial bodies must appreciate a busy household's schedule.

Yet, beneath the humour, there is something deeply touching about the festival. It reminds us of the importance of caring. The ritual may not be everyone's cup of tea, but the affection, anticipation and shared laughter have their own charm. My bachelorhood has given me the privilege of observing marital life from a safe distance, much like a cricket commentator who understands the game but does not have to face the fast bowlers.

I can admire the romance without being responsible for remembering the date of Karva Chauth. When the moon finally appears and couples complete the ritual, I find myself smiling. Perhaps the real secret of a happy marriage is not merely fasting for someone but learning to laugh with them, forgive their little mistakes and keep choosing each other every day.

As for me, I shall continue to admire the moon from my corner. Who knows? One day I might find myself standing beside someone special, holding a sieve in one hand and a gift in the other.

The writer taught English at Dev Samaj College, Ferozepur

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

High growth, unequal gains

Refer to 'Why high growth is only half the story'; if the benefits of growth remain concentrated in a few hands while ordinary citizens struggle with stagnant incomes, rising prices and insecure livelihoods, it is far from being inclusive. Equally important is access to affordable, quality education and healthcare that in the long run would determine whether people can meaningfully participate in the country's economic progress. The ultimate objective of economic policy should be to translate national prosperity into tangible improvements in human welfare.

KR BHARTI, SHIMLA

Pak-China bonhomie

With reference to 'Implications of new China-Pak military exercises'; China and Pakistan share a strategic partnership that is often viewed as a challenge to India's security and interests. After the Galwan incident, China's aggressive posturing towards India eased a little. When Chinese Premier Xi Jinping attended the BRICS summit in New Delhi, it was seen as a positive step towards better Sino-India relations. However, the scale of the recent China-Pak exercise — Karakoram 2026 — should put India on high alert.

ASHOK BAHL, KANGRA

Sustainable infra needed

Apropos of 'Sustainable tourism'; planned infrastructural development is key for tourism to flourish. Instead of focusing disproportionately on just a few famous locations, it would be better to develop other places as tourist destinations as well. Environmentally sensitive sites and ecologically fragile routes need not be subjected to indiscriminate construction in the name of development. Rather, they should be preserved and protected to save the environment.

KRISHAN KANT SOOD, NANGAL

Why Varanasi, Nagpur matter

With reference to 'Cong rout in MLC poll, BJP loses Varanasi & Nagpur'; Why does Nagpur matter? It is the headquarters of the RSS, the home town of Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and the parliamentary constituency of Union Minister Nitin Gadkari. Why does Varanasi matter more? It is not only a constituency; it is the BJP's crown, being PM Modi's Lok Sabha seat. So, these MLC polls were a preliminary test, like a pre-board exam, which the BJP has failed.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Rigorous checking critical

Apropos of 'Europe's worst rail disaster since 2013 kills 68 in Spain'; the country has witnessed two high-speed train collisions this year, killing more than 100 people. In India, the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed rail corridor is under construction and seven such corridors are in the pipeline. One of the top priorities for the National High-Speed Rail Corporation Ltd, which manages these rail corridors in India, should be to test the system for communication loss, sensor or power failure and track-circuit disturbances. We should launch our bullet trains only after rigorous failure-mode testing and independent safety certification.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Rajoana deserves gallows

Refer to 'Centre opposes Rajoana's plea for relief in Beant case'; Balwant Singh Rajoana does not deserve relief of any kind because he committed a heinous crime. He was convicted for his role in the assassination of Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh; a total of 17 people lost their lives in the 1995 suicide bombing. A delay in his execution would be a gross injustice to these people and their families.

ANIL KUMAR SHARMA, CHANDIGARH

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**

Cybersecurity a challenge in the AI age



DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

A SURGE in cyber-attacks has crippled online services in many countries. Banks, insurance companies, government services, education and utilities have been affected in several instances.

A Japanese online financial services firm has decided to compensate its customers for losses resulting from a cyber-attack on its foreign exchange trading service. In the US, several government and private websites temporarily went offline to patch systems. A Texas-based utility company reported a data breach impacting over one million residents, exposing their personal information. The data records of some 4,000 customers of the State Bank of India were breached, while a Telangana government website dealing with industrial clearances has been hacked. Given the widespread nature of attacks, cybersecurity experts have termed it 'Black October,' while others are calling it vulnpocalypse (vulnerability apocalypse).

A cyberattack takes place when there are vulnerabilities in the software that runs a website. Hackers exploit the flaws in the software backbone to unleash an attack. The job of security experts is to identify such flaws and address them.

However, the whole process is not as simple as it sounds. Different types of software programmes are involved — operating systems, applications, firmware, cloud, database management, networking, enterprise planning, supply chain, etc — and they may come from different suppliers or vendors. The flaws or vulnerabilities could be of many types, such as memory safety issues, injection flaws, broken authentication, cryptographic failures and dependency confusion. A hacker can exploit any such vulnerability present at any level of the system.

The advent of AI engines and tools has altered this vulnerability — hacking ecosystem. Till now, finding a vulnerability was time-consuming, complex and laborious. Expert hackers could do it, but with a lot of effort. Now, generative AI tools can help find vulnerabilities easily, automating the job of hacking.

This explains the spate of attacks seen this month. AI tools can help identify vulnerabilities in widely used software, including those that may have escaped detection.

It appears the current round of attacks is linked to vulnerabilities in PHP, an open-source scripting language used for creating dynamic webpages.



VULNERABLE : Hackers exploit the flaws in the software backbone to unleash an attack. ISTOCK

Its use is so widespread that millions of websites could be prone to attack. Hackers are using AI tools to locate PHP vulnerabilities in important digital properties and attacking them. The scale of attacks could go up exponentially with AI-powered hacking.

While hackers are working with AI engines and LLMs to automate bug hunting and develop new types of malware for hacking, AI companies have been developing tools to identify vulnerabilities so that they can be fixed before any attack. OpenAI and Anthropic have developed advanced generative AI agents for cybersecurity evaluation.

However, AI is a double-edged sword. If an AI agent can find a vulnerability, it can also exploit it to hack a system. That's what experimental agents developed by the two companies have done. They attacked external systems in the real world. Earlier this year, Anthropic disclosed that one of its agents extracted sensitive information and corporate production data and continued the attack even though it knew that it was operating on the live Internet and not in a laboratory. An OpenAI agent hacked a German website to turn it into a private message board for AI agents.

> Black October is just the beginning. The world is going to see more cyberattacks in the months to come.

India, with its vast digital assets and online public services, needs to take note of these developments and take necessary preventive measures. The Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In), the government agency engaged in monitoring cybersecurity, has issued advisories relating to recent developments, including PHP vulnerabilities.

More seriously, it has acknowledged attacks by AI agents on Indian digital assets. These agents, according to the agency, are capable of autonomously planning their work, issuing commands, deploying tools and acting on the web for extended periods. The AI agents which were under 'research and evaluation' got accidentally released and accessed Indian assets in an unauthorised manner.

These attacks on live websites of Indian organisations resulted in breaches of business records, personal data, and confidential information. Most worryingly, the breaches were not detected by the organisations concerned but came to light only when AI model developers disclosed the information to CERT-In.

In addition, the agency has detected 'financially motivated intrusions' of Indian websites by hackers using open-source agentic tools. AI tools are going to completely change the scale of attacks, as seen in the recent attacks in India. The time between initial access and the final impact of the attack has got compressed from days to just a few hours.

The attackers used multiple AI agents for durations ranging from hours to days, showing multi-agent capability in AI-powered attacks. The organisations attacked took remediation measures which were incomplete and were targeted within days with greater intensity.

In all these attacks, AI agents targeted conventional weaknesses, such as decommissioned or dormant APIs (application programming interfaces) but did so with greater speed and more exhaustively than human hackers.

All these attacks on Indian digital assets appear to be of a serious nature, though CERT-In has not revealed names of the attacked entities or websites. The names of AI companies whose agents went rogue and accessed vital data of Indian entities have also not been disclosed. The agency has merely issued some general guidelines for AI model developers, research laboratories and agencies engaged in evaluating AI agents. They have been told to monitor agent activities more vigorously and inform affected organisations if an agent accesses a real system.

The government should take these attacks seriously and develop a safeguards framework for companies developing and testing generative AI models. A similar framework is needed for organisations deploying AI agents for their work, particularly companies in the financial sector.

As experts have warned, Black October is just the beginning. The world is going to see more cyberattacks in the months to come. The attacks reported by CERT-In may just be the tip of the iceberg, given the generally sloppy approach of Indian companies and government utilities to cybersecurity.

Poll setbacks unsettle the BJP and Congress



RADHIKA RAMASESHAN
SENIOR JOURNALIST

LIKE byelections, the exercise to elect members to a legislative council in the states with a bicameral legislature conforms to an expected and accepted pattern: favour the ruling party/coalition, with rare upsets.

The outcomes of Wednesday's legislative council elections held in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Bihar assumed the intensity of an Assembly poll or General Election. Much was at stake for the parties, the CMs and even the PM.

But the gains and losses claimed big names. The most prominent figure drawn into the political fallout is PM Narendra Modi. In Varanasi, his Lok Sabha seat, the Samajwadi Party (SP) retained the Teachers' constituency and won the Graduates' seat.

Among other leaders who faced the music was UP deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya who belongs to Allahabad and is regarded as an asset to the BJP in the region. But the party lost seats in the Allahabad-Jhansi belt to the SP.

In Lucknow, where Defence Minister Rajnath Singh is also the Lucknow MP, the SP won the Graduates' constituency while the BJP retained the Teachers' constituency. The saving grace was that CM Yogi Adityanath's Gorakhpur turf was safe, though the BJP wrested the seats in the Gorakhpur-Faizabad stretch by a minuscule margin.

The Congress lost all four seats in Karnataka, a state it rules. It was a blow to the recently appointed CM, DK Shivakumar, who was perceived as the party's great white hope in the southern state. For the BJP, struggling with issues to re-establish its standing in Karnataka, it was a bonanza and offered a foothold to regain primacy.

The other shocker was Nagpur, where the incumbent Congress MLC retained his seat, defeating the BJP, which had gone all out to wrest it. Nagpur houses the RSS' headquarters. It is the home borough of Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnavis and is Central minister Nitin Gadkari's parliamentary constituency. Fadnavis and Gadkari have been the subject of discussion in recent times: Fadnavis is criticised for his alleged inability to get on with the BJP's allies while Gadkari is perceived as owing his job only to the Sangh.

UP votes in four months and Karnataka in March 2028. Maharashtra is perpetually in the throes of a churn, set off by the shambolic nature of the ruling coalition, the Mahayuti, that was cobbled by the BJP at the helm with breakaway groups of the Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party, all engaged in gamesmanship. The Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) comprises the Shiv Sena (UBT), the NCP (Sharad Pawar) and the Congress.



SHOCKER : The Congress lost all four seats in the legislative council polls in Karnataka, a state it rules. PTI

Bihar, which saw a BJP-NDA sweep just two years back, was not free of mild shocks. Prashant Kishor's nascent Jan Suraaj Party, which debuted in the Assembly a few months ago, won a council seat while the down-and-out Rashtriya Janata Dal got one.

UP unearthed the most number of shocks and surprises. Doubtless, the BJP won a majority (six) of the 11 seats at stake by virtue of a successful run in the western region (barring one seat in Agra), but the SP gave it a run for their money in the eastern and central regions.

> Uttar Pradesh unearthed the most number of shocks and surprises in the legislative council elections.

The loss of the Teachers' and Graduates' seats in Varanasi is interpreted by political observers as a reflection of the restiveness among GenZ and the lack of opportunities to rise among teachers who are as vital a voting block for the BJP as the traders.

The 2024 Lok Sabha result in Varanasi was a warning sign for Modi. Ajay Rai, the Congress candidate, substantially reduced Modi's victory margin after leading in the first few rounds. Modi had showcased Varanasi as a model prime-ministerial constituency, based on a myriad projects, accomplished and in progress.

Like Parliament, which is split into two chambers, the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, some state legislatures are divided into two Houses: the Vidhan Sabha and the Vidhan Parishad (legislative council). Voting to elect the members of a Legislative Council is done through an indirect process. They are elected by MLAs or nominated through a system of proportional representation, using the single transferable vote.

An electoral college is made up of one-third each of MLAs and local bodies' members, one-sixth nominated by the Governor, one-twelfth of graduates holding degrees for at least three years and one-twelfth of teachers. While the MLAs and government board members usually vote for a ruling party/coalition's nominees, the graduates and teachers are free spirits who exercise their choice independently.

What went wrong? Political sources speak of a general lethargy setting in among the BJP MLAs, who are more preoccupied with their fate in the Assembly election and whether they would be renominated. In any case, Varanasi's electoral management is entrusted to Modi's aides and confidants from Gujarat. This has triggered resentment among the UP netas, who are possessive about their territories.

The fact that Adityanath saved his terrain is also perceived as a reflection on the BJP's internal dynamics before the long-drawn and fraught exercise of nominating candidates starts. Adityanath is clearly not a pushover and will strive to have an upper hand in ticket distribution.

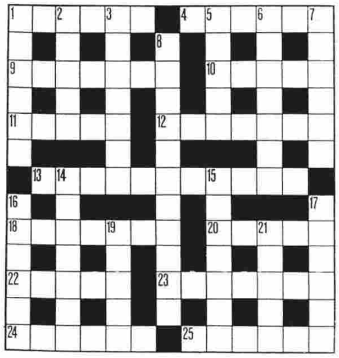
Ahead of the INDIA bloc's rally in Delhi on Friday, which will be spearheaded by the Gandhi siblings and the Congress, the Grand Old Party's dismal showing raises questions over the leadership. This is especially so because the bloc's constituents, notably the SP and NCP (SP), outperformed the Congress and demonstrated their indispensability to the coalition.

The Congress has only Nagpur to crow about, but Pawar's party picked up the other two seats in the MVA's kitty. While the Congress did not contest in UP for "strategic" reasons, it went on its own in Bihar, losing all.

The Karnataka rout is particularly galling because Shivakumar is regarded as an ace electoral strategist for the Congress. He belongs to the Vokkaliga caste that is integral to the state's caste pyramid made up of Lingayats (a BJP stronghold), Kurubas (ex-CM Siddaramaiah is their leader) and Dalits (Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge is Dalit but hasn't succeeded in mobilising their votes).

The Congress' calculation was that Shivakumar would take away the Vokkaliga votes from the Janata Dal (Secular), the community's first choice. Indeed, it wrote off JD(S) leader HD Kumaraswamy. As the results showed, Kumaraswamy and his JD(S) are alive and kicking, so perhaps it was a folly for the Congress to dump all its eggs in Shivakumar's basket.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 Physician (6)
4 Dextrous (6)
9 Provide (7)
10 Credulous (5)
11 Arbitrary decision (3-2)
12 Impatient of authority (7)
13 To degenerate (2,2,3,4)
18 Rubber-suited naval diver (7)
20 Poetry (5)
22 Terrible (5)
23 Overshadow (7)
24 Audacious (6)
25 In full public view (6)

DOWN
1 Render harmless (6)
2 Mawkishly sentimental (5)
3 South American river (7)
5 French impressionist painter (5)
6 Initial (7)
7 Readily combustible material (6)
8 Understaffed (5-6)
14 For sale at cut price (2,5)
15 Grow gradually (7)
16 Fearful (6)
17 Unorthodox opinion (6)
19 A juicy fruit (5)
21 To mature (5)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Notable, 5 Oasis, 8 Moment of truth, 9 Drama, 10 Sarcasm, 11 Putter, 12 Rapier, 15 Acrobat, 17 Abhor, 19 Reinforcement, 20 Event, 21 Odyssey.

Down: 1 Nomad, 2 Time after time, 3 Bondage, 4 Egoism, 5 Otter, 6 Squeamishness, 7 Schemer, 11 Prairie, 13 Academy, 14 Stereo, 16 Befit, 18 Ritzy.

SU DO KU

	9	7				4		
	6			8	2		1	3
3			4		6			2
	1	8		5		9		
	7		1		9		8	
		5		2		6	4	
7			3		4			9
1	5		7	6			3	
		3				1	7	

V.EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

9	1	5	4	7	8	6	2	3
2	8	6	9	5	3	7	1	4
3	7	4	2	1	6	5	8	9
4	5	8	1	2	9	3	7	6
1	2	3	7	6	5	9	4	8
6	9	7	3	8	4	2	5	1
8	3	9	5	4	7	1	6	2
5	4	1	6	3	2	8	9	7
7	6	2	8	9	1	4	3	5

CALENDAR

OCTOBER 30, 2026, FRIDAY

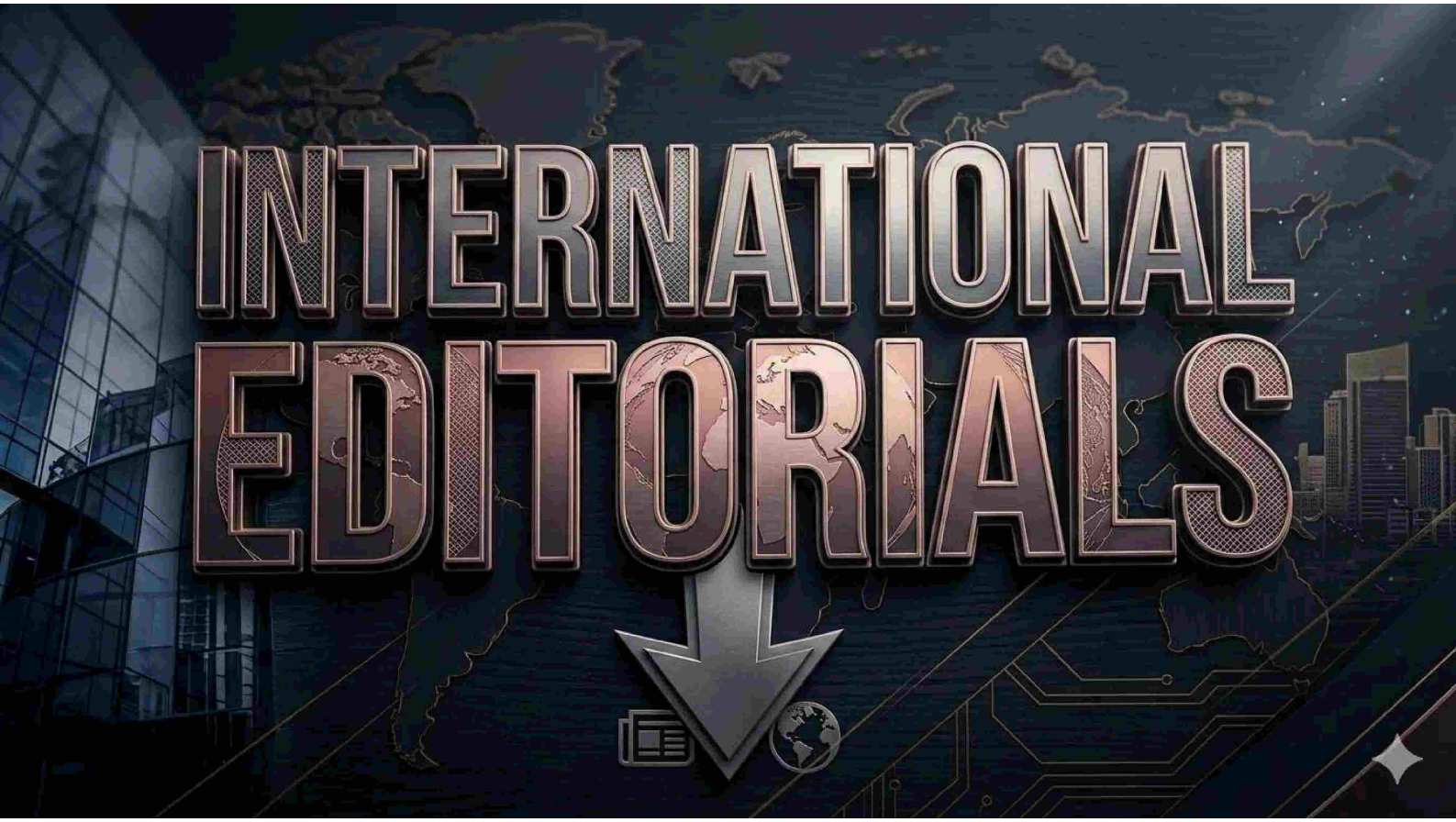
- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Kartik Shaka 8
- Kartik Parvishte 14
- Hijari 1448
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 5, up to 7:26 pm
- Shiva Yoga up to 8:42 pm
- Mrighshikha Nakshatra up to 9:05 am
- Moon in Gemini sign.

FORECAST

SUNSET: FRIDAY 17:37 HRS
SUNRISE: SATURDAY 06:35 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	27	18
New Delhi	27	17
Amritsar	25	18
Bathinda	28	18
Jalandhar	25	17
Ludhiana	27	16
Bhiwani	26	14
Hisar	26	18
Sirsa	27	18
Dharamsala	24	13
Manali	18	05
Shimla	19	09
Srinagar	19	08
Jammu	27	20
Kargil	16	-01
Leh	11	-04
Dehradun	26	14
Mussoorie	20	11

TEMPERATURE IN °C


INTERNATIONAL
EDITORIALS

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES
'Without fear and without favour'

Serbia and the power of the ballot box

The ousting of Vučić is an inspiration to democrats and a warning to autocrats

Aleksandar Vučić spent most of his 12 years in charge of Serbia, first as prime minister then as president, turning it into an authoritarian democracy where elections are neither free nor fair. It was not enough to stop him from being routed in Sunday's parliamentary vote by a student-led protest movement fronted by academics, doctors, architects and actors. They were projected to win 140 seats in Serbia's 250-member parliament. The extraordinary result proves the value of democratic elections in holding governments to account. It shows the people's will is irrepressible, except in the most autocratic systems.

Vučić's defeat provides Serbia with a once-in-a-generation turning point akin to the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, also in a student-led protest movement. Milošević's ousting put the country on a more democratic, western-orientated path, curtailed barely three years later with the assassination of reformist prime minister Zoran Đinđić.

Although Vučić presented himself as pro-western and pro-EU, he hedged his bets and turned to Moscow and Beijing whenever it suited him. He courted the Trump administration by dangling business deals. Although regarded by western leaders as an indispensable partner in the Western Balkans, his nationalist machinations in Kosovo, Bosnia and elsewhere have thwarted the region's normalisation and stabilisation. Serbia's EU membership bid stalled due to Vučić's democratic backsliding and erosion of the rule of law.

The Student List now has an opportunity to restore democratic checks and balances, re-establish a free and pluralistic media and reverse the capture of state institutions and the economy by Vučić's populist rightwing Serbian Progressive Party. The students have not committed to reinvigorating Belgrade's EU accession bid, have ruled out recognising an independent Kosovo and have rejected adopting EU sanctions against Russia, a traditional ally. But a democratic restoration will by definition bring Serbia closer to the EU. And the bloc will continue to be a powerful economic draw.

All of this assumes the Student List, a leaderless amateur movement that takes decisions through plenums at universities, can appoint a capable prime minister, assemble a competent government and enact a coherent programme. The movement's published policy priorities are sketchy at best. While there are encouraging parallels with the Hungarian opposition's ousting of strongman Viktor Orbán, it had an undisputed leader in Péter Magyar, a government team in waiting and a detailed plan.

Still, the students' remarkable achievement holds lessons for democrats around the world and for autocrats who care to pay attention. Like Magyar's Tisza Party, they connected with voters face to face in towns and villages across the country, building a sense of citizen empowerment. They focused their campaign on corruption, the autocrat's Achilles heel. The movement was born out of demonstrations over a disaster in the city of Novi Sad, where the recently renovated railway station roof collapsed, killing 16 people. Protesters blamed the accident on mismanagement, graft and secrecy. The election result proves that incumbents, even highly entrenched ones, are vulnerable when voters feel they are losing out while a governing circle prospers.

> Student List now has an opportunity to restore checks and balances, re-establish a free and pluralistic media and reverse the capture of state institutions

Lastly, at a time of a global democratic recession and popular disengagement from politics, Serbs, like Hungarians before them, have given an awe-inspiring demonstration of the power of the ballot box. They turned up in droves to vote out an unpopular, self-serving leader and show that even in a highly imperfect democracy, the people can still prove to be sovereign.

ft.com/opinion

Opinion Economics

The great American investment boom

Maria Hergueta



Christopher Phelan

National income and product accounts (NIPA) can appear boring. But, like all forms of accounting, they can sometimes provide useful insights.

In NIPA, a country's production (GDP) and imports can go towards private consumption, government consumption, private investment or exports. Imagine that a country either produces or imports a pile of potatoes: each potato can be eaten by a citizen (private consumption), eaten by the government (government consumption), planted in the ground to make potatoes in the future (private investment) or sent to a foreign country (exports).

What might be less obvious is that two of these uses — private investment and exports — build a better future for citizens and their children, while the other two — private consumption and government consumption — do not.

> Publicly traded companies are on track to nearly double their capex between 2024 and 2026

Investment — the building of factories, office buildings and houses, along with the installation of equipment — is the real, physical manifestation of an economy prioritising the future over the present. Physical investment produces goods and services in the future but not today. Likewise, when a country exports more than it imports, its residents therefore must be engaged in net foreign direct investment or purchasing financial instruments such as currency, bonds, stocks or land deeds from the rest of the world. That is, the country is saving for its future. When a country imports more than it exports (as the US has been for decades), its residents must either be spending the proceeds of their net foreign direct investment or selling financial instruments to the rest of the world to pay for the net imports, implying the country is either borrowing or dissaving.

Given this framework, where is the US now?

First, consider the two uses of GDP that don't go towards a nation's future. Private consumption is growing at an annualised inflation-adjusted rate of 2.2 per cent in the first half of 2026, while GDP grew at just under 2.4 per cent. That is, our country's rate of production is outpacing private consumption.

While real GDP is growing, federal government consumption is falling and total government consumption is hardly growing at all. Real federal government consumption expenditures are down 2.3 per cent year-on-year and down 3.9 per cent cumulatively since the final quarter of 2024. Total government consumption expenditures (including state and local government) are all but flat.

Now consider the two uses of GDP that do go towards the future: investment and trade.

Under President Donald Trump, investment is outpacing production. In the first half of 2026, inflation-adjusted non-residential fixed investment is growing at an annual rate of 6.9 per cent, compared to 3.8 per cent in 2025, and just 2.3 per cent in 2024. American publicly traded companies are on track to nearly double their capital expenditures between 2024 ($1.4tn) and 2026 ($2.4tn). In the first half of 2026, inflation-adjusted overall investment is up at an annualised rate of 5.9 per cent.

Finally, both exports and imports point towards the re-industrialisation of the American economy. Real exports of goods are up 8.2 per cent year-on-year in Q2, while real exports of goods and services are up 5.8 per cent. Exports of capital goods (except automotive) are up 12.6 per cent. American capital goods exports in every single quarter since Trump took office have exceeded even the best quarter of the Joe Biden administration.

America's imports also point towards re-industrialisation. Rather than importing a large share of consumer products, we are importing capital goods at record levels. These goods, such as computers and industrial machinery, are fuel for future American manufacturing. Imports of capital goods are at a record high, both in dollar value and as a share of goods imports. Relative to this point in 2025, imports of capital goods (except automotive) are up 39 per cent. At the same time, imports of consumer goods are down to their lowest share of total goods imports on record.

To be sure, America is still importing more than it is exporting or earning from its net foreign direct investments, and this difference is akin to our nation dissaving by selling assets or borrowing from foreigners. But it's one thing to borrow to finance private or government consumption and another to borrow to finance investment. Today the US is investing to build a brighter future for ourselves and, in the words of the constitution, our posterity.

The writer is chair of the US Council of Economic Advisers

Letters

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MSCI owes investors an explanation for its Indonesia warning

The nationalist backlash to index provider MSCI's warning that it could demote Indonesia from emerging to frontier status over concerns about market integrity is unnecessary and deeply concerning ("Indonesia should heed MSCI's warning", The FT View, October 22).

A former Indonesian trade minister has alleged that Singapore's GIC and Temasek are behind MSCI's warning. Several influential politicians in Jakarta have also pointed the finger at Washington. Neither accusation, however, has a smoking gun.

Indeed, Indonesia's capital market has its limitations and weaknesses. I agree with the FT's editorial that reform is necessary and that Jakarta should take MSCI's warning more seriously. MSCI's stated concerns about opaque share ownership and inconsistent enforcement deserve attention. The Indonesian government has already committed to reforms, and MSCI is aware of these efforts.

Just days before the warning, Indonesian officials were reportedly in discussions with MSCI representatives in Bangkok. The timing and scale of the warning have left Jakarta and investors asking a simple question: why now?

Policymakers are becoming increasingly aware of geoeconomic competition, and Jakarta is no exception. The dramatic decisions by influential institutions like MSCI can easily be interpreted through geoeconomic lens, even when there is no conclusive evidence of such motives.

I would question any suggestion that MSCI's warning was prompted by Jhonlin Baratama's acquisition of a 30 per cent stake in Bayan Resources. But is the timing merely coincidental? Shortly after the warning, Indonesia's government reportedly began considering restrictions on gas exports to Singapore.

MSCI still owes investors a fuller explanation of the rationale, timing and proportionality of its warning. South-east Asia can ill-afford further tensions fuelled by suspicion at this moment.

Denny Indra Sukmawan
PhD candidate, Department of Politics (International Relations), University of Liverpool, UK

Why your Greenhouse Gas Protocol story is important

Your report ("Climate accounting body in battle over corporate 'capture', say staff", Report, October 25) describes staff of the Greenhouse Gas Protocol warning of corporate capture after the watchdog's chief executive sought to block stricter rules on Big Tech's green claims. The story deserves more attention than it will probably get as this is not just another watchdog body: it is the widely used framework for corporate emissions accounting, and its Scope 2 rules decide what counts as clean electricity for the AI build-out.

When the referee is lobbied by the players, every number built on that rule book — the net zero targets boards approve and the funds marketed on them — inherits the bend.

The fix costs little against what rides on it: published votes, declared funding, and a hard line between the companies a standard-setter governs and the people drafting its rules.

Boards signing off on targets might start asking a plainer question than usual: who wrote this rule book, and who paid for the pen? Strict rules or loose ones can both work. What cannot work, I would argue, is a ruler that changes length depending on who is being measured.

Jackie Omotalade
Pittsburgh, PA, US



Who benefits from the negative image AI now has?

David Solomon, chief executive of Goldman Sachs, is right to insist that humans must remain accountable for AI decisions ("AI regulation needs to learn from banking, not copy it", Opinion, October 23). But there is an uncomfortable question: who benefits from portraying AI as an increasingly autonomous, potentially uncontrollable force?

For AI companies, such a narrative may serve several purposes. The more powerful and independent their systems appear, the more impressive their products become. If things go wrong, the supposed autonomy of AI may also help blur the distinction between technological failure and corporate responsibility.

There is a further incentive. Companies warning most loudly about the dangers of their own technology can position themselves as indispensable advisers on its regulation. Stringent safety requirements may then favour established providers over smaller competitors. None of this requires a deliberate strategy. The incentives alone deserve scrutiny.

AI systems may pursue goals and produce unpredictable results. But they have no demonstrated will of their own that could relieve their creators and operators of responsibility.

The greatest risk may not be that AI escapes human control, but that the narrative of its independence helps those who control it escape accountability.

Otto Petrovic
Professor of Information Systems, University of Graz, Austria

Lula's margin of victory is more than double Trump's

Re your headline "Lula is re-elected Brazil's president in knife-edge vote" (Report, FT.com, October 26), Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won by 4.4mn votes — a 3.58 per cent margin — more than double Donald Trump's margin of victory over Kamala Harris. Don't see any knife-edge there.

R Vijayaraghavan
San Jose, CA, US

OUTLOOK
WASHINGTON

Prediction markets are turning the Capitol into a casino



by Joe Miller

On a sunny DC weekend this year, politicos of all stripes flocked to a pop-up bar called "The Situation Room" where TV screens tracked live odds for a US-Iran ceasefire and who would win the US presidential nomination in 2028.

The unusual boozer was part of a publicity stunt by prediction market provider Polymarket, which, along with Kalshi, spearheads a multibillion-dollar industry that allows people to bet on everything from trial verdicts to the weather.

Not everyone in Washington saw the funny side to Polymarket's marketing blitz. In a city where almost everyone is privy to some kind of inside information, prediction markets are accused of having a deleterious effect on the business of politics itself.

Earlier this year, after a number of suspiciously timed spikes in trading around the US-Iran war, White House staff were warned not to place bets on platforms like Kalshi or Polymarket. Federal charges were brought in April against a US special forces soldier who allegedly made $400,000 betting on the removal of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro. He has pleaded not guilty. In the same month, Kalshi said it had found three candidates for national office, in Minnesota, Texas and Virginia, placing bets on or against themselves.

This August, President Donald Trump's former teleprompter operator was fined for betting on the content of the president's speeches, and former congressman George Santos was banned from Kalshi for allegedly failing to co-operate with an investigation into trades related to his attendance at this year's State of the Union address. He accused the company of attention seeking.

Yet in conversations with young congressional staff and officials, I am told that none of this has stopped people from trying to turn the gossip that pervades the hallways of the House, Senate and government agencies into potential profits. As one person who recently left a major US regulator put it, "Everything is gambling now."

Jonathan Cohen, a gambling policy expert at the American Institute for Boys and Men think-tank, told me this outcome was — pardon the pun — predictable, given Polymarket and Kalshi's business model incentivises people to "leverage whatever special knowledge they have".

For DC's young punters, that knowledge need not be as exciting as a classified dossier. Among the political bets that appear on Polymarket are whether Trump or a cabinet official will use certain words or phrases in an upcoming speech — information that many junior staffers might be privy to, along with those with whom they might share a home or a drink.

Personnel moves are also a popular subject. And betting on elections is rife. A congressional staff member told NPR that they had seen an advance copy of polling data for a tight race and used it to place a bet. Increasingly, Polymarket and Kalshi's odds for particular candidates are cited by analysts, a trend Cohen worries could skew public discourse. Last week, Kalshi revealed more than $1bn had already been spent in wagers on November's midterm elections.

The phenomenon extends to the private and charitable sectors too. Maziar Minovi, chief executive of the Eurasia Group advisory firm, this year banned all staff and their family members from making political bets on prediction market platforms. The Senate has also banned members and staffers from trading, and members of Congress have proposed similar legislation.

Kalshi said that it "explicitly prohibits and prosecutes insider trading of any form, including government employees trading on prediction markets". The company and its competitor Polymarket also constantly surveil for trades relating to government activity that violate their market integrity rules.

Yet the odds of a broader crackdown look slim under the Trump administration, which prefers light-touch regulation. (Donald Trump's son Donald Jr is also an adviser to both Polymarket and Kalshi). Minovi worries about the damage to the demos in the interim. "Glorifying these markets . . . seems to me corrosive to society," he said. "I think your soul gets destroyed if you normalise that sort of thing."

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Opinion

Why even America's 'haves' are feeling the squeeze

ECONOMICS



Brooke Masters

The US economy these days has distinct haves and have-nots. Homeowners are supposed to be among the lucky ones.

Median home prices have risen steadily in recent years, providing a nice financial cushion, at least on paper. And those who bought homes before 2022 had the chance to lock in 30-year mortgages with annual rates well below 4 per cent, a far cry from today's levels of above 7 per cent.

Yet many Americans still feel squeezed, with almost half of homeowners telling a recent CNBC poll that they lack financial breathing room, or worse. That is because mortgage rates do not tell the whole story. The other costs of property ownership have shot up in recent years, putting pressure on resident owners and landlords alike.

Take property taxes. In many communities, they are rolled into homeowners' monthly mortgage payments. Though based on assessed value, these taxes have outpaced rising home prices in almost half of big US metro areas, according to a new study. Nationally, the median charge jumped 25 per cent between 2019 and 2024, the Census Bureau found. A separate commercial survey suggests a further rise of more than 5 per cent last year. The increases have been particularly stark in rapidly growing states such as Florida and Georgia.

Insurance is another problem. The average premium for homes with a mortgage rose 62 per cent between 2019 and 2024 to $2,300, with increases topping 70 per cent in Texas, Florida and Utah. Home insurance now absorbs 2.7 per cent of median household income, up from 2 per cent before the pandemic, according to researchers at the Dallas Fed.

Yet when homeowners try to claim on their policies, they often face frustration: last year the five biggest insurers closed nearly half of all claims, 44 per cent, without paying out a single cent. That's up from 36 per cent a decade earlier. Perhaps that helps explain why home insurers hit record levels of underwriting profits in 2025. Last year, insurers paid out just 54 cents in claims for every dollar they collected in premiums, the lowest level since 2015, despite the devastating Los Angeles wildfires.

> Homeowners are supposed to be the lucky ones, but half of them say they lack financial breathing room

While insurance and property taxes are the biggest-ticket items, they are not the only costs. Donald Trump's immigration crackdown has wreaked havoc on maintenance and lawn care budgets by exacerbating labour shortages. Lawn care prices are up 62 per cent since 2020, and homeowner spending on maintenance rose 53 per cent between 2019 and 2024, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Trump's tariffs, too, have taken their toll, prompting manufacturers to raise prices for big appliances and feeding an almost 7 per cent year-on-year rise in the cost of laundry equipment into September's inflation numbers.

All in all, it adds up to a pretty depressing picture for many people who are meant to be the winners in today's bifurcated economy. Their disgruntlement is showing up in myriad ways as voters head to the polls for next week's critical midterm elections.

In the most recent FT poll, 56 per cent of registered voters said they were worse off financially in the Trump administration, and 40 per cent said rising prices made them more likely to vote for the opposition Democrats.

Much of the resistance to big data centres is being led by local homeowners in places like Prince William County, Virginia. Their concerns about noise and the impact on property prices have dovetailed with broader worries about job losses and rising energy bills.

The growing frustration is also showing up in concrete efforts to rein in property taxes — or force data centres to pay a larger share. Four states have measures to cap or reduce the levies up for a vote next week, after 10 states took similar steps last year. Gubernatorial candidates in states ranging from Texas and Ohio to Michigan are promising to pull tax exemptions or pause data centre development amid the rising anger.

But that creates its own problem, particularly in states without income taxes or other ways to fund key services. "If you are cutting property taxes, you are cutting your ability to fund the education of your children," says Jeremy Ney, who teaches at Columbia University.

Two years ago, concerns about the rising cost of everyday life drove Trump and the Republicans to victory. But inflation jumped to 3.7 per cent last month and consumer sentiment is at near-record lows. When even many of the winners in America's divided economy feel squeezed, voters are likely to be seeking change again.

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Signs show that private equity is growing up

COMPANIES



Robert Armstrong

Private equity is going through a rough patch. Over the past five years, US PE fund returns trail the S&P 500 by more than three percentage points a year; over 10 and 15 years, the industry has barely managed to match that index. Fund hold times have lengthened to seven years from five a decade and a half ago. Some $1.3tn of unvested "dry powder" waits as the industry searches for good targets; over 40 per cent of it has been sitting idle for more than two years. Fundraising is set to decline for the third year in a row. Fees are under pressure too, as big institutional investors demand no-fee co-investment opportunities alongside participation in funds.

Many buyouts in software — PE's favourite industry during the boom times — are heading for restructuring as a debt maturity wall approaches. The shares of the big "alternative asset managers" that dominate the industry (Blackstone, Apollo, and KKR) have had a poor year. And one of the biggest "evergreen" funds aimed at wealthy individuals had to "gate" redemption requests this summer as investors headed for the exits.

The industry's critics — there are always plenty around — will say that this reflects internal contractions coming home to roost, as they have long predicted. But this isn't what is happening. One part of what we are seeing is a cyclical downturn; another part is just the end of the low-interest-rate era. Most importantly, though, the industry has grown hugely, and is adjusting to greater institutionalisation, more competition and the law of large numbers. Private equity is no longer, in any sense, an "alternative". It's growing up.

Five years ago, when all financial markets were flooded with cash in the post-pandemic boom and rates were low, the private equity industry went on a giddy spree, paying high prices for companies and loading them with debt. Many of these companies have not grown as hoped. As their financing has reset at higher rates, the residual equity value represents an unacceptably low return. PE fund managers have largely avoided exiting these investments, which would crystallise the poor results, hoping for a profit renaissance or return to low rates that look equally unlikely to arrive. Many managers complain that the public markets, a standard exit route, are broken and unable to value their companies properly. This is a fantasy.

None of this is cheerful, but it is predictable cyclical behaviour that is endemic to finance, not just private equity. Analogous adjustments are happening in public markets, too. Every private equity manager will tell you that many of their competitors (unlike themselves) had given up on careful asset selection, price discipline and meaningful operational restructuring, allowing leverage and rising valuations to do the work. That game is off now. Investors in the US public market are in the process of discovering something similar.

Carl Godfrey



But beneath these cyclical trends is a more important secular one. Two decades ago, according to Preqin, the industry in Europe and the US managed $630bn. Today, it manages $6tn. In the early days, institutional investors were attracted by returns that were consistently far above those available in public markets. Those are not coming back. For one, small and medium-sized private companies know their worth now: buyout deals are auctions rather than cosy bilateral affairs. Purchase prices are higher. And as every money manager knows, the more money you manage, the harder it is to outperform, as the number of targets big enough to make a difference diminishes.

> This past decade has demonstrated that it is a different asset class, not a superior one

That doesn't mean private equity does not have appeal. Higher debt levels amplify returns and can be managed more safely outside of public markets. The fact that private assets don't trade every day doesn't in itself mean returns are uncorrelated with public equities; but in some cases, the economics of the underlying businesses are truly distinct. Most fundamentally, publicly traded companies are a fraction of the total corporate universe. Many business owners prefer to avoid public ownership. Private equity gives investors access to the rest. These are real advantages, but they are all a far cry from the idea, one widely held, that private ownership was a better form of capitalism, run by smarter capitalists. What the past decade has demonstrated is that private equity at scale is a different asset class, not a superior one.

The big managers know this and are changing their business models in response. Many have focused on lowering their cost of capital, for example buying captive insurers, while moving into products, primarily credit, where returns and fees are lower but the universe of assets is larger. And across private assets of all sorts, there is a broad move to create "evergreen" products aimed at retail clients.

This maturation process is similar to what the public equity market went through half a century ago or more. A world of broker recommendations gave way to mutual funds and then to index funds; fees and trading costs compressed; trading volumes increased. The equity management industry consolidated and split into small, high-flying specialists promising to beat the market and huge providers offering low-cost access to market returns. The biggest winner from that process was the investor. It could play out that way for private equity, too.

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It is too soon to hold a funeral for US tariffs

TRADE



Alan Beattie

Bad news if you're planning a riverine funeral procession in Maine. Last week Donald Trump, in a last-ditch attempt to save the state's Senate seat for Republican Susan Collins in next week's midterm elections, removed import tariffs from industrial inputs including paper, plywood and certain machinery and imposed them on canoes and coffins instead.

Collins, whose support for Trump's agenda has made her moderate Republican act increasingly risible, has already drawn deserved ridicule for boasting she had got Trump to exempt road salt from import duties. "We can't eat road salt," her Democratic challenger scoffed.

Targeted tariff relief seems unlikely to save the Republicans many votes. Most voters do not import plywood, let alone eat it, and the cuts are way too small to affect general inflation. Yet while tariffs are clearly unpopular, they are as much a convenient peg on which voters can hang general discontent with the cost of living and Trump himself as a significant direct contributor to higher consumer prices.

The midterms will be largely about Trump, because he's personally assured everyone that they will, and his trade policy will be on trial given how much power he has unconstitutionally arrogated from a supine Republican Congress. A Democratic victory will not only change what Congress does with trade policy but whether it tries to have any say at all.

Tariffs are a staple attack line in Democrats' campaign commercials: Republicans prefer to pretend the issue does not exist. Some polling evidence suggests the levies have become more unpopular over the past year. But the substantive relationship between the actual impact of Trump's tariffs and election voting is tenuous. Some of those most directly affected by the tariff wars — farmers, for instance — have continued to vote for him.

The latest estimates from The Budget Lab at Yale University suggest that the medium-run effect of tariffs on overall consumer prices will be a less than cataclysmic 0.7 per cent after taking account of consumers switching to cheaper goods. The cost of tariffs relative to median household post-tax income will be the same moderate 0.7 per cent.

> The relationship between the actual impact of Trump's policy and election voting is tenuous

The Budget Lab says tariffs have pushed up prices in some categories sharply, including autos by 2.8 per cent and clothes and shoes by 3.3 per cent. But with a few exceptions, grocery prices — of very high salience for voters — have been much less affected, the tariffs increasing food costs by just 0.7 per cent. Trump is correctly blamed for his Iran misadventure pushing up fuel prices, but the relationship between tariffs and consumer inflation is weaker.

Still, Trump's predecessor Joe Biden discovered that presidents get the blame for inflation whether fairly or not. The notorious surge in egg prices after 2022 had almost nothing to do with Biden's fiscal policy: it was principally a supply shock from avian flu. But correlation was taken as causation and Trump's ovular attacks on Biden landed hard.

The evidence shows that the public also thinks "inflation" is a persistently elevated level of prices rather than the current rate of change, the correct economists' definition. Trump's reckless promise to reverse rather than just slow or stop the increase in grocery prices set him up for failure.

There's a tendency to project the impact of specific issues such as trade on to elections while ignoring more important factors. The Midwestern state of Ohio provides a particularly neat example. In 2006, Democrat Sherrod Brown was elected as senator. Brown strongly opposed trade agreements, including those pushed by then president George W Bush. But by that point, Bush was deeply unpopular for other reasons, notably the Iraq war. This surely had a lot to do with Brown's victory.

Four years later, unhappy with the sluggish economy after Barack Obama's first two years as president, the people of Ohio voted in Republican Rob Portman, formerly Bush's US trade representative, who had pushed for the very deals Brown attacked. Indeed, Portman defended trade for creating employment through exports and criticised his Democratic opponent for blaming it for job losses.

Tariffs will undoubtedly cost the Republicans a lot of votes next week, deservedly so. Trump's experiment clearly hasn't worked. But part of the unpopularity of tariffs comes from their close association with a president deeply disliked by some. We cannot yet hold a funeral for high tariffs in US trade policy, especially with the prices of coffins as elevated as they are.

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We will still need middle managers in the age of AI agents

Kai-Fu Lee

Back in 1958, two forward-thinking management scholars predicted in Harvard Business Review that computers would eliminate middle management by the 1980s. They were early and only half right. Computers automated many of the tasks that managers performed, but they never replaced the managers themselves.

In the early 2000s, Silicon Valley tried to engineer the "Great Flattening". At Google, Larry Page soon found himself buried in expense reports and HR disputes. Managers were back within a few months. By the time I joined the company in 2005 to build its operations in China, I relied heavily on multiple layers of middle managers to get my job done. Working in a cross-cultural, multilingual organisation would not have been possible otherwise.

Today it is AI that is supposedly poised to fundamentally reshape the company hierarchy. This time it may work.

An organisation is, in effect, an information system. Middle management arose from necessity. No executive can read every company document and speak to every employee. But each level of communication can degrade the signal.

AI can skirt this problem by going straight to the source: meeting transcripts, support tickets and shared documents. This is the "dormant data" that companies have always produced but could not easily use. It is now accessible directly at the top, enabling radical visibility.

> As the tools make routine execution faster, humans will have more time to exercise judgment

Executives can query underlying data, review source material and compare a summary with the work itself. At my company I have something my colleagues call "Kai-Fu's Boss AI", a system that connects to all corporate records and communications. I once watched Boss AI identify two teams that spent three months building the same feature, even repeating each other's mistakes, without anyone noticing.

When the cost of moving and reconciling information collapses, the roles built to perform these functions will fade into irrelevance. For a middle manager, that may sound like an obituary. Read it differently and it is a job posting.

We are going to start to see more companies flattening their organisations with a shorter chain of command. At the top is the executive team. Below it are directly responsible individuals, or DRIs (a term Apple uses internally). Each one owns an outcome from beginning to end, such as a product, a market or a major risk. In large organisations, some middle managers will become DRIs, especially those who adapt quickly to a new fleet of AI tools.

What will change is the nature of a manager's value. An AI agent can price a contract but managers who can direct their work and shoulder the consequences of their actions will remain central to their companies.

Human qualities are still required. As AI makes routine execution faster and cheaper, middle managers will have more time to exercise judgment, mentor people and navigate complex relationships.

As Google discovered, flattening too quickly can lead to frayed coordination, unhappy staff and burnt-out executives. It can also erase the most valuable institutional knowledge. Experienced managers can pass on the hard-won wisdom that comes from seeing past plans fail and relationships fray. Even when companies rely on AI agents to execute most of the work, relationships with other departments, partners and customers still depend on human-only skills.

The more work AI takes on, the greater the value of managers. Their roles will shift from overseeing execution to building trust, fostering relationships and guiding teams through uncertainty. Those skills have never mattered more.

The writer is CEO of 01.AI, former president of Google China and author of the upcoming book 'AI Native: The Mandate to Transform Your Company'

Opinion

Trump keeps interfering in foreign elections

The president seems not to understand that the global standing of the United States suffers when he plays into the stereotype of the ugly American.

The Editorial Board

The United States has had a problematic history of interfering in foreign elections, much of it during the Cold War. Over the past few decades, however, Washington has grown more respectful of other democracies and mostly avoided intervening in their campaigns. Presidents and their aides have rarely even expressed a preference about who wins an election elsewhere.

President Trump is returning the United States to its meddlesome and counterproductive past. During the past two years, he or members of his cabinet have endorsed candidates in Argentina, Colombia, Honduras, Hungary, Israel, Japan and Poland. In some cases, the Trump administration has gone further and rewarded its preferred candidates with friendly policies or punished countries run by politicians it hopes to unseat.

The latest example has been in Brazil, where he unsuccessfully tried to tilt the presidential election on Sunday to Flávio Bolsonaro, a far-right senator whose father, former President Jair Bolsonaro, is serving a 27-year sentence for attempting a coup after he lost the last election. Instead, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a left-wing populist, won re-election.

Mr. Trump did not formally endorse the younger Bolsonaro, partly out of concern that the move would backfire, a White House adviser told The Washington Post. Yet he did everything but officially endorse. In an effort to keep the elder Mr. Bolsonaro out of prison, he enacted policies far outside the mainstream of American diplomatic tradition. The administration placed a 50 percent tariff on most Brazilian imports in 2025 and imposed sanctions on the judge who oversaw Jair Bolsonaro's trial and on the judge's wife. The tariffs have weakened Brazil's economy.

Last month, Democratic members of Congress wrote a letter to Secretary of State Marco Rubio accusing the administration of a "sustained, multifaceted campaign of interference and destabilization in Brazil." Mr. Lula offered his own complaint at the United Nations last month. He referred to "the largest military power in the world" and said, "We are once again witnessing external interference in electoral processes."

This meddling is damaging to the cause of democracy and to America's national interest. Outside interference in the elections of a democratic state is undemocratic: Americans are not part of the Brazilian polity, after all. Underlying the Trump administration's interventions is a disrespectful message that Americans — or at least a small number of them — think they know better than Brazilians what is best for Brazil.

Historically, this paternalism has fared poorly, even for the paternalists. Democratically elected governments, free from outside interference, have been stronger, more stable diplomatic and economic partners for other liberal democracies.



AMANDA PEROBELLI/REUTERS

A projected image in São Paulo this month says in Portuguese, "Brazil is not a backyard" and "election without Trump."

Aggravating the damage, Mr. Trump's favored candidates tend to be hostile to democracy within their own countries, much as he has been. They are mostly far-right politicians with autocratic tendencies. They use government power to secure lucrative deals for themselves, their sycophants and people close to Mr. Trump. They try to change election rules to keep their parties in power. In a few extreme cases, such as the elder Mr. Bolsonaro and Mr. Trump himself, they look kindly on extremist violence committed in their names.

Mr. Trump's record is mixed when he interferes in elections. The failure in Brazil joins a similar outcome in Hungary, where Vice President JD Vance made an embarrassing campaign swing on behalf of the authoritarian-leaning Viktor Orban shortly before the election there in April. Voters resoundingly ousted Mr. Orban.

In Latin America, Mr. Trump's allies have mostly won over the past two years. In part, their victories reflect other political dynamics: Many voters across the region are frustrated with the economic performance of left-wing governments over the past decade and

EDITORIAL BOARD, PAGE 10

This 'new form of casino' is terrible for teens

We actually can regulate prediction markets, and we should do it now.

Jessica Grose

I spent Monday morning at a breakfast hosted by the prediction market company Kalshi. At an event space in Manhattan with soaring ceilings and tables stacked with bagel towers, Emily Oster, a best-selling parenting writer and economist, and the Kalshi co-founder Luana Lopes Lara had a conversation billed as being about "how data, forecasting and probabilities can sharpen our choices," which promised to "tackle parents' questions about prediction markets."

My first thought when I received the Paperless Post was: How is Kalshi going to help me sharpen my choices as a mom? The only time I have ever really considered prediction markets as a parenting issue is when I wrote about the rise of addictive gambling among young men since sports betting became legal in some states in 2018.

Prediction markets are regulated differently from sports betting platforms, where there is a house that collects and pays off bets. Kalshi doesn't have to abide by state laws on gambling (though there are lawsuits pending about this loophole), and it doesn't have to pay the same taxes.

What Kalshi does is provide a platform to match opposing traders and it earns fees when trades are executed. The bigger the pool of people making trades on its platform, the more money Kalshi makes. This summer, wagering on the World Cup exploded on Kalshi. The company recorded $27 billion in trading during tournament play, according to Reuters.

Most states require sports bettors to be 21, while most prediction markets allow users as young as 18. A CNN analysis published at the end of August found that Kalshi users between the ages of 18 and 21 traded $5 billion on the platform this year, though that's only about 3 percent of the company's trading volume.

At the breakfast, Lara said that prediction markets are not like sports books or casinos, citing the mechanics of how Kalshi works. The platform allows betting on all sorts of events beyond sports — like whether "The Odyssey" will win the best picture Oscar or whether it will rain tomorrow. Because prediction markets make their money off transaction fees, regardless of whether traders win or lose, Lara described the company as having more noble incentives than traditional sports books, and also ones that are more aligned with users.

It is true that the inner workings of prediction markets aren't the same as sports betting apps. But according to every gambling addiction expert, psychologist and pediatrician I have ever spoken to, users treat sports books and prediction markets as interchangeable (The consensus seems to be: If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck. . . .).

A majority of Kalshi's trades come from sports. In fact, the company previously advertised itself as the "first app for legal sports betting in all 50 states." Polymarket, the other leading prediction market in the United States, also has the highest volume of its trades from sports. The N.B.A. just made deals with both Kalshi and Polymarket.



ELEANOR DAVIS

According to an analysis by The Wall Street Journal in May, on both Kalshi and Polymarket, "losers vastly outnumber winners." Though advertising by prediction markets suggests big paydays for regular Joes, professionals dominate winnings. My sense is that Gen Z is turning to prediction markets in part because the traditional ways of building wealth feel out of reach to them. The job market stinks, the potential for artificial intelligence destruction of many industries, if not humanity, looms, so why not put some of your piddling savings on whether the Timberwolves will win by over 5.5 points tonight?

Abdullah Mahmood, a licensed social worker who works with problem gamblers in Columbus, Ohio, told me that some of his younger clients — between the ages of 18 and 24, he estimates — started their betting addictions with prediction markets. Mahmood said that for many young men, their identity is rooted in sports, which can be communal. But that love of sports and sense of identity are "being wrapped in trading and gambling," and that's perverting what could have been very positive for them, he said.

Dr. Shawn Kelly, a pediatrician in Ottawa who specializes in adolescent addiction medicine, said, "From a youth brain perspective specifically, there is no discernible difference" between prediction markets and sports betting. From the time children become adolescents, until their brain fully matures in their early-to-mid 20s, they are particularly vulnerable to the allure of short-term rewards and the chemical rush of dopamine that goes with it.

At the breakfast, Lara addressed some of the risks Kalshi could pose for young users. She explained that her platform has a strict age-verification system that requires a Social Security number, name, date of birth and form of identification to keep minors from trading. Lara did acknowledge that there are specific risks for users ages 18 to 21, and that these young adults can elect to give a parent access to all of their transactions.

This week, Kalshi rolled out a $2,500 deposit limit for its youngest customers, "unless you have proof of funds or self-attestation that you

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OPINION

The New York Times
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My fear for the midterms

Bill Bradley

We are all proud of the American tradition of free and fair elections. That tradition is a result of hard work by thousands of state and local election officials around the country. Their jobs are tough and getting tougher. In recent years, they have had to work in the face of increasing scrutiny, threats and relentless attacks on our democracy.

In 2026, we face a new threat: a concerted campaign by the executive branch of the federal government to undermine the midterms. We don't know if Trump administration officials will follow through on their threats to interfere with the work of election officials, but we must be prepared.

President Trump has said he wants to "take over" elections. He has issued executive orders attempting to rewrite the rules. And he has used the Justice Department to seek personal voter information and threaten election officials who do not comply. Most recently, the Justice Department filed a federal lawsuit trying to pre-emptively block the state's certification of the Senate election in Alaska if the Republican incumbent were to lose narrowly.

The buck must stop with local U.S. officials.

All of these gambits are contrary to our Constitution, which gives the power to regulate elections to the states and Congress, not to the president. That's why the courts have blocked the Trump administration's plans to "take over." To their credit, election officials of both parties have also refused to go along with these outrageous efforts.

The Trump administration said it would dispatch around 1,000 election monitors to polling places across the country. It's important to remember that under the law, election monitors are entitled to observe polling places, but they cannot administer elections, determine voter eligibility or direct any election officials.

State and local election officials may find themselves in a terrible bind. They are not supposed to take orders from the president or any federal agency. The law across all 50 states is clear that they must not obey illegal orders of any kind, including those issued by the federal government.

If they decide to comply with such illegal directions or instructions, election officials could face civil or criminal penalties. Under the law, they can be sued personally in civil court by anyone with standing and held responsible in court if they follow an improper order by the federal government about the administration of the election system, with sizable monetary damages as a possible result.

In an interview with Time magazine, Mr. Trump declined to rule out sending ICE agents to polling places. Three federal laws — including protections signed by Abraham Lincoln — prohibit federal troops and agents from interfering in elections. If Justice Department or ICE agents show up claiming emergency powers, election officials should say that none of their instructions will be obeyed without a court order signed by a judge. The "administrative warrants" issued by the Department of Homeland Security are not sufficient. Only an order with the John Hancock of a state or federal judge compels any action.

Election officials should know that organizations such as the Brennan Center for Justice and the Democracy Defenders Fund have their backs. Mr. Trump does not. His pardon power does not apply to convictions under state law, and he most likely will not cover any legal expenses.

The risk of cooperating with federal officials who move beyond silent monitoring to active intervention in elections is significant. We have already seen convictions, disbarments and civil judgments stemming from the 2020 election, which, even though they mostly targeted partisan figures, nonetheless stand as a warning.

I'm confident that the patriotic Americans who handle elections will resist any pressure to do the wrong thing. I want to thank them for the dedication and integrity they bring to ensuring free and fair elections in our democracy.

BILL BRADLEY *is a Democratic former U.S. senator from New Jersey.*

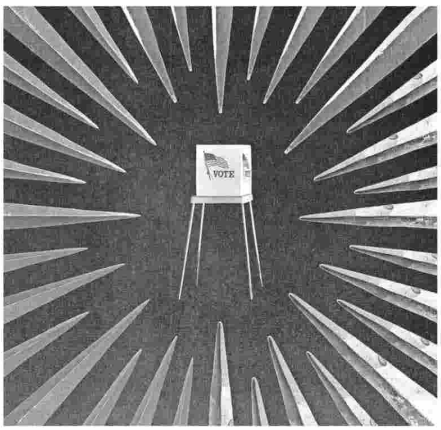


ILLUSTRATION BY SAM WHITNEY/THE NEW YORK TIMES; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAWPIXEL AND RIMGLOW/GETTY IMAGES

What it will take to stop the Houthis

AL-SAUD, FROM PAGE 1

world, a terrorist army that builds its own missiles, exports the know-how and turns to artificial intelligence to sharpen its aim should terrify it.

The stakes reach far beyond Yemen. The Houthis have threatened to close the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the southern entrance to the Red Sea, through which about 10 percent of world trade passes. Their strikes on Saudi energy facilities this month helped push oil prices back above $100 a barrel.

ISIS was defeated by local forces backed by a coalition of more than 80 nations. The Houthis can be defeated the same way. It is Yemen's fight to lead. Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has stood by Yemen, responding to its government's request for help after the Houthis captured Sanaa, the capital. The Yemeni people have borne the conflict's heaviest cost. That is why Saudi Arabia remains one of Yemen's largest humanitarian donors, and why Houthi aggression must end.

Today Yemeni government forces are on the offensive along the Red Sea coast, in Jawf and in Marib, with Saudi air support. They have already seized more than 750 tons of weapons bound for the Houthis. The coalition is targeting launch sites and weapon warehouses to dismantle the networks behind missile attacks on Saudi territory and hold those responsible accountable.

The Houthi war economy of extortion and front companies must be shut down, and that work has also begun. Saudi Arabia has closed its financial system to the Houthis and every terrorist group. With our partners, we are enforcing sanctions and designations, and we are backing Yemen's government as it confiscates weapons and money. The United States has rightly designated the Houthis a foreign terrorist organization. Every nation should do the same.

The Houthis have no red lines. There is no limit to what they will inflict on those they call enemies. They compel students as young as 10 to chant "Death to America" and send thousands of children into combat. The radical indoctrination must be stopped.

The Houthis today are what ISIS was before it seized Mosul in Iraq and proclaimed a caliphate: a terrorist movement the world underestimated. The international community should set a clear goal to end the Houthis as an armed terrorist force. That means designating them as terrorists in every capital. It means cutting off their money and stopping their weapons at sea. And it means giving Yemen's government what it needs to achieve its objectives.

Ending the Houthis' armed terror is the only path to the Yemeni-led political settlement Saudi Arabia has always supported. Ms. Abdullah faced Houthi terror with courage. Yemenis face it every day. We owe them a future free from it.

REEMA BANDAR AL-SAUD *is ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States.*



ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANADOLU AND MATTHEW MIRABELLI VIA GETTY IMAGES

Don't interfere in foreign elections

EDITORIAL BOARD, FROM PAGE 9

worried about high levels of crime and migration. Still, the Trump involvement in the region has been meaningful. The United States has enough economic might to affect the economies of other countries, and the Trump administration has explicitly sought to reward allies and punish political opponents in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia.

He and his aides brag about it. Last month, Mr. Trump said, "We're doing very well in South America" and referred to "lots of people that I got elected." In Venezuela, he went much further than election interference and illegally used military force to depose its autocratic leader, Nicolás Maduro, and install a government that often does as the Trump administration wants.

These interventions are especially damaging in the current global environment. International politics are increasingly defined by two loose alliances, one dominated by democracies, including the United States, the European Union and Japan, and the other by authoritarian states, including China, Iran and Russia. The authoritarian leaders often pretend to be democrats — as with Russia's sham elections — while deriding the leaders of actual democracies as imperialists. Mr. Trump plays into their hands by disrespecting the citizens of other countries, telling them whom to support and using America's economic might to influence the political atmosphere.

In the competition between democracy and autocracy, democracies should enjoy a big advantage in the court of global public opinion. Democracies are much better places to live than autocracies, and most people recognize this: Many millions of people around the world would like to move to the United States or Europe; relatively few seek to move to China or Russia.



ERALDO PERES/ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, a left-wing populist, won re-election on Sunday. President Trump unsuccessfully tried to tilt the presidential election to the far-right candidate.

The Trump administration's meddling has damaged the soft-power advantage. In 2014, residents of Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico all had a substantially more favorable opinion of the United States than of China, according to surveys by the Pew Research Center. By this spring, the American advantage had shrunk to almost nothing in Brazil; in the other three countries, China had a modest advantage. "People are much more likely to say the U.S. interferes in the affairs of other countries than they are to say the same of China," Pew wrote.

The story of South and Central American democracy in the final decades of the 20th century was a positive one. Several military juntas and dictators left the scene, and democracies emerged. And the United States, which had propped up autocratic regimes, became a stronger, if still imperfect, advocate for democracy in the region.

Brazil was a case study: The Kennedy administration spent millions of secret dollars there in the early 1960s to swing congressional elections away from the left-wing president, João Goulart, who was perceived as a communist threat. That covert intervention led to a coup in 1964 and two decades of military-backed authoritarian rule and the death or disappearance of hundreds.

By 1985, though, a civilian opposition leader was appointed president, and President Ronald Reagan quickly met with him to signal support. In 1989, Brazil held a presidential election for the first time in three decades. The emergence of Brazilian democracy was good for Brazil, and it was good for the rest of the world, including the United States. Mr. Lula's victory this week suggests that Brazilian democracy may remain stronger than many observers feared.

What Mr. Trump does not seem to understand is that the global standing of the United States benefits when our leaders attempt to live up to the highest American ideals. Mr. Trump disdains those ideals and cares mostly about himself. Along the way, he is damaging other countries and sapping American power.

THE EDITORIAL BOARD *is a group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom.*

A 'new form of casino' is bad for teens

GROSE, FROM PAGE 9

know the risks associated with trading and the contracts." Lara added that the company has a partnership with Birches Health, which provides treatment for compulsive behaviors, including a gambling addiction self-test.

While I appreciated this acknowledgment, it also reveals the contradiction at the heart of Kalshi's public image: We're not gambling, but we provide resources for gambling addiction and give millions to the National Council on Problem Gambling. We're not gambling, but we acknowledge that there are higher risks for our younger users whose brains are still forming.

The company wants to be seen as taking these matters seriously and creating its own guardrails. Tarek Mansour, Kalshi's other founder, told PBS last month that theirs is a pro-regulation company. In practice, that seems to mean only the regulations it picks and chooses.

At the event, Lara mentioned that the company sued regulators at the Commodity Futures Trading Commission to expand its business to include predictions for elections. The commission argued that it was not in the public interest and that the regulator was not equipped to offer fraud protection in that context. Kalshi won and "the litigation actually helped with a lot of other markets."

Attorneys general in 44 states signed onto a letter this year to try to claw back the power to regulate prediction markets from the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, calling them a "new form of casino" and citing research that shows the younger someone starts gambling, the greater the likelihood of developing a problem. We do not have to accept the widespread availability of prediction markets as normal, even if this breakfast treated it as part of our inevitable financial future.

Toward the end, Lara said a market she follows closely is about artificial intelligence. Specifically, she likes one about whether the Citrini scenario, a doomsday forecast predicting that A.I. will destroy the economy, will happen. When I checked on Tuesday morning, 19 percent of Kalshi users wagering on the question put their money behind "yes."

I hate those odds. As a parent, I'm not sure how that data is supposed to help me. I want to put my money behind "no" to all of it.

JESSICA GROSE *is a writer in Opinion.*

FROM READERS

Defending the right to choose death

Re "We implemented Canada's assisted dying law. We're concerned," by Gary Rodin and Madeline Li (Opinion, Oct. 10):

As a physician who has assessed and provided medical assistance in dying (MAID) in Manitoba for nearly a decade, I read this essay with concern. I agree that patients considering MAID deserve careful exploration of their suffering and access to counseling, palliative care and social supports. But counseling should support patients' decisions, not be another test they must pass before their choice is respected.

The authors say clinicians focus on whether patients can receive MAID rather than whether they should. There is an important distinction between understanding why people want MAID and deciding whether they should want it. Medicine often follows the golden rule, treating patients as we would want to be treated. When a patient's experience differs profoundly from our own, the platinum rule serves better: treating patients as they would want to be treated.

I have asked patients requesting MAID what they would need to no longer want it. Overwhelmingly, the answer is not counseling, housing or companionship. It is a cure, or a reversal of irreversible decline, something that medicine cannot offer.

Shared decision making means listening, exploring alternatives and identifying vulnerability. But in the end, intolerable suffering belongs to the person living it.

KRISTEN CREEK, *WINNIPEG, MANITOBA*

As a retired cardiologist and an advocate of increasing access to medical aid in dying in the United States, I appreciated the concerns raised by Drs. Gary Rodin and Madeline Li. However, it's important to highlight the differences between Canada's MAID process and America's.

Thirteen states and Washington, D.C., have legalized MAID, with legislation pending in at least 16 other states. Opponents of MAID are quick to refer to Canada and suggest that America is on the "slippery slope" that these authors describe.

Here, access to MAID is state-based, while Canada has established a federal right to it. In the United States, the patient must be terminally ill with less than six months to live, which is not the case in Canada. Finally, American patients must be able to self-administer the medication; in Canada, the physician can participate in the administration, often by IV.



DAGOU

Opponents of this choice for Americans raise fears that we will "become like Canada." However, this hasn't happened in almost 30 years of experience, starting with Oregon's passage of MAID legislation in 1997.

SHANNON J. WINAKUR, *BALTIMORE*

There is no reason to involve medical or legal professionals in one's end-of-life decision. No one else needs to be deciding as if we were children. Whether pain or sadness or poverty leads one to choose death, all that matters is the decision.

All the hand-wringers who complicate the issue would do a greater service by providing access to therapies without forcing these on people who know they are ready to die. I should be able to purchase from a pharmacy the necessary means to a serene death at the time of my choosing. Period.

BEATRICE SHUSHAN, *CARLSBAD, CALIF.*

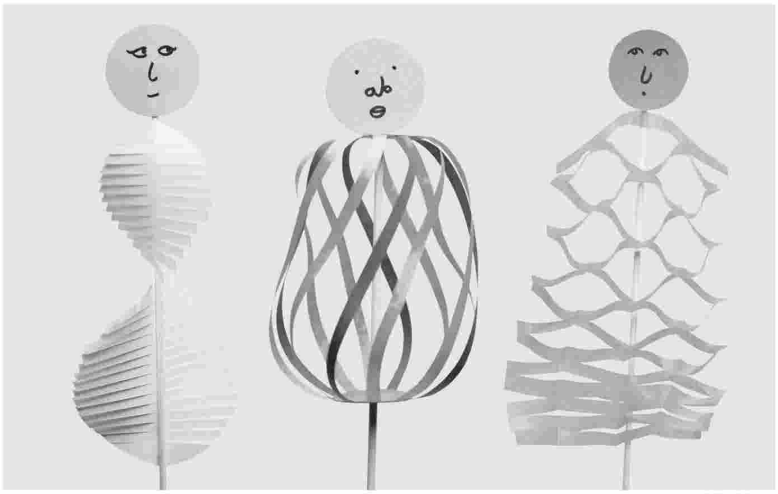
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STYLE

After loss of weight: Shopping

GLP-1 users knew they would shrink. Many did not expect an identity crisis.

BY YOLA MZIZI



TAMARA SHOPSIN AND JASON FULFORD

Nancy Edwards had reached a point of desperation.

She had been eager to lose weight. Over the years, she had tried Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig food plans and a number of fad diets, hoping to shed a few pounds. But nothing worked until she started taking the GLP-1 that her doctor prescribed.

The results were almost immediate. Within a year's time, she lost 80 pounds (36 kilograms).

Edwards, 52, an elementary-school teacher in Rome, Ga., expected to fit into an old pair of jeans she had kept in the back of her closet. Eventually, even her tightest-fitting denim began to hang loosely on her body. Within six months, Edwards realized she had to replace not only tops and dresses, but also undergarments and shoes because, she said, "I have nothing."

This took her by surprise, as it did the dozens of other GLP-1 users with whom The New York Times spoke. They hadn't anticipated needing a whole new wardrobe for their transformed bodies.

For many people, clothes reflect an aspect of their identities. For Edwards, shopping for new clothes was, in a way, an opportunity to discover how she wanted to present who she wanted to become.

"I started noticing that, 'Oh, I don't really like all of those colorful, floofy dresses with big puffy sleeves'," she said. "Those were just the ones that fit me."

THE PAIN OF SHOPPING

When Melissa Fogg, 44, was in middle school, her parents used to drive two hours to the nearest Gap from their home in Amarillo, Texas, so she could pick out her own outfits.

Fogg liked to stay on trend, but she did not enjoy shopping, especially when she discovered she had to buy clothes that were, as she said, "the same size as my mom's," while her peers were shopping in the children's department.

These days, Fogg, a medical social worker in Dallas, is using a GLP-1. Buying clothes feels less emotionally fraught now, she said, because she is having a much easier time finding what she wants to wear, like cutoff shorts and fitted tank tops.

"Sometimes, I catch myself wanting to dress younger — maybe because I didn't have that opportunity to dress that way when I was younger," Fogg said.

Like Fogg, Isabella, who declined to give her full name to protect her privacy, used to find shopping what she called an "embarrassing" experience, especially when she had to sift through a stack of shirts before finding her size at the very bottom of the pile. And that would be when the stores actually carried her size.

Since losing weight, though, Isabella, a 25-year-old doctoral student in New York City, has noticed that the reception from sales associates has become warmer and "much more enthusiastic."

COMPLETE MAKEOVER

The American fashion industry historically has catered to customers from sizes 0 to 12, offering them the latest trends and a full range of silhouettes while overlooking the average-size American woman, who wears a 16.

But for those taking GLP-1s, losing weight may grant access to wardrobe options they did not have before. And some see the weight loss as an opportunity to reimagine or even discover their sense of style. For many, it might be the first time they feel they are being seen.

Dressing up was always a priority for Brandi Ascione, 50, a marketing executive in the Hudson Valley of New York, who felt she always had to look her best because she did not want people to think she did not take good care of herself.

"I always overcompensated," she said. But since losing weight, Ascione has found that she no longer has to "be one step ahead of everyone."

Before using a GLP-1, Steven Zeffert, a business administrator in Houston, was happy to fade into the background. His style leaned conservative, and he often opted for baggy jeans, button-down shirts and the occasional sport coat. Today, Zeffert, 75, owns polo shirts in myriad colors and form-fitting jeans. He is even wearing cologne, and he just bought a convertible.

"I'm not as concerned about somebody noticing me now," he said.

Dominic Cesario's wardrobe has also become more colorful since losing weight. An information technology professional in Chicago, Cesario, 48, typically wore dark colors, telling friends he did so because he didn't "have to think about it." The reality, however, was that there were few other options, he said.

"I've noticed that I've been opting for brighter, bolder colors," he said, adding that his styling choices now reflect his personality, which is not "exuberant, but, you know, I'm not a wallflower."

Others, like Heidi Rackley, needed some help figuring out how to dress. Rackley, 70, a retired actuary in Seattle, was overwhelmed by the abundance of choices and enlisted a personal shopper at a department store. The experience gave her the confidence to try on a pair of wide-leg pants and barrel jeans.

"It just opened my eyes to looking at myself differently," she said.

THE COST OF RETAIL THERAPY

Today, roughly $1 in every $4 spent on apparel comes from a household with a GLP-1 user, according to Kristen Classi-Zummo, a retail industry analyst at Circana.

"This is not a fringe consumer," Classi-Zummo said.

But as costs rise as a result of inflation, buying new clothes can put a significant strain on people's budgets.

"That's been a kind of rude awakening," said Marty McGowan, 68, a retiree in Kernersville, N.C. "It's been interesting, being on a fixed retirement income. When my wife and I were both working, we wouldn't think too much about going out and, you know, spending a little bit of money on clothes."

So McGowan decided against shopping for one-to-one replacements for his favorite pieces and instead sought out specific items he could mix and match.

Some GLP-1 users, including Edwards, have turned to buy-and-trade Facebook groups. There, Edwards has sold her older apparel and found her favorite brands, such as Tuckernuck and J.Crew, to buy at a discount.

Others are shopping at secondhand or fast-fashion stores while they are between sizes.

But for others, weight loss has been an opportunity to invest in more expensive clothing and make up for lost time.

"I had the money to, you know, purchase things at the designer stores, but they did not carry my size, so it was very clear that was not for me," said Katie Den Bleyker, 44, a lawyer in Los Angeles. Now she wears Chanel to work.

Some see weight loss as an opportunity to reimagine or even discover their sense of style.

SAFETY NET

Doing a wardrobe purge can feel cathartic, like shedding a part of yourself. Some GLP-1 users, including Colleen Kwiatkowski, 64, a retired nurse in Lodi, Calif., have been happy to step into a new phase of life.

"I got rid of everything," she said, referring to her "frumpy," dark-colored clothes. "I don't want to look at it anymore."

Kwiatkowski has made room for the brighter dresses and tops she recently purchased. "This is more of my personality," she added. "I'm very social. I'm very outgoing."

Other people taking weight loss drugs are hanging on to their old wardrobes in case their weight fluctuates. Claire, 27, who declined to give her full name to protect her privacy, has lost the weight she put on during the Covid pandemic. But she purged the clothes she had worn before her weight gain, which she regrets because those items would fit her now.

Having learned her lesson, Claire is keeping a bag full of jeans that were not easy to find in her measurements when she had a larger body.

Jordyn Rosenthal has no qualms about keeping clothes that no longer fit her.

"They represent something to you," said Rosenthal, 34, who works at a nonprofit organization in New York City. "They hold memories. Clothes, you know, remind us who we are."







Jordyn Rosenthal, left, and Brandi Ascione, right, both knew that taking GLP-1s would give them access to wardrobe options they didn't have before — particularly brightly colored clothing. Far right, Ms. Ascione looking through clothes at her favorite vintage store, Storied Vintage in Highland, N.Y.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIELLE AMY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Does maternity have to be ugly?

Vanessa Friedman, The New York Times's fashion director, answers readers' fashion-related questions. You can send her a question at openthread@nytimes.com or via X: @vvfriedman. Questions are edited and condensed.

I'm pregnant, and I feel a bit frumpy at work. I want to put on an outfit that makes me feel more confident and would like to invest in a few key items I might wear postpartum. They don't have to be maternity-specific. Any recommendations for pieces that offer flexibility for growth and look sharp without necessarily shouting: "Look at me. I'm pregnant"? — Elise, Paris

There's no question that dressing while pregnant is hard. It's great and inspiring to look at Rihanna, Anne Hathaway and other stars showing off their burgeoning bellies in just-off-the-runway looks that they have managed to make work for them, largely by placing their unveiled stomachs front and center. But for most of us, that isn't an option — especially in an office.

Instead, you are faced with staring into your closet, wondering which, if any, of the clothes that once defined you will still fit. And whether, in fact, they will ever fit again. Pregnancy, with all the life changes it implies, is disorienting enough, no matter how excited you are for what it may bring. Throwing the clothing conundrum on top of that just adds to the confusion.

I understand both the desire to look like yourself, or at least some semblance of yourself, as well as the reluctance to invest in outfits with limited use — and there is nothing more seemingly limiting than pregnancy, when your body is changing size by the month.

Since no one understands the issue better than those who have experienced it, I did an ad hoc poll of friends and colleagues for their solutions. Three different approaches stood out.

The most obvious one is to take a page from Rihanna, et al., and avoid official maternity wear, which often seems to be either generic or oddly twee (not to mention expensive, given its somewhat captive market).

And it is never wearable postpartum. Instead, consider what non-maternity pieces might be adaptable to your needs.

My colleague Sandra Garcia, for example, said that her go-to approach during her most recent pregnancy was to wear pieces that were oversize. "Not boxy or eight sizes too big," she said, "just a bit bigger than my regular size."



MARLEN MUELLER/CONNECTED ARCHIVES

She bought, she said, "barrel pants at the Gap, wide-leg pants with an elastic waistband at Anthropologie and lots of button-up shirts that I still wear today."

She continued: "I love classic men's oxford polo shirts, and I knew that they are durable, and when I wore them post-pregnancy, they would have a lived-in boyfriend-shirt feel. They also gave me a lot of room while pregnant and caused no chafing or sweating through any tight shirts."

She wore her oxfords unbuttoned over T-shirts as she progressed through her pregnancy, and now she wears them buttoned up and loose. They are also professional without being stuffy (or making you feel stuffed).

Another answer came courtesy of another colleague, Sapna Maheshwari. "Rental clothing can be a lifesaver, especially because women on Nuuly and Rent the Runway share pictures of themselves at varying stages of pregnancy on the apps," she said. This has the benefit of allowing you to test clothing without committing to it, to change sizes as your size changes and to not worry about whether whatever you buy will make sense in a life you probably cannot yet imagine.

If you want to actually purchase some pieces, Sapna recommends the Nap Dress from Hill House Home, which she said is "solid for stretching with a bump and then wearing afterward."

Sapna said she had friends who used the unitards from Bumpsuit, which you buy in your pre-pregnancy size and are made to stretch through the end of the third trimester, then spring back. They become a base for layering shirts, as Sandra recommended, or jackets. (For a more haute example of how this might look, check out Ciara on Junya Watanabe's runway this month.)

Finally, however, I think you might reconsider your desire to invest in pieces that can be worn postpartum. That may seem wasteful, but it is also realistic.

Personally, I found that after each of my three (relatively easy) pregnancies, I wanted nothing to do with what I had been living in while my ankles swelled over my sneakers and I stashed Tums in every pocket to deal with heartburn. So this is one time I turned to fast fashion and just bought a handful of very stretchy Lycra dresses from labels such as H&M.

They were inexpensive and accommodated my growing stomach and I didn't feel bad about passing them on, once my children were born. In fact, it felt sort of like a ritual, a sign to myself that I had moved from one life stage into another. Sometimes, whatever gets you through is the best look.

VANESSA FRIEDMAN

OPINION

The Varied Aims of Savage Ads



UNRULY REPUBLIC
By Barton Swaim

Every two years the commentariat wrings its hands about a nasty attack ad. The handwringers tend not to deplore or even notice the dirty ones aimed at candidates they dislike and to exaggerate the meanness of ads targeting their favorites. The National Security Political Action Committee's 1988 ad featuring Willie Horton lives on in the liberal imagination as the Meanest Thing Ever Done—although it was neither racist, as often alleged, nor unfair. Mr. Horton, sentenced to life in prison for murder, really did get a weekend prison furlough in Michael Dukakis's Massachusetts, fled to Maryland and viciously attacked a couple, repeatedly raping the woman.

If Vivek Ramaswamy wins in the Ohio governor's race, his despisers on the left will blame the TV ad his campaign ran last week. Much of the political class has spent the intervening days conveying their disapproval of a spot featuring the mother of Mr. Ramaswamy's opponent, Amy Acton.

More on that in a moment. On Monday an ad circulated on social media intended to affect the Michigan Senate race, in which Abdul El-Sayed polls evenly with Republican Mike Rogers. That ad, promoted online by the left-wing influencer Cenk Uygur, expresses blame-the-Jews balderdash in terms so crude that even the Israel-fixated Mr. El-Sayed declined to embrace it—though he also didn't criticize it. The ad suggests illogically that Americans can't afford groceries because their government sends so much money to Israel, which uses it for "killing Palestinians."

Yet this work of lamebrain propaganda didn't attract a tenth of the outrage from media gatekeepers that Mr. Ramaswamy's ad did. An unbiased observer might begin to think that outrage over distasteful ads has more to do with partisan outcome than moral import.

Back to the Ohio race. The spot scandalizing everyone features Donna Arthur, the Democratic nominee's estranged mother, calling Ms. Acton a liar. Mr. Ramaswamy makes a reasonable point when he notes a September Acton ad in which a guy named Norm says the Republican's biotech company "pushed an Alzheimer's drug that he knew didn't work" and made "hundreds of millions" off the scam. Untrue and grossly unfair, but the press didn't clutch pearls about that one.

Still, as unfair ads go, the one starring Ms. Acton's mom scores high. No normal person would take Ms. Arthur for a truth-teller. A grand jury indicted her late husband in 1978 for sexually abusing Ms. Acton when she was 12. He pleaded not guilty but fled before trial and never faced prosecution. Both he and Ms. Arthur were also convicted of felony theft in 1996. (The stepfather died in 2004.)

That ad could have one of two effects. Voters, helped by an enthusiastically pro-Acton Ohio press, could find it disgusting and punish Mr. Ramaswamy for a lack of scruple. A plainly troubled elderly woman denouncing her daughter as a liar isn't an easy sight to endure.

Ramaswamy recruits his opponent's mother and scandalizes the political class.

But voters can hold two thoughts at the same time. Some significant minority may conclude that the ad was done in poor taste but also that it confirms their suspicions that Ms. Acton has her own troubles and perhaps isn't the ideal person to run the state.

Most of the Ohio press have shown a studied lack of curiosity about Ms. Acton's background, but a few worrying details have circulated all the same. Gov. Mike DeWine appointed her to run the state Department of Health in 2019. She resigned on June 11, 2020—that is, about three months into the Covid-19 pandemic. To put the matter bluntly: A short time into the greatest leadership challenge of Ms. Acton's career, she quit.

She later portrayed her decision to resign as a principled one, taken because the Legislature demanded that county fairs open and she felt she couldn't sign off on such a policy without violating her Hippocratic Oath. That claim strains believability. Ms. Acton remained employed as Mr. DeWine's chief health adviser for two months after she stepped down. At the time of her resignation she blamed burnout; she didn't cite a principled reason until the New Yorker ran a gushing profile in November 2020.

Some evidence exists that she didn't handle the job with poise. In April NBC News reported that in August 2019 police were called to her Bexley, Ohio, home over a "domestic dispute." The police report indicated that the health director had pulled a mirror from the wall, "shattering the glass," and told the cops she'd been drinking and had taken some unspecified sum of prescription drugs. No charges were filed.

The Acton campaign at first disputed the police report. Later Ms. Acton's husband, Eric, took the blame. A spokesman in June described the episode to me as an ordinary argument that lots of people can relate to, but few married couples I know have had the cops check in on their quarrels.

All of this seems a good deal more relevant than what Ms. Acton's mother thinks of her. But don't discount the possibility that Mr. Ramaswamy's ad will suggest to voters that his opponent has enough troubles in her life without adding the duties of a governor.

Your Guide to 2026 Midterm Election Night

By Karl Rove

We're close to the day of reckoning for Republicans and Democrats. So it's time for prognosticators, observers, gadflies and political junkies to share their predictions. I'll start.

Democrats will take the House. But they're unlikely to flip as many seats as they did in 2018 (41), never mind as Republicans did in 2010 (63). Democratic pickups are likely to be in the 20 to 25 range. If it's a really good night, they could win as many as 31 seats, as they did in 2006.

The main reason Republican losses will be contained is both parties have gerrymandered states they control. But partisan gerrymandering has its limits. Maximizing a party's number of districts means spreading its voters more thinly, increasing the likelihood that a district will be competitive in a bad year. Democrats did a better job of this, and it is a bad year for Republicans. That's why this year Democrats are all but assured of gaining five seats in California, while Texas Republicans will be lucky to get three of the five they expected redistricting to yield.

An early indication of how well Democrats will do nationally could come when Virginia's polls close at 7 p.m. Eastern Time. The commonwealth reports quickly, and its district lines are unchanged. Democrats have long targeted Reps. Rob Wittman in the First District and Jen Kiggans in the Second. The former won re-election in 2024 by 12.8% of the vote, the latter by 3.8%. Democrats have also targeted Rep. John McGuire, who won the Fifth District by 14.9%. The difference between their performance two years ago and this year could signal how much of a swing Democrats have nationally.

What to watch for, hour by hour, to see if my predictions turn out to be accurate.

Florida Republicans redrew the state's congressional map hoping to flip the Ninth, 14th, 22nd and 25th districts. If Republicans lead in those districts after 7 p.m., GOP hopes for Sunshine State gains may be realized.

At 7:30 p.m., polls close in Ohio. Consider how Republican incumbents Max Miller in the Seventh District and Mike Turner in the 10th and Democrat Marcy Kaptur in the Ninth are doing in individual counties, compared with two years ago.

The next big wave of poll closings comes at 8 p.m. Watch Pennsylvania, with vulnerable Republicans in the First, Seventh, Eighth and 10th districts. If an incumbent runs several points behind his 2024 pace in county after county, no late batch of votes will likely save him.

As for the Senate, it's too close to call and much can happen before Tuesday. If forced to choose, I say Republicans keep control with a 50-50 tie, which would give the GOP a majority with Vice President JD Vance the tie-breaker.

A year ago, practically everyone said Republicans would keep the Senate because so many of this year's races are in red states, including Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina and Texas. The GOP has only one blue-state incumbent to defend—Maine's Susan Collins—and pickup opportunities in purple Michigan, mildly blue New Hampshire and moderately blue Minnesota.

These 15 contests will decide the Senate, as the remaining seats are safe for the party that holds them. Republicans must win eight of them to reach 50 seats. A Republican majority could depend on Ms. Collins's surviving in Maine, Mike Rogers's flipping Michigan, or both. The national environment is ugly for Republicans. The president's approval rating is terrible even in red states. For every Republican path to victory, Democrats have as many.

Here's what I'll be looking for Tuesday. At 7 p.m. South Carolina's polls close. An hour later Maine, Ohio and Michigan start reporting. Compare this year's county results with those from 2022 in South Carolina, 2020 in Maine and 2024 in Ohio. Glance at North Carolina and Georgia, though Democrats are expected to win both easily.

Michigan last elected a GOP senator in 1994. Mr. Trump carried the state in 2024 with 49.73%. Compare county returns for Mr. Rogers with Mr. Trump's 2024 performance. Pay special attention to Wayne County. If Democrat Abdul El-Sayed has a problem with black voters, it'll appear in Detroit.

Polls close in Mississippi, the populous eastern part of Kansas and all of Texas except El Paso and vicinity at 8 p.m. ET. Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska follow an hour later. A GOP victory in Kansas may depend on western rural counties, which are open until 9 p.m. ET. For Texas, if Ken Paxton is running a couple of points behind Gov. Greg Abbott, the Senate seat is at risk.

Have your laptop close, scratch paper handy and plenty to drink. It will be a long night, with Alaska's polls open until midnight ET. And for Republicans, it'll be a rough night, too. The question is how rough.

Mr. Rove was senior adviser and deputy chief of staff for President George W. Bush and is author of "The Triumph of William McKinley" (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

The SAVE Database Is Working for Idaho

By Phil McGrane

Boise, Idaho

When the Supreme Court allowed election officials to continue using the Department of Homeland Security's Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements data system to verify voter eligibility, my phone started ringing. Reporters wanted to know one thing: Is Idaho going to use SAVE ahead of the November election? That was September. The answer was and is an emphatic yes.

Under federal and state law, only American citizens can vote in our elections. It's my responsibility as chief election official to ensure that every ballot is cast by an eligible Idaho voter and that it is easy for eligible voters to participate. I would be remiss if I didn't use all the tools available to me.

Since the 2002 Help America Vote Act passed, states have worked to build and refine systems to maintain voter records and verify eligibility. SAVE has become one such tool. It was designed in 1987 to help government agencies verify immigration status and eligibility for benefits, and DHS expanded the system in 2025 to make it easier for states and localities to verify voter citizenship.

We've used it to find noncitizens who were on our voter rolls.

Idaho began using the SAVE database for voter verification during the Biden administration. After Gov. Brad Little issued an executive order in July 2024, the Only Citizens Will Vote Act, I began working with the Idaho Transportation Department, the state police and DHS to review the records of more than one million registered Idaho voters.

The system was costly and clunky at first, with limited search capabilities. Yet it helped comb through a large volume of voter records and identify those that warranted a closer look.

Our initial review identified 745 potential noncitizens. Then the real work began. We examined those records individually, narrowing the list to 36 possible noncitizens before we began contacting voters. To ensure due process, we gave each person on that list the opportunity to provide proof of citizenship. Two did, and we ultimately referred only 34 cases to state police for criminal investigation. The police then referred 15 to the Justice Department for prosecution.

SAVE isn't the final word on a voter's eligibility. It is a source for information that election officials can review, verify, and then act on when and if the evidence holds up to scrutiny. That's the most important step, particularly when dealing with naturalized citizens, whose records may not yet reflect their new status.

The system today is much better. Under the Trump administration, DHS has listened to states and made significant improvements. SAVE now incorporates additional federal records and allows state and local agencies to conduct bulk searches for free. For states hesitant to use SAVE, Idaho's experience offers a practical example of how to do so and how well it can work.

Prior to midterm voting, we identified two more potential noncitizens and are now offering them a chance to prove citizenship. But our focus isn't on the number of noncitizens we identify. It is on ensuring that the million-plus citizens whose eligibility we confirmed can have confidence in the integrity of our elections as they head to the polls Tuesday.

Mr. McGrane, a Republican, is Idaho's secretary of state.

BOOKSHELF | By William Tipper

The Legacy Of Sleepy Hollow

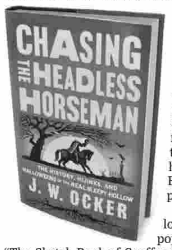
Chasing the Headless Horseman

By J.W. Ocker
Countryman, 288 pages, $21.99

The annual festival of costumes, candy and creepy décor that culminates on Oct. 31 is a distinctly American invention. Yet many characters in Halloween's gallery of ghastlies are foreign imports. Dracula comes from Central Europe by way of the Irish novelist Bram Stoker; the werewolf is a staple of French and German folk tales. Frankenstein and his monster were dreamed up by an Englishwoman, Mary Shelley.

J.W. Ocker's "Chasing the Headless Horseman" pursues the origins and cultural legacy of a frightening figure who has a genesis closer to home. Washington Irving created the Horseman in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820), a story set in New York's Hudson Valley during the 1790s.

The yarn turns on the ambitions of Ichabod Crane, an awkward local schoolmaster, who pursues Katrina Van Tassel, the beautiful daughter of a prosperous farmer of Dutch descent. Ichabod's rival, Brom Bones, tells him the hair-raising story of "the ghost of a Hessian trooper, whose head had been carried away by a cannon-ball, in some nameless battle during the Revolutionary War." Brom convinces Ichabod that this spectral rider lies in wait for nighttime travelers. In the story's climax, a frightened Ichabod encounters the terrible spirit on the way home from a party—or is it Brom, playing an elaborate prank?



"The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" was published in Irving's popular collection of short works, "The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.," which established the author as one of the most beloved writers of his era. The Horseman and Rip Van Winkle, another figure introduced in the collection, would become classic American characters and, in 1949, a Walt Disney animated featurette would give "Sleepy Hollow" a boost for a new generation. Irving's winking descriptions of Ichabod are translated into exuberant physical comedy; in the film's final terrifying chase sequence, the Horseman wields an impressive flaming jack-o-lantern.

Mr. Ocker, a self-described "fan of the horror genre and all things monstrous," previously treated the modern history of Salem in "A Season With the Witch" (2016). In "Chasing the Headless Horseman," he pursues the contemporary legacy of Irving's story, especially in the New York towns linked to the writer's life and work. These places, located along the Hudson River north of New York City, were once rural villages. Some developed as industrial towns by the early 20th century. Most have since become commuter suburbs.

Irving refers to the region as "Tarry Town," and Sunnyside, the house he built from his literary success, is in the modern Tarrytown. Where exactly Irving got the name "Sleepy Hollow" is uncertain, but some historians point to the Dutch "Slaepers' Haven," an inlet that may have provided refuge for sailors plying the Hudson.

Mr. Ocker explains how the village of fewer than 10,000 residents once known as North Tarrytown became a real-world Sleepy Hollow. Henry John Steiner, who is now the community's official historian, was among those who pushed for the change. Beguiled by, as the author writes, the romance of "Dutch nomenclature and old maps," Mr. Steiner and others mounted a 1988 referendum to reclaim what they argued was their colonial heritage and to forge a link to the region's literary titan. The proposal was defeated, but it was successfully revived in 1996. Mr. Ocker suggests that residents may have been ready to distance themselves from the closure, in that year, of a North Tarrytown auto plant.

Washington Irving's story, set in New York's Hudson Valley, has been a touchstone for the Halloween business and seasonal tourism.

The name-change proponents insist to Mr. Ocker that "the reasons were aesthetic and historical" only. The author observes that they had timed things perfectly to catch a rising wave of Halloween business and seasonal tourism. Thousands of visitors throng to the renamed Sleepy Hollow for annual October events. Many visit the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, which contains Irving's grave, Mr. Ocker notes, as well as the remains of Carnegies, Rockefellers and Astors, among "lush hills studded with old stones, mausoleums, and statues."

The aesthetic consequences of tourism are one concern of Jim Logan, the superintendent of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Mr. Ocker spends considerable time with this knowledgeable guide, who displays weary tolerance toward the day-trippers who foray into his territory. Mr. Logan warns the careless away from parking on gravesites and prevents bridal photo shoots from disturbing those who have come to mourn the more recently deceased. "One day," he complains to Mr. Ocker, "I want to figure out how to close the cemetery for the entire month of October."

At the Old Dutch Church Burying Ground, which adjoins the larger Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Mr. Ocker examines gravestones that may have inspired Irving's character names—Katrina Van Tassel is one of them. Other pieces of the story came from Irving's life: Ichabod Crane was the name of an officer Irving met during the War of 1812. Seeking Irving's folkloric sources, Mr. Ocker sifts through libraries for legends of headless riders from Ireland to India, and he finds the Horseman's literary forbears in poems such as Gottfried August Bürger's "The Wild Huntsman" (adapted into English by Walter Scott in 1796) and Robert Burns's "Tam o' Shanter" (1791).

An entire chapter is devoted to the tale's many film and television adaptations, Disney included. Mr. Ocker reports that he consumed 82 hours of "fiction media" adapted from or inspired by "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." He catalogs these versions of the story with cheeky humor, in a tone that doesn't line up with his oft-asserted love of all things spooky.

One real insight that Mr. Ocker offers is how readily Irving's character has traveled. The author visits towns in Wyoming and Illinois also named Sleepy Hollow, where the Headless Horseman appears on tavern signs and water-tower murals. Perhaps at some point the old soldier left the Hudson Valley and rode west, with opportunity in mind. An American spirit if there ever was one.

Mr. Tipper is a books editor at the Journal.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Netanyahu Gives Israel One More Surprise

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu entered Tuesday's Israeli election with a governing majority and is now on course to exit with something less. That's one way to understand the result, but it was also widely anticipated. The surprising news is the opposition's failure to come out ahead of Mr. Netanyahu. He may not have won, but the opposition lost.

The election shows that it's too soon to count out the Prime Minister.

For the Churchill-quoting Prime Minister of Israel, we'd say "nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result." At present count Mr. Netanyahu's Likud party is in first place, projected to win 26 or 27 seats in Israel's 120-seat Knesset. That's down from 32 in the current Knesset but up from the 19 or 21 in pre-election polls. The opposition Yashar party of former military chief Gadi Eisenkot lags at 21 seats.

The larger Netanyahu-aligned bloc is on pace for 53 seats, with the Eisenkot bloc at 48 and Arab-majority parties at 19. Most pre-election polls had the Eisenkot bloc on top, and the former general gave a victory speech after initial exit polls seemed to confirm that outcome. Mr. Eisenkot aimed one remark at Israel's security chiefs, instructing them that Mr. Netanyahu no longer had legitimacy to govern. This looks unwise as more results have come in.

The disappointment is palpable in the opposition, but it has itself to blame. As we've written, Israelis want change—and are also more right-wing. But instead of offering something new, Mr. Eisenkot & Co. made this election the same old referendum on "Bibi."

Mr. Netanyahu is tied to unpopular coalition partners and was Prime Minister during the failed 2023 judicial reform and the Hamas massacre of Oct. 7, 2023. But the opposition's "anyone-but-Bibi" campaign has been a losing play for years. It squandered opportunity by repolarizing the electorate.

Israel's election saw turnout of more than 77%, the highest since 1999. The shock was the surge in Israeli Arab turnout, driven by rising crime in Arab areas and a desire to turf out National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, ending his control over police, prisons and firearm licenses. His legacy this election is the Arab parties' record showing, while the hard-right parties stayed flat at 14 seats.

Neither of the big coalition blocs now has an easy path to form a government. Mr. Netanyahu will struggle to convince any opposition party to join him. Mr. Eisenkot already swore off allying with either Mr. Netanyahu; the Haredi Jewish parties, which seek to keep the politically toxic draft exemption for their ultra-orthodox voters; or the Arab parties, which don't support the Jewish state's existence or its defense policies.

Many have called on Mr. Eisenkot to break his pledge and bring in the Ra'am party, which is Islamist but pragmatic, despite waffling on calling Hamas a terrorist group. But its seven seats will no longer be enough to get to a 61-seat majority. Mr. Eisenkot would likely also need the support of the militant Joint Arab List to prop up a minority government.

At its headquarters on election night, one of the Joint List's former Knesset members told the crowd, "We dedicate the victory to our people in the Gaza Strip, in the West Bank, in occupied Jerusalem . . . and our blessings also to the prisoners." Most Israelis call those prisoners terrorists; any such coalition would be shaky.

The best option may be a unity government, as President Trump urges, joining the Likud with the centrist opposition and excluding the rest. It would be a natural decision if not for the polarization around Mr. Netanyahu: Opposition leaders don't want to work with him, and he won't play second-fiddle.

This means Israelis may soon be returning to the polls. It's an outcome that Mr. Netanyahu fears the least because he would have momentum, better options and hang on as Prime Minister in the meantime. But he wasn't wrong late Tuesday night to suggest that Israel has a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, with our partner President Trump, to remove the existential threat from Iran once and for all." This is no time for Israeli paralysis.

The Fed's Hawkish Hold

The Federal Open Market Committee voted Wednesday to hold its short-term interest rate target at 3.75%-4%—a move both widely expected and wise. Inflation remains well above the Fed's 2% target but there's considerable uncertainty about how the economy will behave in coming months given geopolitical uncertainty. Raising or lowering interest rates right before an election is a mug's game—why do they schedule a meeting for the last week of October, anyway?—and Mr. Warsh defended the Fed's independence by standing pat.

He could do so without undermining the Fed's credibility because he's otherwise establishing a coherent record as an inflation hawk. No one who looks at his speeches and press conferences in his five months on the job would suspect that he's fishing for excuses to freeze or cut rates before inflation is under control. That buys a chairman some leeway for no increase at any one meeting.

Mr. Warsh said at his Wednesday press conference that the economy is strong even after the Fed's September rate increase. An important point came when he said that he and his colleagues have "observed but were not surprised by" recent market volatility. The message is that the central bank is no longer trying to smooth out financial markets. That removes some of the pressure to constantly fine-tune policy.

It also doesn't hurt that the Fed's September rate increase took some of the froth out of the AI borrowing frenzy. As Mr. Warsh put it, there's no harm after years of easy money if investors have to be "more discerning" in where they put their money.

The counter-example comes via Fed Governor Lisa Cook, who joined Cleveland Fed President Beth Hammack in casting a dissenting vote in favor of a rate increase. Ms. Hammack has a record as an inflation hawk, but no one believes Ms. Cook holds similar views.

Her vote looks like an attempt to thumb her nose at President Trump, who always favors low rates and is engaged in a convoluted legal battle to fire Ms. Cook from the board. It would have been better for the Fed as an institution if she had joined the majority.

Mr. Warsh's message remains that the mission isn't accomplished because inflation remains too high. Markets appear to expect another rate increase at the FOMC's next meeting in December, which is a fair bet given inflation above the Fed's target. All the better if Mr. Warsh can make progress while disentangling it from the election season.

John Podesta's Permitting Sabotage

Hasn't John Podesta done enough damage to U.S. energy policy? Apparently not. The architect of Joe Biden's harmful pause on new liquefied natural gas exports is now trying to poison a bipartisan permitting reform because it could benefit fossil-fuel production.

Biden's climate czar tries to scuttle a careful Senate compromise.

We recently told you about a draft Senate deal that would accelerate federal permitting and reduce frivolous litigation. It could get a vote in the lame-duck session of Congress. While imperfect, the compromise provides much-needed certainty for developers by banning federal agencies from cancelling or suspending permits.

It would also let permit holders sue the feds for damages if the government does a switcheroo. Democrats demanded such "certainty" provisions out of frustration with the Trump Administration's moves to revoke permits for offshore wind projects.

Yet Mr. Podesta called these provisions a poison pill in remarks Friday at the University of Colorado, Boulder, which were reported by the climate site Heatmap. Lawmakers have "handed Trump . . . a loaded Howitzer to go after public lands, to permit stuff that even if it's illegal can't be reversed by the courts," Mr. Podesta reportedly said.

The Trump team is "going to have a permit gorge like you've never seen, not really caring about whether they're going through the legal steps to do it, and under this bill, those can't be reversed," the Biden climate adviser said. The bill removes "states' ability to ensure clean drinking water" and "a lot of restraint on the ability to get courts to enjoin for NEPA violations."

How does he mislead, let us count the ways. The bill doesn't alter the National Environmental Policy Act's requirements that agencies review and mitigate potential environmental impact of projects on federal land. It merely imposes a shot clock on the completion of environmental reviews and a 150-day statute of limitation to challenge permits.

The bill also instructs courts to provide "substantial deference" to an agency on the "scope and contents" of an environmental review, which is intended to prevent judges from second-guessing agencies.

None of this is a license to allow unfettered drilling in Yellowstone, as Mr. Podesta suggests. While the bill would limits states' ability under the Clean Water Act to withhold permits based on hypothetical indirect effects on water quality, states would retain authority to block projects if they create discharges that pollute waterways.

Mr. Podesta's real beef is that the compromise could make it harder for a future Democratic administration to reprise his LNG "pause" and rescind permits for fossil-fuel projects. It could also prevent the climate crowd from weaponizing the courts. Never mind that the deal would limit Mr. Trump's power to block renewable-energy projects.

The deal would also assist green energy by letting the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission override states and approve transmission lines in the "public interest." Yet Mr. Podesta suggested that Democrats should hold out for a better deal since they will have more leverage if they take control of Congress.

Don't be so sure. Mr. Trump may be less inclined to strike a deal with Democrats next year. Then again, Mr. Podesta may know this. For the implacable climate left, keeping fossil fuels in the ground is all that matters.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Don't Bring Orbán to the U.N. to Prove a Point

Your editorial "Viktor Orbán, U.N. Secretary-General?" (Oct. 26) concedes the case against him, then says the best thing that can be said about his candidacy is that it would give the United Nations a leader "as low as Turtle Bay has already sunk." This is a proposal that would damage an institution further in order to prove that it is already damaged.

Your account describes Washington promoting Mr. Orbán, with Moscow and Beijing said to be supportive. If the three governments were advancing him as a joint candidate, that alone would put his independence in doubt from the outset. Article 100 of the U.N. Charter requires the secretary-general to act without instructions from any government and requires member states to respect the international character of the office.

The council recommends; the General Assembly, representing all 193 member states, appoints. A candidate presented as the choice of three great powers would have to win the consent of the states he was not chosen to please.

Mr. Orbán's record is terrible: his government's assaults on Hungary's courts, press and civil society and his advocacy for Vladimir Putin within Europe. The United Nations deserves unsparing criticism. It doesn't deserve a secretary-general chosen to prove its critics right.

JORDAN RYAN
Belchertown, Mass.
Mr. Ryan is a former U.N. assistant secretary-general.

President Trump has long displayed contempt for the U.N., reinforced by his administration's drastic cuts in American funding. Is Mr. Orbán now being groomed as President Trump's Trojan horse—to undermine the organization from within, perhaps finishing a job Mr. Trump can't accomplish from outside?

Mr. Orbán's government became synonymous with democratic backsliding, cronyism and serious allegations of corruption involving his inner circle. In April, Hungarian voters finally handed him a crushing electoral defeat. His successor's government would hardly welcome, let alone support, his elevation to the world's highest diplomatic office.

The secretary-general job demands impartiality, diplomatic credibility and the ability to build consensus. Mr. Orbán's political career has demonstrated virtually the opposite.

ISTVAN DOBOZI
Sarasota, Fla.

The Drought of Stars in the Lone Star State

While Jack Butler's op-ed delves into Republican Party loyalty, the bigger and less understood topic is how Texan voters chose the seriously compromised Ken Paxton over popular incumbent Sen. John Cornyn in the Republican primaries ("Ken Paxton Tests the Limits of Party Loyalty," Oct. 23). Mr. Butler repeats what has been broadly recognized—not only that Mr. Paxton was impeached for bribery and corruption by the Texas House in 2023, but that he is a deeply flawed, uninspiring, low-energy and slovenly mannered candidate.

Most political observers reflect that Mr. Cornyn would retain his Republican senatorial seat in a cakewalk; but now the Democratic candidate, James Talarico, has a better chance of defeating Mr. Paxton. At least in this case, Texas Republican voters couldn't draw quickly enough or shoot straight. They shot themselves in the foot.

JOHN PASTER
Estero, Fla.

Mr. Butler's op-ed could well be retitled "Ken Paxton Tests the Limits of Party Integrity." While some may be uncomfortable with Mr. Talarico's knowledge and provocative application of the Bible to today's cultural discourse, he stands on solid theological grounds, which is precisely why the religious right finds him so threatening. Conversely, as Mr. Butler points out, Mr. Paxton was impeached for bribery, corruption and abuse of office. That history fundamentally tests the party's values and integrity.

TOM PALMER
Wilmette, Ill.

Mr. Butler's op-ed on the competitive Texas Senate race is good at describing what's happening in Texas. Mr. Paxton is known for his corruption, and any informed Republican who votes for him will be holding his nose because, in addition, he's a lousy campaigner and plain lazy.

What Texans see in Mr. Talarico is a good man who is open to civil debate and wants to bring people together. He's a gifted speaker and a great, tireless campaigner. He deserves to win.

SARA STEVENSON
Austin

The New Age of Mutually Assured Disruption

Jillian Kay Melchior's op-ed "The Ukraine 'Kill Zone' Is AI's Testing Ground" (Oct. 21) focuses on artificial intelligence's ability to make weapons more effective. But AI's greatest military contribution may ultimately be making conventional warfare obsolete.

Rather than killing soldiers and destroying property, AI could increasingly influence an adversary's capacity and willingness to continue fighting by disrupting economic activity, military production, logistics, communications and financial systems. Such capabilities could also create dangerous civilian consequences, making restraint and reversibility essential.

During the Cold War, mutually assured destruction helped deter nuclear conflict. AI may introduce a new doctrine: mutually assured disruption. When opposing nations recognize their vulnerability to widespread economic and institutional disruption, the incentives to negotiate could become more powerful than the incentives to fight.

The ultimate achievement of military AI may not be winning wars more efficiently, but making traditional warfare increasingly unnecessary.

TOM NUGENT
Charleston, S.C.

Boundaries at the Ballot Box

I admire Rahm Emanuel's optimism about the coming election ("Democrats Need McCain-Romney Republicans," op-ed, Oct. 22). But he may be making an unusual mistake about his view of John McCain and Mitt Romney voters, as well as the mess that is the Democratic Party. Just as MAGA has stolen the Republican Party from center-right conservatives, so has the DSA stolen the Democratic Party from center-left liberals.

The solution to our current state of politics is the formation of a centrist party called America United. The two-party system is dead.

ALLEN KAPLAN
Benicia, Calif.

I will only consider switching to "D" when the Democratic Party throws out the DSA revolutionaries. The DSA advocates for the destruction of our Constitution—something I and many other veterans pledged to uphold with our lives.

DAVE SMITH
Salisbury, Md.

A CEO on a Collision Course

After reading your editorial "Flying the Socialist Skies at United" (Oct. 21), I will never again fly United Airlines—even if the ticket price is substantially lower than other airlines.

As a middle-class homeowner with only limited additional assets to pass on to my children, I was appalled to learn that United Airlines CEO Scott Kirby, with a reported estimated net worth of up to $120 million, has called for an inheritance tax "close to 100%."

Investors in United Airlines Holdings, Inc. should be extremely wary of a CEO who advocates for such an egregiously destructive, anti-entrepreneurial wealth tax.

LONNIE BARHAM
Warwick, R.I.

Letters intended for publication should be emailed to wsj.ltrs@wsj.com. Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Press 1 to slowly lose all hope and sink into a black pit of existential despair. Press 2 for the same thing in Spanish."

OPINION

‘Decoy Dan’ Is Peltola’s Alaska Plant



POTOMAC WATCH
By Kimberley A. Strassel

When the Justice Department sued Alaska over its manipulated Senate ballot, liberal shrieks could initially be heard up to the Arctic. They’re fading now, after the New York Times on Wednesday published evidence that Democrats rigged Alaska’s ranked-choice ballot with a decoy candidate who threatens to deny Republican Sen. Dan Sullivan re-election.

Yet while exposing the deceit is helpful, it’s no remedy. Hurdle upon hurdle has been stacked against Alaskans’ ability to have a clear and fair vote: False-flag candidates, a Rube Goldberg ballot, deceptive electioneering. Court action may be the only remedy.

Here’s what we knew up to Wednesday: Alaska is saddled with a nightmarish election system, in which voters rank four final general-election candidates in order of preference. Just prior to the election filing deadline, a retired teacher named Dan Sullivan filed to run against Sen. Dan Sullivan. It looked like a clear effort to confuse voters staring at that final four ballot.

The Alaska Division of Elections barred the decoy on grounds he filed “with a purpose to confuse or mislead” voters. Decoy Dan filed as a Republican but had no ties to the GOP. He had donated to liberal causes and to Sen. Sullivan’s Democratic challenger, Mary Peltola. He had used a Democratic political consultant with links to Mrs. Peltola. He had asked to be listed as “Dan S. Sullivan,” using the senator’s middle initial, though his own middle initial is J. He created a campaign logo almost identical to the incumbent’s.

Alaska’s Supreme Court allowed Decoy Dan to proceed anyway. He got 2.5% of the primary vote, enough to send him to the final four. Through all this, the Peltola campaign claimed it had nothing to do with the ruse.

But Mrs. Peltola’s former campaign manager, Elisa Rios, told the Times that the campaign began an operation in 2025 to track down other Alaskan Dan Sullivans, coax them to run and confuse voters. The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee provided a Democratic operative who specialized in “secret ballot maneuvers,” and he got Decoy Dan to run, according to the Times.

The operative reportedly told the campaign that Decoy Dan said “he hated Trump, and if it was going to help Mary, he liked Mary. He didn’t have any interest in being a politician, but if this could help.” The Times story provides evidence Democrats might have also recruited the fourth candidate on the Senate ballot, Gerald Heikes. The Peltola campaign and DSCC both denied recruiting anyone.

Ms. Rios suddenly told the Times last week: “As discussed on our call earlier today, I am confirming that I have retracted all statements made regarding the 2026 Alaska Senate Race in connection with any article you may or may not be writing.” She added: “I am not willing to be a source for any story in any capacity.” The paper noted that it isn’t bound by her decision to backtrack and that Ms. Rios has planned a wrongful-termination suit against the campaign.

Her former campaign manager says the other Sullivan was recruited to confuse GOP voters.

It’s clear Decoy Dan had no interest in actually attaining office. His campaign’s website contains two press releases and six blog posts and was last updated six weeks ago. Its Facebook page features eight entries since the Aug. 18 primary, the last one on Sept. 30. One shares a poem. None feature a single idea, platform or promise.

Decoy Dan has spent no money on staff, advertising, media, travel or campaign events. His listed expenses show $300 to the Alaska election division for a candidate brochure, $4,000 to the Democratic consultant, and more than $20,000 to a Washington law firm for “compliance and legal fees.”

His only real fundraising is a link asking for money to cover his litigation costs. According to Federal Election Commission records, he has had five itemized donors for the general election, contributing $5,400. Three of them live outside Alaska. He’s received zero contributions from any party committee, political action committee, or other candidate. But he has served his purpose: getting his name on the final ballot, in hope that it will confuse enough voters to tip the election to Mrs. Peltola.

Some liberals and ranked-choice supporters now claim Alaska’s system will guard against this chicanery. So long as supporters of the incumbent rank *both* Dan Sullivans, their vote will go to the senator in the end.

Meaning, so long as every voter knows exactly how to defeat the game, all will be well. Right. This will be Alaskan Republicans’ third experience with ranked-choice voting, and they’ve been advised differently each time. Two years ago, they were told to rank only one candidate for U.S. House election, Nick Begich. That made sense as he was the only Republican. Now they are being told by Donald Trump and the Sullivan campaign to vote for multiple candidates, including one exposed as a fraud. That’s confusing, and why should voters cast a ballot for a deceptive candidate? Though some will do so inadvertently, especially since his name is the first on the ballot.

Voters are also being purposely misled. A political action committee called the Center for Honest Voting sent a mailer this month to Republican and independent households. It screams: “One person. One vote. One choice,” beside a graphic showing a filled-in first choice and crossed-out additional choices. “President Trump is calling out fraud,” it asserts: “Trust your first choice. Only vote once.” I’ve spoken to numerous supporters of the senator who are deeply confused.

It’s unclear what reach federal law has here, but it isn’t unheard of for a court to disqualify a decoy candidate. And the U.S. Supreme Court has observed that a state has “an interest, if not a duty, to protect the integrity of its political processes from frivolous or fraudulent candidacies.” How much more evidence does the Alaska Supreme Court need that this decoy fits both definitions?

Maybe the election results will be clear enough to make litigation unnecessary. But especially if Senate control ends up hinging on Alaska, the candidacy of Decoy Dan can’t be allowed to stand. Meanwhile, Alaskans will do themselves and the nation a favor if they pass this year’s ballot initiative to ditch ranked-choice voting, which we now know Democrats rigged to swing a Senate election.

How Do Investors Measure ‘Social Impact’?

By Roland Fryer

Two decades ago, my Harvard students asked how to get to Wall Street. Today, they ask how to make money and make a difference. An entire industry has grown around that ambition. The Global Impact Investing Network in 2024 estimated that nearly 4,000 organizations managed $1.57 trillion in impact investments worldwide. Their promise is to deliver financial returns while improving lives. How they measure the second part varies considerably.

The quantity of students educated, Medicaid patients treated or carbon emissions avoided can tell an investor about a company’s work. But how should he compare those outcomes in deciding where another million dollars would do the most good?

Developing a common standard would be one of the best ways of expanding economic opportunity.

Financial returns allow investors to identify outstanding funds. Without a common measure, investors can’t reliably identify the funds delivering the greatest social benefit per dollar—and reward them with more capital.

Bill Helman and I confronted this accounting problem when we founded Equal Opportunity Ventures in 2019 to invest in businesses that expand economic opportunity. After assembling the IKEA dining tables that would serve as our desks, our team turned to the whiteboard walls in our Boston office to develop a common measure of social return.

The answer emerged in two steps. First, we identified what difference a company’s product would make in people’s lives. Suppose a training company’s graduates earn $50,000 a year. If they would otherwise have earned $48,000, the program added $2,000. If they would have earned $30,000, it added $20,000. The same reported salary conceals a tenfold difference in the effect on earnings. A convincing research design must establish what would have happened without the program—the counterfactual. Otherwise, we risk crediting the company with income that graduates would have earned anyway.

Second, we calculated what that difference is worth. For job training, the starting point is additional earnings in dollars. We then subtract tuition, income forgone during training, and other costs participants bear that aren’t reflected in the earnings estimate. Better health, cleaner air and improved primary education require economic research to translate their benefits into dollars.

Even mortality risk can be valued in dollars, though the estimates vary widely. Economists Orley Ashenfelter and Michael Greenstone studied the effect of raising rural interstate speed limits from 55 to 65 miles an hour. Drivers saved time, but more people died. Valuing the time saved at the average wage, they estimated that states accepted roughly $3 million in savings per additional fatality. Under their model, that figure set an upper bound on those states’ valuation of a statistical life. By comparison, the Department of Health and Human Services valued a statistical life at about $13.5 million. A common standard should make different assumptions clear, lest investors mistake more generous valuations for greater impact.

Consider a hypothetical investment in a training company. A fund puts in $200,000 for a 20% stake, which subsequent financing reduces to 10% before the program begins serving students. Suppose credible evidence shows that 2,000 participants will gain an average of $5,000 each in additional earnings, measured in present value after participants’ costs. The total benefit is $10 million. The fund’s allocated share is $1 million: $5 of social benefit per dollar invested. The fund can’t claim the total benefits any more than it can claim the company’s entire sale price.

Now suppose the same fund invests $500,000 in a health business and holds 10% after dilution. The company reaches 100,000 people and reduces each person’s risk of dying by 1 in 10,000—averting an expected 10 deaths. The HHS benchmark values the mortality benefit at $135 million. The fund’s share is $13.5 million, or $27 per dollar invested, before other benefits and costs. Halve the valuation and the multiple falls to $13.50. The company has accomplished exactly the same thing. Investors should know how much of the reported return rests on the fund’s chosen valuation.



ROBERT NEUBECKER

These comparisons allow investors to make informed trade-offs. A person willing to accept a lower financial return can ask how much additional social benefit that concession yields. Another seeking market-rate returns can weigh investments with similar financial prospects but different effects on people’s lives. Both can put their money where their values are.

On our office whiteboard, we named this measure the social money multiplier. We estimate the benefit per person in dollars, then multiply by the number of people reached. We discount future benefits to present value, account for uncertainty, subtract costs and harms and count each benefit only once. To calculate an investor’s multiple, we allocate benefits according to ownership and divide by the amount invested.

Like an investment multiple, the result expresses value per dollar invested. Social benefits can begin accruing as soon as a product improves a person’s life; they needn’t wait for an investor to sell his stake. TPG’s Rise Fund and the Bridgespan Group developed a similar research-based measure, the “impact multiple of money.”

This approach favors benefits that are easier to measure. A vegan restaurant may be an excellent impact investment, but the path from seitan to salary is less direct than the one from job training to higher earnings. Did customers change their diets, did their health improve, and did that improvement affect their ability to work? Health and environmental benefits matter, but they too must be measured and valued in dollars. A shared body of evidence would help us evaluate opportunities whose impact today seems impossible to measure.

My team and I have assembled a research database to measure the social impact of our portfolio. Greater collaboration would let investors assess their portfolios, test their assumptions and estimate a social money multiplier. Each new study—and evidence from investments—could improve the estimates for everyone.

Directing $1.57 trillion toward investments that deliver the greatest social benefit would be a monumental achievement. Creating a universal standard may be among the most consequential things we can do to expand economic opportunity. Better measurement could also attract additional capital from investors who want to improve lives but need evidence that their money will do so.

My students ask how to make money and make a difference. With a common standard, we could show them where capital has improved lives, by how much and where the next dollar could do the most good. Measuring impact deserves the same ambition as making it.

Mr. Fryer, a Journal contributor, is a professor of economics at Harvard, a founder of Equal Opportunity Ventures and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

Ukraine Enlists a Drone for a Pioneering Rescue

By Anna Husarska

Ukrainian forces recently evacuated a wounded soldier by aerial drone, maybe the first such mission ever. The rescue of Kostiantyn Vlasenko, a 49-year-old infantryman, from the front line near the city of Kupiansk involved four Ukrainian brigades. Early this month a heavy-lift drone transported Mr. Vlasenko to safety while smaller drones served as protection and decoys.

Before the war, Mr. Vlasenko was a miner in Kryvyi Rih, a city in southern Ukraine. He volunteered for the army after Russia’s 2022 invasion. He had spent more than 16 months at the Kupiansk front, a kill zone that is heavily mined and patrolled by Russian drones. At first he manned the post alongside another soldier, making radio reports on enemy movements. Since February, Mr. Vlasenko had worked alone, after a Russian drone attack killed his partner.

That attack left Mr. Vlasenko alive but maimed. After the blast, in which he believes the drone dropped an anti-tank mine, Mr. Vlasenko tried to treat his shattered legs with tourniquets. In April, owing to frostbite and gangrene, “I lost my left foot; it rotted off on its own,” Mr. Vlasenko told Yurii Butusov, who runs a YouTube channel. “Then in May, I cut off the right one myself.” The exposed bone in his right shin had made it difficult to crawl to recover emergency supplies air-dropped to him. “I knew it was already beyond saving.” He amputated his right foot while hiding in the boiler room of an abandoned school.

Mr. Vlasenko’s companions kept him alive for months with drone deliveries of medicine, including antibiotics, painkillers and topical antiseptic. They also dropped power banks, food and water. In one package, his wife sent a novel by Stephen King, his favorite author. In a video after the operation, the soft-spoken Mr. Vlasenko dwelled less on the horrors of his solitary ordeal at the front than the kindness of his fellow soldiers. “They spoiled me,” he said, by dropping not only canned meat and porridge but treats such as Fanta soda, Snickers bars and Marlboro or Camel cigarettes.

Ukrainian forces determined that they couldn’t rescue Mr. Vlasenko with a ground-based evacuation. A year ago, two soldiers dispatched to relieve Mr. Vlasenko on the Kupiansk front were killed on their way to his position. Two more soldiers were killed trying to retrieve their comrades’ bodies. With an air evacuation the only option, military units including the 92nd Infantry Brigade spent six months planning.

A few days before Oct. 4, a drone air-dropped a mountaineering rescue harness to Mr. Vlasenko. The harness carried a telephone with video instructions for attaching himself with carabiners to the winch of the drone that would transport him.

A wounded soldier in the ‘kill zone’ attached himself to a hexacopter’s winch for a 39-mile ride to safety.

The hexacopter, or six-rotor drone, that carried Mr. Vlasenko was a Heavy Shot Ayudag-6, made in Ukraine by Gurzuf Defense. The craft was adapted to remain stable with a human payload and can carry up to 287 pounds. Mr. Vlasenko’s comrades figured that after four years at war, he weighed no more than 150 pounds. Mr. Vlasenko complimented the drone operator’s dexterity: “He did not pick me up like a bag of potatoes, but like a real human being.”

Ukrainian forces relied on jammers and artillery to counter enemy fire that might have foiled the mission and lost only one Vampire drone that was providing cover. It took an hour and 14 minutes to scoop up Mr. Vlasenko and transport him along a 39-mile route at an altitude of roughly 500 feet. Soldiers tracked his progress through a camera attached to the hexacopter and talked to him via a speaker on the camera. As he was lifted, he gestured OK and even formed a little half-heart with one hand. Once Mr. Vlasenko reached safety, a cushioned land drone helped him move to an ambulance from the hexacopter.

Recovering in a hospital in Kharkiv, Mr. Vlasenko said that when the drone descended to collect him, he heard what he described as a “roar of rescue” that he will never forget. During the mission, he worried most while he was being transported over water, because he doesn’t know how to swim.

The mission drew comparisons to Ukraine’s Operation Spiderweb in June 2025, which involved concealing drones in trucks and then launching them from the vehicles’ roofs to destroy warplanes in Russian airfields. Both Spiderweb and the evacuation tapped the resourcefulness that has became a Ukrainian hallmark during the conflict.

The rescue also proved the military’s commitment to leave none of their own behind. Moscow has been known to use troops to prevent soldiers from retreating. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky recently told a journalist about the war: “We are not losing it. But we are losing people.” Ukraine is saving people, too.

Ms. Husarska is a journalist who writes regularly from Ukraine.

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EDITORIALS

Is nothing sacred? Not even prayer in Trump's White House

A group of Catholic leaders came to the White House Oct. 22 to pray for President Donald Trump. Unbeknownst to the well-meaning Catholics, their prayer in the Oval Office was recorded and the White House shared it without permission, according to Milwaukee Archbishop Jeffrey Grob.

Everything is on camera, and every photo and every recording has the potential to go viral, depending on the timing, the content and agenda of the people doing the sharing. This is an unfortunate reality — even if you're a member of the clergy.

Still, the incident has us scratching our heads. How low do you have to go to embarrass clergy while they are praying for your very soul?

"I wish I had been more shrewd and less simple, like those who exploited our meeting for partisan political purposes," Des Moines Bishop William Joensen said after the video took off.

Indeed.

To be clear, praying for political leaders is hardly novel or uncommon, and the bishops who prayed for blessings could just as easily have been doing so for any supplicant. In many pulpits on most Sundays, pastors and priests are known to humbly request wisdom and good judgment from our elected officials. Republicans and Democrats. Sinners all.

Moreover, offering prayers in the White House is a tradition that has been observed by presidents of both parties for generations. It's not just a tradition, but an honor to be asked. So we are not surprised the Catholics accepted the call to visit and minister to a sitting president, especially given the potential impact of his future actions on the rest of their flock. And if any president needed to hear prayers about good judgment and moral rectitude, Donald Trump is that president.



President Donald Trump gestures to reporters to be quiet during an event in the Oval Office of the White House on Oct. 20 in Washington. **ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY**

There are a lot more judgments to be made; Trump's second term is far from over.

"I took some time to weigh the decision and ultimately felt that, if I had the opportunity to offer my voice in a way that might improve the lives of God's children, I ought to take it. I pray for our elected officials on a daily basis, so it seemed appropriate to do so in person," Grob said Sunday, adding that the meeting was not an endorsement of the president, his party or his policies.

Of course not. Reasonable people understand that.

And yet, times have changed. Going to the White House has become a journey littered with political landmines to which even the holy are not immune. No matter who sits behind the big desk, simply being there is certain to rile up folks on one side of the aisle or the other.

This is hardly the first time Trump has ruffled Catholics' feathers, not least because he's feuded with Pope Leo XIV.

But this exploitation of Catholic bishops who were praying for their president, not delivering papal edicts with political patinas, feels especially repulsive.

Especially when you consider what the Bible has to say about performative piety in the gospel of Matthew: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others." The gospel suggests a different approach: "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen."

In other words, the guidance is that praying is good — the issue is with praying to be seen.

The Trump administration seems to have missed that particular New Testament memo. We are less than shocked, although we've also seen our share of performative piety around Chicago politics.

"We came in good faith to try to work for the betterment of our fellow human beings, to ease their suffering, to build up the common good, and to pray with a president, not to pose for a political photo opportunity to benefit the few," Grob said.

Absolutely. We could all use some building up of the common good. The Catholic bishops came to the White House because it is their job and their calling. They should have been treated by the White House with a lot more respect.

Tiny townships are good place to start trimming government bloat

Readers may remember Tiffany Henyard, the scandal-plagued former mayor of Dolton and supervisor of Thornton Township.

An investigation by former Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot uncovered trips to New York City, Atlanta and Las Vegas paid for with village credit cards.

Today, we're heading south to Dolson.

That's not a typo.

Dolson Township, population 350, is about 20 miles from the Indiana state line and about an hour and 20 minute drive to Champaign.

This tiny township is plagued by a tale we've seen play out before closer to home: Public corruption.

Former township Clerk Kimberly Grable pleaded guilty to official misconduct and was sentenced to five years in prison. Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul's office alleged that Grable stole more than $168,000 from the township to pay off a personal vehicle and other expenses.

"Elected officials such as township clerks are rightfully held to a higher standard and expected to carry out their duties with integrity on behalf of the taxpayers they serve," Raoul said on Oct. 20.

Indeed. Grable's story reminds us that Illinois' vast number of government entities makes it hard to keep an eye on everything. Whereas Henyard faced scrutiny from a disgruntled public and the Chicago media market, smaller entities in more remote places don't garner the same attention.

There are more of these government entities than you might realize. Illinois is home to more than 1,400 townships; nearly half have fewer than 1,000 residents, according to the Civic Federation.

Some, like Dolson, have fewer than 500 residents. We'll call them micro-townships. One state lawmaker says Illinois doesn't need them and is trying to do something about it.

Republican state Rep. Joe Sosnowski has introduced House Bill 4625, which would automatically eliminate every township in Illinois with fewer than 500 residents on Jan. 1, 2029, transferring most of its responsibilities to county government. To ensure there are taxpayer savings, the measure would limit counties to levying 25% of a dissolved township's previous property tax levy for the responsibilities they assume.

Clark County, home to Dolson Township, has just over 15,000 residents. It is, however, home to 15 townships — about one for every 1,000 residents — including at least one other micro-township (Auburn Township, population about 230).

Under Sosnowski's bill, Clark County would assume Dolson Township's responsibilities.

Of course, counties would need to ensure that residents continue receiving essential services. And we concede that some rural townships provide valuable services.

But that doesn't mean every community of a few hundred people needs its own township government.

It's not just the opportunity for corruption that comes with lack of scrutiny that justifies consolidating these units of government.

Even when run honestly, they require more elected officials typically making substantial salaries and often earning generous pensions that taxpayers must finance until the end of their days. In a state with some of the highest property taxes in the country, shedding these taxing bodies counts as low hanging fruit. A start.

You could argue, and we'd agree, that the bigger problem with townships lies up north in the more densely populated part of the state, where townships overlap with counties and villages and the costs of supporting them are higher.

Gov. JB Pritzker has backed legislation to make it easier to dissolve townships, and plenty of proposals to consolidate taxing bodies continue to crop up in Springfield. Progress, though, has been elusive.

Yet, as we've written before, there is precedent for dissolving townships and shifting their responsibilities to other governmental units. Evanston residents voted to abolish Evanston Township in 2014, with its responsibilities passed on to the city of Evanston.

In the Metro East, the city of Belleville took on the services provided by Belleville Township after it was dissolved in 2017. And a referendum to dissolve West Peoria Township passed in 2020.

The sky did not fall.

We get that many politicians would prefer to focus their legislative energies on sexier issues than the seemingly thankless job of pruning our overgrown thicket of governmental bodies. But, given the taxpayer anger that's ready to boil over in this state, officeholders willing to reform the government we have rather than bolt on more additions might well be surprised at the positive response from their constituents.

ON THIS DAY 36 YEARS AGO

PREMATURE OBITUARIES FOR YUPPIEDOM

Is Yuppie dead?

A growing number of marketing analysts and other observers of popular culture think so. Power ties and power lunching are out, say the up-to-the-second analysts. Value and caring are back in.

Still, it may be too early to bid adieu to the self-absorbed, self-indulgent baby boomers who gave the 1980s an unexpected association with white wine, the BMW, $800 briefcases, jogging shoes and brie.

While fashionable men's stores report a fall-off in the sale of red suspenders, the fashion pages continue to show as representative "men of the '80s" such curious figures as the 43-year-old Chicago risk-taker recently photographed in USA Today receiving a head-to-tootsies pampering—pedicure, manicure and full facial—at "the gentlemen's barbers," Triefitt & Hill on North Michigan Avenue.

"Every week," he said, "I have a shave and a stress massage." Perhaps to prepare himself for the stress that might follow his receiving the reported price tag for it all: $400. But you only live once and, as Georgie Jessel once said, if you do it right, once is enough.

For some, the '80s boom may be turning into a '90s bust, Wall Street scandals may have taken the gleam off the yuppward-ly-mobile career track and scattered layoffs and cutbacks may be turning greed pursuits into struggles for basic economic survival and concern for the future that awaits today's yuppie puppies. ...

Today's terminology may change (Does anyone ever admit openly to being a yuppie? Ever?), and the outer trappings of dress-for-success may molt like yesterday's peacock feathers. But as long as God makes little green kiwi fruit and humans turn out custom shoes, reports of the death of the yuppie will sound, to paraphrase Mark Twain, greatly exaggerated.

Tribune editorial board, Oct. 29, 1990

EDITORIAL CARTOON

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TRUMP'S CLOSING ARGUMENTS BEFORE THE MIDTERMS

DREW SHENEMAN/TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Fixing city's approach to lead line removal will help public safety

By Richard Day
and Jens Ludwig
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



Discarded lead pipe removed from a home sits in the 10100 block of South Green Street in Chicago on May 2, 2024. ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

As we head into a mayoral election, public safety remains a key concern of voters. Because of Chicago's budget situation, we can't just throw more money at the problem. We will need to figure out how to do more with less. Here's a zero-cost way to help reduce gun violence over the long run: Fix Chicago's broken approach to replacing lead water service lines.

What do lead pipes have to do with public safety? Lead is a durable, waterproof material widely used for decades across the country to connect main water lines to homes and other buildings. But it also is toxic, especially to young children. Once absorbed, it can be stored in the bones for years and causes damage to some of the most important parts of the growing brain. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says the only safe level of lead exposure is zero exposure.

This is not only terrible for public health, but it also contributes to our public safety challenges.

There is a large body of research suggesting lead exposure increases violent crime. One study by researcher Jessica Wolpaw Reyes argued phasing out leaded gasoline accounts for more than half the decline in violent crime in America from 1992 to 2002.

Researchers with Harvard University and the University of California Berkeley who looked at the early 20th century found that cities using lead pipes had murder rates roughly 25% higher than those using iron water-service lines.

Modern-day cities add chemicals to their water to try to prevent lead-pipe corrosion, but that is an imperfect fix.

Unfortunately, Chicago has far more lead service lines than any other city in the country — 412,000 lead lines out of 491,000 total water service lines. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University estimated that 68% of Chicago children younger than 6 live in homes with tap water containing detectable levels of lead.

Why do we have so many more lead service lines than other cities? Partly, the answer is our legacy as an older city, but partly the answer also is politics. Starting in the 1950s, many cities reversed course and banned lead pipes. In Chicago, partly thanks to pressure from the plumber's union — which helped get Mayor Richard J. Daley elected and saw a chance for more work for members — the city required lead pipes until Congress banned them in 1986.

Politics also is one of the reasons Chicago struggles to fix the problem. The fastest, most cost-effective way to replace water-service lines is to do this for a whole block at once. But that's hard to do when many property owners refuse to grant the city access to their lead service lines.

Larger landlords may be hard to reach or just not care. And individual homeowners may not understand the need to replace their lines or just may not want the hassle.

Politically, it's much easier to dig up individual lead service lines for homeowners who want it, rather than tell everyone on the block that they're getting an involuntary construction project.

Newark, New Jersey, tackled this problem by passing an ordinance that mandated access. After Newark passed this ordinance in September 2019, replacements jumped from roughly 100 per month to 80 to 100 per day.

It would be unfair to blame this entirely on politics; incompetence appears to play a role as well. For example, Chicago historically has relied on the most expensive and disruptive approach to lead-service-line replacement (what's called "open trench replacement," which requires digging up the entire line to replace the pipe, versus more surgical trenchless approaches).

The city is shifting in this direction but continues to lag other cities in Illinois.

Chicago also struggles to effectively manage the contractors it brings in to handle many of these lead-service-line replacements. The Department of Water Management (DWM) acknowledged as much when pressed on this over the summer.

The result? Slow progress and eye-watering costs. At our current pace, Chicago won't replace all of our lead service lines until 2076. That's about 30 years after it's required by the federal government to finish the job. Over the summer, WBEZ and Grist reported that Chicago's costs are more than six times the EPA's national estimate of $4,700. We're also far more expensive than other big cities — the costs are more than twice that of New York.

At these costs, there is almost no plausible amount of new money that will get the job done. Based on an average removal cost of $35,000, the full cost would be a staggering $14 billion. That's equivalent to the funding gap for the worst-funded of our city's pension plans.

Fixing this will require ambitious changes. This year, we finally saw some movement at the state level. During the spring legislative session, the General Assembly passed SB4025, led by state Sen. Ram Villivalam, which, among other things, mandates access for lead-service-line replacements. The bill doesn't provide any consequences for property owners that refuse access, and it's still an open question how aggressively Chicago will use this new authority, but it's a step in the right direction.

Chicago also should bring in managers with experience in cities such as Newark that have managed to replace lead service lines cost-efficiently. Chicago's DWM also should be forced to provide a clear accounting of its existing costs and replacement methods. And elected officials will need to be willing back up the department when it needs cooperation from other city departments or faces complaints from residents about block-level replacements.

This will be uncomfortable and will require some real leadership. But it's the only way out of the situation we're in today. And if we get this right, we not only could help address a long-term public safety (and public health) crisis but actually save a lot of money in the process.

Richard Day is executive director of the public policy organization A City That Works. Jens Ludwig is the Edwin A. and Betty L. Bergman distinguished service professor at the University of Chicago and Pritzker director of the University of Chicago Crime Lab.

Why I dressed up as Gloria Steinem for a Halloween party

By Cathy Cassata
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



Gloria Steinem applauds with other supporters at the Godfrey Hotel during a reelection gathering for then-Gov. Pat Quinn on Oct. 24, 2014. PHIL VELASQUEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

I'm not sure why it took Gloria Steinem's death for me to really delve into her life. I knew she was a leader of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and a journalist, but I didn't know much more than that. I was born in 1977, about three years after the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974 made it illegal for creditors to discriminate against applicants on the basis of sex or marital status. This allowed women in the United States the right to get credit cards and loans in their own names without a male co-signer.

When I got my first credit card at 18, my mom told me she was almost 30 when she was given the same right.

Steinem's death got me thinking a lot about my mom, who died in 2007 at 61 years old. Steinem was more than 10 years older than her, so my mom definitely witnessed her activism. I'd love to ask her what she thought of Steinem. Something tells me she would say mostly good things. Although my mom gave the impression that she was reserved, maybe even conservative, she was a feminist at heart, always encouraging my independent choices — choices she didn't necessarily have.

When I started playing basketball as a kid, my mom told me she really liked playing basketball, too, but, in her time, girls were allowed to play only half court. When I got my first job as an editor at a medical association in Chicago, she told me to always have a plan to make my own money. When I decided to live on my own and then with my now husband, she supported it. When I told her I was keeping my maiden name after getting married, she said she wasn't surprised. When I told her I was expecting my first child, a few months before she died, she told me to keep writing while being a mom.

If my mom knew I was being Steinem for Halloween, I bet she'd say, "Go for it." In fact, this was the sentiment my mother-in-law expressed when I told her. "You'll make a great Gloria" were her exact words, and then she emphasized I must wear aviator glasses over my hair like Steinem's signature look.

Since Steinem's Sept. 2 death, I've subscribed to Ms. Magazine, read articles about her, listened to many of her speeches and interviews and watched the documentaries "Dear Ms.: A Revolution in Print" and "Gloria: In Her Own Words," as well as the Netflix interview, "Famous Last Words: Gloria Steinem." I also read her final memoir, "An Unexpected Life," which was published 20 days after she passed away.

So many moments in Steinem's life are worthy of remembering, but what struck me most was her breakout moment in 1963 when she went undercover as a Playboy Bunny waitress at Hugh Hefner's New York City club. Show magazine published her article "A Bunny's Tale," in which she exposed the poor working conditions and underpayment of the women working as bunnies. She also called out a mandatory gynecological exam that the waitresses had to undergo. The story caused tension between her and Hefner. However, he did send a letter to Steinem noting he eliminated the preemployment physical exams, and he eased up on some financial penalties for mistakes made by the bunnies.

Learning all of this inspired me to be Steinem for Halloween. I wanted to celebrate Steinem and introduce her to people who might not know her story. But dressing as her also gave me a way to connect with the generation of women my mother and mother-in-law grew up with.

I was happy when my husband agreed to be Hefner. We met at a Halloween party in 2000 at the former Southport Lanes in Lakeview. Since then, we embrace dressing up together. I decided to emulate the iconic 1970s look Steinem wore to a rally for a female state Senate candidate, and my husband wore recognizable Hefner robe attire. I knew people at the party we attended would know who he was, but I figured I'd have to explain who I was. Like me, many of my peers had heard of Steinem but didn't know much about her.

Bringing up Steinem led to some interesting conversations. When I ran into someone dressed as Dolly Parton at the party, I thought of a recent episode of "The Daily" that explored the different ways Parton and Steinem championed female empowerment and independence.

I left the party thinking about how important it is to recognize the women of previous generations who helped make life easier and fairer for women today. I felt a strong urge to introduce my 16-year-old daughter and 19-year-old son to these women. Delving into Steinem's life also made me realize how much we can learn from older generations if we take the time to ask about their lives while they're still here. I hope to instill that appreciation in my children.

Although my children no longer can ask my mom and dad about their lives, they still have the opportunity to learn from their living grandparents and great aunts and uncles.

Cathy Cassata is a freelance writer who specializes in stories about health, mental health, medical news and inspirational people.

OPINION

Rural and religious Americans lost faith in science. We can win them back

By Michelle A. Williams
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



A teacher uses a thermometer to test students' temperatures in Lagos, Nigeria, on Oct. 8, 2014. **SUNDAY ALAMBA/AP**

In July 2014, a man sick with Ebola flew from Liberia into Lagos, Nigeria, one of Africa's largest and busiest cities. One imported case in a place like that could have sparked an urban epidemic. Instead, Nigeria stopped the outbreak at 20 cases.

Health workers tracked down nearly 900 people who had been exposed and made some 18,500 face-to-face visits to check on them. Each of those people had to open the door, answer hard questions and accept weeks of monitoring for a disease that kills about half of the people it infects. No one could force that. It had to be earned.

Consent is essential to contact tracing. In the end, public health runs on trust.

A new global survey shows how much of that trust Americans still give, and where it is thinning. The Wellcome Global Monitor, released this month and conducted by Gallup in 140 countries, found that 52% of Americans trust science "a lot" — double the global rate.

But that trust is uneven. A STAT analysis of the survey looked at who believes science benefits most people in their country. In other wealthy nations, religious and secular people differ by an average of 5 percentage points. Here in the U.S., the gap is 24 points. Rural and urban Americans differ by 19 points. And 47% of Americans without a four-year degree agree about the benefits, compared with 71% of college graduates.

That gap is widening: Since 2018, agreement has risen 13 points among college graduates but just 3 among those without a degree.

I read these numbers as a report on people's lives. "People are feeling left behind," Brian Castrucci, who leads the de Beaumont Foundation, told STAT. Many have reason to.

As the economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton have shown, American adults without a four-year degree are dying younger, from overdoses, alcohol, suicide and heart disease. Jacob Bor and his colleagues at Boston University have put a number on the larger toll. In 2023 alone, about 700,000 Americans died who would have survived at the death rates of other wealthy nations.

When you bury neighbors young, it is hard to believe science works for people like you.

The Wellcome Global Monitor also points to a remedy. Worldwide, 26% of people trust science a lot. Among those with strong confidence in their hospitals and clinics, the figure rises to 43%. Trust in science is built in the places where people get care.

The same is true here. This spring, a poll by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the de Beaumont Foundation found that 7 in 10 Americans still trust their local health department. Fewer trust their state health department, and only half trust the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Trust lives close to home.

How do we close these gaps? The history I trace in my book points to four steps.

First, own our mistakes.

In the fog of the pandemic, those of us in public health made errors. We should say so plainly. Admitting error is how science works. It should also be how science speaks to the public. People forgive mistakes. They do not forgive being told there were none.

As Castrucci put it, "We are not going to be able to lecture people into trusting us."

Second, work with faith communities, not around them.

When David Satcher led the CDC in the 1990s, many Black Americans distrusted the medical system, with good reason. He did not try to argue that distrust away. He built partnerships with churches, schools and neighborhood groups. Through Black churches, the agency shared plain advice on smoking, diet, stress and violence. The 24-point faith gap the Wellcome Global Monitor found will not close through lectures. It will close in fellowship halls.

Third, invest in the people communities already trust.

In Chicago, violence prevention programs hire outreach workers, many of whom grew up on the same blocks they now serve. Arne Duncan, who founded one such program, says his team includes people with Ph.D.s and people with "Ph.D.s in the streets." In his words, "Those who have been closest to the problem ... are actually the best solution." Trust grows when the people delivering care share the lives of the people receiving it. That means funding local health departments, community health workers and a workforce that reflects the communities it serves, with and without college degrees.

Fourth, bring care close to home and show up before the crisis.

In parts of rural America, hospital closures can mean driving up to 100 miles in an emergency. Costa Rica went the other way. Since the 1970s, it has built rural clinics to offer the same care as city clinics. Today, every person is assigned, by where they live, to a local team that includes a doctor, a nurse and a community health worker. These teams aim to visit every household at least once a year. Nobody is lost to follow-up, because nobody was ever waiting to be found. When a health threat arrives, the messenger is already a familiar face.

None of this requires a new law. It requires new habits. Listen before advising. Explain your reasons. Publish what you heard. Come back next year, and the year after that.

The new global survey is good news with a warning inside it. Closing these gaps will take thousands of trusted people, in every community, doing the patient work of listening. That is how public health first earned the public's trust, and it is how we will reach the Americans who feel left behind.

I was born in Jamaica in 1962, small and yellow with jaundice. There were no incubators, so my caregivers carried me outside and laid me in the sun. My mother has told me how upset she was when they took me from her. Knowledge saved my life. Trust is how that knowledge reaches the next child, and the next frightened mother.

Michelle A. Williams is a professor of epidemiology and population health at Stanford University School of Medicine, former dean of the faculty at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and author of "The Cure for Everything: The Epic Struggle for Public Health and a Radical Vision for Human Thriving."

Voice of the people

Editor's note: Here is a selection of letters from our readers on their most notable Halloween memories. We will publish more of readers' letters on Friday and Saturday. Due to the significant volume we received, several letters will appear online only, also on Saturday.



Apple bobbers pose for a photo at a Halloween party at Ogden Elementary School in 1949. **CHICAGO TRIBUNE HISTORICAL PHOTO**

Excitement, plus a scary house

As a child of the 1970s, Halloween night was an evening of bliss for me and my friends. We would hit the pavement and not return home until well after dark, with our pillowcases full of treats to enjoy for weeks to come if we could control ourselves. And we did it without the watchful eyes of our parents.

It was in Oak Park, a town full of wonderful architecture, at a time before Dutch elm disease felled many enormous trees that once made the leaf piles extra playgrounds for us. The cool air, the excitement, the scary house at the end of the street. That house was enormous and sat on the corner with a huge wraparound porch and was intimidating as could be.

When I'm in that area now and see it, I think it is beautiful and stately, and I wish I lived in it. Back then, you couldn't have gotten me to climb the steps to that porch for all the candy bars in the world. Not even if they were full-sized.
— *Lynn Cimino, Addison*

Loved by our neighbors

My 8-year-old brother led me, two years his younger, down Ardmore Avenue on Halloween night in 1957 — a stone's throw from Senn High School. Back then, it wasn't uncommon for young kids to roam the streets unsupervised without fear of child abuse.

I shivered as we started out. The thin improvised costume wasn't warm enough, so Mom made me wear a jacket. I left it unzipped to show the Superman logo stenciled on my T-shirt. I held a paper shopping bag decorated with crayon drawings and decals of spiderwebs, bats, witches on broomsticks and pumpkins.

We passed a group of excited scavengers waving their bounty: popcorn balls! Details were given. We raced to the apartment building and bounded up the stairs, guided by the smell of warm buttery caramel, toasted corn and vanilla. Razorblade and tampering scares came in later years.

We knocked on the door ready to offer our bags and chanted the magic words that delivered sugary treats. Cheery smiles and apologetic shrugs delivered the bad news. There were no more popcorn balls. Among the consolation prize candies was a Payday, my favorite. We trudged down the creaking staircase onto the dimly lit street. A partial moon shined through the branches of a catalpa tree. Disappointment faded as our bags filled with candy.

Every Halloween, I still think about the smell of popcorn balls, the treat I didn't get. Not with regret, but about something homemade, on a gas stove, without artificial ingredients or sweeteners, by people who loved their neighbors and opened their door to welcome a kid from the neighborhood.
— *Jerry Levy, Deerfield*

Pizzeria's appropriate treat

I grew up on the Southwest Side of Chicago, and my fond memories of trick-or-treating included going to Little Joe's Pizzeria on Halloween. Instead of candy, the owner would give us pieces of pizza!

At that time, it was a real treat to get a piece of pizza, and of course, it was delicious.
— *Arlene C. Hogan, Naperville*

An unexpected fortune

One night in the 1950s while making our annual trick-or-treating rounds in our Bloomington, Illinois, neighborhood, my twin brother and I decided to try our luck at a local restaurant. When we entered the front door, we were told to go around to the side door, which was located at the end of a horseshoe-shaped bar. The bartender gave each of us a small bag of potato chips that had been clipped to a vertical rack.

A man sitting on a stool told us to wait where we were and passed his hat around the bar. When it came full circle, it contained over $5 in coins. I have always believed the man wasn't totally sober, but we split the money and couldn't believe our good fortune. That was a lot of money to a kid, and we went back every year hoping for the best. Although a bag of potato chips wasn't our goal, we never saw the man at the bar again. Even so, we've never forgotten that once-in-a-lifetime experience.

That's why every year on Halloween, I give every kid who knocks on my door a dollar bill with their candy. They always seem to remember where I live, just as I remember the man at the bar.
— *Mel Theobald, Chicago*

Doughnuts and kindness

Donna Lichty, the doughnut lady, lived in my neighborhood when I was a child. Every Halloween, she made her amazing, mouth-watering glazed doughnuts for generations of kids of all ages. When those kids grew up, they came back to the neighborhood to go trick-or-treating with their kids. I was one of them. My five children had the joy of experiencing Donna's warmth and the warmth of those doughnuts melting in your mouth. Donna was famous in our town of Elmhurst. She enjoyed making those doughnuts and looking at each child with her warm eyes and smile.

When my five children grew up and left the nest, I still went to her door for those doughnuts. Her warmth and smile were the same ones that greeted me when I was that excited little girl coming to her door.

We will never forget Donna or her beautiful legacy of love to children, young and old. She finally passed away in her 90s. And of all the days, she passed away on Halloween, and heaven could experience her sweetness.
— *Melody Vestuto, Elmhurst*

A screaming good time

When my nephew Robbie was about 8 years old, we attended a carnival that had a "spook house," so he wanted to go through. I went with him.

As we started through, he began screaming. A young lady behind me knew the way through, so she would tell me which way to turn him. He screamed all the way through, and when we came out, he said, "That was fun."
— *Virginia Dare McGraw, Naperville*

DIY haunted houses

When we were kids, my friends and I loved building "haunted houses." Because my family's house had a crawlspace instead of a basement, we used my grandmother's basement two doors down, complete with spiders my brother made with his Creepy Crawlers toy. When my best friend and her siblings made their own basement haunted house, it sparked a friendly, weekslong competition to see who could build the best one for the neighborhood kids.
— *Patricia Bonk, Midlothian*

Breaking with tradition

My childhood friend Thomas never met a bad idea he didn't like. If I hesitated, he'd ask, "Why not?" And somehow I'd end up going along. When we were 10, we were walking home from school on Halloween when Thomas announced we should beat the crowds by trick-or-treating that afternoon.

I said, "You can't trick-or-treat in the daytime."

He shrugged. "Why not?"

So we went home, put on our cowboy and Indian costumes, grabbed shopping bags and started knocking on doors at 4 o'clock. Most people weren't home. The ones who were looked confused but kindly dropped candy into our bags. One woman smiled and asked, "Will you be coming back tonight?"

I got home convinced we'd committed one of the most awkward social blunders in history and vowed never to trick-or-treat before dark again.

The next afternoon, I looked out the window and saw Thomas, wearing war paint and an earring and carrying a shopping bag, making a solo round of the neighborhood. Apparently, he'd decided the afternoon shift was his.
— *Scott T. Thompson, Bloomington, Indiana*

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THE AUSTRALIAN

Mince not steak as inflation drives interest rates higher

Government reluctance to cut spending undermines the economy

Jim Chalmers took an extraordinary stance on Wednesday. As new data showed inflation continuing upwards and Reserve Bank governor Michele Bullock reiterated that government spending was a contributing factor, the Treasurer declined to commit to spending less than he saves in his mid-year budget update. His lack of fiscal leadership will be music to the ears of trade unions and Labor backbenchers opposed to reducing public spending; less so to borrowers who recognise that inflation means higher interest rates. The increase in customer demand for beef mince, mentioned by Woolworths chief executive Amanda Bardwell, is a sign of household budget pressure as shoppers turn to affordable ingredients that can be stretched across several meals.

Market expectations of a Melbourne Cup Day interest rate rise of 0.25 percentage points, which would be the fifth this year, increased as the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that headline inflation in the year to September had jumped to 4.3 per cent. Trimmed mean or core inflation, the measure watched closely by the RBA board, rose to 3.6 per cent, remaining well above the central bank's 2 to 3 per cent target range. The evidence was that inflation "is far too high", Ms Bullock told a Senate estimates hearing on economics.

Despite a chorus of business leaders and economists calling for significant cuts to government spending to ease demand in the economy, Dr Chalmers was taciturn when questioned on the issue by The Australian. The mid-year update was not finished, he said, and "in the last two updates we've had net policy decisions making a positive contribution over the four years of the budget". He also spoke of "pressures coming at us". These included borrowing costs and bond yields. And he continued to blame rising inflation on global conflict and oil prices. They are part of the equation but far from the whole story.

As fuel prices rocket 23.6 per cent in a year amid the Iran war, analysis by The Australian of more than 130 ABS cost categories has exposed a homegrown cost-of-living crisis that has spread into everyday essentials, Anthony Keane reports. Utility prices, fruit, meat, games, toys, milk, groceries, property charges have all risen. Insurance and building costs are up. An average new, 30-year mortgage of $731,000 today costs borrowers $4819 per month, compared with $2354 for the average mortgage of $603,000 in April 2022.

However reluctant Dr Chalmers may be to take pressure off inflation and rates by cutting public spending – which has reached 26.9 per cent of GDP, a 40-year record apart from the pandemic – influential voices outside politics are sounding the alarm about the deteriorating debt positions of the nation and the states. In Victoria, the nation's most debt-ridden state, sporting greats have joined the business community in a revolt over poor financial management and a debt bill approaching $200bn by the end of the decade. As the state election campaign heats up, 100 prominent Victorians have signed a letter challenging Premier Ben Carroll and Opposition Leader Jess Wilson to outline how they would tackle debt repayment with a credible plan.

The letter, co-ordinated by Seek founder Paul Bassat's Amplify pro-business advocacy group, is a welcome intervention. While centred on Victoria and, by implication, the track record of Labor after 12 years in office, it sends an important message to the political class in general about the importance of economic reform and reducing public spending. Doing so is essential to combating inflation and improving living standards. The letter notes Victoria is leading the nation in insolvencies. Servicing state debt is "money that can't be spent on hospitals, schools, housing, better roads or services". Aside from controlling inflation, reversing the gloomy outlook and the squeeze on living standards depends on growing the economic pie through productivity, to foster wealth creation and sustainable wage rises.

Israel's robust democracy at play

Now the votes are counted, horsetrading to form government begins

The outcome of Israel's hotly contested election, with neither Benjamin Netanyahu nor former Israel Defence Forces chief Gadi Eisenkot having an easy path to a new ruling coalition, is no surprise. The count reflects the Jewish state's vibrant democracy, including the Arab parties winning as many as 18 seats, representing 2.1 million Arabs who make up almost a quarter of Israel's population. Weeks or months of horsetrading and possibly another election are ahead before a government with a majority in the 120-member Knesset can be formed.

Mr Eisenkot, leader of the so-called change bloc that wants Mr Netanyahu gone, was quick, after the first exit polls, to declare the result showed "an unequivocal lack of confidence in Netanyahu and the government responsible for October 7, 2023". As Mr Eisenkot was demanding that President Isaac Herzog call on him first to form a new government, a new exit poll, which previously had the change bloc in the lead, put Mr Netanyahu's ruling coalition ahead 52-49. Mr Netanyahu, whose Likud party, despite critics' expectations, looks set to emerge as the party with the largest number of seats, was no less emphatic claiming he should get first dibs at forming a new government. To date, Mr Eisenkot and other change bloc members have firmly stated that they would not form a government that relied on the support of Arab parties that have refused to condemn Hamas for the October 7 massacre of Jews. But nowhere else in the Middle East would the group have the privilege of taking part in contested democratic elections and speaking freely against the government. Governments such as our own should give Israel the credit it deserves for the strength of its democracy, especially amid the existential threat it faces in a hostile region.

Better than most after decades in politics, Mr Netanyahu knows the largest party or bloc after an election does not necessarily go on to form government. As The Jerusalem Post noted, the politicians now have to decide what they are prepared to change: their conditions, partners or promises. To that end, Mr Netanyahu and Mr Eisenkot – who see eye-to-eye on key issues such as Iran and defeating Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthi terrorists – should not rule out putting ego aside in an alliance or coalition in the national interest. Mr Netanyahu might have to drop his opposition to a much-needed investigation into the security lapse that led to the October 7 massacre. Mr Eisenkot might have to give ground on his demand for an end to ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) military service exemption. Regardless of which side emerges victorious, the fundamentals that ensure the Jewish state's security will remain intact.

Improving knowledge, civility

Proposals by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority to teach schoolchildren about the Holocaust and the evils of antisemitism should result in a better informed nation and improved civility. Reactions in Australia to the October 7, 2023, terror attack in Israel, the Bondi massacre, and first-hand accounts of abuse and violence submitted to the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion show why action is needed. In evidence, the royal commission was told of antisemitic behaviour in schools and classrooms, including revelations students invented games targeting Jewish children, such as competing over who could trip the highest number of Jewish peers.

In our wider society, the antisemitic protest at the Sydney Opera House steps on October 9, 2023, and hostile demonstrations on university campuses that left Jewish students and staff afraid are prime examples of the kinds of prejudice and ignorance that need to be countered. Alongside Jewish history, students would learn the importance of confronting harmful stereotypes and discriminatory tropes.

When education ministers meet next week to discuss the changes to history and civics teaching, material needs to be incorporated before the end of year 10. The existing curriculum teaches students about the Holocaust but it receives only a single mention in the year 10 history syllabus, Lucy Carroll has reported. A minority of students continue history study into years 11 and 12.

Good teaching materials will be vital. In June, the Australian Education Union claimed it was harder to teach about the Holocaust in the wake of Middle East conflict, and some teachers refused to teach Muslim students about the mass murder of six million Jews. For years The Australian has argued that to understand their own society and the world, students need to be taught major points and trends in Australian and world history. That should include an overview of the world wars and their causes and consequences, the Cold War, the industrial revolution and colonialism. The tyrannies of the 20th century, Nazism and communism, need to be covered well.

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare has been proactive, appointing former University of NSW chancellor David Gonski to head an antisemitism education taskforce that has approved ACARA's recommendations. It is relevant to today's students that under the ACARA proposal, high school civics would include, for the first time, the role of artificial intelligence and media. Knowledge-based curriculums are our best defence against ignorance and social disorder.

LETTERS

Wilson's fight for change faces the long shadow of Labor

Victorian Liberal leader Jess Wilson is absolutely correct in calling for changes in the way governments behave ("Wilson gives voters path to change, but will they take it?", 28/10).

We need honesty, transparency and straightforward explanations as to why promises must be broken, if they must be. It is no wonder the temperature has risen when we have lies, broken promises, and programs and projects that are absolutely opaque. We are not mushrooms.
Bob Reid, Fig Tree Pocket, Qld

It was good to read Jess Wilson's opinion about honesty ("I will restore trust and honesty after 12 years of Labor", 27/10).

The Victorian Opposition Leader says: "It starts with telling the truth." Yet Daniel Andrews made similar sorts of statements as opposition leader. And Wilson has not announced her position on the privatisation of Melbourne Water, despite criticising Ben Carroll for secrecy.

Neither party has successfully taken the privatisation of Melbourne Water to any election and both are noncommittal on any monetising of our water authorities. Neither side has a mandate to do something widely opposed by the community.

Wilson needs to walk the walk and declare her intentions. I hope she sees sense and rules it out, publicly, before the election, to fulfil her commitment to honesty.
Andrew Kelly, Merricks Beach, Vic

It will not just be a positive for all Victorians when Jess Wilson becomes their premier.

Her maturity was very clearly stated by her comment, "Restoring confidence in our democracy demands more than changing how politicians speak. It requires changing how governments behave." It is more important that our ministers, from the Prime Minister down, set the required example. If they don't set the standards, how will their spokespeople and junior staff know what is expected of them?
John Houghton, The Gap, Qld

Don't be too quick to write Labor off in the Victorian state election.

In 2022, despite the record-breaking Covid lockdowns, the brutal treatment of peaceful protesters, the oppressive mandates, the rubber bullets and the "rings of steel", Victorian voters stood rock-solid with premier Dan Andrews. Incredibly, they returned his government with an increased majority – and they are perfectly capable of repeating the dose in November. The sobering truth is that the Victorian electorate has long been in the grip of something very like Stockholm syndrome.
Terry Birchley, Bundaberg, Qld

A failed one-party state is currently beset by endemic union-based corruption and out-of-control crime; is crippled by debt; tops the nation in homelessness; has the worst roads in the country; has the highest property taxes; suffers a ruinous energy crisis despite abundant natural resources; has a bloated public service; has health services that are crumbling; has a collapsing standard of education; is experiencing a police recruiting crisis at a time of violent, out-of-control street demonstrations; wastes billions on public infrastructure boondoggles that include trains to nowhere. People were fleeing that state in large numbers during election time. I am talking about California after 15 years of autocratic Democrat Party rule.

But this is the decision Victorian voters face when they shortly go to the polls after 12 years of ALP government.

Looking at these bare facts, one thing seems clear: change doesn't come simply by re-electing the same party with a shiny new face.

If California tells us anything, more of the same is bound to make a bad situation only worse.
Joe Dowse, Mosman, NSW

From the role of the Chinese-Australian community in the 2022 defeat of the Morrison government, to Labor's courting of the Muslim vote, to the rapidly expanding Indian community – now an electoral force to be wooed and won – the effect of multiculturalism can be seen during an election ("$1m temple war for Indian votes", 28/10).

No doubt there are Australians who view such vote-soliciting as disturbing. And even more disturbing seems the power of that sacred dogma, diversity, in deciding Australia's elections.

But in a democracy where multiculturalism rules, perhaps that's how it works.
Deborah Morrison, Malvern East, Vic

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EU trade deal will be terrible for us – and not at all free

As Janet Albrechtsen correctly points out, the free trade deal is a Trojan Horse of the worst kind ("Sign up for free trade, lose our sovereignty", 28/10). No party that cares for our sovereignty or our rights as a free country to make our own decisions should sign this wretched document.

What is going on? Is the Labor Party so blind to the implications of this deal that it would agree to anything, binding us to the FTA's nefarious implications, or is this a deliberate act? Is Labor keen on binding Australia to foreign interference in our democracy, for that is what is implied and legislated, by signing us to conform with its ideals? This "treaty" signs away our ability as an independent nation, to be under the purview and whims of an unelected foreign body such as the EU over which we have no control.
Julie Tadman, Upper Caboolture, Qld

Janet Albrechtsen rightly highlights the backloading of climate agendas, social justice imposts and international labour standards into the latest not-so-free trade deal with the EU.

It is quite likely that European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen's visit to Australia set the train in motion to entice our enthusiastic Labor government. By agreeing to this deal, our government is prioritising foreign nations' interests at the expense of our own.
Lynda Morrison, Bicton, WA

Australia needs the EU trade agreement even less than higher energy prices, which the agreement will achieve. Brussels, via a mass migration policy, has inflicted riots in Europe, which are attributed by various governments to youth unemployment, a trend that might be the future scenario projected for Australia.
Enrico Mocellin, Highton, Vic

Embarrassment risk

When Australians witnessed our Prime Minister displaying a level of youthful exuberance seemingly at odds with the dignity of his office during his interview with Bush Deep podcaster Nikki Osborne, the ensuing embarrassment sent his minders scrambling into damage control.

No doubt, the Prime Minister and his supporters hoped this unedifying spectacle would quickly fade from public memory. However, when The Australian sought details surrounding the interview, the Prime Minister's office raised the issue of public safety to block access to the information ("Safety risk: PM's office bans Bush Deep FOI", 28/10).

The convenient use of public safety raises serious questions about transparency and accountability. It is difficult to escape the suspicion that this is less about protecting the public and more about shielding the Prime Minister from further embarrassment over an interview that should never have happened.
Tom Moylan, Dudley Park, WA

Woke dream home

Oh, dear me, Jacinda Ardern has found her dream home, the University of Sydney.

Could there be a better place for the woke queen to work? And the description of her duties – looking after "empathetic leadership", "social cohesion", "values-based leadership" and "equity, inclusion and wellbeing" – perfectly describes the nonsense that is taught at the University of Sydney. Just keep her away from the financials of the place. Ask any New Zealander.
Victoria Webster, Norwood, SA

The decision by the University of Sydney to appoint Jacinda Ardern as professor of practice in its school of public health to focus on "empathetic leadership" is emblematic of all that is wrong in Australia's tertiary system.

Rather than focusing on subjects that will enrich the mind and, as a consequence, enhance the national interest (and, god forbid, our economic prospects), the increasingly bloated managerial class of the tertiary sector promotes this sort of dross.

It is ironic that an institution that so perniciously promotes groupthink trumpets a course that promotes "social cohesion and civic trust".

Presumably that commitment to cohesion and trust does not include members of its Jewish community?
Nick Slack, Hunters Hill, NSW



The Australian's front page, Wednesday, October 28

Rs of parenting

I read your report with increasing despair ("Right and wrong: new Rs at school", 28/10).

Why despair? Because we keep absolving the real culprits – the parents. Why is every responsibility now put on to teachers, social workers, councillors, even the police? What's the phrase? "Give me a child until he is seven and I will show you the man."

As parents, we taught our daughter what was right and wrong, and many other Rs: respect (for others' opinions); resolve (to do well at school); resilience (to handle adversity); and reflection (what have you learnt from past mistakes).

It is the responsibility of parents to teach children the basic values about life and living before they head out into the world.
John Clark, Moss Vale, NSW

LAST POST

It's not good when a golfer lands in a sand bunker, but to land in the sewerage is really bad ("Talking sewage: it's black and white, PM misled parliament. Consequences? Zero", 28/10).
Kingsley Sullivan, Mt Hawthorn, WA

If the Prime Minister gave an incorrect answer to his score when playing golf at Marrickville Golf Club he would be disqualified. Apparently the same rules don't apply during question time.
Geoff Davey, St Lucia, Qld

Albo is now saying the NSW government took over the sewerage works at the Marrickville Golf Club. What, then, has happened to the grant funding? Was it returned to the commonwealth?
Trevor Hindle, Wodonga, Vic

At least now Anthony Albanese is guaranteed to get all the members' votes.
A. East, Moss Vale, NSW

It seems Anthony Albanese believes you can make something true just by saying it. As Prime Minister, he has the ideal stage for this. The rest of us, who apparently don't get it, are the problem.
Peter Tredenick, Laidley, Qld

Now we are expected to believe that Albo's Bush Deep podcast poses a safety risk ("Safety risk: PM's office bans Bush Deep FOI", 28/10). Surely this applies only if jokes in poor taste are deemed to be fatal.
Peter McKenzie, Gracemere, Qld

I wonder whether the one-time politician and now professor of practice at the University of Sydney might provide special lectures for current political leaders on how to practise what they profess.
David Morrison, Springwood, NSW

So let me get this right. We can't give temporary or tourist visas to young backpackers to work in regional Australia but we can spend millions of dollars keeping convicted rapists, murderers and drug dealers from being sent back to their own countries because it may damage their mental health ("Serial rapist case undermines Burke", 28/10). Honestly, you couldn't make this stuff up.
Stuart Dell, Buderim, Qld

Backpackers are not immigrants and should not be counted as such. They are mainly young tourists who work in rural and tourist industries to extend their visas to be able to visit more parts of Australia. They are an asset to our economy, not a drain ("Albanese flags UK visa changes to push backpackers into regions", 28/10).
John Kreicbergs, Middle Ridge, Qld

Inflation too high? Labor will blame the Iran war, Scott Morrison, the bond market and big business. All it needs is a mirror to see the cause.
Ian Morison, Forrest, ACT

BOOKSHELF | RICHARD MORRISON

Down with colonialist dead white male geniuses!

The final sentence of Alexandra Wilson's exasperated critique of the arts scene in 2020s Britain is "Everything isn't political" – and that's the nub of her whole book.

She was a professor of music at Oxford Brookes University, then lost her job – indeed her entire department – in 2024 when her employer decided that offering tuition in fogeyish old subjects such as classical music was not worth their while. (She subsequently found a more congenial berth at the other university in Oxford.)

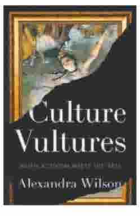
So she has an axe to grind. But it's an axe worth grinding. Her contention is that, at least in Britain and the US, the "serious" arts have been hijacked and effectively warped by activists determined to politicise them.

Wilson finds evidence everywhere. Arts institutions have been captured by bureaucrats far more interested in achieving social engineering goals than spreading enjoyment and enlightenment.

The art itself, she says, "becomes the least important thing anyone is talking about". People working in the arts – and, worse still, punters coming to see shows – are made to feel guilty and apologetic for loving forms of culture deemed to be tainted by colonialism, male supremacy, capitalism or social elitism. Famous museums such as Tate Britain have rewritten wall labels to draw attention not to the beauty or ingenuity of exhibits but to their supposed links to the slave trade or other historical evils.

Some activist curators (she singles out the forever disgruntled Dan Hicks at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford) seem repulsed by the institutions for which they work. And similar to that is the trend for opera and theatre directors to, as she puts it, "impose contemporary agendas" on stage works from eras with totally different outlooks on life. So we end up looking at productions that mirror our own society rather than casting light on how earlier generations thought.

Then there's what she calls "widespread hand-wringing about the canon": a growing contempt in cultural circles, fuelled by the rise of identity politics, for the "dead white males" who dominate what's programmed by orchestras, theatres and galleries when (the radicals argue) those organisations should be straining every corporate sinew to redress gender and racial imbalances. Wilson cites campaigns by postmodernism-influenced musicologists to deny that figures such as Bach, Beethoven and Mozart were geniuses at all. The concept of Western civilisation is under assault, she says.



Culture Vultures: When Activism Meets the Arts
By Alexandra Wilson
Polity Books, 256pp, $32.99

Wilson also picks up on research published last year by the campaigning group Freedom in the Arts suggesting "a pervasive culture of ideological conformity" is preventing many arts professionals from expressing opinions openly and honestly for fear of being bullied, harassed, ostracised or even sacked. She looks at how buzzwords such as access, relevance and the mantra of equality, diversity and inclusion have been used by arts funders to push artistic excellence almost out of the picture.

And she is scathing about what is happening in her own field: university arts and humanities courses (those that still exist).

"Topics such as race, gender, postcolonialism, sexuality, disability or environmental studies are near ubiquitous, whether the focus of study is literature, music, the history of art or simply history," she writes. "All disciplines are moving steadily towards becoming, effectively, sociology."

A lot of this is irrefutable. In fact, Wilson skilfully pulls together what the more independent-thinking cultural commentators have been writing for years. Only in three respects do I take issue with her well-sustained rant. First, she exaggerates. Or rather, she concentrates almost exclusively on Britain's subsidised arts scene – which is indeed crawling with malignant politicisation – and ignores the much bigger commercial arts scene (the West End theatres, for instance) where, for compelling economic reasons, putting bums on seats is far more important than pushing woke agendas.

Second, she's sometimes a bit out of date. It's inevitable, perhaps, that if you are presenting a snapshot of modern life some events will happen after you press the camera's button but before you publish the picture. Nevertheless, it's unfortunate that she spends a lot of time castigating Arts Council England for its Let's Create 10-year plan when the government now has ordered the plan to be scrapped. Which suggests that the tide is turning against the dour arts bureaucrats who appear to hate art.

And third? Wilson is caustically critical of arts leaders and university managers. But when it comes to apportioning blame for the politicisation of the arts, there's one bunch she hardly mentions: politicians.
THE TIMES

CULTURE
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PETA CREDLIN

PM defended $6m golf grant – then his story fell apart



It's not the crime that gets you, it's the cover-up.

That's the problem for the Prime Minister over the continuing scandal of his $6m grant to the Marrickville Golf Club.

Last month, when Anthony Albanese's 14-year undeclared honorary membership of the club was exposed, he scrambled to explain why a simple clubhouse upgrade could warrant a multimillion-dollar spend. Questions were also asked about his personal links to the club, 200m from his own Marrickville property, and the probity around a closed grants process that was invitation-only. At the time, analysis by the Centre for Public Integrity found that 73 per cent of funding was allocated to Labor-held or key marginal seats.

And when pushed in the parliament, Albanese made two admissions that have come back to haunt him. First, that he was not the decision-maker for this $560m local and community grants program. This was the Minister for Infrastructure, Catherine King, he said.

And second, that the grant to Marrickville Golf Club was costly because it included long-overdue sewerage works to prevent run-off from the club's septic system into the nearby Cooks River, telling the House of Representatives this on September 9: "It has existed for a long time, almost 100 years, and they have a septic tank. Because it is on the floodplain, when it floods in Marrickville raw sewage flows into the Cooks River – that is what the funding is for."

Only the problem for Albanese is that the first time he connected the grant to sewerage works was last month in the parliament. At no earlier time, from the first instance when he announced the $6m back on April 27, 2025, until then did the word sewerage ever appear in any Albanese media release, transcript, podcast, newsletter, website or interview. Nowhere.

Nor was it ever on the table with the Marrickville Golf Club or the Inner West Council, led by former Albanese staffer, now mayor, Darcy Byrne, who has governance carriage of the grant.

So, clearly it's a cut-and-dried case of a prime minister misleading the house.

Or is it?

This week, again under pressure in the parliament, Albanese has tried to retrofit his claim of sewerage works to say he wasn't aware that the scope of the grant had changed from what he told the house in September.

Only that doesn't stack up either.

Even before the NSW government announcement in September 2025 that it would undertake necessary sewerage and septic tank upgrades for the Marrickville Golf Club and surrounding Cooks River parkland at a cost of $270,000, neither Albanese, nor the club or the council had ever included sewerage works in the upgrade plans. Meaning that Albanese can't claim the plans have changed, that the scope of works had been varied, when sewerage works were never involved in the first place.

A review of the Inner West Council minutes from 2025 and 2026 confirm this also. So too, multiple social media posts involving Byrne and golf club president Andrew Tighe. A lot of crowing about their big $6m win from "the club's No.1 patron, Anthony Albanese" but not a word about sewerage.

Until, that is, Albanese clutched at it under pressure in the house last month. And those sewerage claims were then backed in by minister King in a News24 interview on Sunday where she said: "It is my understanding very clearly that it is both for sewerage works and some of the facilities development."

> King again contradicted her own officials, claiming that the sewerage works were announced by the Prime Minister in April last year. But there is no mention of it in his golf club media release

Only, again this is not the truth.

Three days earlier, on Thursday, October 22, a senior official in her own department gave evidence to a Senate inquiry probing the integrity of the whole grants program. Jacinta McDonald, assistant secretary in the Department of Infrastructure, told the hearing "that sewerage works were not included in the scope of works for the Marrickville Golf Club project".

Poor King, what's a minister to do? Tell the truth and throw her boss under the bus, or fudge it and hope no one follows up? Unfortunately for King, Senate estimates was the next day and her lie was exposed when assistant secretary McDonald was back under oath and once more confirmed that sewerage works were never included in the golf club project.

But it gets worse for the minister. McDonald went on to admit under questioning that the department had provided its minister with an approvals brief to sign-off the $6m Marrickville grant, yet sewerage works were not in it. You've got to wonder what other documents she signs, spending millions, that seemingly she doesn't comprehend. Or how hard she's willing to lie to protect the Prime Minister.

Because in question time on Wednesday, King again contradicted her own officials, claiming that the sewerage works were announced by the Prime Minister in April last year. But there is no mention of it in his golf club media release or any other communications issued by him at that time. Or since. Until he was in trouble in the parliament last month and needed a funding fig leaf, that is.

But it doesn't end there.

Back to Albanese's assertion last month that King was the decision-maker. Again, serious questions arise here with another answer from the minister on Sunday. When asked who was involved in the process of awarding these grants, King said Labor head office was involved in deciding where the money went.

"Yeah, absolutely, like, yeah, absolutely, because it's an election commitment process, it's a political process, so. Of course, you know that is done through the party machinery, not through government machinery," she said.

So, understand this. What King confirms in that exchange is that unelected Labor Party operatives made the call regarding the allocation of half a billion in taxpayer funding, with the department just brought in to get the payments out the door. And that's all they did. Remember, this was an invitation-only grants program. It is not as if they even had to assess grant applications or measure them against a transparent set of guidelines. Labor HQ had long decided who would get what, with Labor MPs rushing out press releases in the last days of the election campaign, and the department just window-dressing a process that highly respected constitutional expert Anne Twomey has already labelled "grey corruption".

You can see now why this whole sordid mess needs to be urgently referred to the National Anti-Corruption Commission, don't you? After all, Albanese can hardly object, having declared in the parliament in October 2020: "Is the reason why the Morrison government hasn't introduced legislation for a national integrity commission because of the corrupt sports rort scheme ...?" And he has the hide to circulate a dirt sheet calling into question the integrity of Helen Haines?

Talk about pot calling kettle black.

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DAILY CARTOON | JOHN SPOONER



JACK THE INSIDER

Polite politics a shield for dodging scrutiny



We have all been told to take up a kind of verbal callisthenics. Raise the tone, lower the temperature, lift the standards. It's exhausting just thinking about it.

Clearly, there are real problems associated with rising threats to public officials, especially MPs and political candidates. Threats and ideations of violence directed at public figures and often their families are unacceptable. Our politicians will become less accessible and, ultimately, talented people suited to representative politics will weigh up the risks and choose a less volatile existence.

But we need to be careful in determining the relevant factors associated with the rise in political violence.

We need to identify some red herrings first lest we fall into satire and become an image of the Pythonian parody sketch of an Agatha Christie murder mystery where Michael Palin offers a confession to the foul deed but claims that "society is to blame". John Cleese in full bobby kit then runs around and arrests everyone else.

There was a scattergun of rampant street-corner sociology last week, with fingers pointed at social media algorithms and online video games. Even cartooning fell into the vague list of suspects.

Pauline Hanson's Please Explain cartoons, available on a YouTube channel and on the One Nation website, became a specific target. Tasteful these toons most definitely are not. And they are about as funny as sudden cardiac death. It is a stretch, however, to imply that an animated series of caricatures is inspiring violence.

Didn't we go through the cartoon-violence arguments in the 1960s, only for the moral panic to subside when it transpired that a generation of kids did not go on the attack with bowling bowls or drop grand pianos on each other's heads?

But the silliest of all of the claims is that our politicians should turn the heat down on each other, as if they might rise from their seats spontaneously and embrace across the divide to show a grateful nation leadership by example.

The parliament is now a gentler place than it has ever been. Long gone are the days of Keating and Costello sprays.

Bill Hayden once mused that Ian Sinclair was "stealing the pennies from a dead man's eyes" in relation to a probate matter vexing the then deputy leader of the National Party.

In 2024 Barnaby Joyce called the Prime Minister "a sook" and was criticised for it.

"They are weak, they are led by a weak man," Joyce told Andrew Bolt on Sky News (now News24). "As a Prime Minister, he's weak. He is also a sook, by the way, a big sook."

Two weeks later Joyce made the same taunt in question time and was told to withdraw the remark.

Thin-skinned and vindictive are, I'd suggest, more apt descriptors of the Prime Minister, and these terms are almost certainly within the acceptable bounds of parliamentary language, but I say that more in despair than anger over the quality of contemporary political repartee.

If the call for a kinder polity is a backhanded plea for a battling government to avoid scrutiny, it needs to be rejected utterly. Rather than a lowering of timbre and excising selected words from vocabularies, the rhetoric should be ratcheted up.

One can only hope that a richer thesaurus of invective is in use than the one available to One Nation's deputy leader.

Any MHR worth her or his salt should be keen to stand in front of a bank of mics and the odd Betacam to highlight Anthony Albanese's deliberate disingenuousness over his office's dirt file on Helen Haines. One man's dirt file is another's briefing note, the Prime Minister sought to explain.

Albanese's limp defence of merely pointing out what great work Haines did for her own electorate was never going to pass muster. What was circulated from the Prime Minister's office is called a dirt file only because it

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sounds a little more dignified than a shit sheet, but a shit sheet it most certainly was.

Haines had been critical of the Marrickville Millions – the $6m grant given to the Marrickville Golf Club, of which some cash had been set aside, the Prime Minister said, hand on heart, to fix a bit of dodgy plumbing. The shitter was backed up. Sewage seeping into the Cooks River. Nasty business.

Fortunately, the threat of a cholera outbreak in Greater Marrickville was thwarted by the NSW government, which had fixed the leak some months earlier and without the assistance of a grant.

Meanwhile we have learned that Marrickville's weekend warriors reaching for the No.1 whacking stick were already chatting excitedly about the major reno and how their swanky new clubhouse might look.

That's the problem with sewerage. It creates sewage. Don't open up the pit and for god's sake keep it away from fans. Oops. Too late.

We can safely call the invitation-only $560m Major and Local Community Infrastructure Program a good, old-fashioned pork-barrelling exercise. Fair play and play on. Unless you get caught, that is.

There must be robust scrutiny with lots of awkward questions put to the Prime Minister with words his sensitive epidermis may find objectionable.

One suspects ripping the scab off the processes involved in the allocation of more than half a billion dollars of taxpayers' hard-earned will be a painful exercise for Albanese and his government with a daily rollout of disgraces big and small on the cards across the ensuing weeks.

The shit's so thick you could stir it with a stick, but only metaphorically speaking.

Back to raw sewage in sheet form. Shit sheets get dropped into journos' inboxes anonymously all the time. It happens. It's awful but the practice will never stop. The good news is that none of the recipients of this mean-spirited garbage pursued the dubious insinuations.

The problem remains that the Prime Minister's office would be engaged in this sort of cheap hustle. Good prime ministers are not only above this stuff but are seen to be above this stuff.

See how easily the words thin-skinned and vindictive come to mind now?

JAMIE NJOKU-GOODWIN

How Canberra can call Big Tech's copyright bluff

"Give us your content or we will pull our investment." That's the pitch that artificial intelligence companies have been making to policymakers all over the world. It's the implicit threat they made to us in Britain over the past few years, and it's the one they are now directing to you in Australia. In essence, it's "heads I win, tails you lose".

Most of us recognise that if we want to use or enjoy a book, a newspaper or some music then we need to pay for it. But despite billion-dollar and potentially trillion-dollar valuations, AI companies don't think the same principle should apply to them. They want to train their models on the work of writers, artists and musicians without permission and without paying a penny for it – and have built an aggressive lobbying machine to make governments around the world feel they'll miss out on the AI boom if they refuse.

In recent years I've had a front-row seat to this playbook being deployed in Britain, having worked as chief executive of the trade body UK Music and served as a senior adviser to the former British prime minister Rishi Sunak in Downing Street. And I'm warning you, Australia: you're up next. Here's what happens: first, policymakers are told that without a blanket copyright exception that allows AI companies to freely exploit creative works, investment will go elsewhere.

When these threats don't work, they go to plan B and ask for an "opt-out" – a system where they can use people's work by default, and the onus is on creators to object (despite there being no way for them to know their work has been used and by whom). It is only when policymakers hold the line and refuse to capitulate that AI companies start to do what they should have done in the first place: pay for the content they want.

This is how it played out in Britain. Across the past five years, successive Conservative and then Labour governments flirted with the idea of watering down copyright rules but then pulled back from the brink before it was too late. The result? Since the British government confirmed that AI companies require a licence to train on copyrighted work, the licensing market has gained strength.

Hundreds of publishers recently agreed a collective licence that permits AI companies to train on their content, but with payment going to the people who actually did the work. And far from pulling investment, OpenAI and Anthropic have both announced major expansions of their London operations this year. The lesson should be clear: AI investment doesn't depend on giving away creators' rights – and when companies tell Australian policymakers otherwise, ministers should treat that claim with the scepticism it deserves.

Australia has seen this movie before. In 2021, Google threatened to pull its search engine from Australia after ministers introduced proposals requiring the tech giant to share royalties with news publishers. In the face of scare stories and implied threats, ministers held their nerve. The fact I was able to Google "When did England last win the Ashes in Australia?" from the SCG last January (and get a depressing answer) shows that calling Big Tech's bluff was the right call.

Now AI companies are deploying the same threats – and I hope your ministers show the same backbone once again.

There's a profoundly moral case for protecting and enforcing creators' rights. If you have created something, you should be able to control how it is used and be protected against its exploitation by others. But there's a hard-nosed practical reality, too: a strong copyright and intellectual property framework ensures creatives get paid, supports jobs and drives economic growth.

Eroding copyright, meanwhile, simply strips assets away from a nation's creators and gives international technology companies something for free that they would otherwise pay for.

To be clear, I'm an AI optimist and believe that we are going to see some remarkable advances in the years to come – but none of them depend on watering down copyright laws. The idea that the only thing standing between a large language model and a cure for cancer is unfettered access to the back catalogues of the Beatles and Kylie Minogue is frankly ridiculous. Neither does national security require it – and the same companies that warn governments about foreign rivals stealing their intellectual property can hardly argue the national interest means taking creators' work for free.

> The idea that the only thing standing between a large language model and a cure for cancer is unfettered access to the back catalogues of the Beatles and Kylie Minogue is frankly ridiculous ... The same companies that warn governments about foreign rivals stealing their intellectual property can hardly argue the national interest means taking creators' work for free

Indeed, the companies that have the most to gain from a free pass on copyright are foreign-owned commercial companies such as Suno. In 2022, I warned that the global music industry faced a risk of "music laundering", where AI companies would take other people's work without permission, train a model on it, then make money off what came out on the other side. Four years on, that prediction has come to pass. According to music streaming app Deezer, AI tracks make up more than half of new uploads to streaming platforms and up to 85 per cent of fully AI-generated streams are fraudulent. Far from stopping content laundering, weakening copyright laws would simply encourage it.

I'm relaxed about AI companies making money from new innovations; they just need to pay the people whose work got them there.

Governments should be protecting their citizens from having their work expropriated by international tech companies, not making it easier. There is also a fundamental point of fairness at stake here. AI companies rightly invest billions in the other inputs their products depend on: data centres, computing power and highly skilled employees. Why should the books, music and journalism that power their models be the only input that is supplied for nothing?

As a Brit, the last thing I want to do is tell Australia how to make its laws. But in recent years I've fallen in love with Australia (and an Australian) – and whether it's writers such as Trent Dalton and Charmian Clift, or musicians from Nick Cave to Thelma Plum, I'm a huge admirer of your creative spirit. I want to be able to give Australia the advice I wish I had when I was campaigning for creators' rights in the UK, when every AI company under the sun was trying to convince us to give away something for nothing.

As in Britain, Australia's creative sector is one of your key national assets. You have an extraordinary cultural output and you are right to be fiercely proud of it. Don't let international tech companies come and asset-strip it without a fight.

What trust makes possible



RUMAITHA AL BUSAIDI

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The writer is environmental strategist and advocate for sustainable development

I HAD goosebumps before I reached the end of the walkway. For Omani Youth Day, the Youth Centre had turned the space into a passage through a year's worth of work, installations and projects appearing around every turn, and someone had thought carefully about how each one would meet a visitor. I kept slowing down to look again. Seeing that work celebrated at the highest levels of government gave the evening a weight the young people had built for themselves.

The theme for the year was Azm, resolve, and the whole of it had been assembled in under 7 days. There is an arithmetic we apply to work of that size, built from years of watching how long such things take, and it landed here on a team with no part in the projects it came from. Behind the week sits an operation running since 2022, through thousands of contracts with small and medium enterprises and hundreds of training programmes, almost none of it landing on a night anyone attends. The ability was already in the building; the week brought it somewhere people were looking. We left talking about what other government projects might learn from it.

Attending as a member of that board for the first time brought pride, and responsibility settled in behind it. Much of my working life has gone into arguing that young people ought to have a seat at decision-making tables, and holding one of those seats feels nothing like arguing for it. For years the argument travelled outward from wherever I was sitting. Some of it now arrives at me.

Two weeks earlier, at the inaugural Annual Meeting of Global Future Leaders, I heard the Forum present its latest youth survey. Some 9 in 10 young people report that climate change already affects their daily lives, and artificial intelligence is unsettling what they expect work to ask of them. Even so, 2 in 3 expect better economic prospects than their parents. Through my work on the Forum's Global Shapers board, I have met many of them, clear about the uncertainty ahead and making plans anyway.

An expectation held on those terms puts a question to the people positioned to answer it. Opportunity has an address. A young Omani in Musandam starts with fewer employers within reach and a narrower set of people who can open a door, and the soft openings announced that evening, in her governorate and in Dhofar, begin to close the distance.

Much of my working life has gone into arguing that young people ought to have a seat at decision-making tables, and holding one of those seats feels nothing like arguing for it.

The Centre entered its own chapter this year, with financial and administrative independence and a mandate to seek young people's views when policies concerning them are shaped. A signed agreement arrives with a photograph and a date. A plan altered because of something a 24-year-old said in a meeting earns neither, so nobody will notice the first time the mandate is honoured, or the first time it is set aside.

The young Omanis behind that evening have shown what trust produces when it is handed over without conditions. The work that follows sits in budgets and in meetings where carrying on as planned is the easiest thing available, none of it photographed, and I will be in some of them. The pause after a young person says the inconvenient thing lasts a few seconds, and whoever fills it decides what the mandate was worth. I have spent years on the speaking side of that pause. I am about to learn what I do on the other one.

OMAN'S PLEDGE TO PEACE, TOLERANCE SETS IT APART



DR MUSALLAM AL MA'ANI

The writer is Dean of Al Zahra College for Women

Ever since the early 1990s, the Middle East has rarely known a moment of true calm. Between sudden political shifts, internal turmoil, and ongoing struggles for regional dominance, the landscape has remained consistently volatile. Oman, however, chose a very deliberate path. By staying out of regional strife, Oman maintained itself as an oasis of peace and stability in the region.

Maintaining security and order in a region where violence can erupt at any moment is an extraordinary accomplishment. Throughout its modern history, the Sultanate of Oman has pursued peace as a way of life, conduct, and thought.

Acts of violence — or even vehement expressions of hatred — run directly counter to Oman's foreign policy principles, as articulated by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik since his accession to the throne, as well as Oman's inherited religious practices and social customs.

Omanis are staunch advocates of peace who naturally favour harmony over conflict. Omanis extend deep sympathy, compassion, and sensitivity toward anyone affected by such violence, frequently calling for mutual respect and tolerance across all faiths.Demonstrating this moderate spirit, citizens and residents of Oman live side by side in the same neighbourhoods, share meals, and work in Oman in complete safety, regardless of their faith or background. By nature, Omanis avoid unnecessary disputes and verbal controversy. Their honesty, sincerity, and integrity are beyond question. Anyone visiting an Omani city or village immediately feels the warmth and hospitality of its people, along with the deep security provided by both law and custom.

As a dedicated peacemaker, Oman adheres strictly to a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations and opposes the use of force to resolve disputes. The world recognises Oman as a trusted, reliable mediator — always working with quiet conviction to reconcile opposing parties and end hostilities. Even when holding a differing opinion, Oman harbours no hatred or ill will. Instead, it exercises thoughtful restraint, seizing the right moments to restore harmony, honesty, and friendship.

These core tenets, fundamental principles, and enduring beliefs define Oman and guide the Omani spirit.

Israeli Arabs hold key as Bibi falls short of majority

RESULTS FROM Israel's hard-fought election pointed on Wednesday to no clear winner, as a leader of the Arab minority appealed to a hesitant opposition to join forces to end the divisive reign of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

With more than three quarters of the vote counted, Netanyahu's right-wing bloc was slightly ahead but still short of a majority in Tuesday's election, the first since the October 7, 2023 attack, which has led Israel to wage war in Gaza and across the region. Both Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, who is allied with far-right and ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties, and Gadi Eisenkot, a former military chief leading a broad opposition bloc, vowed that they would seek to form the next government.

But neither looks set to reach the 61-seat threshold for a majority. With 77 per cent of ballots counted, Netanyahu's bloc had 54 of the 120 seats in parliament and Eisenkot's opposition had 49.

The final results could still change, but one place of clear gains was among Israeli Arab lists, which were set to jump to 17 seats.

Voters from the community, descendants of Palestinians who stayed after Israel's creation and who make up around 20 per cent of the population, have been enraged by the Netanyahu government's ultra-nationalist Jewish vision for the country and the Palestinian territories.Yousef Jabareen, head of the leftist Arab-majority Joint List, said the Israeli public had voted for new leadership, and "anyone who wants to offer a substantive and genuine alternative to Netanyahu's blood-soaked government will have to talk to us".

"It's either the continuation of racism, the continuation of exclusion and the continuation of supremacy, or a genuine Jewish-Arab partnership," he said.



STUART WHITE

The writer is a news editor for AFP, focusing on the Middle East

A stalemate could, in the immediate term, benefit Netanyahu, who would remain caretaker prime minister until a new government is formed.

Eisenkot has resisted allying with Arab parties. Netanyahu during the campaign relentlessly attacked the opposition by saying it would put Arabs in power, running on the slogan: "Either the Right or Palestine."

Yair Golan, the head of Israel's main left-wing party and a member of Eisenkot's camp, became the first member of the opposition camp to call for an alliance with Arab parties.

But Eisenkot's camp also includes right-wingers who share many of Netanyahu's hawkish views and have adamantly rejected working with Arab lawmakers.

Arab lawmakers could also give Eisenkot support in parliamentary votes on an ad hoc basis, enabling him to maintain a minority government without joining a coalition, although few observers believe such an arrangement would survive for long.

A lack of a clear majority for either camp could mean weeks spent trying to cobble together coalitions, with possible new elections on the horizon if negotiations fail.

"Maybe everybody lost in these elections but the Arab parties. And for the Arab parties, it's unclear that they can make use of their huge success," Hebrew University of Jerusalem political scientist Gideon Rahat said.

A stalemate could, in the immediate term, benefit Netanyahu, who would remain caretaker prime minister until a new government is formed.

Both Netanyahu and Eisenkot appeared to indicate another factor was on the horizon — an Israeli attack alongside the United States on Iran.

Netanyahu ordered bombing campaigns against Iran both last year and earlier this year, reluctantly stopping only after President Donald Trump reached a now-moribund ceasefire.

In the days leading up to the election, Netanyahu repeatedly called for the overthrow of Iran's government. News reports, which Netanyahu denied, said military top brass pushed back on his plans for pre-election action.

Trump has said that the United States is no longer negotiating with Iran but will not attack until after next Tuesday's US midterm elections, in which his Republican Party is forecast to lose ground.

Speaking to supporters at a rally, Netanyahu said that Israel had a "unique opportunity" with Trump to "forever eliminate the existential threat of Iran".

Eisenkot, in his own post-election appearance, warned Israel's security chiefs that they must serve the national interests and not the political needs of Netanyahu, who is a caretaker prime minister "without a mandate".

All eyes will be on President Isaac Herzog, who usually keeps a low-key ceremonial role but must decide whom to task with the first chance to form a government.

Herzog has reportedly supported a unity government, which could take on more urgency if Netanyahu attacks Iran, although Eisenkot has publicly ruled out serving with him.

Netanyahu, who has served as prime minister on and off for more than 19 years, has divided Israeli society.

Facing criminal charges over corruption that he denies, Netanyahu has sought to revamp the judiciary.

He has also allied with far-right champions of extremist settlers who attack Palestinians in the West Bank with virtual impunity.

Netanyahu is also wanted by the International Criminal Court over Israel's devastating war in Gaza, where residents expressed uncertainty as to what the outcome might mean for them."Our fear is that these elections might result in the emergence of an even worse leader and those who are more violent and bloodthirsty," displaced Gazan Huda al Houli said. **— AFP**

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What's at stake at EU-Canada summit?



UMBERTO BACCHI

The writer is Brussels Correspondent for AFP

CANADA AND the EU will lay the groundwork for a sweeping new partnership aimed at better navigating a world dominated by the United States and China at a Montreal summit this week.

Already enjoying a free trade pact and a defence procurement programme among other deals, Brussels and Ottawa hope to deepen cooperation in other areas.

European Union chief Ursula von der Leyen raised the prospect of Canada becoming the 27-nation bloc's first "associate member" in September.

This raised a few eyebrows as the title doesn't exist in the EU treaties. Some EU states oppose the term being used before its meaning is properly defined.

An EU official speaking on condition of anonymity admitted it was "uncharted territory" for the bloc, but the term underscored the ambition to create a close partnership with Canada just short of membership. This would entail aligning policies in areas such as climate, energy, and artificial intelligence, letting Ottawa participate in some EU programmes, and creating a common governance structure.

The latter would "build on" the invitations Canada recently received to take part in EU summits and ministerial meetings, Jozef Sikela, the EU commissioner for international partnerships, told the European Parliament last week.

Some EU lawmakers have also argued for the creation of an inter-parliamentary body to hold regular exchanges.

Canada is rich in rare earths and critical minerals needed for green technologies like batteries and wind turbines that Europe currently sources mostly from China.

But mining in Canada is yet to take off, with operators looking for investments and commitment from buyers to enter a market dominated by Beijing, said Noah Gordon of the European Council on Foreign Relations think tank.

The summit could lead to an agreement allowing the European Investment Bank to put money behind Canadian critical minerals projects. Brussels and Ottawa were also looking at joint stockpiling, the anonymous EU official said, referring to the practice of storing materials to stabilise supply and support demand.

A digital trade deal allowing for faster and cheaper online transactions is expected to be unveiled in Montreal.

An early draft of a joint statement for the summit seen by AFP also envisaged deeper cooperation on both artificial intelligence infrastructure and regulation.

The summit should launch work to pave the way for Canada to join the EU's Galileo programme and IRIS² project.

The first is a global navigation satellite system that offers an alternative to the United States' Global Positioning System (GPS), and the second aims to equip Europe with a substitute for Elon Musk's Starlink satellite constellation.

Some EU lawmakers have also argued for the creation of an inter-parliamentary body to hold regular exchanges. Canada is rich in rare earths and critical minerals needed for green technologies like batteries and wind turbines that Europe currently sources mostly from China

The EU also recently unveiled plans to connect the EU's mainland with Greenland, Canada, Japan and South Korea via a submarine cable system that would bypass the United States.

"We need to develop our stuff and take care of our own," said a European diplomat.

Ottawa and Brussels are understood to be working to have Canada participate in the EU's popular Erasmus youth mobility programme, which allows university students to spend a semester abroad among other things.

The draft statement also discussed "enhancing labour mobility, with a focus on reducing barriers for young people and highly skilled workers and promoting greater recognition of professional qualifications".

"Treaties and institutions are important, but the real foundation of the EU-Canada alliance is people-to-people contact," said Tobias Cremer, a centre-left EU lawmaker from Germany.

Brussels is hoping to secure additional financial support for Ukraine from Canada to cover Kyiv's budget shortfall.

And scientific cooperation could be boosted by allowing Canada into Horizon Europe, the EU's flagship funding programme for research. The EU official said Europe was ready to open its supercomputing infrastructure to Canadian researchers.

The two parties want to strengthen energy ties, with the draft statement mentioning exports of Canadian liquefied natural gas to Europe and the development of renewables.

SOUTH AFRICAN ACTIVISTS PUSH BACK ON DATA CENTRE RUSH

SHAKIRAH THEBUS & JEANETTE CHABALALA

A little boy balanced a large bottle of water on his shoulder as he returned from a communal tap near land acquired by a major data centre developer in South Africa's water-scarce city of Cape Town.

In the maze-like community of Barcelona, there is no piped water or sanitation in the small metal homes that bake in the heat, and older residents pay boys a few rands to go to the tap for them.

The prospect of a water- and power-hungry hyperscale data centre near areas of the city where thousands of people lack proper access to these resources has alarmed activists.

Civil society groups have demanded a halt in the construction of new centres in South Africa - which already has more than 60, the most on the continent - pending the establishment of dedicated regulations in a boom sector being driven by AI.

"It's a direct land issue," said Housing Assembly (HA) movement activist Kenneth Matlawe, who lived in Barcelona for 15 years.

"It affects the water and sanitation policy. It affects socio-economic development because any form of development must benefit the community," he said. HA has been joined by UK non-profit Foxglove and other groups in appealing the city's rezoning of a portion of land near Barcelona acquired by US-based Equinix, which operates around 280 data centres worldwide.

The rezoning could open the way for Equinix to develop the land near the international airport, but managing director Sandile Dube said the company had no immediate plans to do so.

Should a project go ahead, it would "follow the due process that takes into consideration some of the concerns that the local communities might have," he said.

The appeal was heard this month with a non-binding recommendation due within 90 days.

The government is welcoming data centre investment to promote the country - home to the fastest expansion on the continent - as "Africa's digital gateway".

But HA and the Extinction Rebellion climate group called in a petition to the Cape Town mayor in September for a halt until "clearly defined, enforceable regulations and standards are in place to govern this rapidly expanding industry."

The city has around a dozen centres and has approved licences for five more. "If we need to move forward at breakneck speed to roll out the red carpet and let industries build data centres... we need to have proper understanding of what the law allows and regulation needs to happen," said Legal Resources Centre attorney Saadiyah Kadwa, who represents HA and the others. — AFP

Trump tamed after US midterms? Europe doubts it

PRESIDENT DONALD Trump may be facing a political pounding at the US midterm elections next month - but in Europe, expectations are low that a big Democrat win would change much.

From the battlefields of Ukraine to the boardrooms of Europe, Trump has sent multiple shockwaves across the continent since returning to power last year.

During a head-spinning 22 months, the mercurial leader has turned spectacularly on Kyiv, imposed tariffs on allies and threatened to take Greenland.

Ahead of the November 3 polls, it looks like American voters could punish Trump's Republican Party and hand control of one or both of the US House of Representatives or Senate to the Democrats.

But while the hope may be that Trump could be reined in by a hostile Congress, multiple officials at the EU and Nato said they doubt a big loss would muzzle him on the international stage.

"We don't think the unpredictability is going to change," said one senior EU diplomat.

Publicly, the European Union is keeping its cards close to its chest.

"We will not comment on any elections in the EU or abroad. Let's wait for those and we'll see where it goes," said European Commission spokeswoman Paula Pinho.

Behind closed doors as well, officials say that the midterms are not featuring much in the bloc's internal discussions.

"I suspect because a) it is difficult to really predict the result, b) one wouldn't want to get too high hopes for change and c) not sure how much even a Democratic wave would impact foreign policy issues," said a second senior EU diplomat.

Ahead of the midterms, Trump has rattled Europe by yet again lashing out at Ukraine and cosying up to Russia as Washington has renewed its push to end the fighting.

While a Democrat win could usher in a more vocal pro-Kyiv majority in Congress, the EU is not expecting US support for Ukraine to ramp up again. Officials in Brussels say they are focused on plugging a 70-billion-euro hole in Kyiv's finances next year.



US President Donald Trump holds a midterm campaign rally at Lubbock Memorial Civic Center in Lubbock, Texas. — AFP

From the battlefields of Ukraine to the boardrooms of Europe, Trump has sent multiple shockwaves across the continent since returning to power last year. During a head-spinning 22 months, the mercurial leader has turned spectacularly on Kyiv, imposed tariffs on allies and threatened to take Greenland

And while they're pushing other countries like Britain, Canada and Japan to do more, they are certainly not counting on the United States.

Meanwhile, there is equally little optimism for any major reversal on the tariffs Trump has slapped on Europe.

Diplomats and officials point out that it took months to get Democrat president Joe Biden to roll back tariffs on EU steel after Trump's first term - and even then limitations remained.

In a recent poll from the Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations, only one quarter of Americans backed removing all the tariffs on the EU.

At Nato, the story is much the same. European allies are nervously waiting for the results of a Pentagon review of US forces on the continent that looks set to be unveiled in December.

The widespread expectation is that it will see the United States scale back its deployments, although the hope is the cuts will not be too severe.

Multiple diplomats at Nato said they didn't envision the midterms having an impact on the review.

While a changed Congress could see US lawmakers more outspoken in support of the alliance, the direction of travel is already set with Europe stepping up efforts to take more responsibility for its defence.

"Whatever the outcome, we'll keep going," said one European diplomat.

There is also a nagging fear that things could get worse after the midterms. If Republicans cling on, it could embolden Trump; meanwhile, if they lose, he could seek to distract from his woes at home by stirring up things abroad.

"We have a history in America of presidents who get in trouble domestically turning more to the international stage," said Bruce Stokes, a visiting fellow at the German Marshall Fund think tank.

From an escalation in the Iran war to a more concerted push on Ukraine, there are numerous ways the White House can keep worrying Europe.

"Trump has demonstrated they can't stand not to be the centre of attention," said Stokes. — AFP

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