



Warning on warming

India must shed its victim mindset while acting on climate change

The United Nations Environment Programme's report, Limiting Overshoot, is a reminder that breaching the 1.5°C global warming limit would bring irreversible losses that adaptation cannot undo. Were all countries to deliver on their climate pledges today, the globe is still poised to heat 1.8°C and on current policies, 2.6°C. Given that the limit has already been breached – and, with the ongoing heating in the central equatorial Pacific expected to bring on into one of the strongest El Niños in recent history, likely again in 2027 – the report is an acceptance of the scientific reality that we are in a 1.5°C world, while resisting the conclusion that nothing more can be done. The authors describe an “overshoot, peak and decline” pathway under which average global temperatures rise above 1.5°C but countries collectively hold the peak as low as possible and then bring them back below the limit by the end of the century. Neutralising the heating effect of even a tenth of a degree, the report argues, is far harder than preventing that rise in the first place. This in itself is nothing new. What is new is the emphasis on greenhouse gases beyond carbon dioxide. Action on methane, responsible for about 0.5°C of current warming, is considered the most effective way to slow warming in the near-term. Over 155 countries – India is not among them – have joined the Global Methane Pledge to cut anthropogenic methane at least 30% below 2020 levels by 2030.

That absence reflects the familiar tension between reports of this nature, which emphasise mitigation, and major developing economies such as India. They stress that they are already en route to moving away from fossil fuels and, being vulnerable to the impacts of historical stocks of carbon, deserve greater financial support and affordable technology from richer developed countries responsible for the crisis. The latest report unfortunately has little to say on adaptation finance, though there are previous assessments on the topic. With countries set to convene in Türkiye in November for COP31, familiar disagreements are likely to surface – but in the aftermath of the Bhotokoshi disaster in Nepal, India's position too has been complicated. Nepal's Foreign Affairs Minister, Shishir Khanal, has said that major industrial emitters such as China, the United States and India must consider the impact of rising temperatures on small countries such as Nepal. For India, this list means that a section of the world – despite India's position as a victim of climate change with below-world-average per capita emissions – sees it as part of the problem. India must take such perceptions seriously and, rather than ignore the reality of a 1.5°C world, should calibrate its messaging to adapt to it.

Out of neglect bin

The perimenopausal policy will ease access to care for women in midlife

Women's health care can be accused of being focused entirely on the reproductive age group. Menopause, for instance, is a natural transition phase, but even when its symptoms are severe and debilitating, women seldom have access to health care, and are forced to “just endure”. Given the huge care gap that exists here, it is appreciable that Tamil Nadu and Karnataka have taken the step to move ahead with the announcement of a perimenopause/menopause policy. Both the States made the announcement within a short while of each other, in August. The primary benefit, besides relieving women's mid-life care from the neglect bin it has been languishing in so far, is that the physical and mental-health needs of women in this stage of life will become part of routine government health care, making access to care easier. Tamil Nadu Health Minister K.G. Arunaj made the announcement of a perimenopausal care policy in the Assembly on August 17. He said the aim was to facilitate early identification of physical and mental health needs of perimenopausal women, with screening, counselling and treatment services through PHCs and higher centres. On August 4, Karnataka Health and Family Welfare Minister U.T. Khader, introduced “Ruthi Thare” as the country's first dedicated women's health policy with a strong focus on perimenopause and menopause, at a meeting in Bengaluru. Menopause is the permanent end of menstrual periods and reproductive ability, confirmed after 12 consecutive months without a cycle. It happens when the ovaries naturally slow down and produce lower levels of the hormones oestrogen and progesterone. The transition time, leading up to menopause, is the perimenopausal period which can bring irregular periods and bodily changes over several years. Common symptoms include hot flashes, sleep trouble, extreme mood changes, joint pain, debility and fatigue, and for many women these can be disruptive.

Both States are planning outreach screening and counselling at the community level, women's health clinics, district-level well-women screening, and community outreach, besides referrals to district hospitals and government medical colleges. No doubt, this is a progressive measure which will also give legitimacy to the complaints of menopausal women, but the proof of any pudding is in the eating. How effective these policies are will be measured only during implementation. Among the critical points today is that the symptoms of menopause are not treated with adequate seriousness even by the medical community; so, adequate awareness generation among medical professionals and the beneficiaries and their families as well is a must.

The Gulf is calling and New Delhi must listen



Shashi Tharoor

Fourth-term Member of Parliament (Congress) for Thiruvananthapuram, who served nearly three decades at the United Nations, where he rose to the position of Under Secretary-General. He has also been a Minister of State for External Affairs in the Government of India and is the bestselling author of 29 books, including “Pax India: India and the World of the 21st Century”. He currently chairs the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs.

What worked until now

But while India was careful to be friendly to all, it was not too friendly to any, in an effort not to offend any of the various capitals in the mix. The logic was clear: there was much to be gained from all parties in what was widely seen to be a likely West Asian economic renaissance. The region was seen through a macroeconomic vision that highlighted its convenient geographic features, its immense natural resources of oil and gas, massive capital accumulation, and its receptivity to imported labour and skills, of which India has a surplus. In this framing, the global economic centre of gravity was seen as inexorably shifting away from an aging, debt-burdened West toward a highly dynamic Asia, positioning West Asia as the ultimate maritime and terrestrial bridge between a declining West and a rising East.

This defensive and essentially transactional posture served India well in an era when the United States stood as the undisputed guarantor of West Asian security, keeping sea lines of communication open and maintaining regional stability. However, the geopolitical bedrock of West Asia is undergoing a violent structural shift. As Washington recalibrates its global commitments and retreats into an unpredictable “selective engagement” posture, a profound security vacuum has emerged, sparking a scramble among regional states for durable security guarantees. Here, has India been caught napping, continuing a business-as-usual approach that risks early obsolescence?

West Asian capitals no longer view distancing, whether called non-alignment or multi-alignment, as a virtue. They are actively seeking alternative, dependable security partners who can offer more than diplomatic platitudes and routine economic cooperation. This structural reality was highlighted by the signing of the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement, bringing together Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Pakistan into a collective defence arrangement. While framed as a defensive effort to manage shared

vulnerabilities, the pact signals a broader security realignment. By linking Gulf capital with Turkish defence technology and Pakistani military manpower and skill, the agreement creates a powerful new security architecture right at India's western maritime doorstep.

A clear signal of change

For New Delhi, the Mecca Agreement is not an isolated diplomatic transaction; it is a clear structural signal that West Asia's security framework is being fundamentally rewritten, often by actors whose strategic interests directly run counter to India's own long-term objectives. While India's strategic silence on this development is understandable, it still begs the question: what next? The growing influence of external powers and hostile regional pacts directly threatens India's trade routes, energy security, and the welfare of millions of Indian citizens living in the Gulf. Is India going to build its own partnerships, or become irrelevant to the region's security?

If India continues to rely on legacy diplomatic processes and transactional commerce, it risks being marginalised in a region essential to its national survival. The challenges are formidable. The eruption of hostilities involving Iran demonstrated that modern, highly integrated economic infrastructure remains profoundly fragile when subjected to grey-zone, asymmetric warfare. State-of-the-art port facilities, energy networks, and logistics corridors proved highly vulnerable to low-cost drones, showing that capital-intensive infrastructure cannot fully compensate for localised security vacuums. Hyper-secure economic enclaves will remain perpetually exposed to the spillover effects of surrounding instability in the region. Since the modern Gulf model relies heavily on foreign corporations and expatriate labour, regional stability is intimately tied to global perception. If security risks cross a certain psychological threshold, the talent and capital that flowed in seamlessly can exit just as rapidly. And when narrow naval chokepoints or overland trade routes face active disruption, global supply chains inevitably stall, revealing that these ambitious trade corridors are only as strong as their most unstable geographic link.

Against this critical background, the assumption that trade ties and diaspora diplomacy alone can preserve Indian influence is rapidly unravelling. A region grappling with maritime threats in the Red Sea, drone strikes on critical infrastructure, involvement in conflicts in Iran, Yemen, Sudan, the Strait of Hormuz and now the Bab el-Mandab, requires partners capable of providing tangible security assets.

West Asian powers are hungry for hard-power options such as naval patrols, intelligence sharing, defence-industrial collaboration, and credible counter-terrorism capabilities. If India Delhi-dallies over stepping into such a role, others will fill the void, as Türkiye has already demonstrated in Mecca.

The hard moves India must make

To protect its strategic space, New Delhi must contemplate a decisive doctrine change, evolving from a passive beneficiary of regional stability into an active guarantor of it. This requires moving beyond high-level bilateral visits and economic summits to actively project hard power into the western Indian Ocean and the broader West Asian region. India's immediate focus must be the rapid expansion of naval and maritime security partnerships across key choke points, including the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman and the Gulf of Aden, the waters off the Somali coast and the Bab el-Mandeb. By embedding its naval footprint more deeply through joint maritime patrols, permanent logistics access arrangements, and interoperable surveillance networks with friendly Gulf states, India can establish itself as a, if not the, premier net security provider in its immediate neighbourhood.

Furthermore, India must leverage its growing defence manufacturing ecosystem to offer West Asian states a reliable alternative for hardware and technology. Collaborative defence ventures, joint military exercises with real operational teeth, and deep intelligence-sharing mechanisms must replace mere procurement discussions. Developing robust bilateral and “multilateral” security frameworks with partners such as the United Arab Emirates or Israel, and separately even with Saudi Arabia, will allow Delhi to build a counterweight against hostile axes without succumbing to rigid Cold-War style alliances. The goal is not to entangle India in foreign quagmires, but to build a strategic deterrence web that safeguards Indian interests and reassures regional allies.

The era of passive presence in West Asia has reached its natural end. The Mecca Agreement serves as a stark reminder that regional security arrangements will coalesce with or without Indian participation. If Delhi wishes to secure its economic destiny, safeguard its energy arteries, and claim its rightful place as a leading global power, it must act with urgency and ambition. Moving decisively beyond routine diplomatic engagement to construct real, hard-power security partnerships in West Asia is no longer just a strategic choice for India. It is an imperative for its national security.

A changing West Asia requires a more assertive Indian role in pursuing real, hard-power security partnerships

A BIT of a reset, with a wider debate

It has been widely reported that India is revising its model bilateral investment treaty (BIT) and that the revised text will soon be placed before the Union cabinet. The seeds of this were sown when Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in the Union Budget speech in 2025, that India was considering revamping its 2015 Model BIT. The treaty was adopted as part of a broader appraisal process launched after several foreign investors sued India for BIT breaches. The two key outcomes of this appraisal were the unilateral termination of BITs and the adoption of a new model BIT as the basis to launch new negotiations.

A model that is out of balance

In the last decade or so, India has managed to conclude only a handful of BITs based on its 2015 model. This reveals the many limitations of the 2015 model, which many scholars, including this writer, have repeatedly pointed out. If investment treaties aim to balance the two competing objectives of investment protection (one end of the spectrum) and the state's right to regulate (the other end), the Indian model BIT tilts heavily towards the latter. This creates doubts among countries that export capital to India about the legal protection afforded to their investments. These doubts are exacerbated by high regulatory risks, not-so-well-developed governance models, and an agonisingly tardy judicial system. As these concerns have grown louder, India has rightly decided to revisit the model, apparently with the objective of pulling the pendulum back towards the centre.

Any process of review of BITs has two core components. The first is on what substantive and procedural changes need to be made to the law; and the second is about what processes need to be followed to ensure the robustness of the outcome. The first aspect has attracted considerable attention, with experts pointing out



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Revising India's bilateral investment treaty (BIT) requires consultation and stronger democratic accountability

the necessary legal reforms, such as making it easier for foreign investors to use international arbitration for treaty claims, enhancing the substantive protections for foreign investment, and having more investment facilitation measures. However, the second issue has not been deliberated much.

Concerns about democratic deficit

Since international economic treaties, including those on foreign investment, have a conspicuous impact on citizens, it brings into play the all-affected principle in democracy. In other words, whether those affected by, say, an investment treaty should have a right to participate in decision-making. If those affected are not able to participate effectively in decision-making, say, through their elected representatives or other civil society organisations, it raises concerns about “democratic deficit” in the treaty-making process. Originating in debates in Europe, “democratic deficit” refers to the insufficient oversight of technocrats and bureaucracies, or the executive in general, including the political executive, who negotiate and evolve treaty frameworks behind closed doors. The lack of oversight may take many forms, such as a lack of or inadequate parliamentary supervision of the treaty-making process, and an absence of an external consultative process with other stakeholders, including subject-matter experts and civil society organisations.

To overcome the charge of “democratic deficit”, many countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, mandatorily place the text of the negotiated treaty before ratification on the floor of the Parliament, enabling it to express its views. Specifically, in the context of model BITs, Norway held two rounds of public consultations – in 2008 and 2015 – on an updated draft. Likewise, Colombia released its model BIT for public

consultation. India, too, in March 2015, circulated its draft 2015 model BIT for public comment. This provided an opportunity for the Law Commission of India (LCI) to assemble a team of experts to study the draft model BIT. The LCI, in its 260th report, made recommendations on how to improve the draft model BIT. India finally adopted the revised version in December 2015, though not all of the LCI's recommended changes were reflected in it.

Have a consultative process

Presumably, the government must have already undertaken widespread internal consultations, i.e., intra-governmental deliberations on the model BIT. As regards external consultation, the following may be considered. First, form a core team of experts, external to the government, who have demonstrated proficiency in international investment law or foreign investment, and engage with them. This would ideally include international lawyers and economists drawn from universities, research institutions and think tanks. This core team could act as the sounding board for the government. Second, invite industry bodies, arbitrators, law firms, and other civil society organisations to offer their views on the model BIT.

Following these first two steps, the third step will be to prepare a draft and place it in the public domain, inviting comments from the public at large, as done in March 2015. In the fourth step, or simultaneously, the draft model BIT should be placed on the floor of Parliament for discussion. The relevant department-related parliamentary committees can also be roped in for the same. Most notably, this consultative process should not be carried out merely as a box-ticking exercise, but as a meaningful activity that upholds the spirit of participatory democracy, which would necessarily include engagement with dissenting views.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Crisis of confidence

India cannot call itself a young nation with confidence if its young people are forced to fight for basic opportunities. They want quality education, employment, entrepreneurship, economic independence and dignity. These are not unreasonable demands. The government must ask a fundamental question: why are students losing confidence in the existing education system? The government must

understand that every frustrated student on the street represents a failure somewhere in the system – whether in education, employment, administration or opportunity. But Gen Z must understand something equally important: democracy requires responsibilities as well as rights. Protests must be peaceful. The government must therefore undertake a ruthless review of Ministries and public institutions

where performance is inadequate. Non-performance must have consequences. Corruption must have consequences. Deliberate obstruction of reforms must have consequences. **Richard Hay, Kochi, Kerala**

Calling Gen Z apolitical may overlook the issues that genuinely concern them. Young people in India engage actively with questions of

unemployment, education, climate change and social justice, even if they remain distant from conventional politics. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to increase political participation but to make democratic spaces more accessible and meaningful to young citizens. Gen Z in India may not be apolitical; it may simply be politically disenchanted. Have we considered this? **Sodhi Raj, Dhenkanal, Odisha**

New Secretariat in Chennai
The report, “New Secretariat to come up in Chennai at ₹1,200 crore: Vijay” (Front page, September 4), has highlighted three possible sites. Having been involved in the site-selection process in 2003 as tahsildar, Mylapore-Triplicane taluk, I would like to suggest the Madras Race Course as another option. Several sites, including the Government Data Centre, Anna University Campus, Directorate of Technical Education, Highways Research Station and Anna University's Taramani Campus, were surveyed at the time. The Madras Race Course could be ideal, given its accessibility, scope for wider road approaches, suitability for VIP visits and convenient access for the public. **S. Dharmarajan, Chennai**

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

GROUND ZERO



The government middle school in Hirapur, Sehore district, Madhya Pradesh. The school is located in a dilapidated building. It is in the same premises as the village panchayat office and a community centre ground. MEHUL MALPANI

Missing: boundary walls, bathrooms, blackboards

Across north and central India, government school education, especially in rural areas, is a challenge, both in terms of the number of teachers in every school and the state of the building that houses children. Reporters from four States track the state of school education. **Amarnath Tewary, Ashna Butani, Mayank Kumar, and Mehul Malpani** examine teaching quality and infrastructural support

In August 10, Abhijeet Dipke, founder of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), said in a video that since Independence, no government has been able to provide students in rural areas with the same facilities as those available to students in urban areas. He pledged to begin checking schools in the district from which he hails, Hingoli in Maharashtra, and request sarpanchs to improve the situation.

"We have constructed a new Parliament and a new residence for the Prime Minister. Why, then, are we not able to construct new schools in our villages? Do we not consider the children of farmers and labourers as the future of our country," he asked.

Since August 15, the CJP's 'School karo (reform schools)' campaign has shone a spotlight on the condition of schools across States, with issues ranging from broken roofs to a lack of washrooms and drinking water. It asked locals to participate in a three-step audit of schools: 'download a checklist, conduct the audit, and submit and tag us'. The checklist includes questions about whether the school has drinking water, boundary walls, wash rooms, and midday meals.

Bihar
At Dumri Kewat Tola primary school, in Muzaffarpur district in north Bihar, the plaster sometimes falls in the corridor outside the two classrooms. "We dread walking on this veranda," says one teacher.

All the 119 students crowd into the pink building, which was painted six months ago but is already peeling. They share space with two goats, which play on the corridor, and occasionally wander in to be petted. Under the crumbling roof of the corridor stand two motorcycles – they belong to the teachers.

"The school was established in 1982, but there is no boundary wall, no wash room, no sports ground, and no space to store the midday meal supplies," says the headmaster, Sanju Kumar. He travels 15 kilometres daily, one way, to reach the village. The six teachers of the school use the neighbours' bathrooms, they say, but the children must simply go in the open, or not at all. The school has no space to build, say the teachers.

At the middle school, a kilometre away, at Budhnagra Jagannath Malikana Tola, established in 2002, there are 10 teachers and 283 students. The principal, Umesh Ram, is sad that the school has only two rooms. Students of Class 8 sit on the veranda, and those of Classes 1 and 2 under a tree behind the kitchen.

The teachers complain about space constraints and the fact that the area floods in the rains. The students say their midday meal is tasteless. "Sometimes there are insects in it. We want our food to be better," says one student.

The district education officer says he has written to his superiors in Bihar's Education Department about the schools' demands.

In the adjoining Vaishali district, the primary school at Mirpur Pathad Rajdeo Rai Ka Tola does not even have a building of its own. It runs in a community centre, established in 2014.

The school, from Classes 1 to 5, runs in a single

The school has no playground, no wash room, no kitchen shed, nothing at all
UDAY KUMAR
Teacher, Bihar

room, which is also stuffed with rows of departmental almirahs and midday meal utensils, tables, and broken chairs. The students sit on new benches. There are 91 students and three teachers, including the headmaster, Vinod Kumar. "The school has no playground, no wash room, no kitchen shed, nothing at all," says Uday Kumar, a teacher who travels about 40 km every day to reach the school by motorcycle.

"You can imagine the difficulties we face here every day. When more students come to school than the space allows, they have to sit under a huge banyan tree nearby to study," says Kumar.

The Block Education Department of Rajapark could not be reached. On its department website, the Bihar government reads, "Education is the pillar upon which the fate of a country depends."

Rajasthan
In Unchki village in Rajasthan's Deeg district, there is no public road to the Rajkiya Prathamik Vidyalaya, which is blocked by a graveyard on one side and high boundary walls on the other. Locals say students have no option but to walk through the graveyard. From there, they traverse a thin, muddy path, surrounded by overgrown plants and shrubs, to go to school. A student of Class 3 says, "Bach bach ke aana padhta hai. Keechar bohut hai (We have to come cautiously; it is very muddy)."

Students say corridors are their classrooms. One student says, "The teacher teaches both Class 4 and 5 together." This is either because there are not enough rooms in the building to accommodate all of them or no electricity. The district falls under the National Capital Region and is only 165 km from Delhi.

"My children come home during the middle of the day and then go back to school," explains Sakira Khan, a mother of two children who study in this school. This is because there are no wash rooms. Behind the school there are two brick structures with overgrown shrubs. They open onto the fields and have no doors. In Rajkiya Prathamik Vidyalaya in Amrooka village in the same district, again students say they sit on a corridor outside the classroom which does not have electricity. There are 85 students enrolled in the school. The Rajkiya Prathamik Vidyalaya, in Bas Bolkheda village in Deeg, is located on a hill and caters to students from the neighbourhood. As they leave, students say they have had fun, running around the classroom. They say there are two teachers; neither had come that day. A temporary teacher assigned from another school visits them after finishing his day at the school where he is posted.

The teachers in all the three schools say they have received orders from their supervisors not to speak to the media. One says, on the condition of anonymity, "We keep writing to the district authorities about the shortage of classrooms, but they say they do not have the budget."

There is one empty teaching post in one of the schools. "We are forced to manage," explains another teacher. "We all take turns to teach students from another class."

The teachers also admit that many students

do not attend class because of infrastructural issues. While there is no permanent principal, a nodal officer in each block frequently visits the school, serving as the principal. In all three schools, the teachers say 50-60% of the total enrolled students come to school daily.

Locals sitting under a tree near the school say children do not learn much in government schools compared to private schools. Aas Mohammad, whose granddaughter skipped school for the day, says, "It is not possible to send all my grandchildren to private schools. They may have all the facilities, but they cost some ₹18,000 a year."

Locals also allege that governments do not pay attention to their requests because they live in predominantly Muslim areas.

District Magistrate Mayank Manish says if Education Department officials receive complaints from schools, they act on them quickly. "The government is focused on education. It is trying to increase or convert funds wherever possible. Teachers' vacancies are filled regularly, and online materials are made available in case of a shortage of teachers," he says. On specific concerns such as the lack of toilets and pathways to schools, he says officials will look into the matter.

Uttar Pradesh
Aworried Digvijay Narayan (name changed), 44, asks his wife which non-essential expenses they can cut to reduce their monthly spending.

Narayan, who lives in an urban settlement near Dayal Chauraha in Gomti Nagar, Lucknow, is a cab driver. He is considering moving his daughter, Payal Gautam (name changed), 11, from the Government Primary School Gwari in Vikas Khand in Lucknow to a private school after she suffered a prolonged illness due to a urinary tract infection. "We believe the dirty wash room at the government school caused the infection. She had symptoms for more than 10 days," he says.

He is anxious about arranging an additional ₹1,000 per month for the move. "My son goes to a private school; now both will go together. I will ask the management to give me some concession," he says.

Payal says she travels over a kilometre by foot to go to school every day. Drinking water, she says, comes "in fits and starts." About the wash room, she says she will never use it again. "The water facilities in the wash room are dysfunctional at times, so we have to arrange for water from the houses nearby."

Narayan feels the dismal infrastructure also impacts productivity. "A peaceful atmosphere, like what you find in a private school, will help the student focus on their studies," he says.

Madhya Pradesh
Around 1 p.m., five teachers sit in two classrooms at the government middle school in Hirapur village of Madhya Pradesh's Sehore district, about 40 km from the State capital, Bhopal. Students are absent; they have not returned to classes after the festival of Raksha Bandhan.

The school is located in a dilapidated building. It is in the same premises as the village panchayat office and a community centre ground. The four-room school, which includes a small principal's office, has only 22 students enrolled across eight classes. While teachers have chairs and tables, there are no benches for students. The classrooms have mats on the floor, dim lighting, and broken almirahs. While one classroom does not have fans, the other two have fans that are out of order. The walls and the roofs have rainwater seeping through during the monsoon.

Next to the school building is a small pit filled with dirty water covered by green moss and surrounded by bushes. The community centre ground is filled with cattle dung. Stray dogs roam

around. There are two wash room complexes on the opposite sides of the ground – one for the staff and the other for students. However, in the students' complex, only one of the two wash rooms is functional, forcing female and male students to use the same toilet.

The school in-charge, Mahendra Singh Sisodia, says students from eight classes are being accommodated in three classrooms after the primary school building on the same premises was abandoned about six months ago because of its poor condition.

Most of the 22 students at the school are from marginalised communities, he says. "Other dominant communities in the village send their children to private schools, so this school does not get much attention," he says. Since the premises do not have a gate, some people also use the ground for drinking at night, he adds.

A small room is used as the kitchen to prepare the midday meal for the children. Sisodia says that the self-help group designated to prepare the meal stopped its services about three months ago. "I have informed Education Department officials at the district level and they have instructed me to make arrangements for now. So, I have been buying ration for the school. Hopefully the money will be reimbursed soon," he says, adding that the school also does not have drinking water supply and the students bring bottles from home.

The school falls under the Ichhawar Assembly segment, the constituency of the State Revenue Minister, Karan Singh Verma.

About 20 km from Hirapur is Sarvar village in Bhopal's rural outskirts. The government middle school here appears clean and well maintained. There is a boundary wall and a gate, and the campus has plants. However, a conversation with the students reveals a different story. The classrooms don't have an electricity connection and many do not have fans or lights. The switchboards have been removed and the wires taped shut.

A Class 8 student says, "Since there is no light in the classrooms, it is difficult to study here, especially during the monsoon when we have to shut the windows. The summer heat is intolerable. While I like my school and teachers, this is one thing that we all want fixed at the earliest."

The school has a strength of 104 students. All the three teachers for Classes 6-8 are on leave, while the principal, Suresh Malviya, is at an official training exercise. There are only two teachers of the primary classes present.

Over the phone, Malviya says that the school building has been in poor condition for about five years. The electricity connection had to be cut since water was leaking through the ceiling and there was risk of it reaching the wires, he says.

"We have been sending annual proposals for repairs for five years but no one has taken cognisance of it. The school gets ₹25,000 annually for miscellaneous works. It's not enough to repair the building. The money is utilised for hiring a worker once a month to clean the wash rooms," Malviya says.

Another teacher says, "The floor, the boundary wall, and the gate – or anything that appears in a good condition – was built by the village panchayat after a school alumnus became its head a few years ago. There is barely any attention on such matters from the department."

Students complain of poor quality of food and say that many prefer to bring food from home. "The dal is watery and the rotis are often burnt or not properly cooked," says a Class 7 student.

At both schools, the worried staff asked if this was an inspection by the CJP or whether permission had been obtained from senior officials.

An official at the School Education Department highlights a gap in the government's approach towards different kinds of schools in the State. "Over the past few years, the focus has been on flagship institutions like Sandipani (earlier known as CM Rise) Schools and Excellence schools, so small rural schools, which were already not in a very good condition, have been struggling even for basic infrastructure."

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The Big Picture

10

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2026

CHOCOLATE WITH CAPSICUM? DATA IS CHANGING THE FOOD WE EAT

Only an intrepid chef would mix bacon and banana. Or crab and coffee. MADHURITA GOSWAMI explores the world of computational gastronomy, where molecular biology, data and AI help users discover unlikely flavour pairings, besides helping with personalised nutrition and sustainable food



DON'T FORGET to try something new! is the motto that drives Bessarav Grigori, 31, a chef-mixologist at Dubai's Frank Meat & Taps, whether he is mixing cocktails for guests or experimenting with food in the kitchen. It is this impulse that led him to the FlavorDB database in 2023, after he came across an Instagram reel featuring it as a culinary tool. Since then, the database has led him to serve flavour combinations he had not explored before.

FlavorDB is an open-access digital database that maps food ingredients by the flavour molecules they share, paving the way for exploring culinary combinations that might otherwise go untried. Think capicum and chocolate. Bizarre as that may seem, both ingredients share flavour molecules — volatile chemical compounds that contribute to the taste and aroma — and, consequently, pair well should someone decide to put them together in a recipe.

The database, developed by a research team led by Dr Ganesh Bagler of the Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, is one of the many applications of computational gastronomy, an emerging science that brings together molecular biology, data science and artificial intelligence. From mixologists like Grigori who like playing around with flavours to conscious consumers of food, who weigh their calories and measure their carbon footprint, and those who seek personalised meal plans for health reasons — computational gastronomy promises applications tailored to varied needs.

Vodka & biscuits. It's a match!

Among the most curious combinations Grigori has discovered are lemon and white chocolate, pineapple and snow peas, and what he swears by: bourbon, bacon and banana. "People are used to flat, obvious combinations... The database gives me non-obvious pairings at the level of shared aroma molecules, so I'll serve a guest something like pea-pineapple. It surprises them and sells really well," he says, on a video call from his home in Russia's St Petersburg.

Using FlavorDB, Grigori says, requires both an understanding of how the database works and a chef's imagination to translate its suggestions into something appealing. That, says Associate Professor Andrea Vitaletti of the Computer Science department at Rome's Sapienza University, is ultimately the point of computational gastronomy: "generating insights that help experts reflect on and better understand their own intuitions and judgments" on food.

Bagler's database contains 936 food ingredients (coffee, egg, chamomile, and berry wine, among many others), each containing flavour molecules of its own. That's nearly 26,000 flavour molecules in all. Users of his application can find what pairs best with, say, coffee, by clicking on it, which then reveals the different ingredients with which coffee has molecular overlaps, thus helping discover untested pairings. For instance, coffee has 269 flavour molecules and capicum has 218, and they share 78 of them. Who would have thought that coffee also shares flavour molecules with crab, and is waiting for a chef to toss them together in a recipe?

The potential of untested recipes is what caught Grigori's attention. Though he is now on vacation in St Petersburg, he has been unable to resist the pull of the city's food scene and has taken up work as a barback at Ark Bar. He rues Russians' tendency to choose vodka almost every time, but also calls vodka "the greatest" spirit for mixing with different ingredients. He recently discovered that biscuit shares 95 flavour molecules with vodka, and he now wants to infuse vanilla vodka with biscuit and make the twist for it. What

• What is computational gastronomy?

Computational gastronomy uses computing, data science and AI to study food — from the chemical compounds that create flavour to the ingredients, recipes and combinations that shape cuisines, helping analyse patterns in what we eat and look for ways to modify it

• How is it being used?

DISCOVERING NEW FLAVOUR COMBINATIONS: Every food ingredient has flavour molecules of its own. These are volatile chemical compounds that contribute to its taste and aroma. For instance, coffee has 269 flavour molecules. Using AI and network analysis, one can see if coffee shares a significant number of flavour molecules with, say, capicum. According to food hypothesis, food with overlapping chemical profiles taste good together. Turns out, coffee and capicum share 78 flavour molecules. Which means, they are waiting for a chef to use some imagination to put them together

DEVELOPING PERSONALISED MEALS: Computational models can design recipes based on flavour, nutrition and individual dietary requirements or preferences

REDUCING FOOD'S ENVIRONMENTAL FOOTPRINT: Data on ingredients, recipes and their environmental impact can help identify and design food that retain desirable taste and nutritional properties while reducing emissions

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excites him about such experimentation is "how little by little, I'm shifting the guest's own sense of what actually goes together."

If curiosity drew Grigori to FlavorDB, nostalgia was the driving force behind Shantanu Patil, a food entrepreneur from Barshi in Solapur, Maharashtra. His company, All Sow Great, manufactures millet-based products, including chivda, cookies and flakes.

Patil, who studied Environmental Food Entrepreneurship in Scotland, wanted to recreate memories of the food he enjoyed while growing up in the 1990s. His idea was simple: "Today's fathers would want to introduce their children to the flavours that they once loved."

He had grown up with a fascination for Parle-G Kismi maids biscuits and wanted to recreate the experience with ragi, considering that using local ingredients reduces carbon footprint. What he particularly wanted in his biscuits was the flavour of raisins that his favourite childhood snack had. He could have simply added raisins, but that would have cost more, making it difficult to reach a wider market.

Another challenge, he says, was "how to mask the muddy taste of ragi with flavours that customers will want to come back to; any flavour will go well with maids cookies, but it is different for millets."

He used Bagler's database and eventually found that baked ragi, when paired with cardamom or elaichi oil, gave the raisin flavour he wanted.

While baking ragi, its natural carbohydrates and amino acids undergo Maillard reactions, producing sweet, caramel and malty flavour compounds. The cardamom oil adds floral and citrus notes to this malty base, helping create the sensory experience Patil craved. He has since successfully marketed the resultant product.

Most importantly, says Patil, "10 trials karne ka zavarat nahi hua (I didn't have to do multiple trials)."

For a small business such as Patil's, investing in research and development or hiring consultants — who may have charged Rs 20,000-25,000 to analyse an existing product, such as the Parle biscuits — can substantially increase costs. While "digging around" for an alternative, he came across Bagler's paper on FlavorDB.

Every molecule tells a story

For Grigori, computational gastronomy is "the next layer" in the evolution of food. "Science and gastronomy change the industry one way or another — just think of sous vide," he says, referring to a culinary technique where food is sealed in an airtight plastic bag and cooked in a precisely controlled warm water bath, helping chefs achieve consistent textures in meat, fish and vegetables. "The technique showed up in restaurants back in the mid-70s, and what used to feel like something magical is now an everyday tool," he says.

Food science can be empowering for chefs, Grigori says, because "even the most ordinary guest eventually gets tired of the same thing and votes with their money for the unexpected."

Besides its use in throwing up new flavour pairings, computational gastronomy has expanded the idea of food as a vehicle for health benefits. Exploring this intersection, Bagler's team has developed SpiceRx, another digital database that maps spices to their reported health impacts and could support therapeutic approaches to meal planning. For instance, it shares the benefits of ginger against nausea, which more than a hundred research articles have reported.

Research into food that is not only tasty but also nutritious is currently exploding, with personalised meal planning gaining traction. "Meal planning today is not only about looking at ingredients or their calorie content, but also breaking them down into their molecular components and mapping their health impacts. Then, by looking at a person's blood work or genetic information, a personalised meal plan can be designed," says Nanya Sharma, who works with Bagler's team.

The next frontier for Bagler's team is food that is also sustainable, for which they have developed SustainableFoodDB to map the carbon footprint of dishes.

"Imagine designing new food that has a desirable flavour profile, using ingredients like white sorghum that is known to be climate-resilient, or with local and seasonal ingredients that have a smaller carbon footprint. A futuristic scenario is that consumers — just like they now check the price or calorie content or whether the dish is vegan — will also look at the carbon footprint of a recipe before making a choice," he says.

But gaps in digital databases make such labels difficult to produce accurately. "The

traceability of ingredients is missing. Does the olive oil in a dish come from Europe or Egypt? Depending on that, its carbon footprint changes," he explains. He adds that his lab is also using machine learning to predict how different molecules might taste, including how sweet, bitter or savoury.

One question the researchers are trying to answer is whether AI can predict how sweet a molecule will be simply from its chemical structure. If it can, Bagler says, the possibilities are enormous.

At times when multinational companies are seeking alternatives to sugar, such research could eventually influence the formulation of foods and beverages.

Several limitations, however, remain. "It is still difficult to capture the taste of an ingredient; only a coarse approximation is made," Bagler says. An ingredient's flavour, he adds, can also change depending on how it is prepared, whether it is boiled or roasted, etc. Finer details on raw ingredients are missing as well. He explains with a question: "Our database lists the taste of chilli broadly, but what about the distinctive tastes of Gunter chillies, Bhut Jolokia and Kolhapuri mirchi?"

Stock up, build the database

The challenge for scientists of computational gastronomy is not only to expand the existing food databases but also to incorporate the enormous diversity of ingredients, preparation methods and regional food traditions.

This is particularly true in the context of India, where much of people's food is missing from digital databases. "In the West, there are large databases of dishes with the exact nutritional value, complete with calorie counts and essential portions of nutrients and micronutrients. But there is very little data for Indian ingredients and dishes. The Indian Food Composition Table, published by ICMR, has detailed information for 528 raw food items only. The Indian Nutrient Database, built by research teams, expands this to cover 1,095 individual food items and 1,044 commonly consumed Indian recipes only," says Lipika Dey, Computer Science professor at Ashoka University.

A team of computer scientists and nutritionists from the university is now engaged in building a comprehensive "Knowledge Graph of Indian Food" that contains thousands of Indian recipes and ingredients, with meticulous annotations on nutrition. The aim, says Dey, is to make personalised and data-driven recommendations, based on what a person, whether pregnant, diabetic, or playing a sport, requires.

But here, too, there are challenges that are uniquely Indian. "For instance, a winter samosa from Bengal has cauliflower instead of potatoes. And when using potatoes, it is not mashed like the North Indian variety," she says.

Artificial intelligence is also making extensive use of Artificial Intelligence to analyse "imprecise recipes", which is the hallmark of the Indian cooking process.

As Vitaletti of Rome's Sapienza University says, "A recipe is not an algorithm. If the same recipe is given to 10 different chefs, the resulting dishes will likely exhibit substantial variation due to differences in technique, ingredient selection, environmental conditions."

Further, much of Indian cooking involves knowledge that is transmitted orally within indigenous communities, most of which remain largely absent from online databases and cookbooks.

Looking to address this representational gap, the team at Ashoka University has been part of a collaborative research project conducted by Karyn Inc. and Microsoft Research, with researchers reaching out to 338 rural women across six states and documenting 1,060 recipes containing 11,398 unique ingredients through audio interviews.

'Only a chef can do it'

Vitaletti, along with Assistant Professor Dongyeon Park of South Korea's Sejong University, is currently conducting computational research on rice dishes from Italy and South Korea. "While Korea embraces rice as a daily staple at the heart of dishes such as bibimbab, and teok, Italy employs rice in regionally distinctive preparations, including risotto, arancini, and traditional desserts," he says.

The research will involve using a computational model to study how rice interacts with different ingredients in the two culinary traditions. It is expected to help identify possibilities for fusion dishes, which will not require years of trial and error in commercial kitchens.

Ultimately, says Vitaletti, "bridging the gap between algorithmic predictions and human perception will be crucial for transforming computational gastronomy from an exploratory research area into a discipline capable of delivering applications with tangible societal and industrial impact."

Grigori emphasises that science does not eliminate the role of the chef or mixologist but makes that role more important. "When people go out dining, he says, they are looking for an experience or emotion they cannot easily recreate at home. "Pulling all of it together — the science, the technique, the molecules — into one coherent experience is something only a person can do. The database gives you possibilities, but not decisions; it can't read the guest, the cost, the balance, or the presentation."

He then cites an example: "I don't want to pour mango-passionfruit with lemonade for the 100th time, but I draw a clear line between my taste and the guest's taste. So I give them passionfruit-physalis, which, for the guest, is something familiar and delicious; for me, that bit of something new. The data suggests a combination, but the decision of how to serve it to the guest stays with me. And that, right there, is the chef-bartender's job."

CHEF GRIGORI'S RECIPE: GORST COCKTAIL

MAKE A SUNFLOWER SEED ORGEAT BASE WITH:

- Raw shelled sunflower seeds: 310 g (eating 10 g during the process is mandatory!)
- Water (80 °C): 800 ml

METHOD: Toast seeds until golden and aromatic. Cool down, blend into crumbs. Pour hot water, blend 20–30 sec, infuse 30–40 min. Blend again 1–2 min, squeeze firmly through cheesecloth

MAKE APRICOT CORDIAL* WITH:

- Fresh apricots: 400 g
- Dried apricots: 50 g
- Sugar: 400 g

METHOD: Chop fruits, vacuum-seal with sugar, leave for 5 hours at room temp. Filter, then add 3 g of malic acid and 2 g of citric acid

MAKE A SUNFLOWER SEED FOAM:

- Sunflower seed orgeat: 500 g
- Simple syrup: 40 ml
- Salt: 2 g
- Albumin: 3 g
- Xanthan gum: 0.3 g

METHOD: Mix dry ingredients. Pour in a thin stream into the liquid while blending. Chill, then pour into a whipping siphon.

MIX WITH THE BASE:

- Ginster Ice Cream: 50 ml
- Apricot cordial: 30 ml
- Fresh orange juice: 40 ml
- Lemon juice: 10 ml
- Red Italian bitter: 3 ml

TOP WITH THE FOAM

Enjoy!
*THE APRICOT CORDIAL WAS A SUGGESTION FROM AN ONLINE DATABASE THAT USES COMPUTATIONAL GASTRONOMY TO COME UP WITH FLAVOUR PAIRINGS

"Pulling all of it together — the science, the technique, the molecules — into one coherent experience is something only a person can do. The database gives you possibilities, but not decisions," says Grigori, a chef-mixologist



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GOOD PAIRING

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(Clockwise from right)
Dr Ganesh Bagler of Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology; Professor Andrea Vitaletti of Rome's Sapienza University; Dr Lipika Dey of Ashoka University; food entrepreneur Shantanu Patil; chef-mixologist Grigori



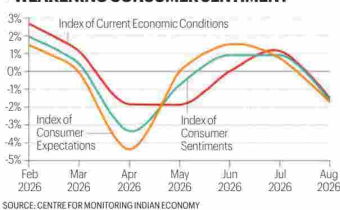
LEGAL

- **POLITY**

- **ECONOMICS**

The fear among sections of the valley's political class is that a new Census followed by delimitation could reduce its advantage.

- **WEAKENING CONSUMER SENTIMENT**



1. Employment has stagnated, with the percentage of working-age people (15 years and above) with a job declining from 2016-17 to March 2026.

2. The labour force has declined, showing fewer people actively demanding jobs, most likely because discouraged workers stop actively looking for work.

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Table 1

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The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES ALL

Beyond GDP, brace for turbulence ahead

OFFICIAL GDP growth estimates for April-June — plus more recent data on car, two-wheeler and tractor sales or GST collections — show India weathering the West Asia war-induced energy supply shock quite well. But there's another storm brewing — from soaring global long-term interest rates. Ten-year government bond yields crossed 3 per cent this week in Japan for the first time since 1996, while they hit 4.8 per cent for the US and 5.2 per cent for the UK. Even higher are 30-year bond yields for the three countries, at 4.1, 5.3 and 5.9 per cent, respectively. Given that these are virtually risk-free, being issued by governments that have never defaulted on their debts, the implications are huge. If investors are getting an assured 4.8 per cent dollar-denominated return on 10-year US treasuries, why would they put money in India?

Not surprisingly, Indian banks had to offer 6-6.5 per cent interest on FCNR(B) deposits that mobilised \$127.2 billion between June 8 and August 21. They were enabled to do so by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) bearing the hedging cost against currency fluctuation through a special dollar-rupee swap facility. The banks have, in effect, transferred the risk of rupee depreciation to the RBI, allowing them to pay such high interest rates — that too, in foreign currency — on these deposits. Either way, there is a cost involved, as much as the fact that foreign money no longer comes cheap. Going by the direction of global bond yields, it may only turn more expensive. Unless the Indian economy's growth prospects, which also translate into returns from its equity markets, are compelling enough, attracting serious long-term capital from foreign investors isn't going to be easy. That challenge will be even more in today's world of elevated bond yields.

The current situation demands building economic resilience through a greater focus on macroeconomic stability and boosting exports. In a rising interest-rate environment, governments cannot afford to run high fiscal deficits that would further crowd out private-sector and other productive borrowings. Nor can these be allowed to spill over into current account deficits that are, again, difficult to finance when global capital flows turn volatile. An RBI special foreign swap window, like the one for FCNR(B) deposits, can only be a one-time affair providing a much-needed reprieve to India's external sector. These cannot substitute more durable interventions directed at fiscal consolidation, export promotion through increased global market access and elimination of duties on imported raw materials and components, and ensuring policy stability and predictability for foreign investors.

In a warming world, reframe climate task

THE CONCLUSIONS of the UN Environment Programme's latest study, Limiting Overheat, confirm the worst fears of climate scientists. The report, released on Wednesday, notes that there is no way to contain global temperature rise within the Paris Climate Pact's threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius. The danger line has been breached more than once in the past five years. These lapses over a few months or a year were warnings that the planet was perilously close to the long-term temperature rise that the Paris Pact sought to avoid. The distress of heat-worried people in Europe, America, Australia, the sufferings of flood in communities in different parts of Asia, and now the toll taken by the Nepal flood, are signs that climate change is now in uncharted territory. The UNEP report, therefore, has a plea to "make the overshoot above 1.5 degrees as small and short as possible".

Every fraction of a degree increases the risk of irreversible tipping points and makes it difficult to increase the resilience of communities living near retreating glaciers and rising seas. The UNEP report's best-case scenario sees warming peaking at about 1.8 degrees Celsius. This figure should not be mistaken for a new target but as a warning of what even the most resolute action may now have to confront. Currently, not even the most ambitious net-zero targets are enough to immediately neutralise the carbon accumulated in the atmosphere. Removing the GHG would require a combination of traditional approaches — increasing sinks such as forests — and new technologies to suck out carbon.

The question also is: Who pays for climate-inflicted damage? The tragedy in Nepal, for instance, has imposed an enormous burden on a country that has hardly any culpability for climate change. The UNFCCC's Loss and Damage Fund was created in 2022 for such crises. However, even the most conservative estimate of the Himalayan nation's rebuilding cost is several times the fund's corpus. Its board is yet to respond to the plea from several countries for an emergency meeting. The UNEP report is a reminder that a rapidly warming world will require institutions to respond promptly to calamities. It will also require this response to be anchored in the principle of climate justice.

Ariana Grande is saying no to the circus

AFTER COMPLETING her 41-city Eternal Sunshine Tour, Ariana Grande, one of the more gifted pop stars of her generation, has decided to step away from public life for a while, following what her representative described as "endless, ongoing public scrutiny". The 33-year-old American pop star of *Wicked* fame said her decision had come from "a thoughtful, empowered place", and that "boundaries needed to be set". The decision seemed to be aimed, at least partly, at silencing the persistent rumours regarding Grande's slender appearance in recent months. The conversation around her health amplified even after she addressed the matter in 2023. There were conversations around diet and appearances, which seemed to overtake her music. This week, when Grande wrapped up her tour, she welled up singing her marquee piece, "One last time".

For all the fame and fun, pop stars have never had it easy. While the paparazzi were relentless long before Instagram and Facebook, a time when tabloids made a business out of artists' relationships, bodies, outfits, bad hair days and low points, consumers of the content have now changed drastically. They don't just watch, they also wield megaphones. And soon after what may just be a simple passing image or remark, these men and women, some of whom call themselves fans, weigh in instantly. Grande is not new to this attention. She has now spent a lifetime being picked apart and one might think that she would have learned to live with it. What seems to have changed is that she has decided not to be part of the circus anymore. The Oscar-nominated singer and actor is stepping away at the top of her game knowing that a pop star's popularity depends on being seen and heard. Grande's decision is about taking back control of her life.

The Editorial Page

Let's hold our teachers in the highest esteem. They help India learn and lead

TEACHERS SHAPE destinies. This Teachers' Day, on behalf of all Indians, I convey my gratitude to all teachers who instil knowledge, skills, values and motivation into the lives of crores of our students.

It is well known that Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the second President of India, wished that his birthday be observed as Teachers' Day. He was an intellectual of international repute, a renowned author and esteemed statesman, yet he regarded his role as a teacher as the most important of all. Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, one of India's most beloved former presidents, was once asked whether he thought people would remember him more as a scientist or as a president. Dr Kalam replied that he would like to be remembered as a teacher.

The teachers whose competence and character make them venerable, and the students devoted to such teachers, have always been our ideal. Our ancient texts prescribe that teachers should love their students as their own children, they should treat them all equally and fairly, they should not lose their temper at students, they should remain patient, keep the well-being of their students foremost, and teach them according to their ability to learn. It is in the spirit of deep respect for such teachers that the Shishuavali in the Taittiriya Upanishad gave the timeless message, "Aacharyadevo Bhava", nearly three millennia ago.

It has been my greatest fortune to have been guided by many wise and affectionate teachers. Sometimes, our teachers would teach us in their homes even beyond school hours, and would look after us with great care. After completing Class VII, I was the first girl to venture out of the village to pursue further studies. Later, while studying in Bhubaneswar too, I was blessed to receive abundant love and encouragement from my teachers. I mention my teachers here with humility, because their story illustrates a profound truth: A loving and dedicated teacher can awaken limitless potential and inspiration within a student. Strengthened by that encouragement, students develop the courage to face life's toughest challenges and the confidence to pursue the loftiest of goals. Teachers do far more than teach a curriculum. Through their own conduct and example, they also instruct their students in the art and skills needed to live a fruitful life. Besides being a mentor, a teacher is also a well-wisher, a friend and a fellow-traveller in the students' quest for learning.

The insight about what makes a good teacher, handed down through our culture and tradition since ancient times, remains entirely relevant even today. Centuries ago, in his play *Malavikagnimitram*, Mahakavi Kalidasa wrote that a good teacher is one who possesses profound knowledge and also has the ability to transmit this knowledge effectively.

A well-known Sanskrit maxim tells us: "Sarvatra vijñāni icchet, shishyati icchet parajayam" — one may wish for victory everywhere, except before one's own student, where one should wish to be defeated. To encourage independent thinking in students, to ignite their curiosity, to promote the tendency to ask questions, to sharpen their capacity for argument and judgement, and to help them grow into independent individuals — these are among the most useful and rewarding dimensions of teaching. It is only through such inspiring education that we will raise generations of successful entrepreneurs, brilliant scientists, creative artists and citizens capable of finding innovative solutions to emerging challenges.

Teaching is not merely a vocation; it is a vow. It is more than a career or a job; it is the sacred task of shaping humanity. It is the noble responsibility of illuminating the path for generations to come.



DROUPADI MURMU

I have also learnt much from the students I taught. I believe that teachers, too, learn a lot from the spontaneity and curiosity of children. I am always keen to meet students and understand their thoughts and ideas. What they share stays on with me

My memories associated with teaching give me a special sense of fulfillment. I taught children at the Sri Aurobindo Integral School in Rairangpur, Odisha. Apart from teaching them various subjects, I used to be fully involved in helping the children prepare for their musical performances, sports activities and plays. Even today, it is exhilarating for me to reminisce about our preparations for Independence Day and Republic Day celebrations and the joyful excitement of the children during the functions. I also found great satisfaction and meaning in taking students on picnics to beautiful natural surroundings and, through play and exploration, introducing them to the world of animals, birds, trees and plants.

Years after leaving school, my students still invite me to their family functions. I not only distinctly recall the names of many of my students but also the nicknames we would fondly address them by. I have also learnt much from the students I taught. I believe that teachers, too, learn a lot from the spontaneity and curiosity of children.

On the occasion of completing the second year of my term as president, I spent time with the students at the school located in the premises around Rashtrapati Bhavan and taught them about environmental conservation. I am always keen to meet students and understand their thoughts and ideas. What they share stays on with me.

About 11 years ago, I established a residential school at my village home. Students from disadvantaged families and children who have lost their parents study at that school. I have been visiting the school from time to time to meet the children. This year, on one visit, I was delighted to meet the children on my birthday. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi ji also visited the school with me and motivated the students. The extraordinary experience of meeting him will remain an

enduring source of inspiration for them. Watching those children thrive fills me with a special sense of meaningfulness.

The task of imparting education is not the responsibility of teachers alone. Those who become role models for children through their conduct and achievements are also a valuable source of learning and inspiration.

Parents and guardians repose the highest trust in teachers when they send their children to study. They believe that the teachers will treat the children as their own and take utmost care of the child's safety and development. It is the *dharma* of every teacher to uphold this sacred trust placed in them. A teacher's attitude, conduct and behaviour should not generate fear and anxiety in the children, break their morale or allow any sense of inferiority to develop. Good teachers help their students become the best versions of themselves.

It is the sacred duty of teachers to guide their students to become good human beings. Students who achieve prosperity and glory while remaining ethical in their thoughts and actions are living embodiments of a teacher's success.

Our country is moving steadily towards the goal of becoming a developed nation with social inclusion at the core. As we advance on this journey, I want our teachers to shape generations of students who value the richness of our cultural heritage and traditions; who develop a scientific outlook and work for the welfare of humanity; who uphold the ideal of *antayodhya*; who protect the environment and all living creatures; who strive for individual and collective excellence, and who move forward with the spirit of "Nation First". To every citizen, I make an appeal: Always hold our committed and sincere teachers in the highest esteem. I earnestly wish that with the contribution of our dedicated teachers, India continues to learn and goes on to lead.

The writer is President of India

Today, a good teacher makes a student evolve into a teacher



NANDITESH NILAY

AS WE watched the student protesters at Jantar Mantar, one question that was raised is this: What kind of teachers inspire them, what kind of teaching will touch their lives, address their fears and doubts and yet celebrate their individuality? Let's not forget that the students were protesting the leak of an exam where teachers were the ones who broke their trust, teachers who passed on the paper to parents who were willing to pay. Also, when you can learn from YouTube, ChatGPT, when there are algorithms that answer every query before a teacher can finish framing it, when Siri and Alexa decide what is right and wrong a hundred times a day, what should a good teacher do?

One easy response is to further police the student. Ban the AI tool, detect plagiarism, force a return to pen and paper, keep raising the exam bar, categorise students as winners and losers, celebrate the unicorn founder, forget about the majority of students who are unseen and unheard. That puts the burden in the wrong place. The real question is not only how a student should adapt to the transformative technology of AI, it is how a teacher empowers the student to do so. Can she walk into a classroom with her own mind and hold it? Can she be, once again, a Socratic teacher?

Socrates never wrote anything down. He worked by elenchus, drawing out what a student already half-knew. Plato recorded those dialogues and built Western philosophy on them. Confucius did not lecture his students; he gathered them, ate with them, mourned student Yan Hui's death as a father mourns a son. Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda were bound by something no curriculum can schedule. These are the models. East or West, worth emulating, not the teacher as a lecturer, content-deliverer, because then she will always be competing with a machine that will deliver content faster, but the teacher as an intellectual guardian, as the one with the moral compass outside the safety net of parents, friends and family.

So the discipline required now falls on the teacher, not the student. Can she conduct a 90-minute class with only a whiteboard and a marker, trusting her own knowledge rather than a PowerPoint? Can she make everyone in the classroom feel part of the class, each one on her own but all united by the common purpose of learning? When Albert Einstein arrived at Princeton in 1935 and was asked what he needed, he reportedly asked only for a desk, a pencil, some notebooks, and a "wastebasket for my mistakes". That is a teacher's real skill — a mind willing to think in front of students and be seen thinking, mistakes included, and make sure that there are wastebaskets for both her and the students.

This is harder than banning AI in an exam hall. It asks a teacher to become again what a machine cannot be. Someone who knows the student's name, notices the bad week, asks the follow-up question that has no single correct answer, and stays in the room after the bell.

Aristotle believed morality could be learned, not memorised, through the cultivation of good habits until virtue became disposition. That is a teacher's real syllabus. Practical and technical skills, taught by a teacher who has first built that relationship, become an inspiring inheritance rather than just a reading or homework assigned.

In the end, a good teacher is one who helps her students increasingly trust their own reason over her authority earned through dialogue rather than demanded. A good teacher makes a student evolve into a teacher and, in that process, herself become a better student. Happy Teachers' Day.

Nilay is the author of *Being Good*.
Aaiye Insaan Bane, Ethikos, and Kyon.
He teaches and trains courses on ethics, values, and behaviour

Gloria Steinem didn't fit in. That was her strength



AISHWARYA KHOSLA

THE PASSING of Gloria Steinem has launched a thousand obituaries, and almost everyone calls her the face of feminism. Her aviator sunglasses, centrepiece hair, and lean frame made her synonymous with the movement in America. But it is a description she would have resented, having spent nearly 50 years trying to dismantle it. In her final interview in February 2025 for Netflix's *Famous Last Words*, she said, "I hope I wasn't the face of the feminist movement because if it's not right, it's a diverse movement... [My] funnel has moved to do with endurance... I've just lasted longer." This paradox — of a face that both launched and limited her career — was established early on. At 28, she answered a Playboy Club ad calling for "attractive young girls" and went undercover for 11 days. Her exposure brought to light the exploitation and low pay the women endured. It remains one of the most influential pieces of journalism to this day. But editors refused to hire her. "We don't want a pretty girl," she later recalled being told. Did her telegraphic face make her more palatable to the masses despite her "radical" ideas? Sure. But being the face came at a steep cost. Critics dismissed her as a "miniskirted pinup girl of the intelligentsia", while the right attacked her for destroying the family. The left found her too mainstream, too palatable. Being the face meant that her views were taken to be the views of the entire movement, and she received immense flak for defending US President Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The visibility that made her a symbol also made her a target.

But the most significant impact of her journey was helping usher in an internal revolution. In 1969, she covered an abortion speak-out in a Greenwich Village basement where 12 women testified about their illegal abortions. Steinem sat in the audience, holding a secret of her own — she had an abortion at 22 and had told no one. That day, she experienced what she would later call, in her 2015 memoir, *My Life on the Road*, a "click of consciousness" — namely, that I had been silent and silenced.

That "click of consciousness" was a call to action. She went on to co-found *Ms.* magazine in 1972. At a time when women's publications survived on advertising from fashion, beauty, and food companies — and editorial content that praised them in return — *Ms.* refused to play along. This defiance of commercial expectations was an act of principle, but the true measure of its success was found on the open road. Steinem recalls an incident in her memoir about an elderly woman who approached her at a motorcycle rally in South Dakota. She pointed to a purple Harley and said: "That's mine. I used to ride behind my husband, and never took the road on my own. Then, after the kids were grown, I put my foot down. It was hard, but we finally got to be partners... I even put 'Ms.' on my licence plate — and you should see my grandkids' faces when Grandma rides up on her purple Harley!"

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40 YEARS AGO September 5, 1986



Gaddafi slams US, allies

THE LIBYAN President, Col Muammar Gaddafi, called upon the Non-Aligned Movement to come out with an effective plan for collective defence against US imperialism and to break relations with the US, the UK, South Africa and Israel. In a blistering attack on the US and its allies, he described them as imperialist forces bent on destroying the freedom and independence of small countries.

Zia rakes up Kashmir at NAM

PRESIDENT ZIA UL-HAQ raked up the Kash-

mir issue at the eighth Non-Aligned summit in Harare. Addressing the plenary of the summit on the fourth day, Zia said his country was seeking tension-free relations with neighbours and had endeavoured to promote friendly relations with India.

Delhi Bar council chief quits

THE CHAIRMAN of the Bar Council of Delhi, R.K. Anand, resigned from the post in protest against the continuing impasse over the non-appointment of Justice T.P.S. Chawla as the Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court. In a statement, Anand, who was elected the

council chairman in April last year, said, "I was duty-bound to bring about an amicable settlement whereby Justice Chawla could be elevated as Chief Justice by the government."

Gavaskar back in team

TO FACILITATE Sunil Gavaskar's inclusion, the strength of the Indian squad for the initial two one-day fixtures to decide the touring Australian team has been increased to 15 from original 14. In the absence of captain Kapil Dev, whose arrival was delayed, the national selectors met and decided to include Gavaskar in the squad.

The Ideas Page

Taking heart from the GDP story, behind the headline number



S MAHENDRA DEV
AND SAURABH GARG

FOLLOWING the release of India's FY26 GDP estimates on June 8, and most recently, post the release of the estimates for Q1FY27 on August 31, there have been extensive commentaries on the state of the Indian economy. Much of it has been optimistic about India's economic momentum. A section of academic opinion, however, has continued to be sceptical about the reliability of the evidence underlying this optimism, pointing to issues in national accounts methodology. Here, we seek to examine and address the important concerns raised.

The 7.8 per cent real GDP growth recorded in Q1FY27 is underpinned by a broad constellation of high-frequency indicators, lending credence to the strength and breadth of the expansion. Commercial vehicle sales grew 18.3 per cent, signalling strengthening freight and business demand, as firms expand fleets in anticipation of higher demand. The investment cycle appears particularly robust: Capital-goods production grew 15.2 per cent and machinery and equipment imports 21.5 per cent. Cement production, finished steel consumption and infrastructure construction goods also expanded strongly in Q1. E-way bill generation remained in double-digit growth, while gross GST collections rose 8.4 per cent despite substantial rate rationalisation. Together, these indicators point to resilient underlying activity.

Consumption, too, remained resilient, with household vehicle registrations and three-wheelers pointing to firming discretionary demand in Q1FY27. Non-food bank credit grew 16.3 per cent year-on-year at end-June, up from 15.0 per cent in March, with broad-based growth across agriculture, industry and services. The confluence of strong investment, resilient consumption, buoyant goods movement and expanding bank credit suggests that the expansion is sustainable.

One persistent concern relates to the



ILLUSTRATION: C R SAKSHI KUMAR

price adjustment between the GDP at current and constant prices, that is, GDP deflation, despite the substantial methodological improvements in the base-year revision. Following the first-quarter results, the most substantial technical concern raised about the estimates is also about GDP deflator. In line with international best practice, the revised National Accounts have shifted from WPI (Wholesale Price Index) to the new output PPI (Producer Price Index) for price corrections. The February 2026 revision had already moved away from single deflation, adopting double deflation wherever feasible and volume-based extrapolation otherwise.

The relatively small revisions arising, particularly, from the shift from WPI to PPI have buttressed our earlier assessment that the use of WPI had not introduced any material anomaly, given the close conceptual alignment between the two. However, the simultaneous changes in deflation methods and price databases have made recent movements in the GDP deflator less readily interpretable, as reflected in commentaries following the Q1 release.

We have moved to double deflation in manufacturing, under which output and intermediate consumption are deflated separately, with real GVA (Gross Value Added) derived as the difference between their real values. This is the global best practice in National Accounting. When input prices rise faster than output prices, nominal GVA growth can be lower than in real GVA, producing a negative implicit GVA deflator even when both output and input

The 7.8 per cent real GDP growth recorded in Q1FY27 is underpinned by a broad constellation of high-frequency indicators, lending credence to the strength and breadth of the expansion

prices are rising. There are instances of advanced economies using double deflation encountering similar outcomes. In Q1FY27, higher raw-material inflation relative to output inflation contributed to a lower GVA deflator, while low price growth in some services further widened its divergence from headline CPI/WPI. Constant price GVA estimates are not compiled based on headline price indices; it is the result of careful deployment of over 300 producer prices/price indices across a disaggregated array of inputs and outputs. It cannot be faulted by quoting aggregate, disparate numbers, misleading public understanding of a transparently refined set of statistics.

Let us now focus on manufacturing GVA which is mostly in public focus too. This warrants an explanation, also because, if manufacturing GVA deflator had been close to that of the non-manufacturing GVA, the overall deflator would have been closer to public perception. What is the counterfactual? Analytical commentaries have correlated manufacturing IIP (Index of Industrial Production) growth with real manufacturing GVA growth. Since IIP is a volume index, its appropriate analytical counterpart is manufacturing GVO at constant prices. For FY24 and FY25, the two measures recorded remarkably similar average growth—6.7 per cent for real GVO and 6.6 per cent for IIP indicating strong consistency between the two measures of manufacturing activity. Hence, when we are comparing comparable economic variables, there is con-

vergence in evidence.

Under conditions of synchronised price movement in output and input prices, a growth comparison of manufacturing IIP and manufacturing GVA may also yield defensible results in the short-term. Care is, however, warranted in comparing IIP with GVA and, while interpreting manufacturing deflator, under conditions of differential input and output price dynamics. The following is the crucial point. Manufacturing is pivotal as both a major supplier and user of intermediate inputs. Intermediate consumption accounts for roughly 81 per cent of manufacturing output, leaving 19 per cent as GVA. Hence, divergences in output and input prices and volumes can generate disproportionate movements in real GVA. This was evident in FY25—as in Q1FY27—when input-price inflation exceeded output inflation, resulting in a negative implicit GVA deflator. This is statistically robust and makes economic sense as well. Meanwhile, the gradual decline in the ratio of intermediate consumption to GVO at constant prices is indicative of improving input-use efficiency, consistent with the ongoing product and factor-market reforms.

We have also seen recent analysis juxtaposing India's economic performance after 2014 with a constructed comparison country, made by combining other countries whose economic performance had assumedly moved closely with India's before 2014. It uses this historical co-movement to estimate how India's per-capita GDP might have evolved after 2014. Based on papers by other researchers, the paper faults India's national-accounts methodology unfairly; it assumes that the alleged overstatement of GDP growth masks the estimated performance gap a "lower bound", without demonstrating the methodological flaws.

Needless to say, we welcome specific, focused and actionable scrutiny on the GDP methodology, which will lead to constructive outcomes, but not such misleading commentaries and sweeping inferences. Particularly so when the high-frequency, economy-wide indicators corroborate the ongoing growth momentum implied by the headline GDP estimates.

Devi is chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, Garg is secretary, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. This is co-authored with Anny Antony, Economic Adviser, MoSPI.

Viksit Bharat should be a whole-of-nation ambition



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

FOUR YEARS ago, during his 76th Independence Day address, Prime Minister Narendra Modi invoked the idea of Viksit Bharat for the first time. He gave it a *pancha prana*—five pledges for the citizens of India, the first among which was the building of a developed India by the time the nation completes 100 years of its Independence in 2047. He called the 25-year road map *amrit kaal*. For the *amrit kaal* to succeed, citizens were called upon to take the other four pledges, too—freedom from the colonial mindset, pride in their own heritage, strengthening national integrity, and upholding civic responsibility.

The PM's vision was tall and daunting. NITI Aayog projected Viksit Bharat's economic targets as achieving \$15,000-18,000 per capita, five to six times the present levels, and taking the country's GDP to \$30 trillion, more than seven times the present level. For these targets to be achieved, the economy has to register a year-on-year GDP growth rate of at least 7 per cent for a long time. Only a few countries, such as China and Singapore, have been able to maintain such high growth rates for longer durations. But the Prime Minister is not a leader with empty dreams. Despite Covid and the global economic slowdown induced by it, despite US President Donald Trump's tantrums that caused serious economic and trade upheavals, and despite raging fears of an impending major global recession, Modi persisted with his agenda.

The result was a steady above 7 per cent GDP growth of our economy in the past three years. While the rest of the world struggled, we recovered quickly from Covid-induced sluggishness to register 7.3 per cent growth in 2023-24, 7.2 per cent in 2024-25 and 7.8 per cent in 2025-26. The controversy over the growth figures of 7.8 per cent for the first quarter of 2026-27 is petty and pessimistic given this track record.

In his Independence Day address this year, the Prime Minister continued his emphasis on Viksit Bharat by highlighting seven priorities, the *sapta dhara*—seven streams of the development agenda: Manufacturing power, agriculture and food processing, technology and innovation, infrastructure and connectivity, self-reliance in defence production, green and blue economy, and soft power. The Prime Minister underscored the need to reinvent our approach in order to achieve

newer heights in these key sectors. "We have to change our work culture... we also have to change our thinking... We also have to accelerate the pace of reform," he insisted.

Historical transformations are rarely linear. Modi expressed a similar sentiment, saying, "the pace of work that was not achieved in five to seven decades, we have to achieve in the coming five to seven years." Countries like China that registered phenomenal progress witnessed such periods of accelerated change, which resulted in their take-off into the league of developed nations. During the two decades from 1978 to 1997, under Deng Xiaoping's vision and pragmatism, China raced ahead on the path to unstoppable development. In 1980, India and China were comparable in GDP size. In per capita terms, India was ahead with \$582 against China's \$307. Two decades later, in 2000, China surged ahead to a GDP of \$1.22 trillion while India was only able to reach \$468 billion. In per capita terms, too, China surged ahead to \$969 against India's \$442. During those two decades, China singularly focused on developing its manufacturing sector and emerged as the "factory of the world".

In the past couple of decades, with its advances in the services sector, India emerged as the "office of the world". But PM Modi is determined to achieve not incremental but spectacular growth in the next two decades. Why shouldn't there be 50 Indian companies in the Fortune 500 list? Why shouldn't Indian banks be among the top banks in the world? Shouldn't our consulting firms or accounting firms be among the top firms in the world?

The only answer to these questions raised by the PM is for the entire country—bureaucracy, state and local governments, industry and entrepreneurs, and leaders in all other sectors like agriculture, education, technology and innovation—to catch up with the pace of the PM. Viksit Bharat should be a "whole-of-the-nation" ambition.

The writer is national vice-president, BJP and president, India Foundation

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trust the voters

THE EDITORIAL does some plain speaking about the 13 crore deletions across the nation ("Presumed guilty, SIR's spreading stain", IE, September 4). One shudders to imagine the rationale behind the ECI presuming each and every one to be guilty. One wishes that the ECI had trusted at least those who had already been proved to be Indian citizens instead of making them undergo such a cumbersome exercise.

Kumar Gupta, Panchkula

THE DELETION of 13 crore names from the voters' list is a matter of serious concern, and the process is still going on, so many more names of voters will be deleted ("Presumed guilty, SIR's spreading stain", IE, September 4). It seems that the SIR intends to disenfranchise more voters, especially those who belong to the minority community, and the credibility of the entire process is at stake. Transparency and complete impartiality are expected from the Election Commission. The process of adding deleted names back should not be Kafkaesque.

Hitesh Parmar, Rajkot

Energy fix

INDIA'S GROWING energy needs require better coordination across ministries and sectors ("We need one Ministry of Energy, not five", IE, September 4). Fragmented responsibilities can lead to delays, duplication and conflicting priorities. A more integrated institutional framework could help balance energy security, affordability and environmental commitments. Any restructuring, however, should preserve specialised expertise and accountability. The government should examine whether closer coordination or a unified ministry would improve planning and implementation. India needs a clear, long-term energy strategy rather than disconnected policy decisions.

BA Neboba, Perundurai



MANOJ KUMAR JHA

IT WAS, at the very least, heartening to hear the RSS chief speak at Madison Square Garden in New York in a language that reaffirmed India's inclusive character. His assertion that a Hindu who does not want Muslims in India cannot be a true Hindu was unambiguous. It was also a reminder of elementary truth that Muslims do not live in India by anybody's permission. They are citizens of India. The important question is what happens to this inclusiveness when the political discourse returns home.

If a Hindu who does not want Muslims in India is not a true Hindu, what are we to make of the dog-whistles around Muslims? What are we to make of ministers and party functionaries who use polarising slogans and coded appeals to majoritarian anxieties? And of the silence of the organisational leadership when such language is used?

The RSS is the BJP's ideological fountainhead. Either the party's discourse has drifted from the parent body's teaching or it has not, in which case Madison Square Garden was an act of translation for a particular audience rather than a statement of principle. Also, statements of this kind are rarely spontaneous; they are responses to some pressure that has become difficult to contain. Was it the scrutiny of an inter-

It is not enough to say that Muslims belong in India. The political culture must stop producing the conditions under which their belonging is repeatedly questioned

national audience? Or, the arithmetic of politics that has begun to find polarisation yielding diminishing returns?

The RSS and the BJP cannot have two vocabularies of India. Gandhi would have found this distinction unsettling. His India was one in which the majority carried a moral responsibility for the security, dignity, and equal belonging of minorities. For him, Hinduism was inseparable from the capacity to recognise the humanity of the other. This was beautifully captured in the bhajan he cherished, "Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye", where religiosity is measured by one's ability to feel another's pain and respond to it. That was his idea of faith and, ultimately, of India.

Nehru translated a similar intuition into the language of the modern republic because he understood that diversity was the substance of the nation. That is also why we should be wary of the language of "tolerance", which can suggest that the majority has the power to permit the minority to exist. Constitutional citizenship begins with the equal claim of every citizen to dignity, security and belonging.

It is therefore not enough to say that Muslims belong in India. The political culture must stop producing the conditions under which their belonging is repeatedly ques-

Two vocabularies: One for New York, one for home

tioned. There is a difference between an explicit statement of inclusion and an environment in which exclusion is constantly suggested without being formally declared. This is how the boundaries of citizenship begin to shift through language. The danger is greater when such language comes from those in positions of power. A chief minister's remark or a powerful organisation's calculated silence has weight. It tells citizens what can be said, whom it is acceptable to mock, and whose anxieties deserve political attention. That is why the RSS chief's statement deserves to be noted, but cannot be viewed in isolation from the larger context. If the assertion is sincere, it should travel to every political rally in India, and the polarising discourses should be done away with forever. Such statements should be heard wherever Muslims are turned into electoral shorthand, their patriotism questioned, their names, food, dress or faith made into political ammunition. They should be heard inside party meetings and cabinet rooms. It may be pragmatic to embrace the language of pluralism abroad, but the real test is whether we are willing to practise it at home. The idea of India is meaningful only when every citizen feels equally secure in belonging to it.

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

Focus on the children, not the platform



MEGHNA BAL

META RECENTLY settled a \$17.1 billion case with several US states concerning allegations about its impact on children's mental health. The company must make several changes to its apps, including incorporating daily usage limits and "nighttime blocks" for teenagers, "enhanced age assurance measures" to prevent children from using them and the depersonalisation of feeds, meaning that a child's feed would serve random content rather than content tailored to their interests. Many have hailed the decision as a step towards holding platforms accountable. But such framing is problematic because it places the platform, rather than the child, at

the centre of the problem. Once platforms become the focus, the policy response gravitates towards imposing more obligations on them. Asking what more platforms can be required to do is not the same as asking what children really need to be safer online.

The first problem with a platform-centric child safety approach is that it often produces measures that are difficult to enforce. The requirement for Meta to introduce age-gating is one example. Children are sophisticated and motivated users of technology and find ways around such measures.

The second is that such an approach can ignore what children need to be safe or have positive experiences online. The move to restrict personalised recommendation illustrates this tension. Poorly designed recommendation systems can expose children to harmful content, but removing personalisation does not auto-

matically make a service safer. It may expose children to irrelevant or inappropriate material, while making it harder for educational or support services to reach them.

Instead of focusing on eliminating every risk from the online environment, decision-makers must look at how to equip children to deal with those risks as we do in the physical world: What not to do, how to respond to unsolicited contact, how to recognise ma-

For many children, digital spaces provide support that may not be available offline. LGBTQIA+ children and those experiencing abuse may use online platforms to find information or help

nipulation, when to block or report someone, and when to seek help. Yet digital literacy and sensitisation receive far less policy attention. India has made a nod to such an approach, with the 2026 Economic Survey calling for a digital wellness curriculum in schools. It remains to be seen how widely and appropriately this will be implemented.

The third problem is that for many children, digital spaces provide community, expression and support that may not be available offline. LGBTQIA+ children, those experiencing neglect or abuse, and socially isolated children may use online platforms to find information, companionship or help. Children's online participation is also not confined to one platform. If one service becomes too restrictive or cumbersome, they can simply migrate to platforms with weaker protections.

The fourth problem is that children's online engagement is often shaped by their offline environment. In India, screens may not necessarily be displacing abundant offline opportunities but filling a vacuum. Many children lack access to safe public spaces or affordable recreational facilities. If policymakers want children to spend less time online, they must also ask what children are being offered offline.

None of this absolves platforms of responsibility. But approaches more in touch with children's engagement online are likely to be more effective. This requires addressing the entire ecology of childhood: Platforms, parents, schools, communities, public spaces and children themselves.

The writer is director of the Esya Centre, a New Delhi-based think tank. Views are personal

EXCHANGE'S LISTING COULD BE THE COUNTRY'S BIGGEST EVER

NSE gets SEBI nod for IPO, may eye listing this month

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, September 4

THE DECKS have been cleared for what may be the country's biggest-ever listing, as the markets regulator has approved the estimated Rs 30,000 crore IPO of the National Stock Exchange (NSE), over two months after it filed the papers, and about a decade after it first tried to hit the primary market.

The country's largest stock exchange may get listed as soon as this month, reports suggested.

The approval clears a key regulatory hurdle for the exchange after it had first filed its IPO papers back in June. The price band for the issue is likely to be announced on September 15, with plans to list in the week starting September 21, Reuters reported, citing unnamed sources.

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) issued an observation letter with the green light to NSE on Friday. With the path now clear, the issue could end up as the country's biggest-ever IPO, surpassing Hyundai Motor India's Rs 27,870 crore issue in 2024. The unlisted market indicates a valuation of around Rs 5 lakh crore for the exchange.

The valuation and the amount raised would depend on the price band of the issue.

Rival BSE had raised Rs 1,245.3 crore through its public issue back in 2017. The stock has since gained nearly 29 times from its listing price, becoming among the most lucrative stocks in the market.

NSE dominates India's equity derivatives market and is the world's most active derivatives exchange by contracts traded. It also leads NSE in terms of revenues, market share, and

India's biggest IPOs



SOURCE: EXCHANGES, OFFER DOCUMENTS

liquidity. It will also be interesting to see if the regulator allows NSE's shares to trade on its own exchange through the "permitted-to-trade" route.

What is the IPO structure

The issue will entirely be an offer for sale (OFS) of 14.89 crore shares, representing around 6% of the exchange's stake.

Funds raised via OFS are pocketed by selling shareholders and are not utilised in a company's business. SBI will offload up to 2.48 crore shares in the OFS. MS Strategic (Mauritius) will sell up to 1.6 crore shares. Other major listed entities offloading some of their

stakes include Bank of Baroda, General Insurance Company of India, and the New India Assurance Company. Shares of many of these companies have skyrocketed in the run-up to the issue.

For example, shares of New India Assurance shot up over 18% on Friday.

In fact, the stock has gained 34% over just a month. Having bought shares early on at an average cost of under a rupee, the IPO, which targets high valuations, is expected to unlock significant cash for the likes of SBI, Bank of Baroda, and the insurance companies.

FULL REPORT ON ENTITIES OFFLOADING SOME OF THEIR

Why Tata Chemicals' Kenya ops are halted

George Mathew
Mumbai, September 4

KENYAN PRESIDENT William Ruto's order to halt Tata Chemicals' operations in the African nation has put the Tata Group company on the defensive, with the firm saying on Friday it remained committed to resolving the dispute through "constructive engagement" with the Kenyan government and the relevant legal and regulatory authorities.

This is the second major dispute between Kenya and an Indian entity after Adani group's Nairobi airport project was cancelled by the African nation.

The current dispute centres on Tata Chemicals Magadi Ltd (TCML), which operates a soda ash plant at Magadi in Kenya's Kalai County. The company, Africa's largest producer of natural soda ash, has been operating the facility for decades and says it remains fully compliant with regulatory requirements.

Here is what the dispute is about, what the Kenyan President has alleged, and what Tata Chemicals has said it plans to do.

The issue

The immediate issue is a dispute between TCML and the Kenyan Ministry of Mining, Blue Economy and Maritime Affairs over matters relating to the company's operations and regulatory compliance. TCML said it has acknowledged an official communication from the Ministry dated July 28, 2026, and has submitted a comprehensive response to the matters raised by the government.

According to the company, it provided all the required information, reports and documentation to the Ministry on August 11. "TCML is fully compliant with the regulatory requirements," the company said in an exchange filing on Friday. The company is now awaiting the Ministry's review of its submissions and further direction.

The dispute has, however, escalated after President William Ruto publicly said that he had ordered Tata Chemicals to stop its operations and indicated that the Kenyan government would bring in two new

companies to take over the operations.

Kenyan President's allegation

Ruto has criticised Tata Chemicals over what he said was a lack of investment and development in Kalai, where the Magadi operation is located. "That Tata company... had that contract for 100 years. They have not built anything in Kalai, they have not built any factory in Kalai," Ruto said.

He also said the government would bring in two new companies to take over Tata Chemicals' operations.

Ruto's main accusation is that Tata has extracted Kenya's mineral resources without providing enough economic benefit to the local area or country. Specifically, he says Tata has operated under a very long-term contract but hasn't built sufficient local industrial facilities. It has largely exported soda ash rather than creating more value-added manufacturing in Kenya. It hasn't generated enough local

jobs, investment and industrial development relative to the resources it extracts and failed to meet what the government considers adequate obligations concerning the local community.

Meanwhile, Ruto's opponents allege the government's real motive is control of the area's other mineral resources. Tata Chemicals, however, has said that the Magadi operation has played an important role in the Kenyan economy since it acquired the plant in 2005.

Legally strong, politically sensitive

Magadi is in Kalai County, where questions surrounding land, mineral wealth, employment and community benefits are politically sensitive. Tata's legal position is considered strong because its rights stem from a 1928 lease granted by the Kenyan government and subsequently extended in 2004. The lease provides Tata with extensive rights over the Magadi deposits and runs until 2053. This political

context helps clarify the appeal of President Ruto's claim that Tata has exercised control over the resource for "100 years," despite the far more complicated legal history underlying that assertion, say reports from Kenya.

There has already been a major dispute with Kalai County over payments. The area's other mineral resources, including diamonds and royalties, while Tata challenged the claims, arguing that the relevant mineral rights and payments were governed by its agreement with the national government rather than the county. In October 2025, Kenya's Court of Appeal sustainably sided with Tata, according to reports from Kenya.

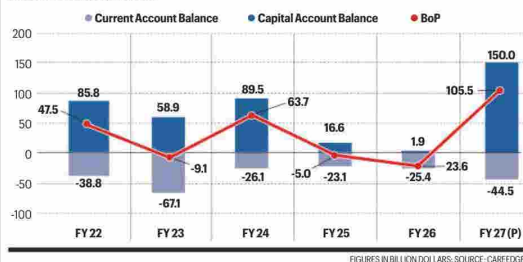
According to the National Council for Law Reporting (Kenya Law), the court ruled that the county's demand of about Kenyan shilling 1745 billion was not payable. It also found that the county's closure of Tata's operations had breached Tata's lease and its constitutional property rights.

FULL REPORT ON

WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

BoP TO MOVE TO A LARGE SURPLUS IN FY27

The government raised around \$127.2 billion through FQNR(B) as the window closed on August 31. FDI is resilient too. Net FDI rose 15.9% on-year to \$6.1 billion in FY27. Ratings agency CareEdge expects the capital account surplus — which happens when the total inflow of foreign capital exceeds the total outflow of capital — to rise to \$150 billion. With the current account deficit projected at \$44 billion (1% of GDP), the overall balance of payments (BoP) is expected to record a surplus of \$106 billion in FY27, compared with a deficit of \$23 billion in FY26, the agency said.



FIGURES IN BILLION DOLLARS. SOURCE: CAREEDGE

Rupee at 5-week high amid RBI intervention

Mumbai: The Indian rupee ended largely unchanged Friday, but posted its best weekly performance against the US dollar in five weeks, helped by stronger-than-expected dollar inflows into the central bank's special schemes.

The rupee moved in a narrow six-paise range before ending at 94.4850, aided by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), which intervened at the start of the session and continued to sell dollars thereafter, traders said.

For the week, however, the currency gained 0.9%, posting its biggest rise against the dollar since the week ended July 31, aided by heavy RBI intervention. The rupee was also supported by an influx of dollars that far exceeded estimates.

The RBI repeatedly sold dollars near the open through the week. The central bank's increasingly forceful intervention comes as its special schemes for stop-loss orders.

BSF's managing director and chief executive officer Sundaraman Ramamurthy told CNBC-TV18 on Thursday that participation in CAS had been lower than expected, contributing to volatility, and that considerable improvement was needed. FE

Play leading role in skilling push: Govt tells industry

Press Trust of India
Mumbai, September 4

THE GOVERNMENT has urged industry to take a leading role in transforming the country's skilling landscape through the ambitious Rs 60,000 crore PM-Skill initiative to drive India's energy and industrial transformation.

The Pradhan Mantri Skill Development and Employment Transformation through Upgraded ITEs (PM-Skill) scheme envisages enhancing the overall quality and relevance of vocational training with upgraded labs, machines, and industry-aligned curriculum in the country.

Speaking on the concluding day of Bharat Electricity 2026, co-located with POWERGEN India and Indian Utility Week on Thursday, Debashree Mukherjee, Secretary, Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE), outlined the government's vision for a future-ready workforce equipped to drive India's energy and industrial transformation.

She noted that industry partners will now have a con-

trolling 51% stake in Section 8 companies managing IT clusters, with the government and states providing the bulk of funding and industry's 17% share eligible under CSR. This model puts curriculum design, technology adoption, and skill development directly in industry's hands, ensuring our workforce keeps pace with the demands of the energy and manufacturing sectors, Mukherjee added.

She also cited ArcelorMittal's leadership in the Vizag cluster as a benchmark for transformation. Organised by The Energy & Climate Initiatives Society (ENCIS), Bharat Electricity, POWERGEN India & Indian Utility Week 2026 concluded on Thursday, bringing together over 15,000 professionals, 250 exhibitors, and 150 global thought leaders from over 40 countries. The event highlighted India's energy transition, next-generation utility solutions, and the critical importance of workforce development, innovation and collaborative innovation to power the nation's future.

FX reserves surge to new all-time high of \$740.8 bn

Reuters
Mumbai, September 4

INDIA'S FOREIGN exchange reserves climbed to another record high of \$740.8 billion in the week to August 28, central bank data showed on Friday, boosted by heavy inflows from special schemes to attract dollar inflows into the country.

India's FX pile has risen for nine straight weeks, jumping by almost \$75 billion during this period, with the latest figure comfortably surpassing \$729.33 for week ended August 21.

In June, India unveiled discounted hedging facilities for overseas borrowings by state-run firms and banks, and a free-of-cost hedging facility for banks to raise overseas FX deposits.

The Reserve Bank of India received over \$136 billion under these schemes between June 5 and August 31, including about \$127 billion from non-resident Indian deposits.

For the week, the rupee rose 0.3% against the dollar to 95.3775.

The inflow will give the RBI strong spot FX reserves which can be used to stabilise or strengthen the rupee, HSBC said in a note.

Changes in foreign currency assets, expressed in dollar terms, include the effect of appreciation or depreciation of other currencies held in its reserves.

Foreign exchange reserves include India's Reserve Tranche position in the International Monetary Fund.

BRIEFLY

RBI absorbs Rs 6.02 lakh cr as liquidity surplus hits record high

Mumbai: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday absorbed over Rs 6.02 lakh crore from the banking system through two variable rate reverse repo (VRRR) auctions as surplus liquidity remained at a record high. The central bank received and accepted bids worth Rs 5,41,975 crore in a three-day VRRR auction against the notified amount of Rs 7 lakh crore. The auction was conducted at a cut-off rate of 5.24%. PTI

SEBI moves to recover Hindenburg trade gains

New Delhi: The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has started hearing representations as it seeks to recover gains from trades it suspects benefited from prior knowledge of Hindenburg Research's scathing report about Adani Group, two people with knowledge of the matter said. The SEBI in 2024 said US-based Kingdon Capital Management built short positions in Adani-related stocks through a Mauritius-based fund linked to Kotak International before Hindenburg published its report. REUTERS

SEBI, ESMA ink pact to boost cooperation

New Delhi: Market regulator SEBI and its European counterpart ESMA have inked a pact to deepen regulatory cooperation and information sharing on central counterparties (CCPs) under the Indian market watchdog's oversight. The MoU replaces an earlier pact signed between the two regulators on June 21, 2017. The pact provides a framework for SEBI and ESMA to cooperate in line with their respective laws and regulations. PTI

Norms allowing e-comm cos to keep inventory notified by govt

New Delhi: The Department of Economic Affairs under the finance ministry has notified changes in FDI norms to allow e-commerce firms to maintain inventory only for export purposes. These firms will have to export goods manufactured or produced in India. Also, FDI in inventory-based e-commerce retailing has not been permitted. The department in a September 2 notification has added a provision in this regard in the Foreign Exchange Management (Non-debt Instruments) Rules, 2019. PTI

MARKETS

Sensex	NIFTY	Gold	US Dollar
76,515.43	23,897.70	₹1,54,884	₹94.49
362.57	24.25	Silver	Oil
0.48%	0.10%	₹2,35,456	\$99.35

NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER INDIA BULLION AND JEWELLERS ASSOCIATION DATA. GOLD PER 10G, SILVER PER 1KG. CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF SEPTEMBER 2, 2026

MINUTES IS NOT YET AS OPERATIONALLY SOUND AS BLINKIT, ACCORDING TO UBS

Flipkart Minutes closes in on Blinkit's order value

ENS Economic Bureau
Bengaluru, September 4

FLIPKART'S QUICK commerce arm Minutes has narrowed the gap with market leader Blinkit on order value, with its strength in mobiles and electronics pushing its overall basket above the incumbent's, according to channel checks by UBS.

Excluding mobile phones, Minutes' net order value stands at Rs 500-530, marginally below Blinkit's average net order value of Rs 518 in Q1FY27, the checks showed. Including mobile phones, Minutes' order value is higher than Blinkit's, reflecting Flipkart's established position in mobiles and electronics. Swiggy's Instamart reported a net average order value of Rs 508 in Q1FY27, leaving all three platforms clustered within a narrow



Flipkart is now using Minutes to draw customers for fresh, beauty and personal care and other immediate-use categories. REUTERS

band. Amazon's quick commerce arm Amazon Now seems to be lagging well behind, at an average order value of Rs 400-450, despite growing from Rs 260-300 in UBS' April 2026 checks, the report added. That is

a gross figure, and would fall further on a net basis, making the gap wider than it appears. Minutes' category mix was more mobile-heavy in its first year but has since broadened. Flipkart is now using the plat-

Q1FY27 NUMBERS

MINUTES' NET order value stands at Rs 500-530, excluding mobile phones, while Blinkit's net average net order value was Rs 518

MINUTES' CATEGORY mix was more mobile-heavy in its first year but has since broadened

MINUTES IS not yet as operationally sound as Blinkit, with gross margins still trailing

form to draw customers into its ecosystem for fresh, beauty and personal care and other immediate-use categories, reversing a migration in which shoppers had increasingly turned to standalone quick commerce apps for

such purchases, the report added. In locations where Minutes is live, 40-45% of customers visiting Flipkart also visit Minutes. Metro markets contribute 60-65% of demand, with north India accounting for slightly under a third and south India scaling rapidly, it added.

Minutes is not yet as operationally efficient as Blinkit, according to the checks, with gross margins still below the market leader's seven cost per order in most cities has moved closer to Blinkit and Instamart levels. Its advertising revenues are broadly in line with leading peers. On pricing, UBS' tracker showed Minutes cut discounts by 20-60 basis points month-on-month in August to 22% on its core offering and 23% on XtraSaver, against 18-19% at Blinkit and 21% at both Instamart and Zepto. FE

CIBIL, Equifax, CRIF fined by RBI for late compensation

New Delhi: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday said it had fined TransUnion CIBIL, CRIF High Mark, and Equifax Rs 26.8 lakh, Rs 6.9 lakh, and Rs 1.2 lakh, respectively, for providing delayed compensation to complainants.

This came after a statutory inspection of the three credit bureaus' positions at the end of 2024-25.

The central bank also levied a fine of Rs 6.2 lakh on Hinduja Leyland Finance for not having a board-approved policy on pricing of mortgage loans and undertaking activities "in the nature of 'synthetic securitisation'". Sammaan Finserv was fined Rs 4.2 lakh for not reporting borrower credit data to the Central Repository of Information on Large Credits. ENS

India's tightrope walk on Brics finance

The Brics summit next week will test India's ability to navigate the changing currency landscape as it seeks to de-risk from the dollar



SHYAM SARAN

India wants to de-risk itself from the US dollar-dominated global currency and financial system. But it also wishes to avoid provoking the United States' ire by its participation in any so-called "de-dollarisation" initiatives.

It has taken the route of billing its actions as motivated by the desire to save on transaction costs entailed in currency exchange, achieving greater efficiency, and incorporating advanced technology in handling financial transactions. It is keen to showcase its own advances in digital payment systems and digital public infrastructure — or what's called the India Stack. US President Donald Trump has threatened to levy 100 per cent tariffs on Brics countries if they are party to any initiative to create a Brics currency or to bypass the dollar financial eco-

system. This is one challenge.

The other is not to be drawn into an alternative China-led global currency and finance system of which the mBridge project is a centre-piece. This is a network of the central banks of China, the Hong Kong Monetary Authority, Malaysia, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, who have linked their central bank digital currencies (CBDC) on blockchain ledger system pioneered by China, to allow virtually instant cross-border financial transactions. The pilot phase of mBridge is now over and its commercial launch is imminent. This coincides with the convening of the Brics summit on September 12-13 in New Delhi and will influence its deliberations.

India has made two proposals. The governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said on August 10, "Cross-border payments is an area of interest for all of us, including the Brics, because we feel there is a lot of scope for reducing costs. Various options are on the table but it is still at a discussion stage, including CBDCs and linkage to fast payment systems."

India is a founding member of NEXUS, a multilateral initiative that connects domestic instant payments systems globally to enable fast, secure and near-instant cross-border retail



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

payments. NEXUS currently has Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand as member states.

It is reported that the European Central Bank is considering a proposal to link its own Euro-wide Target Instant Payment System (TIPS) with NEXUS.

NEXUS has been promoted and handled by the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) Innovation Hub in Singapore. The mBridge project was also steered by BIS until it left in October 2024.

It appears that the RBI is recommending a NEXUS-like network for Brics as a parallel system. Since NEXUS incorporates Western compliance and regulatory provisions, it is unlikely to be of interest to China and Russia.

The BIS is involved in another parallel project, called AGORA, for linking CBDCs of G7-plus countries, including the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the central banks of the United Kingdom, France, Japan, Korea, Mexico and Switzerland. In

contrast to mBridge, AGORA has 40 private participants and the international messaging system for banks, SWIFT, is a member of the BIS working group designing the project. This is obviously a rival to mBridge, the big difference being that mBridge does away with the correspondent banking system, while AGORA is layered over it. mBridge enables escape from sanctions. AGORA seeks to retain that instrumentality. One should consider mBridge as only one component of the Chinese

efforts to achieve the internationalisation of its currency, the yuan. There are parallel institutional and procedural transactions.

One is the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), which provides both an inter-bank messaging system like SWIFT and a clearing and settlement system. It does not seek to supplant SWIFT, but provides an efficient alternative, taking advantage of China's role as the world's largest trading nation and increasingly as a significant source of investment. It makes sense for partner countries to opt for yuan-designated transactions to avoid exchange risk. Increasingly CIPS also avoids sanctions risk since, unlike SWIFT, it is not subject to US or Western regulation and control. This is why both Russia and Iran now use CIPS almost exclusively for their cross-border financial transactions.

The Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported on June 11 that in early April, when Mr Trump threatened to bomb Iran back to the Stone Age, CIPS set a record for transactions in a single day, totalling \$180.3 billion, almost double the daily volume of February. This was because more oil producing Gulf countries scaled up their share of yuan settlement, to de-risk from the US dollar. Yuan-denominated settlement accounted for a significant 41 per cent of West Asia crude oil trade with China in March. This trend is likely to continue.

A new development is China's initiative to build a global network of gold vaults, taking advantage of the trend towards central banks holding larger proportions of their foreign

exchange reserves in gold. The value of central bank gold reserves exceeded that of dollar reserves for the first time this year. The first offshore gold delivery vault was launched in Hong Kong last year under an agreement with the Shanghai Gold Exchange, with the Bank of China's Hong Kong branch as its designated operator. The Shanghai Gold Exchange also launched its two yuan-denominated gold contracts, which can be settled either in gold or through bank transfer. The plan is to set up similar vaults in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Dubai, Riyadh and Moscow.

The Hong Kong Gold Exchange has entered into a partnership with China's Alibaba to create a state-of-the-art platform for gold clearing and delivery.

This may also provide a work-around for promoting the internationalisation of the Chinese currency. If the yuan is freely convertible into gold and gold is internationally tradeable then, indirectly convertibility of the currency is achieved in practice.

We are heading towards a world of multiple currencies and a la-carte payment systems, with the dollar retaining an edge because of the depth of US financial markets and the legacy dominance of global banking and insurance by Western entities, which have deep interlinkages with the US. China has made significant in-roads into this financial world. The challenge for India lies in navigating this more complex landscape to its best advantage. The forthcoming Brics summit will test its navigation skills.

The writer is a former foreign secretary

The GDP number puzzle



VIEWPOINT DEVANGSHU DATTA

The preliminary estimates of gross domestic product (GDP) for the first quarter (Q1FY27) beat consensus, showing 7.8 per cent growth. There has been controversy about the numbers, including a claim GDP growth was below 3 per cent.

This is a new series. The base-year was reset to 2022-23 from 2011-12. There are other methodological changes. Preliminary estimates for Q1FY26, released in August 2025 under the old series had estimated 7.8 per cent GDP growth. Under the new series, this has been revised down to 6.9 per cent. This wasn't the only revision. After 2022-23 (FY23) replacing the earlier FY22 base, GDP growth for FY24 was revised down from 9.2 per cent to 7.2 per cent. The FY25 growth over FY24 was increased from 6.5 per cent to 7.1 per cent. Nominal GDP for FY26 was reduced by over 3 per cent.

The nominal growth in Q1FY27 over Q1FY26 was 10.3 per cent. After applying the GDP deflator, real GDP growth was estimated at 7.8 per cent. The deflator is, therefore, about 2.3 per cent. That appears low. The consumer price index (CPI) ran at near or above 4 per cent through April-June 2026, and the wholesale price index (WPI) ran at above 9 per cent.

The baskets and weights for the two indices are different. But raw material costs, as reflected in the WPI,

rose faster than finished goods. This leads to an anomaly, given a key methodological change. India is now using a double-deflation calculation, where a final output — a mobile phone, for example — is deflated, and its components — electronics, glass, etc. — are also deflated separately. Earlier only the final product would have been deflated.

When input costs rise faster than the cost of a final good, double deflation may cause a paradox. The manufacturing sector can have a negative deflator, even if everything becomes more expensive. Incidentally, this fits with commentary from corporate managements that has made many references to "margin pressures" in Q1FY27. In effect, companies have not been able to fully pass on rising input costs.

In Q1FY27, manufacturing gross value added or GVA grew 7.7 per cent at current prices, and at 9.2 per cent at constant prices, odd as that seems. The manufacturing sector deflator was, therefore, about minus 1.4 per cent, marking the surge in commodity prices caused by the Iran war. Using single-deflation, the manufacturing sector would have been shrinking and reported GDP growth would have been lower.

Given a new series, new methodology, and paradoxes, it's useful to apply the Li Keqiang Index. The late Chinese Premier tracked three variables strongly correlated with economic activity, in preference to GDP data.

One is electricity consumption. In Q1FY26, electricity consumption fell 1.5 per cent Y-o-Y. This was an extraordinary drawdown, of an order not seen since the Covid lockdowns. The low power demand was attributed to a very wet year, which reduced cooling demand.

In Q1FY27 electricity consumption was up 8.4 per cent Y-o-Y off that low base. Rainfall was in deficit in Q1FY27. That led to higher cooling needs, though there is no easily accessible study of how much cooling demand contributed to power consumption. But even if we make generous allowances for cooling demand, and adjust for the low base, power data supports the growth thesis.

Li's second variable is freight volumes. Rail freight volumes grew 2 per cent Y-o-Y in Q1FY26, and by 1.46 per cent Y-o-Y in Q1FY27. Both numbers are lower than expected from an economy growing at speed. But port traffic grew at a rate of somewhere close to 9 per cent in Q1FY27, and that was off a high base in Q1FY26. Maybe the Railways has lost traffic share?

The third variable is bank credit. In Q1FY26, bank credit grew by 9.5 per cent Y-o-Y. In Q1FY27, bank credit

offtake grew 20 per cent. There were changes in reporting standards. Like-for-like, bank credit expansion in Q1FY27 is closer to 18-19 per cent. That is still significant and supports the growth thesis.

It is counterintuitive to see a negative deflator when there is high inflation. The inverse situation will also be counterintuitive. As and when the prices of crude, gas and other commodities fall, price indices will fall but the deflator may spike if final goods show higher inflation than the inputs. It will take a while to develop a gut-feel for the methodology. It may make sense to focus with some rigour on the Li Keqiang approach and maybe try to expand the list of high-speed variables.

The writer is a New Delhi-based independent journalist

Blended fuel and BJP's mileage

While EBP may be a great idea, it needed three to four years of preparation. Now, the result is a sugar shortage, imports that are bleeding foreign exchange, and higher prices in the festive season

The debate over whether India's gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 7.8 or 2.6 per cent in the first quarter has made our prime time angrier than usual. Sergio Gor must have enjoyed the spectacle of competitive name-calling as studio warriors turned into economists overnight. Great fun till it lasts. But politically, this is the wrong debate. In any case, it will be over soon since we're already well past two-thirds of the second quarter.

Why is this the wrong debate and, if so, what's the right one? It's wrong not just because it's transient but because in this polarised environment people will passionately believe what their politics dictate. No voter will change their mind on account of GDP data. The debate that matters is entirely different: The anger over ethanol blending.

A lot of the vehicle-owning class, mostly the Hindu middle class, is a committed Modi-Shah Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) vote bank. They're furious. We haven't seen any polls on this, but over the past several months now, I've met scores of people, complete strangers at airports, weddings, hotel lobbies, visitors, Uber drivers, all united in anger. Their gripe: How the hell can they force ethanol-blended petrol (EBP) down my throat?

A large majority would've defended the Modi government's growth numbers with equal passion. Translated, it means that the "base" this BJP takes so seriously is furious with it over just this one issue. Of course, they all believe we won't see a recession, and their leader is held in awe by the world, including Putin and Xi. "Yes we just saw at Biskkek". Then why punish me with this "adulterated" petrol? Broadly speaking, here are their questions:

- What benefit do I get? I pay the same price, but get less mileage, as the government admits. Further, it might damage the engine while I'm still paying EMIs.
- What benefit does my country get? If there's any, why am I not being told?
- Why am I not given a choice? First, nobody tells me why I should use EBP. Then I'm told to take it, or take a walk. Literally.
- Who's benefiting from my suffering or sacrifice?

These are good, important questions and the government probably has the answers. It's surprising how it hasn't cared to take its voters into confidence. Nobody prepared the consumer for this change. Just a panoply of ministers now being lined up to explain the benefits — to the farmer, in foreign exchange savings, and in emission reduction — make no impact. If

there's one thing the BJP's base is angry about, besides the repeated examination scams, it's EBP.

Since 2014, the middle class, with a vast Hindu majority, has been the Modi government's most steadfast vote bank. It's been so loyal that it voted for Mr Modi even as it fretted and fumed over high fuel prices. It was forgiving even when crude was at its lowest and the government kept on taking the cream by raising excise duties. That windfall was efficiently distributed among the poor as free grain and other direct benefits. It helped the BJP keep winning elections.

This is what I had once described as "hybridised Robin Hood": Take from the loyal middle class, distribute to the poor, and don't bother the rich. It was cheeky, yes. But the point is that it was just the "secular" parties take the Muslim vote for granted, the BJP can presume the massive Hindu middle-class vote bank. They accepted the high fuel prices because they bought into Modi's promise of Hinduised nationalism. The same voters are now angry.

Nobody ever prepared them for it. Odd for a party that takes pride in its leader's ability to sell the toughest decisions to its voters, demonetisation and the sudden nationwide Covid-19 lockdown included. Intellectually, it's been promoting the idea of "nudge" economics. For EBM, there was neither a call to action, nor a nudge.

It's as if the idea caught somebody's fancy and we serendipitously moved from 1.36 per cent blending in 2013-14 to almost 20 now. And there's heavy talk of 30 per cent.

There are two problems, however. One, the buyers are furious and have the numbers. Second, more ethanol isn't available. There isn't even enough to sustain current blending unless you start dipping deep into grain (rice) reserves. Moreover, people won't accept any more blending.

On paper, replacing imported crude with home-grown ethanol looks good. It's just that you aren't sitting on an ethanol reserve. In which case you can "drill, baby, drill" and start pumping. Your farmer has to grow it, as sugarcane, maize, or paddy.

This was an idea conjured up through years of sugar surplus. The sugar mills could recover their money and pay farmers their dues. So heady was this that sugar mills were even allowed to divert sugarcane juice to ethanol. The markets were already awash with sugar.

This was neat, except nobody gamined in the

vagaries of farming: Commodity markets, rains and, for heaven's sake, pests. Sugarcane dramatically went from surplus to scarcity within a single cropping year, particularly as red rot (fungus) and top borer (insect) sucked away the yields.

This season began with opening sugar stocks lower by five million tonnes (over 34.3 MT base), and they are trending towards 28. The result is a nearly 50 per cent increase in sugar prices. Expectedly, the old movie has been played out: Stock controls, attack on "hoarding and profiteering," ban of exports, opening up duty-free imports. Can we let sugar prices shoot up with the festive season upon us? Are you serious?

Over time, as ethanol procurement was hiked breathlessly, from 380 million litres in 2013-14 to 12,000 million litres this year, refiners turned to maize. And then the maize prices went up nearly 30 per cent. This presages higher dairy, poultry and meat prices as maize goes into the feed. Now came the turn of paddy. First, broken rice, and then any surplus rice. This is being sold by a government desperate to keep the blending on with 7.5 million tonnes of rice allocated for fuel this year, at about half the market price.

I pick much of this data from Harish Damodaran and Ashok Gulati's fine insights in *The Indian Express*. Let me sum it up for you. While EBP may be a great idea, since it depended on agriculture, to persuade the farmer to change crop choice, to create a market, to ensure that we do not fall short of any essential commodity and walk into the food-versus-fuel trap and, finally, convince the consumer of blended petrol. Ideally, give them a choice, with blended petrol significantly cheaper. That's easily done by adjusting excise duties.

The result now: There's sugar shortage, foreign exchange is bleeding, prices are up in festive season, you are diverting rice buffer stocks at nearly half the price for EBP. Of course, the "influencer" community is monetising this as the angry and confused millions watch.

In many ways, this underlines the Modi government's approach on several key issues. In the past, especially after demonetisation and farm bills (which I supported editorially), we have compared the Modi government's shock-and-awe decision-making to a paratrooper who jumps without checking the parachute. Once the government's mind is made up, there is no patience for boring old "staff work," or some war gaming. It is dismissed as bureaucratic nonsense and "Congress-style" analysis paralysis.

Something similar has happened with EBP. We are short of sugar, ethanol, and prices of everything involved are going up, including crude oil. Another rollback should be on the cards, even if partial, to either reduce blending to 10 per cent or offer consumers a choice. Remember this anger comes from committed BJP voters.

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No fear of the future



TICKER MIHIR S SHARMA

It is surprising that our lives are not already suffused by worries about the long-term effects of artificial intelligence (AI). AI is unlike any technology that we have ever seen before, and yet there is a remarkable complacency about its effects.

One relatively well understood reason for this difference from what has gone before is that it will likely

have a different impact on the labour force than any of its transformative predecessors. All of those — from the steam engine to electricity to information technology — wound up increasing the returns to human capital enjoyed by the moderately skilled white-collar worker.

AI, by comparison, threatens to turn these individuals out of the workforce completely. This would entirely rework social hierarchies.

It was commonplace a few years ago for people to worry about the impact that robotics would have on the prospects of skilled workers on the shop floor. And certainly, fewer such workers are required these days, when normalised by the value of output created. But it is hard to make the case, either, that the overall number of factory workers has decreased in the world once the

People's Republic of China is taken into account. In fact figures from the United Nations Industrial Development Organization suggest that manufacturing employment went up from 448 million in 2015 to 477 million persons in 2022. And, indeed, it seems that for certain workers — skilled factory workers, supervisors and foremen in specialised fields like semiconductors, metallurgy and pharmaceuticals — there is a severe shortage. The widely reported news that the South Korean conglomerate SK Hynix had paid bonuses of more than \$500,000 to its workers certainly lends some credence to this belief.

Currently, certainly, it looks like the white-collar worker is more endangered by technology than her blue-collar colleague. Again, this is not the usual case for technical change, which economists have shown is usually skill-biased.

Nor has the possible impact on another influential, if much smaller, class of individuals been before. Creative workers. Other transformations have increased their reach. The printing press made it possible to make a living from writing: electricity and the mass media allowed them unprecedented control over the national and global narrative; the communications revolution allowed influencers to emerge from anywhere in the world.

What happens when AI begins to compose music, or direct short films, better than these individuals? For those without any particular aesthetic sensibility whatsoever — a depressingly large proportion of your Facebook friends, for example — AI-created content is already supplanting the tired forwards and recycled memes that provided them with entertainment and edification. It will shortly start climbing up the

accomplishment ladder.

On Spotify and other music-streaming platforms, it is already hard to tell apart AI music from the regular overproduced slop churned out by the music industry. AI movies are still some distance away — though Elon Musk has promised us an all-AI, non-woke *Odyssey* before the end of the year — but you can go on YouTube and watch any number of AI-constructed trailers today. Almost all of them are appalling and unwatchable. But there are already some of genuine quality, including some superb parodies. One such AI-using creator, who skillfully reconstructs trailers for such staples of pop culture as the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* movies in the style of, say, North Korean propaganda or Balenciaga advertisements,

has tens of millions of views.

The implications of the very real possibility that AI will put the entire creative industry out of work are worth considering. On the one hand, it means that future iterations of AI will be forced to recreate new content by regurgitating the old — including all the current AI-generated, low-quality slop that gets thousands of views. We should fear that this will cause a spiral to the bottom in quality, rather than a race to the top.

But also, have we considered what happens to the creative class around a technological revolution that alienates the entire creative class — the people responsible for shaping those stories? It is remarkable that we are not already surrounded by an atmosphere of deep alarm about AI,

that this existential fear is not being built into the music we consume, the books we read, and the shows we watch. Still, even if we are not now, we likely will be once the creative class discovers the level of the threat.

The final reason why one would imagine that the public sphere would be far more concerned about AI than it is emerges from the final unusual thing about AI: Those responsible for developing and profiting from it are not its owners, its creators, its parents in a sense — are the most worried about it. Regardless of their specific attitude to regulation, almost to a man (and they are all men), they have expressed concern about what AI, including truly self-generating and self-replicating AI, could do to human civilisation. This is not how James Watt sold the steam engine, Edison electricity, or Bill Gates the personal computer.

Those who know AI the best fear it the most; but somehow the rest of us don't.

Sometimes true stardom is ineffable

Beyond trophies and award snubs, Uttam Kumar's enduring appeal lies in a rare, unscripted charisma that turned a commercial movie star into a cultural icon



CULT FRICTION
SANDIP ROY

My Uttam Kumar story is merely a second-hand one.

Apparently the great Bengali movie star once came to the house next door. The son-in-law of that house knew him and had produced one of his films. My mother said she and our domestic help peeked into our neighbour's room from our living room, while discreetly hiding behind our curtains.

With Uttam Kumar's centenary on 3 September, the media has been awash with stories about him. Several Durga Puja committees in Kolkata have announced Uttam Kumar themes this year. One will have hand-painted posters of his greatest films. Another will recreate his make-up room. His niece and daughter-in-law have appeared at events and panel discussions. Even the Prime Minister devoted his last *Mann Ki Baat* address to the superstar. Some 45 years after his death at the age of 53, Uttam Kumar seems to still be a way to win hearts and minds in Bengal.

"His life offers another great lesson: Never give up," the Prime Minister said, reminding audiences that his early films flopped. But that's not really the secret to his enduring appeal. Uttam Kumar is inspiring but more importantly he is beloved.

Many cultural figures have had their centenaries in the last few years—Bhupen Hazarika, Laxman Pai, Mukesh, Mahashweta Devi, Ritwik Ghatak, to name a few. Hazarika was posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna. Uttam Kumar got no such honour in his lifetime or after his death. He didn't even get the Dadasaheb Phalke though he was the Best Actor recipient at the first National Film Awards in 1967 for

his roles in *Chiriyakhana* and *Antony Firingee*. But this is not a story about wounded Bengali pride.

When an actor becomes part of the cultural zeitgeist, awards do not really matter much. He had already won the hearts and minds of millions of Bengalis. That's why he is still on t-shirts, he is still the subject of memes, he is still part of popular culture. He was the right man at the right time. Though one could say his meteoric rise really happened after the Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen duo clicked at the box-office.

Indian films have many legendary pairings—Raj Kapoor and Nargis, Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol, M. G. Ramachandran and Jayalalithaa. But Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen remain the gold standard. In her book *Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen—Bengali Cinema's First Couple* (2013), Maitreyee B. Chowdhury writes that onscreen "even when they immersed themselves in their characters, they managed to retain their individual magnetic presence". They were never not Uttam Sen. So much so that the director had to change the original tragic ending for the 1961 film *Saptapadi*. The producer had come to Uttam Kumar with folded hands and pleaded that if Sen died in the film, he would be ruined.

In the 1950s, *bhadralok* Bengali society was "still awkward with issues of romance and intimacy," writes Chowdhury. At a time when public expression of love was still frowned upon, when the two actors gazed deep into each other's eyes or rode a scooter into the horizon, they "represented what young lovers sought from their love lives, but could not attain."

If Sen was the face that launched a thousand ships, Uttam Kumar had the smile that did the same. At the Kolkata launch of Sanghamitra Chatterjee's biography *Somitra Chatterjee and his World at the Kolkata Literary Meet* in 2025, Chatterjee's daughter Poulami said her father and Uttam Kumar were close friends but very different as actors. Uttam Kumar advised Chatterjee to not



Sharmila Tagore and Uttam Kumar in 'Nayak'.

mix so easily with the regular public, walking into petrol pumps like an *aam aadmi* and instead maintain his aura as a star. Chatterjee demurred, saying, "I'm an actor first, not a star." But his own wife remained a diehard Uttam Kumar fan, saying "Aar kaar erolam bhuban bholano hashi aachhe? Who else has a such smile that makes you forget the world?" Chatterjee would tease, "Don't I have a beautiful smile?" His wife would respond, "Just shut up. You don't even come close."

Uttam Kumar was an actor, director, producer, even composer and a colossus of the Bengali film industry. It might seem trivial to remember his smile on his centenary. Like Sen's beauty, Uttam Kumar's smile was god-given. It was not exactly a talent cultivated through hard work and study. We tend to dismiss the

power of beauty though we lead lives in thrall of beauty. Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen are a reminder of how sometimes true stardom is ineffable, something we cannot capture through dissection and analysis.

In his lifetime, Uttam Kumar was caught in the face-off between art and popular culture. Satyajit Ray did write the film *Nayak* (1966) with Uttam Kumar in mind but in the book *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* (1989), his biographer Andrew Robinson calls him "fairly disdainful" about Uttam Kumar as an actor. But he knew he was a star. In a scene Ray shot with Uttam Kumar at Howrah station, he said thousands of people turned up to watch, and even the police who were there for crowd control were watching the superstar. Ray likened Uttam to Gregory Peck, "an actor

with no acting skills, who was propelled into stardom on the strength of the fan mail he received after his first film opened." But Uttam Kumar, Ray wrote in an obituary for the star in *Sunday* magazine, "even in the most inconsequential of parts exuded confidence which Peck never did."

Now it sounds rather condescending especially when one reads the fulsome centenary tributes to his acting talent. But it is a fact that when he died, the communist government under Jyoti Basu did not allow his body to be taken to Rabindra Sadan for public viewing, allegedly because he was a star of commercial "bourgeoisie" cinema. Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee used that story to accuse the Left Front government of a great disconnect with the masses.

My parents too went to the Rashbehari crossing in south Kolkata to watch his funeral cortege. I said I didn't really have an Uttam Kumar story. I cannot even claim to have been his No. 1 fan. But I realise the man turns up in a cameo in both books I've written. In my novel *Don't Let Him Know*, middle-aged Romola steals out of the house to try and see the body of a matinee idol superstar. Though the film star is named Subir Kumar, the scene is clearly based on the death of Uttam Kumar. Like Romola, my mother too had a little diary tucked away among her saris, where she wrote down the name of every Uttam Kumar film she had seen. She maintained that list diligently as if it was a connection to the man himself.

And when I interviewed the *jatra* star and female impersonator Chapal Bhaduri while writing his biography, he told me about the time Uttam Kumar came to see a *jatra* where he was playing the mother. Moved by the scene, he asked to see the actress and was annoyed when a man, now in shirt and trousers, was brought before him. When someone explained that Chapal had played the mother, Uttam Kumar stared at him in disbelief and then hugged him to his chest. Chapal said all he could think was that this was the chest where Suchitra Sen had once rested her head. "I have no photograph of that night, no autograph. All I can say is I will never receive a greater award for my acting."

I remember how Bhaduri's face lit up when he told me that story. Just as my mother's did when she stumbled upon an Uttam Kumar film on television while browsing channels. He was an inebriated actor of extraordinary talent but he also lit up every ordinary lives with that smile. And continues to do so long after death. A smile that makes you forget the world is not a smile to be laughed away.

Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against. Sandip Roy (@sandipr) is a writer, journalist and radio host.

Stuck in a loop of bad decisions

We should blame climate change for the disaster in Nepal. But mindless construction made it much worse

Ribek Bhattacharya
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The Indian and Eurasian plates collided about 65 million years ago to begin the process that ultimately formed the Himalaya, and today, the Indian plate continues to plough into Tibet at roughly 4-5cm a year (that is about the speed of which a human fingernail grows). So, if there's one word that describes the Himalaya best, it is "friction". As the youngest and most geologically active mountain range in the world, it is also one of the crumbliest.

While the Himalaya are still growing in height, the range is simultaneously eroding at an average rate of about 2.7mm per year, with the eastern part eroding at a higher rate than the western. A combination of strong monsoon rains and steep-sided valleys are the main reasons for this, but of late, another urgent trigger has been added to this—deforestation. The latter is mainly due to the Himalaya is stressed. Into this mix, add climate change.

Once these Earth systems are tipped over the edge, it is difficult to regain the old equilibrium, especially as the world continues to get hotter, because our economic and political systems just don't want to be weaned off our fossil fuel addiction. And a steadily warming Himalaya means that the glue that holds the rocks of the highest peaks together—regular snowfall, extensive glaciation, and permafrost—is not so slowly vanishing.

UNLEASHING THE MONSTER WAVE
All this brings us to the perfect storm that

was the Nepal flash flood on 26 August. Perhaps "flash flood" is too vague a word to describe that violent tsunami that wiped out the upper reaches of the Bhote Koshi and Trishuli rivers that day. Scientists are calling it a glacier failure flood, one of the most violently overwhelming and scarily fast-moving monstrosities that can be imagined in a narrow Himalayan valley.

Around 8.37am (Nepalese time) that day, a large chunk of a hanging glacier on the north face of the Langtang Lirung peak, as well as the rock that it was sitting on, snapped off and fell thousands of feet down to the glacial moraine below. The force of the collapse sent millions of metric tonnes of rock and ice thundering into the Lende Khola Valley and the earth shook under the impact, which the US Geological Survey registered as a 5.2 magnitude earthquake. Geologists are increasingly of the opinion that this break happened because the permafrost holding the rocks together under immense pressure had thawed, rendering the entire structure unstable.

This sent a tidal wave of debris flow down the valley, travelling at about 180kmph. It took just 7 minutes for the flood to reach the China-Nepal Gyirong border checkpoint and dry port, 20km away, which straddles the point where the Lende Khola meets the Bhote Koshi. Hemmed by steep gorges, the speeding flood, nearly 150ft high, obliterated Gyirong, its extensive infrastructure and hundreds of people in seconds.

Over the next half an hour, the flood wiped out the villages of Timure and Syabu Besi (where the Bhote Koshi joins the Langtang Khola to become the Trishuli), and large parts of Trishuli valley further downstream. The more the flood destroyed, the greater was the load of mud and other debris it carried. Imagine being hit by a flood of liquid concrete, travelling at over 100kmph!

Between 9am and 3.20pm—when the flood swept away a part of Devighat, where the Trishuli joins the Narayani river—multiple villages and about 10 hydroelectric projects (HEPs) were washed away, wiping out 10% of Nepal's electricity generation. Wherever the flood encountered infrastructure obstacles, it became more violent, and this is a point we need to remember.

As of the time of writing, over a 1,000 people have been confirmed killed by the deluge, and it is highly likely that the number of casualties could well rise to 5,000 over the next few days. Even now, frantic efforts are underway to rescue 900 trapped workers at the various HEPs. Hope dwindles, even as the risk rises for rescue teams. At the point of the avalanche, two large, debris-dammed lakes have been created, and as the area gets more rainfall, the risk of these lakes bursting remains very high.

A DISASTER FORETOLD

Nobody could have forecast the glacier failure event itself, but Nepalese and Chinese authorities had been worried about the vulnerabilities of the area around Gyirong. Reuters reported that at a 27 May meeting in Kathmandu, officials from Nepal and China had discussed greater cooperation to monitor glacier-related hazards and floods, including an inventory of glacier lakes and hazard mapping. In 2025, a glacier lake in the area had suddenly released a large quantity of water, killing nine people in Nepal, with 12 people missing.

The thing is, it is sheer folly to build busy roads and huge buildings in such areas in the first place. Since Gyirong was a border transit point, a lot of trade passed down the valley, not to mention a steady stream of



(above) A village washed away in Nepal's Nuwakot, and photographs of missing persons in Kathmandu.

international tourists and pilgrims passing through that choke point in order to travel to Mt Kailash and the Mansarovar lake. The presence of so many HEPs along this fragile area of deep gorges was another act of hubris. On top of that many villages had expanded down to the very edge of the river, with some neighbourhoods constructed on drier parts of the riverbed.

It is true that Nepal contributes next to nothing in the planet-heating greenhouse gas emissions that are causing climate change, but surely someone, somewhere should have raised the alarm at taking on such unnecessary risk in the name of development. But Nepal isn't alone in this. We have seen similar scenes in the Indian Himalaya, and for the same reasons.



The flood that swept down Rishi and Dhauliganga in early February 2021 was uncannily similar to the Nepal catastrophe. Then too, a glacier and bedrock failure in the upper Rishi Ganga gorge—due to a warm winter, lack of snowfall and permafrost thaw—had unleashed a deadly torrent, which became even more destructive when it encountered HEPs downstream. At the time, when I spoke to affected villagers and climate experts, they all blamed the role played by unscientific infrastructure projects in magnifying Himalayan floods.

Last August, Dhauliganga village was washed away when an accumulating debris field in the upper Rishi Ganga river was eroded by heavy rainfall, unleashing a devastating flood that killed at least 61 people in an instant. Just like Nepal, it was a catastrophe that had been captured on numerous phone cameras. In them, it is quite clear that densely built-up parts of the village lay right on the path of the drainage channel of the Rishi Ganga.

Go even further back and we find the deadly Garhwal flood of 2013, when a lake on the Chorabari Glacier behind the Kedarnath temple burst. The death toll was staggering, with over 5,000 people killed. Even then, one of the main force multipliers of the flood was the dozens of HEP along the Alaknanda and Mandakini rivers, many of which were simply washed away.

In October 2023, one of the worst floods hit Sikkim, when a glacial lake in the South Lhonak Glacier burst, unleashing a wave over 65ft high, that surged down the Teesta river, tearing through

roads, bridges and the crucial NH10 connecting Siliguri to Gangtok, while destroying the L200MW Teesta III HEP dam at Chungthang. In fact, while driving down NH10 a few months ago, I was struck by how low the highway's elevation is, and just how close it is to the banks of a highly volatile Himalayan river.

The thing is, we never learn. It was grimly ironic to hear public officials blaming global warming for the Assam floods of July and August. As an attribution study has since shown, there's no point in blaming climate change, because the climate has already changed.

The equilibrium is now broken. In the case of Assam, we should expect cloudbursts every monsoon. But we shouldn't exacerbate the impact by building HEPs on the tributaries of the Brahmaputra in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, or by encouraging infrastructure development in exposed areas. In Uttarakhand, every monsoon, when huge crowds overwhelm fragile infrastructure during the Char Dham Yatra, we're playing Russian Roulette with people's lives.

Just as Assam's plight has now receded from view, soon the Nepal catastrophe too will be a thing of the past. But the Himalaya will continue to destabilise, glaciers will shrink, more glacier lakes will form, while existing ones will reach dangerous levels. Maybe even a rogue earthquake will spark a chain of collapse. These things are now inevitable in this warming world we live in. Highly vulnerable countries like Nepal and India have to radically re-think what constitutes development and acceptable risk in this new reality.

Vassanji traces the rise and fall of kingdoms

The award-winning Canadian writer discusses his ambitious new novel set during the era of the Delhi Sultanate but alive with the spirit of our times

Aditya Mami Jha

The Canadian writer M.G. Vassanji's latest novel (his 11th), *The Apparition*, plunges the reader head-first into the Delhi Sultanate in the early 14th century, the twilight days of Alauddin Khilji's reign. It is a kingdom beset with war, famine and religious ultra-orthodoxy, not to mention the machinations of the Sultan's deceitful, power-hungry vizier Malik Kafur. Amir Hassan al-Shirazi, the narrator-protagonist, is a Sufi poet, historian and intellectual who the Sultan himself has tasked with chronicling the history of his regime. In one scene, Hassan's friend Nazar Ben Hakim, a dealer in rare books, manuscripts and antiquities, is arrested by Khilji's clerics on suspicion of being a Baatini—a word used to describe Muslim groups that differentiate between an outer (*zahir*) and an inner (*batin*) meaning of Islamic scriptures. Vassanji, 76, was born in Kenya to Indian immigrant parents from one such community, the Khoja Ismailis.

The Apparition is divided into three sections and, to emphasise its theatrical structure, there is an exhaustive list of characters for each section at the beginning of the book. The first section ends with the fall of the Khilji regime, thanks to the arrival of 'the Avians', a hyper-intelligent and resourceful race of half-human, half-bird hybrids who conquer Delhi with minimal bloodshed. The second and third sections are about the Avians themselves; their covert agendas and the challenges they face while setting up their colonial rule. Soon, Delhi becomes a culture in flux as the Avians' influence permeates everyday life.

For example, a growing cohort of young Muslim women called the 'Newbirds' stops observing purdah, ditching their veils for flamboyant make-up modelled after female Avians. Many men are upset at first and some even assault these women, but the Avians crush them quickly and ruthlessly. Soon, the Newbirds become a fact of life in Delhi. The point here isn't to elevate one way of life as superior to another. It's to depict the ground-level push-and-pull involved with any societal reform.

"I wanted to show how an entire population reacts to change at that scale," Vassanji says during an interview in Delhi. "Most ordinary people have some taboo behaviours that they frown upon. But they're still regular folks, they're not crazy and they adapt with the times. The real fanatics, the ones who refuse change no matter what, are a small slice of the population. You can observe this everywhere across eras. If you visited the South Asian diaspora in Toronto 25 years ago, for example, you would never see the kind of gay and lesbian representation that you do today. Delhi culture also changed with the Sultanate—people (especially the elite)



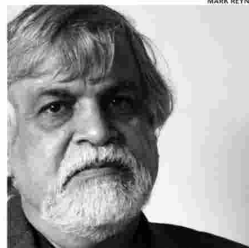
The Qutb complex in Delhi with ruins dating to the Sultanate era; and (below) M.G. Vassanji.

started speaking Persian and Turkish, and so on." Amidst this upheaval, Hassan finds solace with his fellow Sufis, especially his master Sheikh Sadruddin, who is written as the epitome of liberal, inclusive Islam. When he is twirling in circles with them, Hassan is peaceful and content, lost in a religious reverie. Sadruddin's faith gives him and his followers a palpable lightness of spirit and he is notably the only character in pre-Avian Delhi who is unafraid of Sultan Khilji. Despite repeated requests, Sadruddin refuses to meet with Khilji and instructs his followers to do the same.

"The character of Sheikh Sadruddin Auliya," says Vassanji, "he refused to go to Alauddin Khilji's court because he did not see the point. The Sufis could not submit to a human authority because they were worshipping a higher power and seeking a god within themselves. So why bother with the Sultan? I think this idea feels quaint to us today because we are cynical and besides, we are all terrified of our governments."

The meticulous characterisation of the Avians (plus their detailed lore) is one of the biggest strengths of the novel, showing us the blow-by-blow mechanics of how kingdoms rise and fall. In a lot of Islamic art, architecture and calligraphy, birds are viewed as intermediaries between earth and heaven. We see the Avians installing a wise hoopoe-woman as the new ruler of Delhi. This is evocative of a tale from the Quran, where a hoopoe acts as intermediary between Queen Sheba and King Solomon (a character associated with preternatural wisdom).

How stories and legends migrate across cultures and inform each other, therefore, is also a



MARK REYNES

recurring theme. The Avians have a version of Christ's crucifixion story, only, in this version, "Yoshua" flies away from the crucifix at the end. The Baatinis, hunted for their unconventional beliefs, are a kind of moral and theological weather-vane for *The Apparition*. Even a super-tolerant man like Hassan can't help but feel a measure of anxiety and fear about their existence. In a darkly funny scene, we are shown how orthodox Hindus and orthodox Muslims are united in their horror of Baatini traditions of worship, which explicitly incorporate Hindu, Muslim and Christian figures and themes (modern-day Ismailis continue this tradition, incorporating Hindu *bhajan* kirtans within their worship).

"Ismailis have been persecuted... in Pakistan and elsewhere largely due to ignorance and insecurity," Vassanji says. "Because of that persecution, they're trying to change in a reactionary way. Some people within our community are trying to erase parts of our belief system—what I'd call Indian culture, the culture I grew up with. So if

there's a *bhajan* that Ismailis are singing, and it has the words '*har har suam*', they will get very nervous." In his essay *Nowhere with God: Uneasy Confessions of a Syncretist* (part of the 2024 essay collection, *Nowhere, Exactly*), Vassanji had written about his upbringing in the Khoja Ismaili community and argued that a turn towards religious rigidity would end up narrowing our imagination, making us parochial and small-minded.

For a reader discovering Vassanji in 2026, I imagine many of his previous novels read like extended prophetic warnings, especially *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and the criminally underrated *Anurika* (1999). The inimitable Vikram Lall belongs to a Kenyan family of Indian origin—his father works for the British. Vikram meanwhile becomes close friends with a pair of British siblings living next-door, even as his sister falls for his Kenyan friend. He is well and truly "in-between", caught in a crossfire between several cultures. As chest-thumping nationalism is on the rise globally, Vikram's account feels like a cautionary tale, the story of a man who pays a heavy price for being loyal to people, not flags.

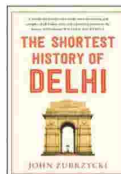
"I have this friend from Zanzibar whose family is Indian. He was a part of the Zanzibar Revolution," Vassanji says. "But after the socialist government replaced the royals, he found himself discriminated against because of his Indian heritage. Even then, the bitterness he felt was against the government, not the land he grew up in. Vikram Lall is very similar."

By the end of *The Apparition*, Hassan al-Shirazi, too, makes his peace with "in-betweenness." Like many Vassanji protagonists, Hassan becomes a bridge between the religious and the secular, the old world and the new. *The Apparition* proves, yet again, why Vassanji remains one of the most audacious investigators of post-colonial strife today. Aditya Mami Jha is a Delhi-based writer.

NEW ON SHELVES

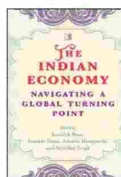
John Zubrzycki takes the reader into the speckled history of India's capital, while connecting the dots of its present maladies. From the invaders who left behind its many surviving landmarks to freedom fighters who led the struggle for independence to the pollution and civic woes, a vivid portrait comes together through deft storytelling.

The Shortest History of Delhi, by John Zubrzycki, Pan Macmillan India, 224 pages, ₹599.



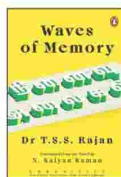
Four scholars come together in this new book to present a wide-ranging view on India's economic challenges on the cusp of a major global turning point. Based on the proceedings of a conference organised at Cornell University in 2023, this volume presents a considered view on India's place in a changing world order.

The Indian Economy: Navigating a Global Turning Point, edited by Kaushik Basu, Sonalde Desai, Ashwini Deshpande and Nirvikar Singh, Simon & Schuster India, 304 pages, ₹899.



Translated by N. Kalyan Raman from the Tamil, this memoir by the freedom fighter T.S.S. Rajan (1850-1953), paints a picture of resilience, perseverance and political astuteness. A renowned surgeon, Rajan was an ardent patriot who fought for India's independence under Mahatma Gandhi and C. Rajagopalachari.

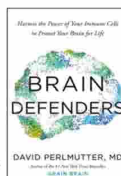
Waves of Memory, by T.S.S. Rajan, translated by N. Kalyan Raman, Penguin Random House India, 400 pages, ₹1499.



In his new book, a neurologist and best-selling writer David Perlmutter presents research into the brain's microglia, which play a key role in neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's.

Parkinson's, Long Covid and MS, among others. Apart from accessibly explaining the science behind these conditions, he also outlines a lifestyle protocol that can help improve our cognitive faculties as we age.

Brain Defenders, by David Perlmutter, Hachette, 384 pages, ₹799.



'Why am I so tired' and other stuff we ask Google

'What We Ask Google' chooses fuzzy feelings about connectedness over depth about the future of search engines

Pragya Srivastava
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About a month after the outbreak of the war in West Asia, Google searches surged for "LPG prices" and "induction cooktops", shifting away from "flight cancellations" and "Middle East airspace". People's online search behaviour could be read as a snapshot of what they were feeling and indicated how the war miles away had entered the country's kitchens.

In *What We Ask Google: A Surprisingly Hopeful History of Humankind*, Google's data editor Simon Rogers delves into billions of queries to capture a shared arc in real-time human intent and how it has evolved since 2004. However, the author's uni-dimensional focus on statistical summaries, narrated through warm lens, settles into snarkable trivia rather than an engaging story about the complex and digitised world we live in.

Across 10 thematic chapters, Rogers turns a record of unfiltered human curios-

ity, anxiety, desire, and empathy into a largely enjoyable read. He successfully maps some shifts in the world, such as search interest in "take care of parents" overtaking "take care of kids" in 2023 and more interest in "low calorie" food/drinks after 2013 compared to "low fat" in the preceding decade, pinpointing when structural changes in demography or diets began to shape online behaviour.

Through several such examples—people searching for how to calm pets during a storm or how the words "baby" and "sleep" spike around 2am—the author attempts to find common threads across different people, places, and situations. He opines that humanity has a lot more in common than one would think.

Rogers sparingly delves into the reasons behind particular search trends. For instance, he traces the search spike in "How to say thank you for an unexpected gift" in Niger to a cultural way of life. Nigeriens don't let anyone leave empty-handed, and he wonders if the English-speaking aid workers visiting the country made these queries to acknowledge gifts from its citizens. It's a hypothesis he draws though, not one substantiated by any research.

In another instance, Rogers traces how searches for food banks and similar terms were higher in the US and the UK during the post-pandemic high-inflation period, and how these trends could predict wider



The words 'baby' and 'sleep' spike in searches around 2am across the world.

economic issues—providing real-time signals until official data is released. A spike in searches for Ukrainian food in 2022 in Poland, Canada, Ireland and the UK occurred after migration to these countries took place soon after the outbreak of the war with Russia.

However, the book doesn't offer any revelations—there isn't anything surprising about parents frantically looking to get their toddler to sleep in the middle of the

night. The nature of the data, which is anonymous, limits further exploration. For example, there is no way to know whether the 2am searches are being done by women or men, or if men's participation has increased in recent years.

Beyond the understandable limitations of Google search data, the author has also kept the scope narrower than what was needed for more nuanced storytelling, by his own admission. In the chapter *Why is*

my poo green?, Rogers writes about his experience of searching for answers online when his "left eye was filled with floating spots". It prompted him to see a doctor and get laser surgery the same night. However, anyone who has ever used the internet can attest to the general frustration over a lack of accurate information on health-related queries.

Rogers side-steps addressing the accuracy of search results—and the potential harm they could do—by adding this disclaimer: "This is not a chapter about the results we get when we search. It is, however, about what we look for."

This is a lacuna felt throughout the book. Rogers chooses not to address complex issues about how helpful and accurate Google search results are, how artificial intelligence is reshaping the way people search, and how commodification and monetisation of data in a digitised world are influencing human behaviour.

His assertion that collective human experience has a lot to be hopeful about is sincere, but it ignores other dimensions of

the story. The very same private and anonymous confessions or searches about love, grief, disease and pregnancy that form the basis of the book are also used to identify behaviours and target users with advertisements. The book's anthropic storytelling is silent on tech monopolies, people's anxieties and desires being used to extract economic value.

What We Ask Google comes at a time when AI is fundamentally changing traditional search models. Users previously typed in keywords to land on a page; AI now offers them a quick summary. AI-generated content is making online interactions algorithmic, diluting authentic human instinct.

The book acknowledges AI integration, but its razor-sharp focus on search behaviour limits any exploration of how our online interactions could be shaped in the future.

Ultimately, *What We Ask Google* is not a critique of the role technology and algorithms play in shaping behaviours in a digitised society. Rogers makes a sincere attempt to weave billions of data points into a story of common human instincts, but it is aimed more at evoking nostalgia than addressing harsh realities.

What We Ask Google, by Simon Rogers, Penguin Random House, 288 pages, ₹999



the hindu businessline.

SATURDAY • SEPTEMBER 5, 2026

Gaming children

Meta's child safety curbs in US should apply here

Meta's reported \$18 billion US settlement, and its agreement to implement sweeping safety guardrails for young American users, exposes a glaring corporate double standard. While Meta moves to introduce mandatory two-hour daily caps, overnight usage blocks, and non-algorithmic feeds in the US, it has offered no such protections to Indian children, despite India being its largest single market by user base.



This cynical asymmetry should force an immediate reckoning for Indian policymakers. Reports and litigation in the US have alleged that Meta knew about the additive potential of features built into its platforms, and yet continued to use design tools that maximise engagement. This reinforces the case for Indian regulators to examine whether children are being exposed to products deliberately engineered to keep them engaged. Autoplay, endless scrolling, personalised feeds, notifications and algorithmic recommendations can turn casual use into compulsive behaviour, particularly among children whose capacity for self-regulation is still developing.

The Centre should commission an independent, evidence-based study into the impact of platforms such as Meta's Instagram and Facebook on children and adolescents. This should examine not merely screen time but the effects of algorithmic recommendations, addictive design, exposure to harmful content, online harassment and social comparison. If the evidence establishes that platforms have knowingly deployed design features that cause demonstrable harm to children, they should be held accountable. India cannot allow global technology companies to treat its vast young user base as a market in which the social costs of their business models are someone else's problem. The Centre has summoned social-media executives, issued warnings and expressed concern. But it has rarely gone beyond exhortation.

Whether it was the controversy over the misuse of personal data by data-analytics firms, the continuing challenge of child sexual abuse material on platforms such as Instagram, or the broader question of children's access to social media, the response has too often stopped at warnings, meetings and consultations. The Centre has been discussing the possibility of regulating children's access to social media, but discussion cannot substitute for policy. Australia has already moved to restrict social-media access for children under 16. The *Economic Survey* has pointed towards regulating the architecture of platforms themselves. Teen-safe defaults, stronger privacy protections, tighter controls on messaging and recommendations, and disabling features such as autoplay for young users should be considered. Platforms should also face meaningful transparency and accountability obligations, allowing regulators to scrutinise how their algorithms affect children. The fact that Meta has agreed to build safeguards in the US proves that these features are technically buildable. For too long, India has relied on voluntary compliance. It is time that regulation takes over.

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

De-funding the US military

Another round of press leaks is warning that the US military arsenal is in dire straits, and the Trump Administration is vowing to prosecute the leakers. But this news wouldn't be so damaging if President Trump and Congress were fighting harder against Democrats to address US shortfalls in naval power and ammunition. The stories that US military commanders oppose further action in Iran should be viewed warily. They are selectively released with malice aforethought to constrain Mr. Trump's options in Iran, and you can bet the regime in Tehran is reading. (NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 5)

CHINADAILY

Fostering cooperation to sustain prosperity

The Asia-Pacific Media Forum, which will open on Saturday in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, with the theme 'Building a Path to Shared Prosperity for the Asia-Pacific Community: Media Consensus and Action', comes at a time when the Asia-Pacific's economic success is being tested not only by tariffs and trade barriers but also by the stories told about them. The region needs media exchanges precisely because its economic cooperation has become too important to leave that narrative to those who see every commercial relationship through the lens of geopolitical rivalry. The journalists and media executives attending the forum have been visiting Guangzhou, Foshan, Dongguan, Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Zhongshan before the forum starts. These trips provide a walk through the physical landscape of the Chinese economy. (BEIJING, SEPTEMBER 5)

A tale of 2 'revised' price indices

CPI AND WPI. The revisions raise doubts on whether both GDP and inflation are being underestimated

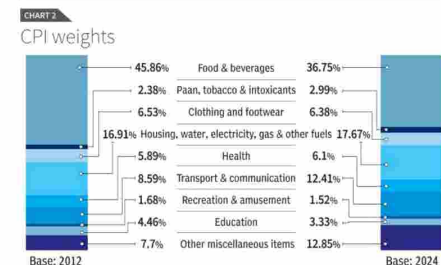
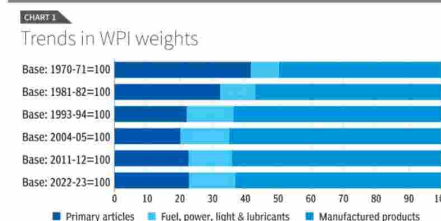


The two price indices, CPI and WPI, that form the bedrock of Indian inflation measurement have seen some familiar divergences — and unfamiliar methodological issues, thanks to base year revisions. While divergence itself is neither new nor surprising, the revisions deserve close attention. What implications would these changes bring in for inflation? How is it likely to impact growth measurement and hence policy perspectives?

First a look at the data: In July 2026, the headline CPI inched up to 4.45 per cent (provisional) from 4.38 per cent in June 2026. The CPI remained elevated above the RBI's inflation target of 4 per cent for consecutive two months. Food inflation (provisional) stood at 5.79 per cent in rural areas and 5.05 per cent in urban areas, reiterating that the increase in CPI is largely due to the increase in food prices. Time and again, with food prices being the major item that leads to changes in the CPI figures, the headline CPI numbers move considerably away from core inflation.

WPI inflation has been increasing persistently over the past six months and stood at 9.78 per cent (provisional) in July 2026. In the WPI, primary articles inflation went up further to 8.52 per cent, from 7 per cent recorded in June 2026. During the same time, fuel and power inflation decelerated from 27.41 per cent to 20.05 per cent, while manufactured products inflation inched up from 7.48 per cent to 8.29 per cent. Wholesale food inflation went up from 6.14 per cent to 6.65 per cent. It is evident that the fuel inflation, which has largely been the reason for WPI inflation in the last few months, has now been replaced by an upward inflationary trajectory in both food and manufactured products. While both the series demonstrate a higher trajectory, WPI has seen a sharp increase, not yet reflected in CPI.

WPI: CHANGES, IMPLICATIONS Now, to the revisions. Firstly, the base of CPI and WPI have been updated: WPI base to 2022-23 from 2011-12, and CPI base to 2024 from 2012. Traditionally, we attribute the divergence of the indices to factors like differences in coverage and baskets, weighting diagram and price variation at different stages of the value chain, etc. For



example, WPI has large share of manufactured products and no apparent service components. On the other hand, CPI has substantial services share and relatively small manufactured products contribution.

These two price indices are equally important for national income measurement. However, it is not clear why the revised WPI and CPI, released almost at the same time, have different base years — 2022-23 and 2024. As they are chosen as bases, both years must have been considered as a normal year. Historically, they are produced by two different Ministries. Some coordination would have helped aligning the base revision of both the indices.

Second, the weights in the new WPI series are based on the Gross Value of Output (GVO) from domestic production. This has replaced the older Net Traded Value method, which considered imports minus exports

(previous 2011-12 series). That is, the present WPI, with a GVO-based approach, gives more weightage to commodities in domestic production rather than their traded value. Thus, the present rise in WPI could represent that domestic prices are now increasing more rapidly than those exposed to global price changes.

Third, the structure and composition of Indian economy have changed dramatically post liberalisation. How then have the WPI weights remained stable during the past three decades (Chart 1)? It is plausible that broad macroeconomic proportions, such as the relative dominance of manufactured items versus primary articles, evolve gradually over the medium term. However, the stable weights witnessed since 1990s is both surprising and counter-intuitive.

CPI REVISION

The CPI series update was far more anticipated and watched by both individuals and market participants. It was the first revision after the RBI adopted a flexible inflation targeting approach in 2016 using CPI inflation as the nominal anchor. The new series adopts the Classification of Individual Consumption According to Purpose

As online purchases are increasingly shaping consumption, are we underestimating consumption/GDP to that extent?

India grew 7.8%, but did the common folk benefit?

The real question isn't whether India grew 7.8 per cent — the data confirm it — but whether the growth is broad-based

Sankalpa Bhattacharjee

India appears to have pulled off a growth miracle. Real GDP grew 7.8 per cent in Q1 FY27, exceeding the RBI's 7 per cent projection, with real GVA up 8.2 per cent, manufacturing 9.2 per cent, financial, real estate, IT and professional services 12.1 per cent, and investment demand 11.9 per cent. This happened despite conflict in West Asia, elevated oil prices, supply-chain bottlenecks, and concerns over El Niño. The government's verdict is straightforward: the Indian economy is resilient. Yet, when an economy emerges seemingly unscathed from shocks that strained households and small businesses, the real question is whether the headline numbers reflect the realities beneath the aggregates.

Nominal GDP grew 10.3 per cent against 7.8 per cent real, implying a GDP deflator of about 2.3 per cent — a broad inflation proxy that appears surprisingly low given producer-side inflation: producer prices rose 10.7 per cent in manufacturing, 4.98 per cent in agriculture, 19.5 per cent in mining, and 58 per cent in crude petroleum and natural gas. Retail inflation climbed from 3.48 per cent in April to 4.38 per cent in June — surpassing RBI's 4 per cent target and touching a 19-month high of 4.45 per cent in July. The

unusually low implied deflator, therefore, deserves scrutiny. MoSPI attributes this outcome to its double-deflation methodology, under which output and intermediate consumption are deflated separately before real value added is calculated. The approach can generate unusually low, or even negative, sectoral deflators when input prices rise faster than output prices.

LOPSIDED COMPOSITION

Even after accepting the official 7.8 per cent, its composition tempers the celebration. Financial/real-estate/IT/professional services grew 12.1 per cent (27 per cent of GVA); trade/hotels/transport 8.5 per cent (15 per cent); construction and public administration/defence/other services 7.7 and 7.5 per cent (23 per cent combined) — together 65 per cent of GVA, concentrated in urban, organised India. Agriculture, which employs far more of the workforce than its 17 per cent GVA share suggests, grew just 3.6 per cent; mining contracted. The asymmetry is familiar; growth is strongest where incomes are already high.

A deeper concern is how the informal economy is measured. MoSPI's consultations indicate the informal sector contributes roughly 45 per cent of GDP; government data show 73.2 per cent of non-agricultural workers remain



THE CHALLENGE. Converting growth into development

in informal enterprises. Because informal activity cannot be fully measured every quarter, GDP estimation still leans on a benchmark-indicator methodology, under which benchmark estimates are extrapolated from formal-sector indicators such as GST collections, listed-company results, banking data, etc.

This works when the two move together; a formal sector plausibly more insulated from this quarter's oil shock than the informal one means the extrapolation risks overstating nominal GDP — and, for any given deflator, real GDP too.

Real private consumption grew 7.1 per cent, well below investment's 11.9 per cent; investment's share of GDP rose from 31.4 to 34.3 per cent, while household consumption's share slipped from 55.8 to 55.6 per cent. Growth leaned more on investment than on

(COICOP 2018), replacing the earlier structure comprising six broad groups. The revised weights reflect updated household expenditure patterns as captured in the HCES 2023-24. At the all-India level, the number of weighted items has increased from 299 to 358. Within this, goods items have increased from 259 to 308, while services items have increased from 40 to 50; some of the pertinent newer items include rural housing, online media or streaming services, value-added dairy products, barley and its products, pen drives and external hard drives, babysitting services and exercise equipment.

Importantly, in terms of price collection, e-commerce prices have been introduced as an additional market in 12 large towns with populations exceeding 25 lakh. In the new series, the share of food and beverages has declined from 45.86 per cent to 36.75 per cent, though it continues to remain the largest component in the CPI basket (Chart 2). However, a close reading of the CPI revision document as well as the HCES 2023-24 reveal that the new CPI weightage, particularly for food, does not capture the changes in consumption due to online purchases. This may result in the food weight and food inflation being underestimated in the new CPI. If the CPI continues to underestimate food inflation, then the divergence of inflation between the two series is not unexpected even for common items.

EFFECT ON GDP

In India's new GDP series (base year 2022-23), the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) uses the HCES 2022-23 as a direct national benchmark to track item-wise Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE) and reshape quarterly distribution patterns. However, as stated earlier, HCES 2022-23 does not capture consumption from online purchases. As online purchases are increasingly shaping consumption, are we underestimating consumption/GDP to that extent? It may so happen that the effect of unprecedented increase in UPI transactions is not captured in the nominal GDP. While earlier we were concerned that GDP not appropriately capturing the informal/unorganised sector, there is now an increasing unease of missing economic transactions coming from the formal sector, too. This has direct implications for both GDP and inflation. (Das and Roy Trivedi, April 17, 2026, *businessline*). So, even with new base revisions, are we underestimating both output and inflation?

Das is ICICI Bank Chair Professor, IIM Ahmedabad, Trivedi is Associate Professor, National Institute of Bank Management. Views are personal

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

Labour reforms

Agitates 'Work in progress' (September 4), the uncertainty surrounding the Supreme Court's interpretation of the definition of industry deserves careful attention. Labour laws must protect workers without creating unnecessary ambiguity for businesses operating in a changing economy. The government should therefore move quickly to clarify the relevant provisions of the Industrial Relations Code and ensure that judicial principles are applied consistently.

Any reform must strike a fair balance between flexibility for enterprises and adequate safeguards for employees. Clear statutory language, supported by timely rules and guidance, would reduce avoidable litigation. Labour reform must create a framework that serves both economic growth and social justice.

A Myilashi

Cumbatore

India-Belgium ties

The expanding India-Belgium engagement comes at a crucial

nexus of global economic realignment. For India, Belgium serves as more than a diplomatic partner: it is an irreplaceable logistics hub for European markets and a global centre for advanced technologies, clean energy and critical minerals. To maximise dividends both nations must move rapidly from policy declarations to joint execution, particularly in defence manufacturing integration, green hydrogen and resilient supply chains for critical minerals. Strengthening academic and

skill-exchange programmes will further anchor this commercial synergy.

AC Vineth Kumar

Thrissur, Kerala

Women-focussed policies

This is with reference to 'Women's empowerment — schools and beyond' (September 4). It is surprising that some of the states with high per capita income have lagged behind in bridging the gender gap. There has been considerable evidence to suggest that greater

women's participation results in better outcomes for economic and social development. These high per capita States could have benefited from greater policy attention on programmes directed at reducing stunting among children under age of five, improving girls' school education and bridging the gender gap. The wide disparities among States in gender-related outcomes reflect differences in their economic, social and policy environments.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

Hyderabad

Economy

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2026

IN THE NEWS

CBIC RELAXES DOCUMENTATION NORMS UNDER EMI SCHEME

THE CENTRAL BOARD of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) has "substantially reduced" the data and documentation requirements for businesses that opt for the Eligible Manufacturer Importer (EMI) scheme. The simplified documentation process for enrolment under the scheme will come into effect from September 15, the CBIC said in a circular. The FY27 Union Budget had introduced a new facilitation measure for trusted manufacturers by enabling the facility of deferred payment of Customs duty to a new category of importers called Eligible Manufacturer Importers (EMIs).

Jaishankar in Poland, discusses trade, defence

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER S Jaishankar and Poland's Deputy Prime Minister **Radoslaw Sikorski** held wide-ranging talks on Friday, focusing on trade and investment, space, AI, semiconductors, defence and energy, as well as the complex global challenges and conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia.

NFRA sets up advisory panel on audit quality

NATIONAL FINANCIAL REPORTING AUTHORITY (NFRA) has set up a nine-member advisory committee on audit quality, assurance and technology. Former RBI Deputy Governor **Shyamala Gopinath** and ex-Sebi Whole Time Member **Ananth Narayan** are among the panel members.

Punjab govt to hike DA of 85,000 employees to 60%

PUNJAB WILL RAISE the dearness allowance of around 85,000 government employees recruited after July 17, 2020 from 42% to 60%, Cabinet Minister **Aman Arora** said.

AGENCIES

TAX REVENUES GROW AROUND 12%, BORROWINGS DECLINE

States' capex growth halves till July

Monsoon, lack of extra tax devolution weigh on investments

PRASANTA SAHU
New Delhi, September 4

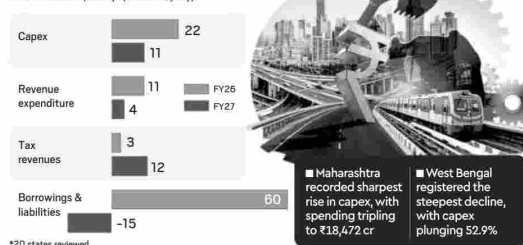
STATES' AGGREGATE CAPITAL expenditure (capex) likely grew at half the pace in April-July of the current financial year compared with the year-ago period, partly due to monsoon-induced slowdown.

Going by the finances of 20 large states reviewed by *FE*, their capex during April-July FY27 rose 10.7% year-on-year to ₹1.79 lakh crore, compared with 21.8% growth in the same period of FY26. The moderation could also partly stem from only four tranches of tax devolution being shared with the states in April-July 2027, compared with five in the year-ago period.

However, stronger tax revenue growth, lower borrowings and the likely front-loading of tax devolution in the coming months could provide

INVESTMENTS SLUMP

State finances in April-July* (Growth % y-o-y)



states with greater fiscal space to step up capex in the remaining months of FY27.

The 20 states analysed by *FE* are Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Bihar, Rajasthan, Odisha, West Bengal, Punjab, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Haryana, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

Maharashtra recorded the sharpest increase in capex, with spending more than tripling to ₹18,472 crore from ₹6,000 crore a year earlier. Punjab also more than tripled its capex to ₹4,299 crore, albeit from a much lower base. Kerala recorded a 69.1% increase, while capex rose 58% in Chhattisgarh and 54.9% in Telangana. Among the larger spending states, Gujarat remained the

biggest spender, with capex rising 10.9% to ₹23,612 crore. Madhya Pradesh, despite spending ₹18,102 crore, recorded a 21.2% decline in capex, while Uttar Pradesh's capex fell 3.8% to ₹18,049 crore.

West Bengal registered the steepest decline, with capex plunging 52.9% to ₹1,670 crore, underscoring its fiscal constraints.

Bihar's capex declined 40.5%, while Jharkhand and Haryana recorded declines of 31.5% and 25.1%, respectively.

Revenue expenditure across the 20 states rose just 4% during April-July 2026-27, sharply lower than the 11% growth recorded in the year-ago period.

In contrast, tax revenue growth accelerated to 12% from just 3% in the corresponding period of FY26.

The states' borrowings and liabilities declined 15% YoY during April-July FY27, reversing a 60% increase in the year-earlier period. The decline indicates lower reliance on borrowings amid stronger tax collections.

The Centre is encouraging states and public sector enterprises to maintain the momentum in capex to support economic activity, even as private-sector capital expenditure shows signs of gaining traction.

The Centre's own capital expenditure grew a robust 30% YoY during April-July of the current financial year.

WATERLOGGING AT DELHI AIRPORT



Airport staff inspect the waterlogging condition at Indira Gandhi International Airport (IGIA) after heavy rainfall, in New Delhi on Friday. A source said there was excess water inside Terminals 2 and 3, which was later cleared. At least 11 flights were diverted and more than 400 flights were delayed at the Delhi airport on Friday due to bad weather conditions. IGIA is the country's busiest airport and handles more than 1,300 flight movements daily.

ANI

QUICKPICKS

CAQM assessing intensity of stubble fires

TO CURB AIR pollution during winters in Delhi-NCR, the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) has begun to assess the intensity of stubble fires in Haryana and Punjab instead of just relying on fire counts. A senior CAQM official told *PTI* that the statutory body is also focusing on measuring land area affected by stubble fires, called burnt area, and having a well-defined protocol in place to do so.

PTI

Maritime regulator starts seafarer tracking module

THE DIRECTORATE GENERAL of Maritime Administration (DGMA) has launched a Seafarer Tracking Module on the eNAVIG Portal, in view of the prevailing geopolitical tensions and heightened maritime security threats. DGMA in a circular said the module also provides region-wise data on vessels and seafarers, facilitating enhanced maritime coordinated response during emergencies.

PTI

E-way bills rise 7.7% in August

SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, September 4

THE NUMBER OF e-way bills generated under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime rose 7.7% year-on-year (YoY) to 139.1 million in August, according to data from the GST Network. Sequentially, however, e-way bill generation declined 0.5% from 139.8 million in July.

In July, e-way bill generation had increased 6% YoY, marking the slowest growth in 45 months.

An e-way bill is an electronic GST document required for the movement of goods valued at more than ₹50,000. Growth in e-way bill generation is considered a leading indicator of economic activity and domestic trade.

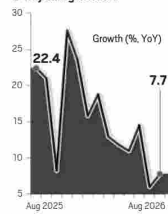
"The sustained rise in e-way bill generation figures clearly reflects that the growth momentum in India's organised economy remains firmly intact. This consistent upward trend is a strong signal of underlying economic resilience, driven by improved compliance, formalisation of business activity, and steady consumption demand across sectors," said Saurabh Agarwal, tax partner at EY India.

"Building on this positive trajectory, it is reasonable to expect that collections in September are likely to be even more robust, as the country

IN NUMBERS



E-way bills generated



moves into the festive season," Agarwal said.

A rise in e-way bill generation generally points to stronger GST collections in the subsequent month, as a significant portion of the underlying transactions gets reflected in the following month's tax receipts. India's gross GST collections rose 14.8% YoY to ₹2 lakh crore in August.

Battery storage to be mandatory at solar, wind units

SAURAVANAND
New Delhi, September 4

INDIA PLANS TO mandate two-hour battery storage equivalent to at least 10% of capacity for all new ground-mounted solar and onshore wind projects commissioned after July 1, 2027, as the rapid addition of renewable capacity poses growing challenges in balancing intermittent generation and avoiding curtailment, according to draft regulations issued by the Central Electricity Authority (CEA).

The requirement will become more stringent from July 1, 2029, when the minimum storage duration will double to four hours, while the minimum storage capacity will remain at 10% of a project's installed capacity.

The CEA draft states that ground-mounted solar and onshore wind plants commissioned after July 1, 2027, "shall be equipped with co-located Energy Storage System (ESS) having a minimum storage duration of two hours" and a capacity equivalent to at least 10% of installed capacity.

For a 100-MW solar project, this translates into at least 10 MW of storage for two hours. For projects commissioned after July 1, 2029, and up to June 30, 2031, the draft proposes "a minimum storage duration of four hours" while retaining the minimum storage capacity at 10%. A 100-MW plant would therefore require 10 MW of storage capable of delivering power for four hours, equivalent to 40 MWh.

The proposal comes as

UPDATED NORMS



Govt to mandate battery storage equivalent to at least 10% of installed capacity

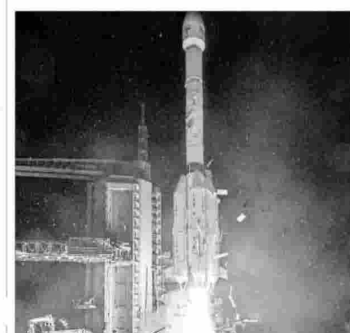
This applies for all new ground-mounted solar and onshore wind projects commissioned after July 1, 2027

The requirement will become more stringent from July 1, 2029, when the minimum storage duration will double to four hours

India rapidly expands renewable energy capacity but faces increasing challenges in managing fluctuations in solar and wind generation. Energy storage systems can absorb surplus electricity during periods of excess generation and release it when demand rises or renewable output falls, helping reduce curtailment when clean power exceeds the grid's ability to absorb or transmit it.

The CEA has invited comments and objections on the draft regulations until October 4, 2026. It has also proposed that any future change in the required percentage of grid-forming capability or ESS capacity "shall be notified by Authority from time to time".

Isro sends India's first geo-imaging satellite EOS-05



Indian Space Research Organisation's GSLV-F17 rocket carrying EOS-05 satellite lifts off from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre, in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh

AMITABH SINHA & ANONNA DUTT
New Delhi, September 4

IN ITS FIRST launch since January, the Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) sent an earth observation satellite, EOS-05, to space early Friday morning, using a GSLV rocket.

The EOS-05 is India's first dedicated imaging satellite to be placed in the geosynchronous orbit, about 36,000 km from Earth, from where it can keep constant watch over the country and provide real-time imaging service. With a 10-year mission life, the satellite is designed to image large areas of interest at frequent intervals for purposes such as monitoring natural disasters or keeping track of agriculture or forestry. It will also have defence uses.

India has several other active earth observation satellites in the lower-earth orbits which circle Earth and periodically capture imagery over India. In the geosynchronous orbit, the satellite remains stationary relative to Earth, and is able to watch the same region

continuously, without gaps.

The GSLV-F17 rocket deposited the EOS-05 satellite in a transfer orbit, at an altitude of more than 190 km from Earth, about 18 minutes after the launch. From there, the satellite will perform a series of orbit-raising manoeuvres over the next few days to travel to the geosynchronous orbit, its final destination.

In a message congratulating Isro, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "Yet another outstanding achievement by ISRO and a proud moment for our nation. The successful launch of GSLV-F17 carrying EOS-05, India's first-ever imaging satellite from geosynchronous orbit is a reflection of the excellence, innovation and growing capabilities that define India's space sector".

Weighing more than 2,360 kg, the EOS-05 was the heaviest satellite to be carried by the GSLV rocket until now. The successful launch is a big relief for Isro as three of the six missions launched in 2025 and 2026 turned out to be unsuccessful.

Company formation slows in first quarter of FY27

In April-June qtr, LLPs formation grew faster than firm registrations

MANU KAUSHIK
New Delhi, September 4

THE NUMBER OF new companies registered in the first quarter of FY27 remained high, but the pace of growth slowed sharply from the previous quarter. Data from the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) showed that 62,986 companies were registered during April-June 2026, up 3% from 61,139 in the same period a year earlier. However, registrations were 9.7% lower than the 69,772 companies registered in January-March 2026, the highest quarterly figure on record.

Despite the sequential decline, the latest quarter was the second-highest in the series. The slowdown was also pronounced compared with the previous quarter, when company registrations had risen 25.5% year-on-year (y-o-y). Experts said the sequential

SEASONAL TREND

	Companies registered	% y-o-y growth	LLP registered	% y-o-y growth
Q1 FY25	47,417	0.1	17,725	28.8
Q2 FY25	40,897	11.5	16,300	17.2
Q3 FY25	37,393	14.5	14,502	2.4
Q4 FY25	55,617	15.4	20,429	24.1
Q1 FY26	61,139	28.9	23,013	29.8
Q2 FY26	60,836	49.5	22,221	36.3
Q3 FY26	56,008	49.8	21,106	45.5
Q4 FY26	69,772	25.5	29,306	43.5
Q1 FY27	62,986	3.0	27,573	19.8



Registrations were 9.7% lower than the 69,772 firms registered in January-March 2026, the highest quarterly figure on record

The slowdown was also pronounced compared with the previous quarter, when company registrations had risen 25.5% year-on-year

drop does not necessarily point to a weakening of business activity.

Yishvas Panjari, managing partner at SVAS Business Advisors LLP, said the first-quarter dip was seasonal and "not alarming", as promoters tend to rush to incorporate before the end of the financial year so that their entities are registered, funded and operationally ready at the start of the

new financial year.

"Once that year-end window passes, incorporation activity naturally tapers," Panjari said. He added that the timing also enables businesses to align statutory audits, book-keeping and startup tax-holiday or Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) recognition timelines with a full 12-month financial cycle.

In the first quarter, limited liability partnerships (LLPs) formation grew much faster than company registrations.

MCA data showed that services continued to account for the largest share of new company registrations, led by community, personal and social services, followed by business services, trading and manufacturing.

The number of LLPs regis-

tered during the quarter rose to 27,573, up 19.8% from 23,013 a year earlier.

The trend comes as the government seeks to ease compliance requirements for LLPs. The Corporate Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026, proposes to decriminalise certain procedural requirements for LLPs. It also seeks to simplify some reporting requirements for LLPs regis-

Opinion



EXPANDING SPACE
ISRO Chairman V Narayanan

We have to really ensure that the space ecosystem in our country grows. Therefore, we will have a lot of job opportunities, the economy will grow, and more satellites will be produced

Conflict over Cauvery

The long-festering water-sharing dispute can be resolved only by the riparian states

TENSIONS OVER SHARING waters of the monsoon rain-fed Cauvery between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu flare up whenever there is a deficiency in rainfall. When rainfall is good, there is no problem in water-sharing. This year, the rain gods have not been kind as the Cauvery basin districts have experienced a rainfall deficit and the water stored in the seven major reservoirs are filled to only 55.7% of their capacity. The poor monsoon and low storage levels were a major reason why Tamil Nadu's chief minister, C. Joseph Vijay, belatedly opened the sluice gates of the Stanley reservoir — built across the Cauvery in Salem district of the state — in Mettur. Water stored in this reservoir is also 55% of its live storage capacity and releases will be for 45 days starting September 1 to meet irrigation needs for the samba paddy crop.

Matters have come to a boil this year as flows to Tamil Nadu have considerably diminished from the upper riparian state of Karnataka. Tamil Nadu is clamouring for its share of water as per the directions of the Cauvery Water Management Authority (CWMA) and has approached the Supreme Court in this regard. On August 25, the CWMA upheld the Cauvery Water Regulation Committee's recommendation directing Karnataka to ensure a flow of 9,000 cusecs for 15 days to Tamil Nadu between August 26 and September 8. Karnataka, for its part, told the apex court that it is complying with the CWMA's directions. Tamil Nadu has further sought its intervention to direct Karnataka to also make good the accumulated shortfall in earlier releases. Since it sought water over and above what the CWMA had directed, Tamil Nadu was urged to challenge the authority's decision before the appropriate forum.

Approaching the Supreme Court may make for good political optics but a settlement over sharing waters will be elusive unless there is a mutually acceptable distress-sharing formula for years of rainfall deficiency. Only a political dialogue between the riparian states (which should include Kerala and Puducherry as well) in a genuine spirit of give and take can lay the foundations of a durable settlement. Karnataka should stop harping on the inequity of historical agreements. Tamil Nadu, for its part, should get used to living with less water from the Cauvery, perhaps shifting away from water-intensive crops like paddy. Interestingly, its farmers have been requested to cultivate medium-duration paddy varieties with low water requirements and also adopt direct sowing of rice to conserve water supplies.

Perhaps all of this is easier said than done as the biggest stumbling block is Karnataka's assumption of primacy of rights over the Cauvery as an upper riparian state. How can a party to a dispute assume the role of the judge as well? In contrast, as a lower riparian state, Tamil Nadu is often reduced to the position of a supplicant and forced to approach the Supreme Court for implementation of the directions of the CWMA to Karnataka regarding the flow of water. As if all of this weren't bad enough, Karnataka has plans to build the Mekedatu Dam across the Cauvery to supply drinking water to Bengaluru despite the opposition of lower riparian states. This problem is not specific to the Cauvery. Even West Bengal as an upper riparian state has for a long time come in the way of equitably sharing waters of the Teesta with Bangladesh.

The tech mogul strongman is on the rise

THE RISE of the liberal order in the 19th century depended on two revolutions. The most obvious was in the political sphere, where reformers restrained over-mighty rulers with a combination of constitutional rules and individual rights. But just as important was the transformation of the business world that created public companies, answerable to their shareholders rather than the government. That political model began to crumble with Vladimir Putin's ascent to the Russian presidency, and continues to devolve with the rise of strongmen globally. But it is the reversal of the second revolution that may prove the most long-lasting and history-shaping.

Previously, public companies had been instruments of state power. But in the 1800s, anybody could create a limited-liability company so long as they could put together a board and management team. Robert Lowe, chancellor of the exchequer under William Gladstone, called these companies "little republics" because they simultaneously limited the power of the state and bound themselves to strict constitutional rules. Lowe's "little republics" are now under threat, externally and internally. Donald Trump has asserted his power over even the biggest US companies, taking stakes in some and telling others where to locate their supply chains.

The internal transformation has been even more far-reaching. Google's 2004 IPO launched a new corporate era in which the link between control and ownership has been severed and the constraints on founders weakened or removed. The company that would eventually become Alphabet adopted three classes of shares: A-shares with one vote, B-shares with 10 votes, and C-shares with no votes. Today, co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin retain over 50% of the company's voting power, despite exiting daily management and owning less than 1% of its outstanding voting stock. Concentrated ownership inevitably reduces the oversight directors or shareholders can exercise. But that's only part of the problem. Successful CEOs such as Zuckerberg have their pick of compliant directors. What does "independent" mean when the controlling shareholder oversees the composition of the board?

CEOs can also up stakes if someone gets in their way. This cocktail — dual-class shares, subservient directors, and jurisdiction shopping — has created a new type of corporation: public capital combined with private control. Many of the most powerful firms are no longer classic public companies in which shareholders elect a board that can replace management. They're something new: vehicles whereby visionary CEOs can raise money without losing control or opportunities for the public to bet on great men.

A recent study found the proportion of US tech IPOs with dual-class shares increased from 20% in 2022 to 15% in 2023. Grab Holdings shareholders recently voted to double the voting power of Class B shares, handing co-founder Anthony Tan 74.5% of voting rights. Cloudflare has won approval to replace its dual-class shares with triple-class shares. Elon Musk has introduced a dual voting structure in SpaceX to make up for his mistake with Tesla: He controls around 90% of Class B shares, which carry 10 votes each, giving him over 80% of voting power, and obliged shareholders to forgo the right to a jury trial or class-action suit. Class B shares also hold the sole power to remove Musk as chairman and CEO, meaning that he can't be ousted without his own consent.

So what? Critics of capitalism have long complained that companies are blinded by the need to generate short-term results to satisfy the stock market. Alphabet and its ilk have come up with a way of raising public money while retaining the freedom to make long-term investments in risky but potentially world-transforming technologies. Investors who don't want to sacrifice corporate control have plenty of conventionally governed options. Surely such corporate innovation should be celebrated rather than reviled — particularly if it is driving, as with AI, a great tech revolution?

There are nevertheless reasons for worry. These new corporate forms exploit shareholder capitalism's legal protections while escaping its discipline. The biggest worry is the concentration of power in the hands of a few. And the close relationship between Trump and his favourite CEOs means the state can reach deep into the private sector and its levers. To put it simply: At a time when public and private oligarchies rule with few effective constraints, this arrangement would be worrying enough in ordinary times. But it is taking place at a moment when AI is remaking the world. Such fundamental change requires careful oversight if it is to serve the general good. Thanks to a combined political and corporate revolution, it is instead being driven by a tiny handful of people who are answerable to nobody but themselves.



ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE
Bloomberg

UNTIL THE START of August, the closing price of stocks with derivatives was determined using the volume-weighted average price (VWAP) over the final 30 minutes of trading. This price matters because it was used to settle the derivatives contracts on expiry day. But VWAP had some shortcomings. A large order placed toward the end of the session could significantly influence the closing price, while other market participants had limited visibility into the likelihood or timing of such an order before it was executed. So Sebi brought in the Closing Auction Session (CAS), beginning August 3. Now all closing orders go into one window and match at a single price, with an indicative price displayed throughout the window. Sebi expected this mechanism to improve price discovery by allowing large orders to be absorbed with lower price impact. In turn, the mechanism was expected to make expiry days more orderly.

Yet on the last Thursday of August — the first monthly expiry under the new closing auction regime — the Sensex's indicative price fell some 2,200 points during the auction window, and then clawed back most of the drop within minutes. The premiums on BSE options swung even harder: one contract surged an astonishing 400% before crashing towards zero. The immediate instinct is to blame the auction system, and it may well have amplified the swings. But the real culprit is the huge liquidity mismatch between cash and derivatives markets in India.

India runs one of the world's largest equity-options market, alongside a relatively thinner and less liquid cash market. Consider the proportions. On a normal day, the notional value of index derivatives traded runs 300 to 400 times the turnover in the underlying

EXPIRY-DAY CHAOS

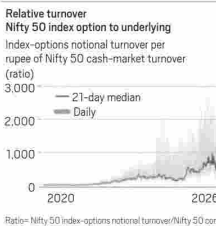
SEBI NEEDS TO TAKE STEPS THAT MAKE SPECULATING IN OPTIONS MORE EXPENSIVE

A liquidity mismatch for CAS

RAJA REDDY BUJUNOORI, SUMIT SAURAV & VENKATESH PANCHAPAGESAN

The authors are faculty members at IIM Bangalore

GROWING GAP



Ratio: Nifty 50 index-options notional turnover/Nifty 50 constituent cash turnover. Notional follows the NSE convention (strike-perm) x quantity. Source: NSE

shares (figure 1). On expiry days, when options market activity spikes, the ratio can balloon to as much as 3,000. For comparison, in most developed markets, the number is far more grounded (5 to 15). This mismatch is what India ultimately has to address.

To see why the mismatch matters, consider a trader who trades options and holds just enough of the underlying shares to offset the position's directional exposure, its delta — a strategy also known as delta-hedging and employed by institutional investors. The catch is that an option's delta shifts violently as expiry nears and the price hovers around the strike. Keeping the position delta-neutral therefore forces the trader to buy and sell the underlying again and

again — in a cash market that is already thin, so each rebalancing trade moves the price and feeds the very volatility the hedgers want to neutralise. This participation in the auction only makes this worse. Data so far suggest that less than 5% of daily trading activity now flows through the CAS window (figure 2), down from around 10% before the transition. In a market with this kind of liquidity mismatch, derivatives hedging can end up driving the price of the underlying shares rather than the other way around.

The same mismatch invites a second problem: manipulation. If you hold a large options position, one way to make it pay is to nudge the handful of shares that set the index. A few hundred crore

rupees deployed in a thin cash market can shift the settlement price against which contracts worth thousands of crores are settled. Sebi's interim order against Jane Street alleges that the firm used such a strategy. And Sebi's recent interim order against Copthall Mauritius Investment Limited and Mansi Share and Stock Broking Private Limited over prime fake manipulative trades during the auction suggests that CAS has not eliminated the problem either, in part because it has yet to attract sufficient liquidity.

This points to the only durable fix. Tinkering with the last 30 minutes will not help until the imbalance beneath it is addressed, and there are only two ways to do that. One solution is to deepen the cash market by making short selling easier for investors, creating genuine two-sided flow that makes the closing price harder to move. The other is to narrow the gap in the cost of speculation between options and the underlying shares. An investor can build a large position in the derivatives market with substantially lower capital than would be required to take an equivalent position in the underlying. As long as that differential persists, options will keep attracting disproportionate volumes, and the problem is likely to persist. Therefore, Sebi needs to take steps that make speculating in options more expensive. Its recent moves — larger lot sizes, higher securities transaction tax, fewer weekly expiries on some indices — are a good start. However, the recent data shows these steps have had only limited impact (figure 1). The gap they were meant to close remains substantial.

The auction was never a problem. The mismatch beneath it is — and until that narrows, no closing mechanism that Sebi designs can eliminate the chaos that Indian financial markets experience on expiry days.

Who are you, again?



MITUL JHAVERI ADITYA SINHA
Jhaveri is a public policy and GovTech professional; Sinha is a New Delhi-based economist

Descartes needed only *cogito ergo sum*. The Indian citizen authenticates, therefore he is, and must be again next quarter

EVERY AUTUMN, THE state develops a suspicion that its pensioners have died, and each must file a certificate of being alive, the continued drawing of the pension being, apparently, insufficient evidence of appetite. Every year, a company director must file a KYC certifying that he is himself, a proposition nobody contests on the other 364 days. The provident fund office will not release a claim unless Aadhaar, PAN, and bank details match to the last character. Descartes needed only *cogito ergo sum*. The Indian citizen authenticates, therefore he is, and must be again next quarter.

India has built the most ambitious identity infrastructure in the democratic world, and has arranged its institutions so that almost none will accept another's verification of who a citizen is.

eKYC is a word concealing at least four different activities. First is customer due diligence under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, which asks who a customer is and how risky. Second is authentication under the Aadhaar Act, 2016, which asks only whether a person is who she claims to be. Third is the seeding of Aadhaar and bank accounts that routes welfare to the right beneficiary, not identity verification at all but payment plumbing. Fourth is subscriber verification in telecom and sundry portals, where the object is to trust a SIM, not to know a customer. Four tasks, four laws, one name. That is why "doing KYC" once buys the citizen nothing at the next counter.

The rulebook, oddly, is kinder than the counter. The RBI's Master Direction on KYC, 2016, already permits Aadhaar OTP, offline Aadhaar, video identification, and Digilocker, and directs that where a KYC Identifier exists in Central KYC Records Registry, the record be fetched and customer not troubled again unless something has changed or lapsed. The humane rule is written. The branch has not read it. Under Sebi's circular of May 2024, a "validated" record traces across brokers and funds, but only inside the securities market. Your bank knows you well enough to sell you insurance, but not well enough for the insurer to use the policy without fresh papers, though all four regulators sit on the same registry.

Outside finance, the checks are misdescribed by the very officials enforcing them. The department of telecommunications discontinued Aadhaar eKYC for SIMs in 2018, after Justice KS Puttaswamy v Union of India (2019) 1 SCC 11; the Aadhaar number was struck from the form years ago, yet citizens still believe they are "doing Aadhaar KYC" for a phone. The rural development ministry told Lok Sabha in 2025 that the Aadhaar-based payment system is merely a mode of payment and that MGNREGA work cannot be denied for want of it; at the worksite, it is denied anyway. LPG subsidy can flow to a bank account linked directly to the gas connection,

with no Aadhaar; at the showroom, biometrics are demanded regardless.

Why did centralisation not become worse? The registry, created by notification S.O. 3183(D) of November 26, 2015, holds well over a billion records, one for every financially active adult; a library in which every book is catalogued and none is lent. India centralised storage before it harmonised purpose; each regulator runs its own logic atop the common records, and the RBI itself has been wary of records drawn from them. Beneath this runs the incentive that defeats the rest. An institution is legally safe collecting the data itself, and re-collection is always permitted where information locks changed or incomplete. A rigid digital flow shuts out the elderly, the disabled, and the mismatched. And a citizen need not fear the relentlessly laws to obey exactly the signal the fraudster imitates; the "update your KYC" scam works because the state has released its victims. The fraudster, it must be said, is the one counterparty who accepts your KYC at the first attempt.

Five changes would fix most of this, and the first two need no new technology. First, amend Rule 9 of the Prevention of Money Laundering (Maintenance of Records) Rules, 2005, to make reliance a duty: where a valid KYC Identifier exists, an entity must onboard from it, recording a specific, risk-based reason for any fresh

demand, with a safe harbour for good-faith reliance. Second, supersede the 2015 notification so that bodies outside the money-laundering perimeter — the EPFO, oil marketing companies, food departments — can rely on the registry under strict purpose limitation. Third, convert the Financial Stability and Development Council's February 2024 proposal for uniform KYC norms into a binding standard: one data schema, one list of documents, one re-verification clock in place of today's two-, eight- and 10-year cycles. Fourth, build a federated exchange rather than another central store, issuing purpose-bound tokens carrying only assurance level, date, source, and consent, routed through the consent managers of the Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025. Singapore's MyInfo and Estonia's X-Road rest on the one-only principle: reuse proof, not raw data. Fifth, codify, from the Aadhaar Authentication and Offline Verification Regulations, 2021, an enforceable right to an alternative rail, so that no entitlement is extinguished by an authentication failure alone.

The colonial default was that an activity is prohibited unless permitted. Its digital descendant is that a citizen is unverified unless re-verified. The presumption against the citizen has survived the very technology built to retire it.

The state has identified its citizens a billion times over. It has not yet learnt to remember them. The pensioner, meanwhile, should keep his certificate handy. Autumn returns every year.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Tangible growth

Apologies of "Beyond the 7.8% number" (FE, September 4), the debate over revised GDP figures highlights a crucial gap between statistical recalibration and lived reality. While we must certainly appreciate the methodological shift to capture broader economic activity, we cannot ignore that a 7.8% growth rate feels disconnected from the ground realities, where private consumption remains

fragile and investment is still selective. The real issue is not the integrity of our data, but its utility in guiding policy. To restore confidence, we need a balanced approach that pairs these new metrics with a clear focus on job creation and wage growth. We should publish additional granular data that tracks household well-being, ensuring that our statistical evolution is matched by tangible progress in ordinary citizens' lives. —K Chandan Kumar, Bengaluru

Look beyond numbers

Apologies of "Beyond the 7.8% number" (FE, September 4), the impressive Q1 FY27 GDP growth deserves recognition, but the headline figure should not obscure the quality of growth. Strong manufacturing, capital formation, and domestic consumption are encouraging, yet employment generation, private investment, exports, and productivity must keep pace. The new GDP series

also calls for greater transparency and a consistent back series to strengthen statistical credibility. India must therefore look beyond quarterly numbers and ensure that GDP expansion translates into productive jobs, higher household incomes, and broad-based prosperity. Growth is meaningful only when its benefits reach the wider economy. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

Will RIL's Next Big Scoop Melt Market?

Entry into icecream biz taps consumption surge

Reliance Consumer Products, an arm of Mukesh Ambani's diversifying business conglomerate, will enter the icecream business, with its own brand, Bombay Creamery. Ambani is known to go up against dominant players in industries, such as oil refining, telecom and even colas. This makes the foray into the icecream business that is led by a dairy farmers' cooperative unusual. Yet, Indian business families have a penchant for building diversified groups. The Ambanis have been outliers in this respect with their focus on a few basic industries where they have integrated vertically. Yet, for a group the size of Reliance must see the merits of expansion into unrelated businesses.

Operating across different industries lowers the risk of specific market downturns. Diversified groups can allocate capital freely to new businesses. Shared resources can bring down operating costs across divisions. On the flipside, running multiple businesses can affect decision-making timelines. Management bandwidth is spread over a wider canvas and could lead to a loss of focus on core operations. Harnessing separate corporate cultures can reduce business value. Investors tend to value diversified conglomerates less than the sum of their parts. It is often more efficient to diversify an investment portfolio than seek the same results through a conglomerate.

Some degree of corporate diversification can be attributed to India's status as a frontline emerging economy that throws up high growth opportunities across a range of industries. Consumption is an obvious theme in the larger India story and has drawn in some of the biggest business groups. Corporate interest is climbing in segments as disparate as housing, food, entertainment and fashion. India needs its own champions in lifestyle brands, and its business barons are ready for the challenge. The consumer space can yield considerable market shares to local brands that can go toe-to-toe with global ones that dominate the landscape. Icecream is as good a place as any to build a truly international brand from India.

Curing Our Broken, Disturbing Roads

A road is only as good as the system that builds and maintains it. India has specifications for road construction. Too often, the distance between what's prescribed on paper and what gets built is measured in potholes, patchwork and pending repairs. NHAI's move to make AI-based machine control (AI-MC) compulsory for highway projects is welcome. Using sensors, computers and real-time data to ensure every layer is built to specification can bring precision, accountability and consistency to 'street credentials'.

There will be an upfront cost. But if better construction means roads that last longer, need fewer repairs and reduce accidents, the investment can pay for itself. In 2025, 62,122 people died on NHs. Better-engineered roads can't eliminate accidents. But quality is vital to road safety and comfort. Good roads move trucks more efficiently and reduce fuel use, travel time and logistics costs. A Transport Corporation of India (TCI)-HIM Kolkata study estimated that poor road conditions, delays and frequent halts cost India \$21.3 bn a year—\$6.6 bn in delays and \$14.7 bn in added fuel consumption.

Went to measure infra in kilometres of highways and billions of rupees. But development—'viksit' in today's jargon—is experienced on the road outside one's home, on the street to the market, or en route to school. Roads are among the most visible markers of development. NHAI's embrace of tech should extend to city roads, arterial roads and neighbourhood streets, where potholes, shoddy patchwork, poor drainage and constant digging remain common. We need not just better roads, but a culture of moving away from a 'vendor-tender' culture, and of monitoring roads before they become laughable definitions of what city roads should be.

THINK ABOUT IT
Leela—play—drives all creativity, even if the players don't know it

Playcore, Lying at the Heart of Creativity

Human creativity, that serious stuff, is built on the least serious of foundations: play. Strip away the jargon of innovation labs, the solemnity of TED talks and the furrowed brows of venture capitalists, and what remains is the same impulse that drives toddlers to stack blocks, and comedians to deliver punchlines. Playfulness isn't a distraction from creativity but its beating heart. The best innovators are players. They may wear suits, gather patents or Nobel Prizes. But underneath, they are children with expensive toys. Thomas Edison tinkered like a boy with a chemistry set. Picasso doodled like a prankster with a spray can. Even Einstein admitted his theory of relativity was born of 'thought experiments'—a fancy way of saying he played with ideas until they popped up proper.

Play comes in two flavours: frivolous and serious. Frivolous play invents Monopoly, Insta reels and government policy in the form of alliterations. Serious play invents vaccines, space travel and national states. Without frivolity, creativity becomes sterile, ritualistic, dogmatic. Without seriousness, it can't move beyond silly-bood. Together, they produce the kind of breakthroughs that make life richer, stranger and, yes, profitable. Many innovators deny they are playing. They prefer to call it 'research', 'business' or 'disruption'. But who are they kidding?

We need mandatory, evidence-based front-of-pack labels consumers can understand instantly

Let's Know What We Eat

Rohit Kumar Singh

Walk into any supermarket and pick up a packet of biscuits, cereal or chips. Front-of-pack labelling (FOP) is a masterpiece in communication: attractive colours, catchy claims, endorsements, photographs, and promises of health, energy or goodness. But nutritional reality is usually relegated to a small table on the back. That asymmetry needs to change.

The debate over FOP has gained urgency after an investigative report said that India's efforts to introduce prominent warnings for products high in sugar, salt and fat faced opposition from sections of the food and beverage industry. The industry has since said India should consult companies while framing new FOP rules. Industry should be consulted. Manufacturers understand formulations, supply chains, packaging constraints and consumer behaviour, and their inputs can improve implementation. But consultation cannot become a veto. The key purpose of food labelling is not to protect the packer's appearance. It is to protect the consumer's right to make an informed choice.

India is witnessing a rapid nutrition transition. The country continues to deal with under-nutrition while facing an expanding burden of obesity, hypertension and cardiovascular disease. Against this background, requiring consumers to decipher percentages, serving sizes, and grams of sugar and mg of sodium from a dense nutrition panel is inadequate.

There is an important distinction between providing information and making it understandable. Existing nutrition tables may satisfy the first test. Effective FOP satisfies the second. A person buying breakfast cereal should not need



Sauce for home food is sauce for packaged food

a degree in nutrition to work out whether it is unusually high in sugar. WHO describes FOP as an important policy tool to help consumers make healthier food choices. It recommends that governments introduce nutrition declarations and supplement them with FOP information that is convenient, relevant and readily understood. It also points to another important benefit: well-designed labelling can encourage manufacturers to reformulate products. That second effect is often underestimated.

The biggest benefit of a strong labelling regime may eventually come not from consumers rejecting products but from manufacturers changing them. If a visible label tells consumers that one product has significantly more sugar or salt than another, competition begins to work in favour of public health. Companies have an incentive to innovate, reduce undesirable ingredients and improve their nutritional profile. The market then becomes part of the solution.

Consistency is also a question. Nestlé says it

has implemented Nutri-Score on thousands of products across continental Europe. Nutri-Score uses a simple colour scale from A to E to help consumers compare nutritional quality. Such labelling helps people make informed choices and encourages the company to improve the nutritional value of its products.

This makes the Indian debate difficult to explain. If an easily understandable nutritional label helps consumers in France, Germany or Belgium make informed choices, why should an Indian consumer be expected to manage with less?

This is not an argument for mechanically imposing a European system. India's food habits, dietary patterns, literacy levels and market structure are different. We need a system designed for India. The debate should not be reduced to whether India must adopt a particular colour, symbol or scoring methodology. There are legitimate scientific questions around nutrient thresholds and portion sizes, and whether labels should provide warnings or comparative scores. These questions should be settled through evidence.

PFSSAI should commission transparent consumer-testing across regions, languages, income groups and education levels. Nutrition scientists, public

health experts, consumer organisations and industry should participate. The scientific basis for thresholds should be published. The selected label should then be simple enough for an ordinary consumer to understand instantly. The final system must also be mandatory.

Voluntary labelling inevitably creates an adverse-selection problem. Companies with healthier products have an incentive to display favourable information. Those with products high in sugar, salt or saturated fat may have precisely the opposite incentive.

A common standard creates a level playing field. Industry concerns about transition costs are legitimate and can be addressed through reasonable implementation timelines. Smaller manufacturers may require greater flexibility and technical support. Regulation should always be proportionate. But the principle itself should not be compromised.

Indeed, FOP should not be viewed as anti-industry. India's food-processing sector is one of the country's important growth opportunities. Stronger consumer standards can increase trust, encourage innovation and push Indian companies towards products that can compete globally. Consumers, meanwhile, remain free to choose.

India has spent years strengthening consumer empowerment through its consumer movement. It is reasonable to reserve a small part of a food package for the truth about what is inside.

gh better disclosure, digital access and more competitive markets. Food cannot remain an exception. The front of a food package today is some of the most valuable advertising real estate in the consumer economy. Almost every centimetre is carefully designed to influence the purchasing decision.

It is reasonable to reserve a small part of that space for the truth about what is inside. FOP cannot belong entirely to marketing. Some of it must belong to the consumer, too.

The writer is former secretary, ministry of consumer affairs, food & public distribution, Govt of India

Curb Misselling, Not Agents



Sirram Kalyanaram

Ask anyone who was sold a 'guaranteed wealth-builder' and later tried to escape it. The product was costly, unsuitable and locked shut. That is misselling, and it is not rare. It usually begins when a seller earns almost everything from the first sale, the complicated, high-commission policy gets sold rather than the simple one the customer needed.

So, IRDAI's instinct to rethink how intermediaries are paid is sound. The regulator wants lower distribution costs, more policies that stay alive, and better value for buyers. The worry is not the goal. It is whether the fix damages the network that reaches ordinary Indians in the first place.

Two proposals are in play. One spreads the commission across the life of the policy instead of front-loading it. The other ties pay to an agent's effort in sourcing and serving customers. Both are meant to protect the buyer. Both also add complexity to a system

that runs on pay being simple and predictable.

Individual agents still bring in roughly 51% of individual new-business premium. Banks, through bancassurance, account for about 33%, and the rest comes from direct, online and broker channels. Two decades ago, agents were nearly 90% of the business, so the shift to banks has been dramatic. LIC remains agent-heavy, while most private insurers lean on their bank partners.

That split matters because the conduct risk is not spread evenly. In 2024-25, life insurers sold about 2.7 cr new individual policies, LIC sold 1.7 cr of those, private insurers sold about 92.5 lakh. Complaints filed under unfair business practices rose to 26,667, from 23,335 a year earlier—up roughly 14%.

What's the biggest standard in the book? Total life claims complaints have dropped, from 1,20,726 to 1,20,428. The pie played the same size while the misselling slice got smaller, from 18% to 22%.

And it's close to 1 in 1,000. Although the share is small, the trend is negative and reflects issues with sales and process. Here are the parts reformers should sit with. Much of the loudest misselling has come from bank counters—



Cherish the network

policies dressed up as FDs or quietly bundled into loans. One hears a lot of misselling in bundled loans. Both PM and IRDAI chief said as much in 2024. Yet, commission reform lands hardest on the individual agent, whose pay is visible and straightforward to cut, not on the bank channel, where the incentive is buried in a wider banking relationship. Squeeze the agent, who is an easier target, and you may leave the real problem untouched.

The reforms could also backfire where India can least afford it. Life insurance still reaches under 1% of GDP. An average of Indians hold one over at 41. That still leaves roughly 26 lakh individual agents, most working in small towns and villages where a policy is sold across a kitchen table, not a screen. For them, the unfair commission is working capital—it pays the bus fare, the repeat visits, and the hours spent explaining what a policy does.

Every GW Saved is a GW Earned



Samir Saran & Parul Bakshi

Indian philosophical traditions have long warned against excess without rejecting prosperity. Aparigraha, restraint in possession, is not a demand for denial but calls for mindful use. Reimagined for a modern energy economy, it offers a strategic insight: efficiency is not austerity but disciplined abundance.

As India engages with another season of record electricity demand—with peak power requirement expected to touch 300 GW in 2027—the policy instinct is familiar: more generation, stronger grids, larger storage, faster transmission. However, in an era shaped by climate extremes and geopolitical uncertainty, how well a nation uses energy may matter as much as how much it produces.

India's rising energy demand is a marker of development. Per capita electricity consumption climbed about 1,338 kWh in 2025, and demand is projected to grow a further 6% annually this decade. Cooling demand alone could add nearly 1/3rd of peak load by 2030, with peak demand rising by more than 7 GW for every additional degree of daily average temperature. Without major efficiency gains in buildings, appliances and cooling, this risks locking in higher generation

on needs and deeper grid stress for decades, since what is built to shape demand for a generation. Efficiency is now a time-critical determinant of whether India's energy future now stays affordable, stable and secure.

Energy efficiency in India is treated as a technical intervention, rather than an instrument of national strategy. Mega-projects command visibility. Finance and urgency efficiencies, even avoided demand, is less politically appealing, although even more vital. Governance remains fragmented across ministries, regulators, utilities and states, with no institutional centre-creatable of elevating efficiency to core infrastructure. Capital, too, flows far more readily toward generation than efficient consumption, an imbalance increasingly at odds with fuel shocks, supply disruptions, climate-driven demand spikes and accelerating demand displacement, all redefining energy security.

In such a landscape, the most strategic unit of energy is not the MW newly produced but the MW never required. Saved energy is immediate, domestic and largely immune to geopolitical risk, an instrument of resilience and demand power that determines not only how India grows but

how securely it does. Energy security is often framed through availability and acceptability. Efficiency is one of the few interventions capable of strengthening all four.

► **Availability** Rapid growth in cooling demand could push ACs alone to account for close to 30% of projected electricity needs. According to some calculations, stronger efficiency standards could reduce the need for costly peak demand while saving consumers tens of billions of dollars. In effect, efficiency creates new 'virtual capacity' faster than more conventional supply.

► **Acceptability and affordability** Efficient appliances and cooling technologies cut household bills and system-wide costs, while lower peak demand reduces the need for costly backup generation, storage and grid expansion. UJALA illustrates the potential, where more than 36 cr LED bulbs have generated \$9 bn in annual savings and cut consumer expenditure by over ₹18,000 cr each year. Acceptability, the climate dimension, follows naturally: meeting cooling and comfort needs with less energy cuts emissions and infrastructure pressure without constraining growth.

► **Reliability** India has built a broad efficiency policy ecosystem. Programmes such as UJALA, LED, the market-based Perform, Achieve and Trade (PAT) scheme, and government-led labelling have demonstrated the potential of

demand-side efficiency at scale, while the Energy Conservation Building Code, Eco-Navas Samiti, and Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment have sought to embed efficiency into the buildings shaping India's urban future. India already has many of the tools. Few strategies improve all four pillars of energy security with comparable speed and economic logic. That combination makes efficiency foundational to energy policy; that is forward looking.

If efficiency is to function as infrastructure rather than aspiration, India must move from prescriptive programmes to deliberate strategy. In 3 steps: 1. Embed efficiency explicitly within India's energy-security architecture, alongside generation, grids and storage, as core planning resource. 2. Govern the coming wave of urban construction, cooling deployment and digital infrastructure with performance targets for specific lessening so private capital flows toward optimising consumption with the same confidence as new capacity.

Efficiency is not a simple strategic resource. Every unit saved reduces future infrastructure needs, moderates import dependence and strengthens resilience. Making efficiency strategic requires exercise in long-term statecraft. Nations that learn to do more with less will shape the resilience of the 21st-century world.

Saran is president, and Bakshi is fellow, energy and climate, ORF



THE SPEAKING TREE

AI and Teachers

NEEL VIMALKUMAR

With the possibilities thrown open by AI, can human teachers be replaced? While AI can handle surveys, data processing and analysis far more efficiently than a teacher's role may never be completely replaced by a robot. Here is why. Teaching is far more than transferring data from a teacher to a pupil. As we grow more dependent on virtual teaching platforms, we cannot overlook the inevitability of a personal teacher in many ancient Asian contexts, gurus and shishyas even lived together as life skills and knowledge were imparted to students. So, the teaching of the subject matter and also to extend life's worth of humanity. Integrity meant character matched capability. John Dewey's thought experiment in cognitive philosophy highlights the personal component of human discernment against a machine's proficiency. While AI can give us correct responses, they would never be able to 'understand' as they would be focused on the syntax of symbols, and not the semantics of the message. A few decades ago, Michael Polanyi, a philosopher of science, pointed out that even in the scientific institution, there is a tradition of knowledge where everything is not just 'personal data'. There is an element of trust, personal knowledge, judgement and social context that cannot be ignored. While AI might bring multiple skills and incredible speeds to the table, we need people to lead people.

ROLLING ON SATURDAY

Social Media Addict

A man went to the doctor and said, 'Doctor, I think I'm addicted to social media'.

The doctor frowned. How long have you had this problem? The man immediately pulled out his phone. 'Let me check. He scrolled for a while. Apparently, someone had used his exact problem in 2018'.

Doc: And? Man: He was cured. Doc: How? Man: He deleted all his social media apps. Doc [smiles]: Excellent. You should try that. Man [horrified]: Doctor, I said I'm addicted. I didn't say I was insane!

Marriage Advice

A newly married man asked his grandfather: 'What's the secret to happy marriage?' Grandson: 'Never argue with your wife.' Grandson: 'That sounds impossible!' Grandson: 'Not. Whenever she's right, agree with her. Grandson: And when she's wrong? Nanaji [smiles]: She's never wrong. Grandson [laughs]: 'That's your secret?' Nanaji: No. My secret is that I've been married for 60 years. Grandson: Exactly. So you must know something. Nanaji: I know when to keep my mouth shut. Grandson: About what? Nanaji: Everything.

Chat Room

Bring Mountain To the Mountain

Apropos 'Trishuli and China Question for Nepal' by Sati Anshu Ravi (Sep 4), Nepal's demand for climate compensation is morally compelling but legally and politically contentious. Despite its noble contribution to global emissions, Nepal faces disproportionate threats from glacier retreat, floods and landslides. Yet, assigning exclusive responsibility for specific losses to India, China or the US remains scientifically difficult. Such natural variability, unplanned and unimpaired construction and infrastructure deficiencies can exacerbate disasters. Nepal's stronger case lies in demanding predictable multilateral climate finance, adaptive assistance and loss-and-damage support, rather than seeking potentially unlimited bilateral reparations from individual countries. N'sushantini Reddy, Bengaluru

[OUR TAKE]

An ambitious defence vision

Some impetus for the Raksha defence diplomacy policy already exists. But India needs to be clear-eyed about implementation

India currently ranks as the world's second-largest arms importer and fifth-largest military spender — a reflection of its ongoing drive to modernise its armed forces against both longstanding and emerging threats. The new Raksha document on defence diplomacy unveiled by defence minister Rajnath Singh needs to be seen in this context, as a blueprint for defence partnerships over the next decade. Its four pillars are forging global strategic partnerships better aligned with India's national security objectives, capacity building through joint military exercises and training, ramping up defence exports by making India a reliable defence manufacturing hub, and enhancing New Delhi's role in security across the Indian Ocean.

This is truly ambitious. However, some of the building blocks for this are already in place. Even till the turn of the millennium, India's dependence on Russia for cutting-edge defence hardware was almost absolute. It has come a long way since, lowering dependence on Russia-origin equipment to about 40% through new defence partnerships with countries such as France, the US, and Israel. India's membership of Quad has helped launch a range of maritime security initiatives across the Indo-Pacific. Even as enthusiasm for Quad itself has cooled, its security-related initiatives — cooperation in maritime domain awareness and tracking of illegal activities across the Indian Ocean, among others — have gained pace. India conducts a wider range of army, air force and naval exercises with a steadily growing number of countries and also participates in multilateral drills. This has helped create greater interoperability that emergencies such as evacuations and disaster response demand. India's defence exports have risen from ₹686 crore during 2013-14 to ₹38,424 crore in 2025-26, with military gear ranging from protective equipment to the BrahMos cruise missile being sold to more than 80 countries.

The latter is the most significant pivot — from dependent importer to confident exporter, while forging alliances with a range of established players — and it has been underway for some time now. The new Raksha document can help fine-tune this process and give it greater impetus. It also comes on the heels of a drive to privatise the production of conventional missiles through the transfer of technology from the DRDO to private Indian entities. Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever's visit to India this week witnessed the conclusion of agreements between entities of the two countries to manufacture equipment ranging from tank turrets to naval mine countermeasures and drones.

As India takes all of these processes forward, it must learn from the experiences of both the erstwhile USSR and the US steer clear of creating defence monopolies. Spreading the pie can help spur defence production and create specialised jobs across the country. At the same time, ambitions should be set realistically, instead of blindly chasing technologies that can take decades to develop only to become obsolete. Needs should be prioritised dispassionately — for instance, we must develop propulsion units for aircraft and warships at the earliest. Embattled priorities causing delays have serious national security fallout, as witnessed in the case of the light combat aircraft Tejas. Research and production costs, too, will need to be kept realistic to give homegrown weapons and military systems an edge in the export market: more so when they are competing against more expensive western hardware. Any policy document is as successful as its implementation, and that's where the government should now focus.

[MINOR HINTS]

Rahul Sagar



The pros and cons of destructive book scanning by AI firms

The question before Artificial Intelligence firms today is whether they will treat rare and valuable books only as disposable training inputs or as the spines of civilisation

The Artificial Intelligence (AI) race has a new victim — second-hand books. Over the past summer, reports have emerged of AI developers around the world purchasing vast quantities of used books. Once acquired, these volumes are destructively scanned: their bindings are cut off and the resulting loose pages are fed through automated scanners, rendering the physical volumes unusable.

This interest in used books stems from two factors. The first is technical. A growing body of literature on model collapse suggests that recursively training AI models on slop (or AI-generated data) can progressively erode their ability to track distributions. The problem is commonly compared to making photocopies of photocopies, a process that produces ever blurrier results. This insight has led AI firms to prize authentic human-authored text. But, as it is becoming harder to discern whether the text we encounter today has already been shaped by AI, developers have become interested in tapping an uncontaminated source — books published before the large language model (LLM) era.

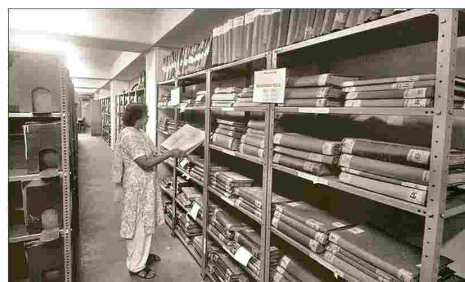
The second factor is legal. In the landmark case *Bartz v. Anthropic* (2025), Judge William Alsop ruled that Anthropic violated the law when it downloaded pirated copies of books from websites like LibGen. Anthropic was, however, entitled to destructively scan books it had lawfully acquired because it was effectively exchanging one format (print) for another (digital). It was also "fair use," Judge Alsop ruled, to utilise the resulting scans for "training," since "generative" AI is "quintessentially transformative" — it seeks not to

"replicate" works but to generate "new text." This decision encouraged AI firms, especially those operating in the US, to begin acquiring physical copies of the millions of books they need to train their models.

But why scan books destructively? There is a logic to the brutality. Unbound volumes can be scanned significantly faster. Because loose pages can be scanned flat, they are also far less susceptible to distortions such as curves and shadows, improving image consistency and optical character recognition. Altogether, this means that destructive scanning is notably cheaper than non-destructive methods (by some estimates, it costs 75-95% less per page). This combination of higher speed and accuracy at lower cost is appealing because AI firms are in an arms race, and the better a model is trained, the better its output will be. From the spillover comes the victor.

What should our attitudes of this development? There is no cause for concern when it comes to books that are in plentiful supply. But it becomes a different matter when AI firms seek to acquire and destructively scan works that are rare — as a recent investigation by the technology publication 404 Media has alleged. It is not hard to see why AI firms may be tempted to acquire "uncommon books". Since the performance of AI models depends on the breadth and depth of their training, it is likely that, as internal correspondence disclosed during discovery in *Bartz v. Anthropic*, revealed, AI firms may eventually seek to "destructively scan all the books in the world".

This ambition raises three concerns. First, it becomes possible that all publicly available copies of a rare or scarce book could be inadvertently destroyed. AI firms have downplayed this risk by stating that they would never destroy "collectibles". But this is just a coordination problem. Suppose only five copies of a particular work are known to survive. Several firms could purchase and destroy them independently, each believing that other copies remained intact. No individual purchase would appear catastrophic, yet the cumulative result could eliminate every known copy.



Much of India's intellectual life between 1800 and 1950 was conducted through the medium of periodicals. Because of poor management and budgetary constraints, libraries in India allowed their collections of these periodicals to deteriorate.

MINT ARCHIVE

Second, even if collectibles are not destroyed, they may nevertheless become unavailable to readers. For instance, Elon Musk has promised that SpaceAI will preserve only rare books it acquires. But where? It is not desirable that collectibles end up in corporate vaults. This worry is not theoretical. Google Books contains a vast array of rare works deemed to be in the public domain in the US. But these works are not always viewable by users located outside the US. This is because Google Books worries that those rare works may not be deemed to be in the public domain in foreign countries, and so to minimise its own liability, it preemptively limits access for foreign users. As a result, one can end up being able to view a work published by an Indian in India in 1875 — only if one is located in the US.

Third, and perhaps most worryingly, because AI firms operate across national and cultural boundaries, they may not always sufficiently appreciate the rarity or value of the works they encounter. For instance, much of India's intellectual life between 1800 and 1950 was conducted through the medium of periodicals. Because of poor management and budgetary constraints, libraries in India allowed their collections of these periodicals to deteriorate. Consequently, the last surviving copies of many of these periodicals can now only be found overseas, which includes the stock rooms of antiquarian dealers. A book procurement system optimised for scale may discard such items of cultural significance without even recognising what has been lost.

It is essential, then, that AI firms exercise due care. In the first instance, they should refrain from

destructively scanning works published before the era of mass printing (which, for the sake of convenience, we can assume began in 1950). In such cases, destructive scanning should proceed only when reviews based on catalogue research and consultations with archivists and scholars confirm that a genre or body of work is not at risk of extinction. Furthermore, AI firms should create a registry of target acquisitions so that competition does not inadvertently cause rare works to become extinct. Finally, seeing as they are reducing the supply of used books, AI firms should commit to making every out-of-copyright work they digitise freely available on the web. This would also reduce the need for their competitors to procure additional scarce copies of the same work.

All this goes to say that the ceaseless appetite of AI firms for training data can be made to work for the good of humankind. The digitisation they undertake can help guard against unexpected losses caused by fire, flood, war, natural disaster, theft, decay, and institutional neglect. It can also make it possible for vastly more scholars to access and engage with books that are scarce or fragile or located in distant repositories. But whether this happy day comes to pass depends on the careful management of the business of scanning "all the books in the world". The question before AI firms today is whether they will treat rare and valuable books as disposable training inputs or as the spines of civilisation.

Rahul Sagar is a Global Network professor at NYU Abu Dhabi. His latest book is *The Birth of Indian Liberalism*. The views expressed are personal

India, Nepal must build a regional energy network

The devastating tragedy in Nepal, and, subsequently, the Himalayan nation's leaders demanding climate reparations from China, the US, and India based on absolute emissions underscore the impact the climate crisis is likely to have on relations between countries. At the same time, it reiterates the centrality of clean energy in furthering shared sustainability.

Geography, history, an open border, and social ties make India and Nepal structurally interdependent. The critical question, however, is how to transform that interdependence into greater economic value and resilience, and ultimately into a wider regional energy architecture.

Soon after his appointment as Nepal's new energy, water resources and irrigation minister, Biraj Shrestha framed the energy challenges in terms of access, the transition to clean energy, and creating an investment-friendly environment. Nepal's hydropower sector now has the scale to address these challenges. Immediately bringing India into the picture as a long-term clean energy partner. The relationship is consequently moving beyond hydropower generation in Nepal to encompass transmission, distribution, demand and markets as interconnected elements of an emerging energy system.

The momentum is already evident. Nepal exported 3,880 GWh of electricity to India in FY 2025-26, a 63.08% increase over the previous year. During the same period Nepal imported roughly 1,150 GWh from India, resulting in net exports of about 2,730 GWh and earnings of NPR29.32 billion. This is beginning to look less like one-way electricity trade and more like an emerging elec-

tricity partnership. Nepal's hydropower provides relatively flexible and dispatchable electricity, complementing India's rapidly expanding solar and wind capacity, which is more variable. The relationship also has a seasonal logic. Nepal generates more electricity from hydropower during the monsoon, when water flows are high, while in the drier winter months it can draw more electricity from India. This seasonal complementarity makes two-way electricity trade economically rational.

The scale of this trade is set to grow substantially. India has committed to facilitating 10,000 MW of electricity imports from Nepal over the next decade, while Nepal's 2035 strategy aims for 15,000 MW of electricity exports. New 400-kV cross-border transmission lines, including Ihara-Purna and Lamki Doldaha-Barahat, are being developed to support this expansion. Nepal has also, over the past five years, become an active participant in India's competitive electricity market. The relationship is therefore moving towards a more integrated regional electricity market.

The emerging energy partnership points to three strategic possibilities. The first is to move from electricity trade to genuine economic interdependence and development gains. The real opportunity lies in turning hydropower into an engine of production. Clean, reliable and competitively priced electricity can underpin industrialisation, efficient irrigation, electric transport, data infrastructure and potentially green hydrogen. The objective should be to capture the wider eco-

nomic value that electricity can generate. For Nepal, this means using its hydropower advantage not simply to earn export revenues but to lower the cost of production, attract investment and create new industries at home. For India, a more stable, prosperous and economically integrated Nepal strengthens both the material and strategic foundations of the relationship.

The second strategic possibility is to make the relationship less asymmetric. India should not seek to remain Nepal's only electricity market but to become Nepal's most reliable gateway to a wider regional market. A relationship in which Nepal depends on a single market can generate political sensitivities and reinforce perceptions of dependence. The experience of the 2015-16 blockade remains a powerful reminder. Nepal's dependence on India for transit and essential supplies turned an economic vulnerability into a major political issue. The alternative is a relationship in which India enables Nepal to reach multiple markets, deriving its strategic importance from the connectivity, infrastructure and market access that allow Nepal to engage the wider region. Laos offers a useful precedent.

seeking to turn itself from a land-locked into a land-linked economy by using its neighbours' infrastructure to overcome its geographical constraint. In the case of India and Nepal this principle can extend even beyond electricity to digital connectivity and transport corridors. India's strategic advantage lies being Nepal's most dependable route to many markets.

The third strategic possibility is already beginning to emerge, turning the bilateral energy relationship into a regional architecture. The Nepal-India-Bangladesh electricity arrangements offers the clearest illustration. Since November 2024, Nepal has been able to export up to 40 MW of electricity to Bangladesh through the combination of the 400 kV Dhalkebar-Muzaffarpur cross-border transmission line and the Baharampur-Berhampore interconnection. It is the first trilateral of its kind. The quantity though modest in commercial terms represents a major strategically created new industries at home. For India, a more stable, prosperous and economically integrated Nepal strengthens both the material and strategic foundations of the relationship.

Uttam Kumar Sinha is a senior fellow at the Manohar Parikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal



Uttam Kumar Sinha

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This points to a different way of thinking about regional cooperation. It has traditionally been organised bilaterally, partly because bilateral arrangements are politically easier to negotiate and manage. But electricity does not necessarily follow political boundaries. The economic case for moving from bilateral trade towards a more integrated system is substantial. Studies estimate that an integrated electricity market among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal could save around \$17 billion in capital costs. Clearly, deeper integration would allow the region to make better use of its untapped hydropower and renewable-energy potential, reduce the need for reserve capacity and improve energy security. Already in the last decade cross-border transmission capacity has increased threefold from 2.1 GW in 2015 to 6.4 GW, largely through connections involving India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's current electricity shortages make the logic even more compelling. An interconnected regional market would allow Nepal and Bhutan to supply hydropower, India to provide scale, capital connectivity and developing electricity market, and Bangladesh to contribute substantial and growing demand. Storage, transmission and a more flexible electricity markets can connect these complementary strengths, allowing electricity to move across borders to where and when it is needed most. The ambition should be to make bilateralism a building block of regional integration rather than its endpoint.

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India's continuing tradition of celebrating its teachers

In the Indian tradition, education has always been understood as a journey that shapes the individual and enriches society. From the *gurukuls* of ancient India to the classrooms of today, the relationship between the teacher and the learner has remained at the heart of this journey, and Teachers' Day gives us an opportunity to celebrate it.

Every year on September 5, we celebrate Teachers' Day in the memory of distinguished scholar, teacher, philosopher and India's second President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.

The spirit of "guru devo bhava" (teacher equated with God) deeply shaped the respect accorded to the teacher, whose role extended to nurturing discipline, character, values, and a sense of responsibility.

The *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-pupil tradition) is still alive in India's education system. A teacher's contribution goes beyond academic learning and plays an important role in the overall development of a person.

This rich educational tradition is visible across India's long history of learning. Our ancient centres of education, including Takshashila, Vikramashila, and Nalanda, attracted students and scholars from different parts of India and beyond.

The Sanskrit expression "gurunam manujasya tritaya natram" describes knowledge as the third eye of a person. Knowledge enables us to see beyond the immediate, understand more deeply, and

make thoughtful choices. The teacher plays a vital role in this process by guiding the learner from information towards understanding, and from understanding towards wisdom. These ideas remain deeply relevant as India prepares its education system for the opportunities of the 21st century. Under the leadership of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, education has been placed at the centre of India's journey towards becoming a developed and knowledge-driven nation. The National Education Policy 2020 represents a significant step in this direction, placing the learner at the centre of education.

Technology is opening new avenues for accessing information and learning at an unprecedented scale. The teacher guides the learning context, direction, and human connection. A classroom equipped with the latest technology becomes truly meaningful when a teacher inspires students to question, explore, understand, and apply what they learn.

The changing nature of knowledge also makes the teacher's role increasingly significant. Students today have access to an extraordinary range of information. Teachers help them examine ideas carefully, distinguish between information and understanding, ask meaningful questions, and use knowledge responsibly.

The PM has consistently emphasised the importance of teachers in shaping the India of the future. His vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 places young people at the centre of India's development journey, and the foundations of that future are being laid through the everyday work of teachers.

The journey from the *gurukul* to the digital classroom reflects India's remarkable ability to carry its civilisational wisdom forward while embracing new possibilities. As we salute our teachers on Teachers' Day, let us celebrate the timeless Indian tradition that places knowledge among the highest pursuits of human life and accords deep respect to those who impart it.

Prathad Joshi is Union education minister. The views are personal



Prathad Joshi

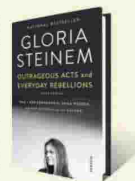
[EDITOR'S PICK]

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

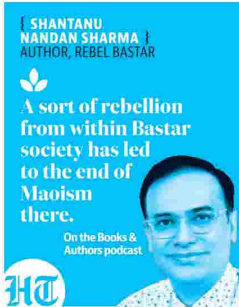
A GENTLE REBEL

"We are the women our parents warned us about, and we are proud," Gloria Steinem once said. A sentence that seems too short to contain so much — the feminist movement since the 1960s, the civil rights struggle, the years spent on the road carrying a message of liberation to the masses across the world and yet it does. So, with Steinem gone at 92, we must read about what makes such a statement possible — in *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*.

This collection of Steinem's essays is, at once, a memoir, social satire, and biting critique of "man's world". From *If Men Could Menstruate* to *Ruth's Song* to *The Personal Is Political*, each essay underlines the particular ways women are made secondary players in their own lives, and as a gender. And provides insight into how the situation is to be corrected. First published in 1983, its third print came out in 2019 — showing how relevant it still remains.



Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions by Gloria Steinem 1983



{ DJAMEL WHITE } AUTHOR,
ALL THEM DOGS

'The real pain here isn't bullet wounds'

On family, gang culture, movies, and exploring the spectrum of masculinities, in his Booker-longlisted novel

Saurabh Sharma
letters@hindustantimes.com

1 Though gang wars and violence feature in *All Them Dogs*, family relationships are also at the heart of this novel. For me, it's a novel about belonging. Tony is looking to be accepted, but he seems to have this twisted idea of who he should be accepted by and what that acceptance might look like. This idea of his gets mixed up with the idea of being feared and admired. It's based on the role models he has seen growing up, the experiences he has had as a young person. Ultimately, what he wants is something universal, which is why readers find something relatable in him. Perhaps a path to empathy, despite all the kinds of horrific things he does.

2 Does the idea of physical home elude him because he doesn't feel at home in his body, and because of the negativity his sexuality might attract? I don't address it directly — the kind of shame or contradiction that might be raging inside Tony. But it goes without saying that, given the environment he was in. If Tony doesn't feel safe in his body, how can he feel safe anywhere? I think that reading could be tracked across the novel.

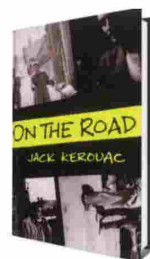
3 Were you inspired by gangster movies, while writing this novel? Gang culture is cyclical in nature. What gets depicted in TV and media is eventually imitated by people who desire and want to mimic this lifestyle. Interestingly, one notices this cyclicity in media itself. For example, in the early episodes of *The Sopranos* (1999), people are watching *The Godfather* (1972), and I quite liked it, but I can't really say if that inspired me.

I don't know why I was so into shows like *The Wire* (2002) or the Irish drama *Love/Hate* (2010), and of course *The Sopranos* and *Goodfellas* (1990). I think it may be the characters, who come from really low circumstances, becoming intoxicated in the rush, the danger, and everything else this lifestyle promises them, before their eventual undoing. For me, there was always something attractive about exploring this tension. In all these stories, there was usually a betrayal. Somebody would have to kill a friend or family member, so relationships were always in question. There were moments of such heartbreak and drama.

4 It's heartbreaking when Tony realises that perhaps Archie and his ma are a unit, and he is being isolated. I mean they're people; they're hurting. It's a strange dynamic these three explore, and it is going to shift. In doing that my intention was to make a story feel true. A story where extravagant things happen but ultimately the trials and tribulations of the characters are grounded on a human level. The real pain here isn't bullet wounds, it's a fragmented connection.



69 years since Jack Kerouac's On the Road was published



Jack Kerouac (March 12, 1922–October 21, 1969) became an icon after *On the Road*, the autobiographical novel based on his road trips across the US and Mexico, was published in 1957. A pioneer of the Beat Generation, along with William S Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac's writing influenced the American counterculture of the 1960s and has had a lasting influence on popular culture. At left, Kerouac in 1958. BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Siddhesh Gautam's graphic novel, *The Blue Book*, that recalls many anti-caste figures, including Ravidas and Savitribai Phule, takes the reader through a long but non-linear history

Suraj Yengde
letters@hindustantimes.com

Had Kafka experienced an epiphany about the renewal of memory. *Metamorphosis* would have encompassed a thousand histories of a thousand years. Thankfully, he left that for illustrators, artists and poet exemplar Siddhesh Gautam to achieve in *The Blue Book*. Among the few who have centralised Shraman-Bahujan history, Gautam is a true savant of India's graphic-novel scene. His work is certainly vastly different from the *Chacha Chowdhury* comics I loved as a child. It was a love that was cut short by my father's insistence that I read Tolstoy, Raja Dhale, Einstein and Kanchi Ram; heavy stuff. For a while, I rebelled. But the comic-book love affair soon came to an end as it was expensive, and Nanded, where I grew up, didn't have a culture of comic-book clubs and libraries, or at least, I was not aware of them.

These days, I sometimes pick up graphic novels, especially those that focus on the stories that most are afraid to tell. Here, the works of Joe Sacco, the defiant cartoonist, whose subjects have included UP's Muslims, North India's Dalits, and the Palestinians, especially stand out. Gautam's book falls in similar ideological territory, but it also stands in a category all its own. The poetry embedded in the social history written in *The*

Blue Book is healing. Take the verse where the author morphs into a deer and ends up in the Deer Park near Sarnath in the 5th century BCE. When he greets fellow deer, they don't respond. He greets them again and is met with a bespectacled silence. Then, the herd takes off.

The author is surely presenting something he has experienced many times; the people he has tried to befriend over several lives have just not made time for him. And, in this current blessed-wretched life, he has attempted, once again, to be like others.

He has changed his clothing, his behaviour, and his nature so he doesn't intimidate others. Yet, their curious-yet-fearful tenor deprives him of that acquaintance, the friendship to follow. "They ran not from fear, but from knowing how not to stay... I was alone again."

This graphic novel invokes many traditions, and attempts to recall many figures from the past. It's true that there are many who have not got their due in mainstream discourse, and the reader is taken through a longer but non-linear history that features glimpses of Ravidas, Meerabai, Savitri and Jyotiba Phule, BR Ambedkar, Gail Omvedt, Annabhau Sathe and Kausalya Baisantri. The narrator talks to these eminent personages in his dreams and, in doing so, makes those dreams an act of learning.

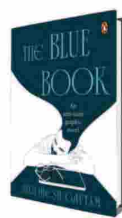
He finds solace as he "sleeps on the Buddha". It is a space and state of mind, of awakening, that demands constant practice. In his panels, the reader is taken right into his room into the bed where he lounges as his pencil runs strokes of familiar intimacy on his iPad. At almost feels like one is sharing the room with a good friend and together building a Platonic life.

The poetry embedded in the social history written in *The*

author is right to critique the male gaze, he is sometimes overzealous. It is a good reckoning of history to state that Savitribai brought her great ability and capacity for candour to Jyotirao Phule's life and to his movement, but the reader would be better presented as the pathfinder while he becomes a mere second-guesser. What this view inadvertently does is frame the caste struggle as one hobbled merely by a disease of conviction. The truth is that the agents of caste harness the biological division to assign weaker roles to a group. This hierarchy would fall with the disbanding of gender roles. It is true that women are stigmatised and have to carry the burden of their birth. Even progressive societies intent on bringing about gender equality need to relearn many things and introduce corrective measures. This is also why advocacy against caste is incomplete without wider group participation, which includes that of women. But breaking the piquant terminology of "allyship" on Ambedkar's and, by extension, Phule's scalp is too much.

But this is a minor complaint. Siddhesh Gautam speaks to many in his generation who, despite being armed with higher education, fancy foreign degrees and pedigrees of intellect, still see themselves as lost and know not where they are headed. Perhaps the answer is to go back to one's roots, all the way to the "last human remain we found in East Africa, and beyond".

Suraj Yengde is the author of *Caste: A Global Story*, a Ford Foundation Presidential Fellow, and an assistant professor at University of Pennsylvania



The Blue Book
Siddhesh Gautam
304pp, ₹799, Penguin

{ HT PICKS } NEW READS

A STORY OF FAMILY AND MIGRATION

Joachim Coutinho's life in Mangaluru is in a rut: a ne'er-do-well father, a mother and sister to provide for, never enough money, and dreams of being an actor in Bollywood which are going nowhere. He sets his sights on Bahrain and a job he hopes will improve his situation. Life in the Middle-East, however, proves to be harder still. He's lonely, and lives with a constant sense of inadequacy. But at least he's a success story at home, and a brave face is what he must put on. Back in Mangaluru, Joachim's nephew, Darrel Serrao, looks on with envy.

He wants everything his uncle has: a loving family, a good job and a life of plenty in a foreign land. Surely if Joachim can do it, so can he? Building incrementally, *You Envy the Coutinhos* tells a story of family and migration, ambition and disillusionment. This is a gloriously dramatic tragicomic tale, astute in its understanding of human relationships.

You Envy the Coutinhos
Michelle D'Costa
180pp, ₹499, Westland

THE MAN AT THE HEART OF THE MIZORAM STORY

Over several decades, Mizoram has seen revolutionary fervour and a high-stakes transition to arrive at a hard-won peace. But how did it achieve this? Author Sanjoy Hazarika delivers the definitive account of Mizoram's political history over the past century.

At the heart of it is Lal Thanhawla, or Pu Hawla, Mizoram's longest-serving chief minister, who has walked many a political tightrope. Hazarika outlines his sophisticated dance of diplomacy, highlighting his bold, often controversial decisions to unlock resources. Based on hundreds of interviews and rare archival material, *Lal Thanhawla* is a portrayal of the game of chess that continues to define the politics of the north-east.

Lal Thanhawla: The Boy from Zarkawt and the Making of Mizoram
Sanjoy Hazarika
412pp, ₹799, Westland

WHISPERED TALES FROM AN EMPIRE'S PAST

When Empire settles in for the night, the ghosts begin to speak. In the bungalows, dark houses, hill stations, jungle ruins and cantonments of British India, the dark carries footprints in empty rooms, voices from the next chamber, omens of death, cursed objects, restless animals, buried crimes, and memories that refuse to stay buried.

The Raj in Ghostly Light gathers classic supernatural stories from the 19th and early 20th centuries by writers such as Rudyard Kipling, Alice Perrin, BM Croker, Flora Annie Steel, Arthur Conan Doyle, S Mukerji and others. These are tales of hauntings, madness, fever, guilt and dread — and of the anxieties beneath imperial confidence. This collection opens a door into the shadowed rooms of the Raj, where every verandah holds a whisper and the past is never quite past.

The Raj in Ghostly Light
Edited by BC Dutt
335pp, ₹499
Speaking Tiger

ontheweb

READ: The Palm House, Gwendoline Riley's Booker longlisted novel, follows two friends as they lean on each other. A work that avoids showiness and experimentation as it effectively conveys the nuances of a 21st-century friendship between two millennials, this is a story of love without romantic ideals.



Scan the QR code to read the review by Rahul Singh

{ SHORT FICTION } IN TRANSLATION

Private wounds and historical decline

Ather Farouqui
letters@hindustantimes.com

Few contemporary Urdu novelists have fashioned a fictional universe as distinctive as Syed Muhammad Ashraf's. He has achieved a rare synthesis between philosophical reflection, particularly informed by the Sufi tradition, psychological insight and narrative artistry. In his fictional world, the personal is never detached from history, nor the ordinary from the metaphysical. Everyday objects, domestic spaces and intimate relationships gradually open into meditations on time, loss, faith, inheritance and civilisational decline.

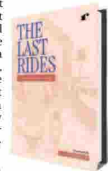
His fiction is firmly rooted in the literary traditions of Urdu yet never confined by them. He came to wider attention with *Daar Se Bichhre*. The long journey from his debut novel to *Akhiri Sawariyan*, translated into English as *The Last Rides*, reflects a steadily deepening command over language, atmosphere, structure and psychological complexity.

Translated by A Naseeb Khan, this volume is a haunting, elegiac and intricately layered meditation on inheritance, memory and the invisible burdens that travel across generations. Childhood furnishes the novel with its deepest emotional register, though Ashraf renders it not as a sanctuary of innocence but as the theatre of first

wounds, first bewilderments and first recognitions of power. The relationship between the young narrator and Jammo, an older girl trapped within the intersecting structures of poverty and patriarchy, is drawn with extraordinary restraint and emotional precision.

Jammo's quiet resistance, most notably her refusal to submit to the expectations of a forced marriage, becomes one of the novel's deepest moral centres. In a world ordered by coercion, her silence defies the forces of decline. One of Ashraf's

greatest gifts is his ability to transform the ordinary into the mythic. A mynah dyed red, rejected by its own kind before being torn apart by a kite, becomes an unforgettable image of stigma, exile and communal cruelty. Such episodes reveal his extraordinary capacity to invest familiar creatures and domestic objects with emotional grandeur, that human language often struggles to articulate. Domestic memory,



The Last Rides
Syed Muhammad Ashraf, Translated by A Naseeb Khan
287pp, ₹549
Rekhta Publications

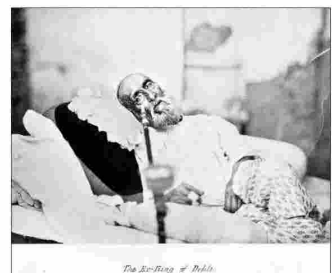
however central it remains, is only one horizon of the novel's imaginative world. It opens outward into historical allegory, summoning spectral figures such as Timur and Bahadur Shah Zafar, whose voices emerge from the ruins of empire to meditate on conquest, beauty, futility and decay.

Timur, broken and introspective, embodies the exhaustion of power after violence has consumed itself. Zafar, dispossessed yet sustained by poetry, emerges as the last representative of a civilisation that has begun to disappear. His verses become a way of bearing witness to a world that can no longer be recovered. Through him, Ashraf brings the past into the present of the novel. History

is treated as an inheritance that continues to shape the lives of his characters. The dead do not simply inhabit memory; they return to remind us of the transience of power and the impermanence of worldly glory.

Ashraf's elegy is not nostalgic in any facile sense. Rather, it recognises that cultures rarely perish through spectacular catastrophe. More often, they fade through neglect, fragmentation and the gradual erosion of everyday forms of grace. One of the novel's quiet triumphs lies in its recognition of women as the custodians of continuity. Amma, Nani, Mami, Jammo and others preserve not only households but emotional memory, ethical tenderness and those forms of resilience that seldom find a place in official histories.

The Last Rides is a significant landmark in the continuing evolution of the Urdu novel. A Naseeb Khan's nuanced translation enables this impor-



Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor, in a picture taken while he awaited trial for his role in the Revolt of 1857. GETTY IMAGES

tant work to find its place among English readers without surrendering the qualities that make it unmistakably a work of Urdu. Adab.

Ather Farouqui is the author of several works on Urdu literature. He is general secretary of Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu (Hind), Delhi

THE ASIAN AGE

5 SEPTEMBER 2026

Is the govt's growth story only half-told?

About five days ago, India was pleasantly surprised by the Central government's quarterly economic data, which pegged the country's economic growth at an enviable 7.6 per cent. The rate of economic expansion beat various growth forecasts, including that of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), by a wide margin.

Though India had witnessed economic growth rates higher than 7.6 per cent, this number was exceptional in view of global economic and geopolitical uncertainty. The nation rejoiced until former finance secretary Subhash Chandra Garg raised doubts about the reliability of the growth figure following a downward revision of the economic activity recorded in the corresponding quarter of the previous year.

Garg, a cost accountant and an IAS officer from the Rajasthan cadre, was not an ordinary career civil servant. He was an executive director of the World Bank from September 2014 to June 2017. He served in various roles at the finance ministry and as a director of the Reserve Bank of India from July 2017 to July 2019. His educational background, profile and lack of any connection with Opposition parties — his rise coincided with the emergence of the BJP as the pre-eminent power in New Delhi — lent credence to his words.

The former finance secretary's argument is very simple: if you shorten the yardstick used to measure growth, the resulting growth will obviously be extraordinary. According to him, the country's economy grew by 7.6 per cent in Q1 of fiscal 2026-27 because the government had lowered the size of the gross domestic product in Q1 2025-26 — the previous year's GDP was used as the yardstick — from ₹86 lakh crore to ₹80 lakh crore. If the government had not shortened the yardstick (GDP size in Q1 FY 2025-26), the data would have shown a growth rate of 2.6 per cent, approximately ₹83.26 lakh crore in Q1 FY 2026-27 compared with ₹86.05 lakh crore in Q1 FY 2025-26.

The government and many economists countered Mr Garg's argument by stating that revision of the base year is an accepted principle in statistics. It cannot compare data calculated using an old base with numbers produced using a new base because they represent different sets of numbers and are, therefore, incomparable.

The government's stand is plausible from a statistical point of view, but Mr Garg's argument is easily comprehensible to the average citizen of this country. The "2.6 per cent growth rate" could create a narrative against the government, especially in the wake of the jobless economic growth and premunification of the economy in recent years.

They also argued that one cannot compare data calculated using an old base with numbers produced using a new base because they represent different sets of numbers and are, therefore, incomparable.

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Irrespective of the battles over narratives in which political parties have been engaged, a manufactured doomsday scenario would not be good for the country because it would slow down the investment cycle. Similarly, a manufactured growth narrative would not be good for the country because it would prevent timely interventions required to get the economy back on track.

If the government wants to avoid speculation about the economy, it should be forthcoming in releasing data. If the ministry of statistics had calculated growth figures using both base years for the initial three years, it would have left no room for unwarranted speculation.

Rahul backs discipline in T'gana

Telangana endowments minister Konda Surekha's ouster from chief minister A. Revanthi Reddy's Cabinet stands testimony to the generational shift in the Congress DNA under Rahul Gandhi, underscoring his insistence on discipline, respect for the chain of command, and integrity — qualities long eroded in the party's state units.

For decades, Congress was synonymous with factional feuds, often vicious, with each camp enjoying the blessings of a patron in Delhi. Indira Gandhi, the party's most powerful leader, institutionalised this infighting in the name of "equilibrium," primarily to ensure that no regional satrap grows powerful enough to challenge her own leadership. Chief ministers were replaced with such frequency that critics quipped she changed them as swiftly as her attire.

Rahul Gandhi's era has consciously broken from this "katputli" culture. By giving chief ministers free hand to a large extent and refusing to lend an ear to dissidents, he has been trying to write a Lok Sabha script. The recent change of guard in Karnataka is more of an issue of integrity — honouring the adjustment reached out between Siddaramaiah and D.K. Shivakumar, rather than succumbing to dissonance.

Establishing another principle, respecting chain of command, the central leadership approved sacking of Ms Surekha and another party veteran G. Chinnappa Reddy from Cabinet-rank posts for attacking Mr Revanthi. The move established his leadership beyond doubt and put to rest any speculation over his replacement, propaganda in which the main Opposition Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) seems to be finding solace rather than believing in its own strength to fight and stage a comeback in the next general elections.

With the talk of growing anti-incumbency gaining traction and after gaining strength from Rahul's enormous support, it is high time for Revanthi Reddy also to establish an emotional connect with party legislators and leaders, which is clearly missing, and take all along with him. He also has to drive the administration to deliver what all he has been promising. As greater responsibility comes with greater power, he should ensure bringing the Congress back to power and giving the highest ministerial Lok Sabha seats to realise what he frequently refers to as the dream of making Rahul PM.

THE ASIAN AGE

KUMAR MITTAR

Editor

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"Say 'no' to everything proposed by the government. Be negative. Don't give a shift. The positivists have overdone. The negativists must use their wit. Denial is a strong beginning. Of alternative ways to go."

— From Kismet Haddi by Bachchoo

They say the UK jails are overflowing and its courts are overwhelmed with cases? The obvious conclusion is that crime requiring the law to be exercised and custodial sentences to be passed, is on a steep increase.

Not so. Statistics tell us that in the past decade crime has dramatically decreased. And yet the imprisoned rate has a court jam crisis and its jails are overflowing with condemned criminals.

Like the behaviour of sub-atomic particles in quantum mode, the reality eludes common sense.

The new government of Prime Minister Andy Burnham has in its first weeks faced a public outcry against the attempt to alleviate jail overcrowding by releasing some prisoners. The media, and the public through it, have stated their strong objection to the early release of, say, prisoners whose actions have led to the death of police officers. These convicts may not have killed their victims with murderous intent, but their action nevertheless led to the

death of the innocents and they were convicted of manslaughter. The previous government moved to free up prison cells by releasing some of these.

Huge outcry. Burnham has now decreed that no prisoners convicted of manslaughter will be released before the completion of their sentences. This government and the prison service have to find other ways of tackling overcrowding in jails.

One of these ways has to be, for instance, the release of a young man who has been in prison for 20 years for stealing a mobile phone. He was given a two-and-a-half-year sentence which was considered proportionate to the petty crime, but then was kept in jail through an ordinance called IPP, imprisonment for 'public protection'.

And the queue of court cases? The last justice secretary passed an ordinance about jailing trials for crimes for which the mandatory sentence is less than three years.

A significant section of the public, and now the parliament, are now opposing such a restriction of jury service. They contend that it degrades the civil rights of accused citizens who have traditionally been tried by a jury of their peers.

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debate head-on. They have commissioned a four-part drama based on the real trial of two young male offenders, one aged 14 and the other in his early twenties, who brutally murdered their mother's new husband (whom neither regarded as a stepfather) as he slept. They stabbed him 69 times and slit his throat.

The drama re-enacts the trial exactly as it happened but with all the names changed, using a jury of 12 citizens of Cambridge, where the murder took place, who knew nothing previously of the crime or the trial. They come fresh to the case and we, the audience, are invited to determine whether the verdict this drama jury pass will be the same as the former actual jury in the case of the two young accused.

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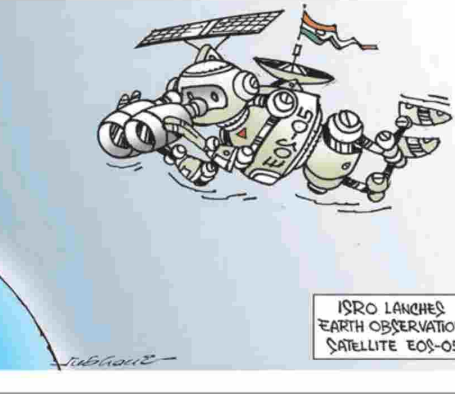
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Subhani

SMART BOY... HE'S OBSERVING US MORE THAN THE EARTH



Belonging: Should the Sphinx have spoken?



Shobhaa's Take

Indian publishing's biggest hot potato is causing major heartburn much before its publishing date. *Do kuch hua*, fact remains Penguin Random House India developed cold feet and decided to "unbelong" to a book (*Belonging* — A Journey of Love, Sonia Gandhi's much-awaited memoir) that the publisher committed to publish for the desi market. But here comes an even bigger question: Should she... or shouldn't she, have written *Belonging* — A Journey of Love? Does the Sphinx lose its mystique, its power as it were, if it miraculously opens its mouth after centuries of silence? Are enigmatic public figures, far more intriguing when little or nothing is known about their private selves? Does the nation — and the world — need to know every tiny hiccup and burp that escapes a celebrity's mouth? Would Greta Garbo had she given multiple interviews, chronicled her extraordinary life through a candid memoir? Does history change its own script depending on what a famous person has said or left unsaid? Are star politicians obliged to restate their own dramatically lived stories for public consumption? And yes when did privacy stop being sexy?

In Sonia Gandhi's case, the most relevant question to ask is: Why a memoir? And why now? Memoirs are tricky, wily, nasty beasts. Every single person on earth has a story to tell and share. But who's interested in the lives of nobodies? Not even family and friends! Naah... they are the last persons to shell out money and buy the book. Then, why? Strangers and other animals? That's a question for

publishers. Sonia Gandhi has exercised her individual right to pen her memoir. There are countless takers for the book. Particularly because Sonia Gandhi's persona has been scrupulously structured around her closed and inaccessible image. Reader curiosity is at an all-time high. Her political career has been meticulously built on multiple illusions surrounding her "real self." She has studiously contributed very little to the public's understanding of who she is, what she represents, and where her emotions reside. This self-created wall, has served her well. Guesswork and speculation about her political ambitions and goals have kept rivals insecure and on their toes as they second guess her every move. Her expressionless face, cold demeanor, distant manner and overall aloofness, have helped shield her from the unwanted proximity of hangers on. For an attractive woman like Sonia Gandhi, the public gaze has been a constant ever since she set foot in her husband's country — India. And made it her own. It's safe to guess *Belonging* is about just that.

Publishing is a small, snarky incestuous world in India. Editors and publishers are close-knit, lives play non-stop musical chairs. There are only a handful of competent publishing professionals who count. The margins are skinty. The gambles, risky. There are more books than readers. Hungry publishers in search of the next big thing, brazenly poach talent, offer crazy incentives to shell out money and buy the book. Then, why? Strangers and other animals? That's a question for

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ty much knows everything about a marquee book deal. *Belonging*, with an initial print run of one lakh copies, is a sure shot. After the controversy, sales will treble, leading to blood on the bookstores' floor? This is a phenomenon that takes place once every 10 years. Sonia Gandhi's book has the commercial potential of a political Harry Potter. Now what? If HarperCollins India acquires the abandoned rights, as rumoured, Diwali bonuses of its employees will go through the roof. It hardly matters that the book may not be what readers expect and contains very little that can be called "juicy" *mirch masala*. Penguin Random House India will be thanked forever by the new publishers for propping the book to giddy heights, based on a few deleted passages.

Frankly, if political pressure was indeed brought into play (duly denied by PRHI), it's a short sighted, foolish move. Most of Sonia's disclosures have already been in the public domain. But her personal take on certain events, forms the real hook and display the main bone of contention. Come on, it's her opinion. Her prerogative. Her story. By giving so much importance to issues that have already been processed, digested and discarded, those insisting on the deletions have displayed an undue weakness and panic.

Then comes the question of who actually wrote the book. Has she ever ghostwritten or ghost story has been mentioned, it is assumed the book contains words

pened solely by Sonia Gandhi. But according to the buzz in Delhi, some invaluable "help" was provided by two or three brilliant writers and literary critics. Why not? Inputs, suggestions and contributions from close family friends and well-wishers, are frequently incorporated, when the writer is a first-time author who has undertaken the daunting task of compressing a staggeringly complex life (defined by monumental tragedy) into a 544-page tome.

Alfred A. Knopf pulled off a major publishing coup when they persuaded one of India's most private political personalities to sign the book contract. Paradoxically, thanks to the controversy, the major marketing thrust has been provided by Penguin Random House India. Will the book be a *chatpata* appetising dish, best served hot? Or will it be a bland pink sauce pasta in place of a palate tingling oily paratha? Those worried about the nappetising portions, should swallow a bottle of antacid in anticipation. But... as insiders are saying, it's a *meetha meetha* vanilla account about *amore* — love. A book written more from a tender heart, than a calculating mind.

"Only her children Rahul and Priyanka know what their mother went through when their father Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated." Soon the world will also get to know the depth of that sorrow. There you have it. A woman named Edwige Antonia Albina was born 79 years ago to Stephano and Maria Matineo V. Albina and raised in a traditional Roman Catholic family. Today, Sonia Gandhi is the same woman who has led the Indian National Congress party as its longest serving president, plus, remains its unchallenged boss lady. And yes... Sonia Gandhi definitely 'belongs'. You have been with that?

Instagram handle @ShobhaaDe; Twitter handle @DeShobhaa

LETTERS

CHERRY-PICKED DATA

The government's claim of 7.8% GDP growth for the April-June quarter has drawn criticism not only from the Opposition but also from eminent economists. Former finance secretary S.C. Garg has put nominal GDP growth at 2.6%, while economists like Raghuram Rajan have questioned why headline numbers do not match ground-level economic indicators. The government says the 7.8% growth is based on better data and a new GDP base year, but these doubts cannot simply be brushed aside. GDP numbers affect businesses, investors and how the world views our economy. The government owes it to citizens to explain the rationale for the 7.8% growth and dispel the doubts, so as to sustain public trust in official numbers.

V. Nagarajan
Chennai

IMPORTANT POINT

ACTRESS Swara Bhasker recently reiterated her criticism of the Jallianwala Bagh in the 2015 film *Fadmasavat* emphasising that rape survivors have a fundamental right to live and rebuild their lives. At a recent event in Delhi, Bhasker questioned the film's depiction of mass Jallianwala. She stated that such portrayals could send a harmful message to modern society — perpetuating a wrong notion that a woman's dignity is tied to her physical body. She stated that such portrayals could send a harmful message to modern society — perpetuating a wrong notion that a woman's dignity is tied to her physical body. She stated that such portrayals could send a harmful message to modern society — perpetuating a wrong notion that a woman's dignity is tied to her physical body.

Jang Bahadur Singh
Jamshedpur

EYEING BLUE SKIES

SEP 7 is observed as the International Day of Clean Air for Blue Skies. The United Nations designated this day in 2019, and it has been observed since 2020. The day aims to highlight the importance of clean air and a healthy environment, create awareness about the harmful effects of air pollution, and encourage governments, institutions and citizens to work together to reduce pollution. Delhi is one of the most prominent examples of the growing crisis. But several cities across India suffer from the problem. If we do not take air pollution seriously and bend in time, we may leave the next generation with weaker lungs and a bleak future.

Dattaprasad Shirodkar
Mumbai

Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings

UK jails full: Time to limit number of jury trials?

"Say 'no' to everything proposed by the government. Be negative. Don't give a shift. The positivists have overdone. The negativists must use their wit. Denial is a strong beginning. Of alternative ways to go."

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One of these ways has to be, for instance, the release of a young man who has been in prison for 20 years for stealing a mobile phone. He was given a two-and-a-half-year sentence which was considered proportionate to the petty crime, but then was kept in jail through an ordinance called IPP, imprisonment for 'public protection'.

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debate head-on. They have commissioned a four-part drama based on the real trial of two young male offenders, one aged 14 and the other in his early twenties, who brutally murdered their mother's new husband (whom neither regarded as a stepfather) as he slept. They stabbed him 69 times and slit his throat.

The drama re-enacts the trial exactly as it happened but with all the names changed, using a jury of 12 citizens of Cambridge, where the murder took place, who knew nothing previously of the crime or the trial. They come fresh to the case and we, the audience, are invited to determine whether the verdict this drama jury pass will be the same as the former actual jury in the case of the two young accused.

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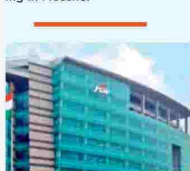
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Nifty 50	23,897.70 +0.10
S&P 500*	7,713.83 +0.44
Dollar (₹)	94.49 -0.01
Pound Sterling (₹)	127.76 +0.189
Euro (₹)	109.77 +0.103
Gold (10gm) (₹)	1,60,900 +1,400 +0.87
Brent crude (\$/bbl)	95.14 -0.40
IN 10-Yr bond yield*	6.971 +0.01
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.784 +0.022

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Meesho's gains 3% on Softbank share sale

Shares of Meesho rose more than 3 per cent on Friday as investors lapped up the e-commerce marketplace stock a day after Softbank divested a 1.7 per cent stake in the company for ₹1,650 crore through block deals on the NSE. The scrip of the company went up by 3.3 per cent to ₹216.67 apiece on the exchange, recovering despite the large block deal in which Softbank parted its holding in Meesho.



JSW Energy hits 15 GW operational capacity

JSW Energy on Friday said the company's total operational capacity has crossed 15 gigawatt mark, with renewables having 60 per cent share. Of 15,025 megawatt (MW), 9,067 megawatt is renewable energy, 3,125 megawatt wind, 2,426 MW solar, 1,735 MW hybrid, and 1,781 MW is hydro power capacity. JSW Energy said in an exchange filing. The thermal portfolio stands at 5,958 MW.

SPML's BESS clears global safety tests

SPML Infra said its proprietary 104.4 kWh Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) battery pack has completed key international safety, performance and transportation certification and testing requirements, marking a step towards commercial deployment. The battery pack, developed under the company's own intellectual property, has completed the necessary requirements for that, the company said.

Ola Electric unveils multiple dealer stores

Ola Electric on Friday announced the launch of its first cohort of network-partner stores, with dealer-operated outlets in the states of Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Bihar, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh & Haryana Pradesh going live. The stores deepen the company's presence in key regional markets and will serve local demand for Ola scooters and motorcycles in their local markets.

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NSE gets Sebi's nod to float ₹30,000-cr IPO

Will be 2nd largest in value after proposed Jio Platforms' ₹37,000-cr IPO

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, SEPT. 4

Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has cleared the National Stock Exchange of India's (NSE) draft red herring prospectus (DRHP) for its proposed initial public offering, paving the way for the much-awaited listing of the exchange.

NSE's IPO is expected to be the second-largest in India, with the exchange looking to raise around ₹30,000-31,000 crore through an offer for sale by existing shareholders. RIL-promoted Jio Platforms has also received Sebi approval for its proposed IPO, which is expected to be the largest at ₹37,000-38,000 crore through fresh equity issuance.

NSE received the Sebi approval a day after the Supreme Court accepted settlement terms between Sebi and NSE over past regulatory lapses in the co-location and dark fibre cases, removing a key regulatory hurdle to the exchange's listing plans.

NSE will be the third stock exchange in India to be listed after Multi Commodity Exchange and BSE. NSE had filed its DRHP for the second time in June 2026. It had first filed the draft offer with Sebi in Dec. 2016 to raise around ₹30,000 crore through an OFS. The approval and listing process were delayed for nearly a decade due to regulatory scrutiny of the co-location issue.

NSE is India's largest stock exchange in terms of total turnover in the cash market and equity derivatives. The IPO comprises an offer for sale of 14.89 crore shares of face value of ₹1 each, (six per cent of



TATA CHEMICALS SAYS KENYA UNIT FULLY COMPLIANT

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, SEPT. 4

Tata Chemicals said it remains committed to constructive engagement and resolving outstanding matters through the appropriate legal and regulatory channels following reports that Kenya's President William Ruto had ordered the company to close its operations in the country.

The company said it respects the Kenyan government's authority and remains committed to the well-being of its employees, the Magadi community and other stakeholders. Tata Chemicals said its Kenya-based subsidiary, Tata Chemicals Magadi Limited (TCML), had submitted all required information, reports and documents to the ministry of mining, blue economy and industrial affairs on August 11.

"TCML having provided a comprehensive response to the matters raised by the ministry including information regarding its compliance with applicable regulatory requirements, and maintained that TCML was fully compliant with regulatory requirements," the company said.

Tata Chemicals said it had received official communication from the ministry dated July 28, 2026, and maintained that TCML was fully compliant with regulatory requirements. The company said it acquired the Magadi plant in 2005 and that the business had since played an important role in the Kenyan economy.

COMPANY	IPO SIZE (₹ CR)	YEAR
Jio Platforms*	37,000-38000	Oct-Nov, 2026 Likely
NSE	30,000-31000	Oct-Nov, 2026 Likely
Hyundai Motors India	27870	Oct. 2024
LIC of India	20,557	May 2022
One 97 Communications (Paytm)	18,300	Nov. 2021
Tata Capital	15,512	Oct. 2025
Coal India	15,199	Oct. 2010
HDB Financial	12,500	June 2025
LG Electronics India	11607	Oct. 2025

COMPANY	(₹ CR)
Pranav Constructions	351
Glass Wall Systems	427.89
Prasol Chemicals	500
Kanohar Electricals	1056
Asset Reconstruction Co. (India)	732.97
Karamtara Engineering	—
Manipal Payment and Identity Solutions	805
Remtomjo	1255.57
LCC Projects	427.14
Veegaland Developers	210

The IPO creates valuation re-rating benchmarks across MNCs, depository entities, AITCs, and retail brokerage platforms.

— THAKUR AJIT SINGH, Graded Financial Services Founder

Sept. to see string of IPOs, cos look to raise ₹25,000 cr

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, SEPT. 4

September's first half is seeing a rush of initial public offerings (IPOs) as several companies seek to launch their issues before the Sebi's extended regulatory approval window expires on Sept. 30, according to online stock trading and investment platform Kotak Neo.

So far, 12 IPOs are in line to raise funds and list on stock exchanges, mostly with issue sizes of up to ₹1,000 crore.

Sebi had allowed a one-time extension for companies whose IPO approvals were due to expire between April 1 and Sept. 30 due to the prevailing geopolitical situation.

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Payments & ID Solutions, Karamtara Engineering and LCC Projects will announce their price bands and public issue dates on Friday.

ARCIL, Kanohar Electricals, Prasol Chemicals, Glass Wall Systems, Pranav Constructions and Veegaland Developers have already announced their price bands and issue dates.

Two IPOs closed on Thursday. Rays of Belief (Monsi's Belief) was subscribed 107.71 times, while Deepa Jewellers was subscribed 42.61 times.

Board, Aranda Investments (Mauritius), Bank of Baroda, Stock Holdings Corporation (India), General Insurance

Corporation of India, The New India Assurance Company, National Insurance Company, United India Insurance Company.

Union (Mauritius) Holdings purchased 46.09 lakh equity shares from TPC-backed Genella Mauritius Holding.

The transaction, which took place on September 2, was executed at a price of ₹760 per share, Aster DM Quality Care said in the filing.

With this acquisition, the company's shareholding in the healthcare major has increased to about 24.58 per cent.

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Forex reserves hit record \$740 bn on dollar inflows

FALAKNAZ SYED MUMBAI SEPT 4

The Reserve Bank of India's special forex swap measures have pushed the foreign exchange reserves to a fresh high of \$740.80 billion, an increase of \$11.475 billion in the week ended August 26.

The latest rise has taken the reserves above the previous record of \$728.494 billion recorded in the week ended February 27. The reserves have now increased for nine consecutive weeks, from \$729.33 billion in the week ended August 21.

To attract dollar inflows and support the rupee, the RBI on June 9 announced the dollar-rupee forex swap facility covering FCNR(B) deposits, external commercial borrowings (ECBs) and overseas foreign currency borrowings (FCBs) inflows.

The RBI's special swap windows raised a cumulative \$136.3 billion by August, with FCNR(B) deposits accounting for 92 per cent, or \$126 billion. The remaining inflows came through offshore borrowing facilities.

The dollar-rupee ratio, which was earlier stubbornly steady, in the face of strong FCNR inflows, has corrected sharply in recent sessions, testing below 95 handle to mid-94 due to strong intervention dollar sales and broader dollar swings, said Radhika Rao, senior economist and executive director, DBS Bank.

The foreign currency assets (FCAs), the largest component, in forex reserves rose by \$8.34 billion during the week to \$600.87 billion. Gold reserves increased by \$2.19 billion to \$116.41 billion. India's special drawing rights (SDRs) holdings with the IMF stood at \$18.81 billion, down \$43 million from the previous week but up \$188 million from end-March.

Meanwhile, the RBI on Friday absorbed over ₹6.02 lakh crore from the banking system through two variable rate reverse repo (VRRR) auctions as required liquidity remained high.

The central bank received and accepted bids worth ₹5.41 lakh crore in a three-day VRRR auction against the notified amount of ₹7 lakh crore. The auction was conducted at a cut-off rate of 5.24 per cent.

In another three-day VRRR auction, banks parked ₹60,419 crore with the RBI against a notified amount of ₹1.5 lakh crore, also at 5.24 per cent.

Moopen Buys Stake in Aster DM for ₹350 Crore

New Delhi, Sept. 4: Aster DM Quality Care said on Friday that Dr Azad Moopen and family have increased their stake in the healthcare major by around 24.58 per cent by buying an additional shareholding worth ₹350 crore.

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Govt's ₹37,500-cr coal scheme gets no bids

New Delhi, Sept. 4: The government's ambitious ₹37,500-crore financial incentive scheme for the promotion of coal-based power projects has found no takers so far, according to sources.

Despite the September 7 deadline, the scheme has received no application from any private or public player to set up projects under the programme, raising concerns over the viability of the coal ministry's push to gasify 75 tonnes of coal and lignite, sources said.

Unless the deadline of September 7 is over, it would not be possible to state the number of applications since the whole process is online, the coal ministry said in an emailed response.

The ministry has received communication from several industries expressing interest in the scheme, it said.

Kia unveils new SUV Sorento, priced ₹27.99 lakh upwards

MICHAEL GONSALVES PUNE, SEPT. 4

Kia, the South Korean car giant, on Friday forayed into the three-row SUV segment in the Indian car market with its locally manufactured Sorento.

Sorento at a starting price of ₹27.99 lakh, with six- and seven-seat options.

The new SUV is assembled locally at Kia's plant in Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, and is available in both six- and seven-seat options.

Kia's flagship SUV gets a 1.6-litre strong-hybrid petrol and 2.5-litre diesel engine, with front-wheel drive and all-wheel-drive options.

"With Kia Sorento we



Given the scale of funds involved in coal gasification projects, the preparation of FRs and project proposals requires time, the ministry said, adding that application rounds are envisaged every two months, providing multiple opportunities

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from
the Friends of India - founded 1818

Burden of Belonging

Few individuals have occupied the centre of Indian politics for as long while revealing as little of themselves as Sonia Gandhi. For nearly three decades, she has been at once ubiquitous and elusive: the head of India's oldest political party, the matriarch of its most famous family and, during the United Progressive Alliance years, arguably the most consequential figures in the country's political establishment.

Her forthcoming memoir, *Belonging: A Journey of Love*, therefore matters not merely as autobiography but as a potential document of political history. The real test will be whether it offers history an insider's illumination or merely a carefully curated family remembrance. Mrs Gandhi occupies a position no other living Indian politician can claim. She entered the Nehru-Gandhi family as an outsider, witnessed the assassinations of both Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi at devastatingly close quarters, resisted politics for years and then became the person who revived a declining Congress and led it back to power.

The unanswered questions are consequently formidable. Why did she finally enter politics after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination? What persuaded her to decline the prime ministership in 2004 despite possessing the numbers to claim it? How did the peculiar duality of authority between Congress president Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh actually function? And how does she now assess the decade that combined ambitious welfare legislation with growing allegations of corruption and administrative drift?

The 2004 decision remains particularly important. Mrs Gandhi's refusal of the prime ministership was projected as one of the most dramatic acts of political renunciation in independent India. Yet renunciation did not mean retirement from power. Her subsequent position at the head of the United Progressive Alliance created an unusual arrangement in which constitutional authority and political authority appeared to reside in different places. A candid account could clarify an enduring ambiguity in India's democratic history.

Mrs Gandhi had fiercely opposed her husband's entry into politics. Yet after years spent protecting her children from the consequences of their family's inheritance, the dynasty's political legacy eventually passed to Rahul Gandhi, while Priyanka Gandhi Vadra entered electoral politics much later. How she reconciles maternal instinct with political inheritance could be among the memoir's most revealing themes.

But perhaps the book's title offers the clearest clue to its purpose. Sonia Gandhi's defining political journey has been one of belonging: from Italy to India, from private life into a public dynasty, and from reluctant participant to custodian of a political inheritance increasingly challenged by the rise of Narendra Modi's BJP. That makes *Belonging* important at a moment when the Congress itself is struggling to define its future. The Nehru-Gandhi family remains simultaneously the party's greatest emotional asset and its most persistent political burden. Mrs Gandhi may not answer every uncomfortable question. Memoirs rarely do. But what she chooses to explain - and what she chooses to pass over - will itself constitute a judgement on a family, a political career and a chapter of Indian history that is still being fiercely contested.

Personalised War

For more than a century, the idea of a vaccine against cancer has occupied an uncertain space between scientific ambition and medical fantasy. Cancer is not an invading virus that can simply be identified and neutralised. It arises from the body's own cells, exploiting the biological mechanisms designed to sustain life. Teaching the immune system to distinguish malignant cells from healthy ones has therefore been one of medicine's most difficult challenges. That challenge may now be entering a new phase. Recent clinical results involving personalised mRNA vaccines against melanoma offer the strongest indication yet that the immune system can be trained to recognise the unique genetic signature of a tumour and prevent the disease from returning. The significance lies less in the prospect of a single vaccine that eradicates cancer than in a fundamental shift in how the disease may be fought.

For decades, cancer treatment has relied on standard categories: surgery, chemotherapy, radiation and, more recently, immunotherapy and targeted drugs. Even the most sophisticated treatments have generally been designed for categories of patients sharing a diagnosis or a mutation. Personalised cancer vaccines take individualisation further. The tumour itself becomes the blueprint for treatment.

That is possible because cancer cells accumulate mutations that distinguish them from normal tissue. By sequencing a patient's tumour, scientists can identify these abnormalities and design an mRNA vaccine that teaches the immune system what to look for. The body's own defenses can then hunt down residual malignant cells that surgery or other treatments may have missed. This represents an important conceptual reversal. The extraordinary genetic diversity of cancer has long been one of oncology's greatest obstacles.

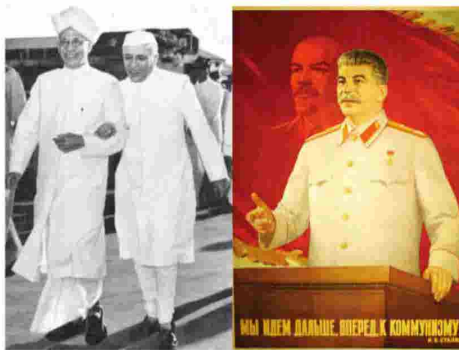
It may now become a vulnerability. Caution, however, remains essential. Encouraging results in melanoma do not amount to a universal cure. Different cancers behave differently, and melanoma - with its high mutation burden - may prove particularly suitable for this approach. Recent setbacks involving mRNA vaccines for other cancers underline the point. Biology is unlikely to yield to a single technological solution. There are practical questions, too. A personalised vaccine requires tumour sequencing, computational analysis and bespoke manufacturing for each patient. Turning such an intricate process into an affordable treatment available beyond elite hospitals will be as much an industrial challenge as a scientific one.

Without dramatic reductions in cost and production time, personalised medicine could deepen the divide between those who can access medical innovation and those who cannot. Yet the broader direction is unmistakable. The future of cancer treatment may increasingly move away from the search for one-size-fits-all cures towards therapies tailored to the molecular identity of individual tumours.

That would mark a profound change in medicine's relationship with cancer. The question would no longer be simply how to destroy cancer. It would be how to identify, understand and exploit the biological weaknesses of each patient's cancer. The age of treating cancer as a deeply personal disease may have arrived though universal cure is distant.

Back in the USSR

Dr Radhakrishnan successfully broke the ice with Marshal JV Stalin. There are 'top secret' telegrams, sent by the Indian Embassy, detailing their talks of 1950 and 1952. The 1950 telegram reported: 'On 15th January 1950, the Ambassador interviewed Generalissimo Stalin at 9pm at the Kremlin. The Ambassador began by expressing hope that good relations between two countries would be strengthened to which Stalin assented. Ambassador affirmed India's anxiety to do everything possible to work for peace. India's policy of neutrality was real and positive'



not join either. Both America and Russia are extraordinarily suspicious of each other as well as of other countries, this makes our path difficult, and we may well be suspected by each of leaning towards the other. This cannot be helped."

In 1949, Dr S Radhakrishnan stepped onto the centre stage of global diplomacy. Nehru was convinced that Dr Radhakrishnan was a personality who could represent and define Indian values to the world. In 1948-49 relations between the Government of India and the Soviet Union had deteriorated. A major reason was, as Gopal's biography notes, the Soviet Union was directing the Indian Communist Party to rebellion and condemning Government of India policies. Nehru was forthright in his comments. "We want friendship and cooperation with Russia in many fields, but we are a sensitive people, and we react strongly to be cursed at and run down. The whole basis of Russian policy appears to be that no essential change has taken place in India, and we still continue to be camp followers of the British. That of course is complete nonsense and if a policy is based on nonsensical premises, it is apt to go wrong."

Added to this crossfire was the inconsequential role which Mrs Vijayalakshmi Pandit played as Indian Ambassador in Moscow. She was not able to build contacts and had yet to get an audience with Marshal JV Stalin. It was rumoured, and later written about, that Stalin considered her arrogant and aristocratic. In this negatively-charged scenario, Dr S Radhakrishnan moved to take charge in Moscow. Nehru's words of advice were to move cautiously, not go too far and to watch the reaction of the United States and Britain at every stage.

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began by expressing hope that good relations between two countries would be strengthened to which Stalin assented. Ambassador affirmed India's anxiety to do everything possible to work for peace. India's policy of neutrality was real and positive and, in Colombo, Pandit Nehru had reaffirmed India's anxiety to avoid Cold War tactics and anti-Communist pacts. Stalin said he did not hear about it, but seemed to approve."

"Ambassador spoke of the essential need for big powers to do their utmost to put an end to the cold war and to place embargo on propaganda against each other, in which Generalissimo Stalin should take the lead in the larger interest of humanity. Stalin replied that did not depend upon him alone. The Ambassador replied that Stalin should take initiative and thus help suffering humanity."

There was a pointed enquiry from Stalin about the Indian Government proposal to carry out agrarian reforms and, headed, something has to be done as peasants are in very poor condition. "The Ambassador assured that land reform was being abolished and essential land reforms were being carried out. India had a hard time to solve all problems in these two years when she had to clear up feudal relics and effects of partition."

Vijay Singh, retired professor of history from Delhi University who researched and translated key documents from the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, underlined the significance of these 'top secret' reports. Through his writings and online portals, Vijay Singh also traced the turns and downturns of India's diplomatic ties with the USSR. The record of conversation of Ambassador Radhakrishnan's interview with Generalissimo Stalin on April 5, 1952 details exchange of views as friendly and

honest. "The Ambassador went on to say that his stay of two-and-a-half years in Moscow was most useful and he had every courtesy and assistance from the Foreign Minister and his Deputies. He recalled the prompt and ready assistance which the Foreign Office and the Soviet Government had rendered last year in the matter of the despatch of wheat to India. When the Ambassador stressed that he was really grateful for the promptitude and readiness with which the Soviet Union had come to our aid in this, Stalin said: 'There is nothing to be grateful about. We have only fulfilled our duty.' The Ambassador remarked that many States did not have a proper conception of their duty, nor did they discharge it, when they had."

"The Ambassador referred to the various Soviet delegations that had recently visited India, and the Indian people got an idea of Soviet achievements. Referring to internal matters, Dr. Radhakrishnan said that the country (India) was indeed passing through critical times. We had got rid of various forms of exploitation. We had rid ourselves of foreign domination and we had got rid of the princely rule. We hoped to tackle the problem of our landlords equally successfully. 'It would be good,' said Stalin, 'if you succeed in doing it.' On the political and economic situation in India, Ambassador Radhakrishnan said that India was as much against capitalist exploitation as Russia and it had the same economic objective. 'But we wish to adopt peaceful parliamentary methods to achieve our aims, because our whole history has taught us that enduring progress should be obtained through peaceful means.'

"To this the Generalissimo said: 'But the exploiters will never quit they will very seriously object to quit.' The Ambassador said that, in any case, we would try our own methods very hard, and if we succeeded it would be a great lesson to other nations. Referring to our foreign policy, Dr. Radhakrishnan said that it was not unlike that of the Soviet Union in several matters - China, Japan, Korea or, for that matter, the admission of other nations to the UN. 'We are not with America and we are not with any power,' he stressed. 'We act according to our sense of right and do not yield to any political or economic pressure.'"

The Ambassador asked whether Stalin would favour a neutral commission investigating the allegations of the use of bacteriological weapons in Korea. Stalin said that he had not given thought to this. As far as they were concerned, he said, "to us it has been proved that they (Americans) have attempted to try this out in Korea", and said that a body of international lawyers had seen the evidence of this. As a talisman to the Korean War debate, according to United Nations estimates, civilian populations of both Republic of Korea and North Korea suffered massive social and economic dislocation: three million Koreans (soldiers and civilians on both sides) died in the war. American troops lost 40,000 soldiers in action, with over 100,000 wounded. The UN forces had casualties of over 100,000. These lessons of history are recalled, once again, on Teacher's Day.

Jakarta Post

Technocracy cannot fix Europe

The Rhine Group launched last week with the goal of restoring Europe's capacity to innovate, grow and compete globally, is an unusual initiative: a private club assembled to do what public institutions are supposed to do.

Nonetheless, it has brought together many household names, with former European Central Bank president Mario Draghi and tech entrepreneur Patrick Collison serving as co-chairs. Luis Garicano, an LSE economist and former liberal member of the European Parliament, is the executive director.

Many other company founders, financiers,

former ministers, serving regulators, senior media figures and economists - including the Nobel laureates Philippe Aghion and Bengt Holmstrom - have signed on.

Few other organizations could assemble such intellectual authority, corporate power and institutional experience in one place. But that is precisely why this initiative deserves scrutiny. True, the concerns it hopes to address are real. Europe is falling behind technologically, struggling to mobilize capital, and becoming dangerously dependent on technologies from the United States and China.

Without urgent action, it will lose the ability to finance self-defense, health care, pensions, education, climate investments and social protection. Although the Draghi report on European competitiveness documented the problem with unmatched authority two years ago, few of its recommendations have been implemented.

The Rhine Group was created to end this paralysis. But despite the severity of its diagnosis, it has so far offered a remarkably thin prescription: Europe must "compete, build and grow again." Even more troublingly, it is reproducing some of the same habits underlying the

paralysis. Once again, we have policy making driven by personalities, rather than by political vision, with technocratic fixes being handed down from above.

The Draghi agenda has not stalled for lack of evidence supporting its recommendations.

The issue, rather, is that common browsing industrial subsidies, capital market integration and regulatory simplification would all redistribute power, costs and benefits across countries and social groups.

That makes them a source of political conflict. The lack of progress is not, as the Rhine Group believes, a technocratic problem that experts can solve.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Glacial health

Sir, This refers to the editorial, "When Mountains Move" (30 August). Disaster struck Nepal on Wednesday after a flash flood ravaged the Himalayas and foothills. Satellite imagery analysed by global agencies, including ISRO, points to a glacier collapse or ice-rock avalanche in Tibet, possibly followed by a temporary river blockage.

There has been extensive damage along the Bhoté Koshi and Trishuli corridors, with settlements washed away and hydropower and monitoring infrastructure damaged. Nepalese authorities said 35 motorable and 45 suspension bridges and about 40 kilometres of roads had been damaged.

Given that it is the monsoon, north India and the larger Himalayan regions are under the influence of a powerful Western disturbance. It would thus not have been unreasonable to expect the floods to cause less damage. The floods that can cause clouds to collide with mountains and release enormous quantities of rain at short notice.

But the ubiquity of satellites is helping



establish a more complex picture, pointing to collapsing glaciers and recalling the October 2023 South Lhonak Lake disaster in Sikkim. There, an eponymous Himalayan glacier suddenly gave way, releasing millions of tonnes of water, debris and rock that pulverised Sikkim's largest hydropower project. Subsequent analysis showed that the resulting Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF) had been years in the making.

The Indian Himalayas have nearly 7500 glacial lakes and about 15,000 glaciers, some monitored through remote sensing. Yet, fully assessing their condition requires site visits, difficult because these lakes lie in inhospitable terrain while expeditions are generally feasible only from July to September. Governments must enforce

construction codes, discourage settlements and large projects in known vulnerable zones, and invest in better tracking of glacier health. Such monitoring can feed long-term disaster planning into development programmes.

Yours, etc, S S Paul,
Nadla, 30 August.

Nature's gift

Sir, Streams, brooks and rivers are gifts of Nature to humankind. None, therefore, has the moral right to claim exclusive ownership over them. The recent loss of thousands of lives and immense property in the devastating floods in Nepal should serve as an eye-opener to authorities in water-surplus States that refuse to share water with their neighbours.

Water should be shared not only to quench the thirst of people but also to save crops, which are often the lifeline of farming communities. Unfortunately, water-surplus states sometimes release water to their parched neighbours only when excessive river flows threaten floods. Such selfishness

and short-sightedness are unfortunate.

Nature does not always follow human calculations. Unpredictable floods can strike suddenly and wreak havoc, as witnessed in Nepal. Water is essential for life, agriculture and the survival of communities.

It should be shared in a spirit of cooperation, compassion and mutual responsibility, rather than becoming a source of bitter disputes. One hopes that the heart-rending scenes in Nepal will make authorities pause and reflect: share water and help others survive, rather than wait for Nature to unleash its fury.

Yours, etc, Tharicus S. Fernando,
Chennai, 31 August.

Ashamed

Sir, As a Hindu I am ashamed to read about Mr Kharge's rally being subjected to purification after it ended. Why is this being practised in the 21st century? What have our children been learning at school over the years? The culprits must be sent to jail.

Yours, etc, Sucheta Sanyal,
Kolkata, August 30.

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

'All of us are to blame'

Hundreds have been killed, the toll is still rising, and thousands remain missing, following the catastrophic environmental disaster of August 26 along the Nepal-China border. Questions remain: What caused the disaster, how did it unfold, and who is responsible? Vibha Sharma talked to environmentalist Soumya Dutta, an expert on climate change, energy, and ecological issues, to seek answers to these critical questions.

Climate expert Soumya Dutta is a trustee of MAUSAM (Movement for Advancing Understanding of Sustainability and Mutuality), a former member of the UN Climate Technology Centre and Network, a founding member of the National Alliance for Climate and Ecological Justice, and a National Working Group member of the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM).

Excerpts:

Q: What happened on 26 August? Multiple theories have been given on what caused the devastation?

A: Two main hypotheses have gained credibility. The first suggests that a very large rock-and-ice mass (glacier and bedrock) collapsed from around 5,200 meters on the northern face of Langtang Lirung in Nepal, near the Chinese border, into the Lhede Khola riverbed nearly 1,200 meters below. The enormous impact generated earthquake-like vibrations around 8.37 am Nepal time. The debris temporarily blocked the river, whose flow was already swollen by the monsoon.

Water rapidly accumulated behind the moraine barrier before breaching. It catastrophically, creating a powerful debris flood. The steep valley accelerated the flow, with rock, mud and soil from both banks eroded and were incorporated. Saturated monsoon debris further multiplied the flood's volume and destructive power. The second is that a glacial lake had formed hours earlier. The subsequent mountain-side and

glacier collapse at 8.37 am dramatically amplified the flow. Planet satellite imagery reportedly shows a huge section of rock and ice missing from Langtang Lirung's northern face after the collapse, compared with August 24 imagery. The high-speed, high-volume debris flow destroyed everything in its path, killing people and obliterating villages and structures. Hundreds of workers are still feared trapped in several under-construction hydropower projects.

Q: Could the catastrophe have been foreseen/predicted?

A: Yes. With global heating increasing at a fast pace, and the Himalayas heating up almost twice as fast as the plains, this kind of catastrophic failure was predicted to rise. Higher temperatures are thawing the vast permafrost base layer of a large part of the Himalayan cryosphere (frozen lands), weakening their bonds. The heat is also melting and opening up more crevasses in glaciers, making them prone to failure at the slightest disturbance. Glacier collapses, sometimes with their bedrock and rubble, are becoming more common. That's what happened in the Rishiganga valley in 2021, when part of the glacier and rock collapsed from the Ronti peak. We will see increasing numbers of such catastrophic failures in the years to come.

Q: China has rejected claims that a "geological disaster" on its side triggered the devastation. To what extent do you attribute such disasters to infrastructure development/human interventions in the region?

A: China is correct on the first point. The huge rock and ice collapse occurred from the northern face of Langtang Lirung, within Nepal, and fell into the Lhede Khola riverbed, also in Nepal, near the Chinese border. Both areas lie within Langtang National Park.

Regarding the second point, large infrastructure projects, settlements and

roads can alter local environmental conditions and add heat. Construction of hydropower plants and roads also involves blasting and excavation, which can weaken rocks and soils in an already fragile Himalayan landscape. These interventions compound rising temperatures from global heating. China, as the world's largest greenhouse-gas emitter and second-largest historical emitter, bears significant responsibility for the global heating intensifying such climatic risks.

Q: Perhaps a timely alert from Beijing could have saved lives?

A: In this case, there is no evidence to support that claim beyond allegations. The USGS recorded the massive ground shaking caused by the glacier and debris collapse at 8.37 a.m. on 26 August. The destructive floodwaters, carrying rocks and debris, reached the China-Nepal border post several kilometres downstream by 8.45 a.m. just eight minutes later. There was little practical time to detect, assess, and issue warnings. But the tragedy highlights the critical need for real-time monitoring systems in vulnerable Himalayan regions and near human settlements.

Q: So, it is a case of the vulnerable Himalayan region being treated as an infrastructure corridor instead of a fragile ecological system?

A: Absolutely, the Himalayas is the world's most active large mountain system and is changing constantly. Large-scale construction of hydropower plants, big roads, military bases and tourism infrastructure are weakening its structural strength. Climate change is adding, and the results are visible.

Q: At what point does development cross the line from being economically necessary to ecologically dangerous?

A: Our traditional model of destructive, construction-driven development may have already crossed that critical boundary. If we calculate the rising number of disasters across the Himalayas

and the massive losses they cause year after year, economic costs alone may have already exceeded the gains. Beyond financial losses are human loss, deaths, destruction, displacement, and the lingering trauma-costs that cannot be quantified in rupees.

From Uttarakhand (2013), Kashmir (2014), Rishiganga (2021), Joshimath, South Lhonak GLOF and Chungthang (2023), to Himachal, Ladakh and Dhaulir, and now Nepal, nature's warning is unmistakable. And let us not forget the Western Ghats. The human and economic losses should have put a stop to this madness in the mountains.

Q: What lessons should India learn from the Nepal tragedy?

A: India need not have waited for this tragedy to learn its lessons. Himalayan disasters have increased over the past decade and a half, beginning with the 2013 Uttarakhand disaster when Kedarnath and four districts were devastated and the state economy suffered a massive blow. The key lesson: the Himalayas must not be treated as a construction site or free-for-all extraction zone for hydropower, limestone, sand and riverbed stone. Basic infrastructure is necessary, but the Himalayas cannot be treated as a stable, flat land. Environmental hazards and climate extremes must be mapped, vulnerabilities assessed, and sometimes the best engineering decision is not to build. Building norms need updating for climate threats and enforcement is also important. Scientific and local knowledge must guide communities. The people in the Himalaya need basic infrastructure, but remember they cannot be constructed like it is done in the plains.

Odisha is a powerful example of how things can change. After the 1999 super cyclone killed over 10,000 people, India invested in IMD's technical capacity. Doppler radars and cyclone shelters. Tracking, forecasting, warnings and evacuation improved dramatically. When an equally powerful Cyclone Amphan struck West Bengal and north



Odisha, despite massive property losses there were fewer deaths. For the Himalayas, too, the governments must establish real-time monitoring and early-warning systems, map vulnerabilities, relocate highly vulnerable settlements and infrastructure, account for 100-year floods, preserve drainage, restrict high-altitude river-valley projects, strengthen infrastructure, and build community and institutional capacity.

Q: The Himalayan region is shared by several countries, how important is real-time sharing of hydrological and disaster-related data?

A: The Himalayas are not called the Third Pole and the Water Towers of Asia for nothing. They are called that because, with the neighbouring Karakoram and trans-Himalayan highlands, they influence the lives and livelihoods of almost 2 billion people—almost one-fourth of humanity. Pakistan faces Indus floods and droughts; Bangladesh is regularly impacted by the Himalayan-origin Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna system, including Teesta flash floods. The broader Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) also impacts Afghanistan and Myanmar.

The HKH was disaster-prone even before climate chaos. The Indian plate continues pushing beneath the Eurasian plate, making the region highly earthquake-prone. The Main Boundary Thrust and Main Central Thrust underlie

central areas, making massive earthquakes inevitable. Global heating has intensified extreme rainfall, flash floods, glacier and bedrock collapses, forest fires and drought-like conditions. All this requires cross-border monitoring and data sharing because transboundary rivers affect both sides. Nepal and India share nine major transboundary river systems: India and Bangladesh 54; Bhutan and India four major basins with 12 smaller systems; China, India and Pakistan share the Indus and Satluj, originating in Tibet. However, despite this interconnectedness, governance remains constrained by rivalries, territorial disputes and militarisation. HKH nations must establish real-time monitoring, map risks, freely share information, create multilateral mechanisms, reduce political differences and curb military infrastructure expansion in the fragile cryosphere.

Q: Ultimately who would you hold responsible for the heartbreaking human tragedy on 26 August?

A: For this tragedy and huge loss of human and animal lives, everyone is responsible. We must recognise the massive GHG contribution of rich industrialised countries, which created today's climate crisis. Climate justice and climate finance are central to any remedial action in the future. Countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan and India need substantial financial support to build climate resilience, not as charity but as an obligation under climate justice and signed climate agreements. This is the responsibility of all the so-called rich nations who caused this crisis.

At the same time, China and Nepal are also responsible—for not acting in time to minimise the risks and for building and allowing massive infrastructure in highly vulnerable areas. These infrastructures also attracted a large number of workers, tourists, pilgrims who paid with their lives and that of their loved ones. For similar Himalayan disasters in India or Pakistan, all governments share responsibilities.

The cost of seeming to know

SUNITA TRIPATHY

It is Teacher's Day again. And I find myself wondering what exactly we have become so good at celebrating. We celebrate teachers, quite rightly. We speak of mentors and guides, of lives changed and futures shaped. We put up photographs, write messages, remember names. There is something deeply human in wanting to acknowledge those who taught us something.

But I wonder whether I have become less interested in the figure of the teacher, and more interested in what teaching leaves behind.

Because information is no longer scarce. In fact, it may be the opposite. There is now more information available to us than any teacher could possibly hope to give a student. Answers arrive before questions have properly formed. Explanations are available before we have had time to wonder about the problem.

What seems to be becoming scarce is something else. Discernment. I think about this more often than I used to.

To know something is not quite the same as knowing what deserves to be known. To have an opinion is not the same as having thought. To be informed is not necessarily to understand. And, increasingly, to appear thoughtful is remarkably easy. Perhaps technology has something to do with this. Not because technology makes us less intelligent. It has done the opposite in so many ways. It has enlarged what we can know, make,

discover and communicate. But it has also made it extraordinarily easy to display the signs of knowing.

We can display what we have read. What we care about. What we believe. What causes we support. What communities we belong to.

Sometimes the position arrives before the thought behind it. Sometimes the answer arrives before the question has been asked. It becomes less able to distinguish appearance from substance can begin to accept symbolic reform in place of reform, representation in place of participation, political performance in place of governing competence. And perhaps the greatest cost is not always visible. It is time. Money can sometimes be recovered. Institutions can sometimes be rebuilt. Policies can sometimes be corrected. But nobody gives a person back the years lost to a bad institution or a bad decision. A child does not recover the years in which an education system failed her. A researcher does not recover the years lost to an institution that could not support good work. A patient does not recover the years waiting for a system that promised more than it could deliver. Bad decisions consume human time. Bad institutions consume human possibility. Perhaps this is why discernment is not merely an intellectual virtue. It is a public resource. And perhaps this is also why I am reluctant to confine the idea of a teacher to a classroom. The person who teaches us to think may be a schoolteacher or a professor. But it may just as well be

to announce. We know what an enlightened institution is supposed to say. We know what an engaged citizen is expected to signal.

And once the signals become familiar, perhaps it becomes possible to reproduce them without reproducing the substance. That thought makes me uncomfortable because it does not belong only to universities. It belongs to public life.

A society that becomes less able to distinguish appearance from substance can begin to accept symbolic reform in place of reform, representation in place of participation, political performance in place of governing competence. And perhaps the greatest cost is not always visible. It is time. Money can sometimes be recovered. Institutions can sometimes be rebuilt. Policies can sometimes be corrected. But nobody gives a person back the years lost to a bad institution or a bad decision. A child does not recover the years in which an education system failed her. A researcher does not recover the years lost to an institution that could not support good work. A patient does not recover the years waiting for a system that promised more than it could deliver. Bad decisions consume human time. Bad institutions consume human possibility. Perhaps this is why discernment is not merely an intellectual virtue. It is a public resource. And perhaps this is also why I am reluctant to confine the idea of a teacher to a classroom. The person who teaches us to think may be a schoolteacher or a professor. But it may just as well be

a coach who notices why a player keeps making the same mistake. A tutor who takes a student's apparently simple doubt seriously. A parent who does not dismiss a child's strange question. A craftsman whose knowledge has come from years of attentive practice rather than formal education. I have never thought that knowledge belonged only to people with credentials. Some of the most valuable knowledge people possess has never been written into a textbook. And the converse is also true.

A credential does not, by itself, make a person a participant in knowledge production. That is not an argument against expertise. Expertise matters. It represents sustained attention to something. But expertise is not status, and status is not contribution. Perhaps thinking is much more ordinary than we sometimes make it sound. It may simply begin with asking: Does this make sense? How do we know? What are we missing? What if I am wrong? These are not questions reserved for intellectuals. They belong to anyone willing to take the world seriously. A school teacher, perhaps, has a particular responsibility to practise them because whatever enters the world as knowledge does not remain entirely the scholar's own. Someone else will read it. Someone else may rely on it. Someone else may build upon it. Knowledge has an ecology. What enters that ecology matters. I have become increasingly wary of the idea that intellectual life is necessarily about being impressive. It seems to me



that its more serious obligation is almost the opposite: to remain capable of looking again. To investigate what seems obvious. To tolerate not knowing. To change one's mind when something better is discovered. To resist the ease of saying something simply because it sounds right. And perhaps, sometimes, to be willing not to be applauded. This is not a claim to moral superiority. It is simply what thinking requires. Perhaps that is also what I value most in those who have taught me—not that they gave me answers, but that they made it harder for me to accept an answer without examining it. And perhaps that is the quiet contribution of teaching, wherever it occurs. Not the production of people who know everything. Not even the production of people who remember everything they were taught.

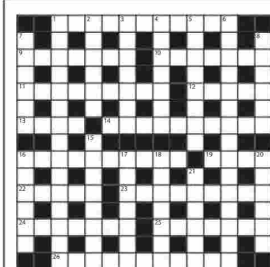
But the cultivation of people who are a little less easily impressed by appearances, a little more willing to ask another question, and a little more capable of recognising when something is substantial and when it merely looks so. I think about this on Teacher's Day because the question seems larger than teaching. It

is about the kind of society we are becoming. A society can produce enormous quantities of information and still become poorer in judgement. It can produce more credentials and less expertise. More participation and less contribution. More visibility and less substance. Perhaps the real danger is not that we will stop thinking altogether. Perhaps it is that we will become sufficiently comfortable with the appearance of thinking that we will no longer notice the difference. And that happens, what we lose will not simply be intellectual rigor. We will lose time. We will lose judgement. We will lose the ability to recognise what is worth building upon. That is why I keep returning to the teacher—not as a figure on a pedestal, but as one of the many people through whom a human capacity can be kept alive.

The capacity to notice. To question. To listen. To think again. And, eventually, to know the difference between knowing and merely seeming to know.

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Crossword | No. 293571



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

ROBINHOOD SAFETY
CHARLOTTE GARDENS
KIDNEY
GOVERNOR
EDEN
ROUNDER
TWINN
HUBBARD
DOLBY
BLINDS ANGINYMOUS

ACROSS

- 1 Low part of track coming to road with fish
- 9 Pole holding female's jacket in an emergency (3,4)
- 10 Kind of wine relative knocked back, lagging university degrees
- 11 One sporting yellow bloomers caught in pub - is she sozzled? (9)
- 12 Buolic couple of rivers (5)
- 13 Club but no ball for a round
- 14 Gauge still a distance across the Atlantic
- 16 Hardliner saw stars
- 19 Heading for insolvency again, one has a lagging bill
- 22 Order is completely uncommensurate
- 23 Around entrance, holiday party white dress down

DOWN

- 2 Pavilion is earmarked to host Frank (2,3)
- 3 Time stops where Naomi appears to be round south
- 4 Comfortable about stifling report
- 5 Like to keep jade stuff in changed Forms (6)
- 6 A sickly brunette's out for reassurance
- 7 Hannibal leading Carthaginian's last stand (7)
- 8 Struts of wood always aboard ship
- 9 Bill's about to think, unlike Queen Victoria? (6)
- 10 Stable employee stole pants put on queen
- 11 Rational former official of Rome

- 15 Result of clot and me limbo dancing
- 16 It's a pity American needs never fare from Asia
- 17 Hannibal leading Carthaginian's last stand (7)
- 18 Struts of wood always aboard ship
- 19 Bill's about to think, unlike Queen Victoria? (6)
- 20 Stable employee stole pants put on queen
- 21 Rational former official of Rome

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

100 Years Ago

OCCASIONAL NOTE

ELSEWHERE will be found the election manifesto of Mr. A. H. Ghuznavi who is seeking election to the Legislative Assembly of India from the Dacca Division Moslem Constituency which enjoys the privilege of returning two members. Mr. A. H. Ghuznavi is a brother of Mr. A. K. Ghuznavi, the ex-minister of Bengal, and a well-known zemindar of the Mymensingh district. He was a prominent Congress man of the old school and did useful work for the country in co-operation with the Hindus. His long association with the Hindu and Muslim leaders of the Province should have given him a valuable insight into the political needs of the country.



Editor's TAKE

India must fix its own classrooms

Can India truly aspire to become a Vishva Guru when it continues to grapple with teacher shortages, overcrowding and inadequate learning outcomes?

Every September 5, India honours Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan - philosopher, Oxford scholar, and the Republic's first Vice-President and second President. When students proposed celebrating his birthday after he became President in 1962, he asked instead that the date be observed as Teachers' Day, insisting teachers deserved to rank among the nation's finest minds. It is a fitting origin story for a country that has long seen itself as a wellspring of learning for the world.

That reverence is not sentimental excess. Teachers do more than deliver a syllabus; they build the cognitive and moral scaffolding on which every other profession stands. The doctor who saves a life, the engineer who builds a bridge, the officer who frames policy - all once sat before a teacher who taught them to reason, question and persist. In a country of 1.4 billion, no institution shapes the future more directly than the classroom, nor any individual more than the teacher standing in it.

India's claim to Vishva Guru status - teacher to the world - rests on genuine civilisational memory. Nalanda and Takshashila once drew scholars from Persia to China; the guru-shishya tradition treated teaching as a sacred trust, not a fallback career.

Revising that stature is now stated national ambition, invoked from foreign-policy platforms to soft-power strategy. Ground reality is more sobering. A Parliamentary Standing Committee last year counted close to ten lakh vacant teaching posts under the Centre's Samagra Shiksha scheme - over seven lakh of them at the primary and elementary level. Vacancies for secondary and senior-secondary teachers, precisely where subject expertise matters most, nearly doubled within a single year.

Regulators have simultaneously de-recognised scores of teacher-training colleges that had reduced the B.Ed degree to a paper formality. Even the good news carries a warning: the most recent ASER survey, in 2024, found barely a quarter of Class 3 government-school children could read Class 2-level text - a real improvement on 2022, but still a low bar for an aspiring Vishva Guru.

Add chronically underpaid contract teachers, overcrowded classrooms and patchy in-service training, and the gap between rhetoric and classroom is hard to ignore.

Vishva Guru cannot be built on borrowed civilisational glory alone. It has to be built teacher by teacher - through fair pay, rigorous training, manageable classrooms, and recruitment drives that fill vacancies before ministries announce new schemes.

Teachers' Day should not be a 24-hour ritual that gives way, on September 6, to indifference about who is actually at the blackboard. The country would do well to remember that the surest way to teach the world is to first take proper care of those who teach it at home.

Teachers as architects of a Viksit Bharat

From the *Guru-Shishya Parampara* to the aspirations of the National Education Policy 2020, the enduring influence of teachers remains central to nurturing an enlightened, disciplined and responsible generation capable of carrying Bharat towards a stronger and more developed future



ABHISHEK ANAND

A nation that reveres its educators progresses on the path of growth and development. As we cruise towards the centenary of independence and our lofty goal of becoming *Viksit Bharat* by 2047, it is worth pondering and exploring how ancient Indian wisdom and civilisational ethos, encapsulated in the *Taittiriya Upanisad's* injunction "*Acharya devo bhava*" (regard the teacher as divine), on the teacher being supremely esteemed, who was looked upon not only as an instructor but as a spiritual and moral guide, remain profoundly and significantly relevant even today.

Ancient Indian education and the Guru-Shishya Parampara

The ancient Indian education system was a disciplined process of intellectual, moral and spiritual formation; not merely of inculcating the ability to read, write and calculate. It was anchored in the *Guru-Shishya Parampara*. Centres of learning assumed and developed different institutional forms, such as *Taxila* and *Nalanda*, over many centuries. At these, the *acharya* or *guru* was often more than a disseminator of information and knowledge. They mediated an intellectual inheritance and shaped the character, conduct and judgement of their pupils. Radha Kumud Mookerji's classic study, *Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhist* (1947), remains the landmark scholarly account of how this teacher-centred model carried the essence of "Indianness" for over a millennium. Similarly, Hartmut Scharfe's *Education in Ancient India* (2002) illuminates the centrality of oral transmission, memorisation, debate, apprenticeship and the close teacher-student bond in this long history.

The *Upanishads* express this relationship with unusual clarity. The *Chhandogya Upanisad* compares an ignorant person to someone left blindfolded in an unfamiliar land; once shown the direction, they can ask their way and reach their destination. The tutor does not walk every step for the tutee; they remove the blindfold, give direction and enable intelligent inquiry. Its conclusion (6.14.2) is striking:

"A person who has a teacher comes to know."

The *Taittiriya Upanisad* goes further by presenting education as a moral compass. In the celebrated instruction to a departing student, the pedagogue says:

"Speak the truth. Practise Dharma. Do not neglect self-study."

These simple words carry substantial weight



THE ANCIENT INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM WAS A DISCIPLINED PROCESS OF INTELLECTUAL, MORAL AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION; NOT MERELY OF INCULCATING THE ABILITY TO READ, WRITE AND CALCULATE. IT WAS ANCHORED IN THE GURU-SHISHYA PARAMPARA, CENTRES OF LEARNING ASSUMED AND DEVELOPED DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONAL FORMS, SUCH AS TAXILA AND NALANDA, OVER MANY CENTURIES

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ality in life, respectful speech, integrity, cleanliness, digital conduct, regard for elders and care for public property. At the same time, classroom discussions, debates and service activities can teach pupils to respect differences, accept accountability and translate constitutional values into daily action. In this way, they can nurture young citizens who are lawful without being unthinking, patriotic without being intolerant and free without being irresponsible; citizens whose honesty, civic-mindedness, environmental consciousness, respect for institutions and commitment to excellence will strengthen Bharat's social fabric and advance the building of a strong, robust, *Atma-Nirbhar* and *Viksit Bharat*.

The guru-shishya legacy in NEP 2020

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 redefines education not only as literacy, numeracy and professional competence, but also as critical thinking, constitutional values, ethical responsibility, scientific temper and a commitment to fundamental duties. In doing so, it seeks to revive the timeless Indian ideal of *Vidya Dana*, where education is a sacred trust that nurtures both individual excellence and collective welfare. By rooting learning in civilisational continuity while embracing modern innovation, it positions educators as the moral and intellectual anchors of this enhanced vision. It states, "The teacher must be at the centre of the fundamental reforms" and calls for the restoration of teachers' "respect, dignity and autonomy". It envisions them not merely as disseminators of subject knowledge but as facilitators of holistic learning, imparting life skills and socio-cultural-emotional intelligence. Hence, their roles and functions acquire a new dimension in reimagining Bharat's advancement.

Conclusion

Beyond other determinants, a *Viksit Bharat* will also be ascertained and measured by the quality of its human resources and civic culture. Teachers are uniquely placed to make this transition real and transformative. They encourage young Indians to move away from the question, "What can the country give me?" to a more meaningful and equally pressing question: "What can I contribute to the country?" This self-inspection and self-reflection are not merely rhetorical. When instilled successfully, they will be seen in the collective endeavour of Indian citizens working together to build a nation by voluntarily practising responsibility, restraint, lawfulness, rule-following and concern for the greater good. In this way, our respected teachers can help achieve a *Viksit Bharat* by enabling millions of Indians to perform civic responsibilities towards the nation with a profound sense of purpose and sincerity.

Living with time: The impermanence of infrastructure



SIDDHARTH ROY

2ND OPINION

A crack in a concrete wall is called a defect. An engineer sees something deeper: a message from time. It tells us that materials age and even strong structures exist within design limits. Civil engineering, therefore, is more than construction. It is an encounter with impermanence.

Every structure carries the certainty of deterioration. Concrete weathers, steel corrodes, roads develop potholes, bridges experience fatigue, dams accumulate sediment and foundations settle. We celebrate a bridge or highway, photograph the ribbon-cutting and then overlook the quieter responsibility: maintenance.

No bridge is permanent. A design life of 50, 75 or 100 years is not a promise of immortality. It is an engineer-

ing expectation based on loads, materials, environment, usage and maintenance. A structure survives because people inspect it, repair it, strengthen it and eventually replace it. Durability is not the absence of decay; it is our ability to respond intelligently to decay.

This is also a philosophical lesson for society. We celebrate creation more readily than preservation. A new expressway attracts headlines; routine resurfacing rarely does. A spectacular bridge becomes a symbol of progress; replacing corroded reinforcement does not. Political incentives favour visible construction because new projects can be inaugurated, while maintenance produces no ceremony.

The consequences follow. Deferred maintenance transforms manageable deterioration into expensive reconstruction. A small crack can allow water to reach reinforcement; corrosion can weaken structural members; weakness can eventually become failure. What engineering teaches us about structures is equally applicable to institutions. Neglect rarely announces its consequences immediately. It accumulates silently until repair becomes unavoidable.

Engineers design for uncertainty. We calculate loads, estimate probabilities and provide safety margins because the future cannot be known precisely. Yet societies often demand certainty from infrastructure. We expect drainage systems to cope with unprecedented rainfall, roads to withstand changing traffic and bridges to remain safe indefinitely. Climate

change makes such assumptions increasingly dangerous. Infrastructure designed around yesterday's climate may confront tomorrow's extremes.

The answer is not to stop building. It is to build with humility. A mature engineering culture must ask not only, "Can we construct this?" but also, "Can we maintain it for generations?" Life-cycle costs should matter as much as construction costs. Materials should be selected for durability and reparability. Infrastructure agencies need regular inspections, accurate asset registers, trained personnel and protected maintenance budgets. Resilience must become a design principle, not merely an emergency response.

There is something profoundly human in our relationship with imperfection. We build knowing that everything we construct will eventually age. A bridge may serve millions for a century and still disappear one day. Its value lies not in defeating time, but in serving people while it stands. Perhaps civilisation is not measured by how successfully it conquers time. It is measured by how intelligently it lives with time.

The crack is not merely a failure. It is a reminder that everything built by human hands requires care and that permanence was never the bargain.

The writer is a consultant to Rashtriya Raksha University, a civil engineer, a short-story writer and a columnist

Daiv Vani

WISDOM FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

The Bones That Saved the World

The Devas were losing their long war against the Demon Vritra, who could not be killed by any ordinary weapon. Only one thing could defeat him - a weapon made from the bones of a Sage who had willingly given up his body in service of others. The Devas approached the Sage Dadhichi, who lived a simple life of penance, and asked for exactly that.

Dadhichi did not hesitate, did not bargain, did not ask what he would gain. He gave up his life so that his bones could be shaped into the *Vajra*, the thunderbolt with which Indra finally defeated Vritra and restored peace to the three worlds. He asked for nothing in return - not gratitude, not remembrance, not even a place in the stories that would later be told about him.

We often measure generosity by what we can spare - old clothes, spare change, a little free time. Dadhichi's story asks a harder question: **what would we give if it truly cost us something?**

Seva does not always demand such extremes. But it does demand the same spirit - giving without calculating the return, without needing to be seen, without asking what remains for us afterward. Today, do one thing for someone that asks nothing in return, not even their thanks.

-DAIV

PIC TALK



Devotees offer prayers during Krishna Jannamashtami celebrations at the ISKCON temple in Dream City, on the outskirts of Jammu PHOTO: PTI

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Lesson from the flood tragedy

The disaster on the Nepal-Tibet border demonstrated the fragility of the Himalayan ecosystem and human vulnerability to natural disasters. The frequency, intensity and scale of floods, landslides and glacial lake outbursts in the Himalayan region bespeak a crisis of frightening proportions. The Himalayan region is topographically, ecologically and geologically fragile. Climate change occurring in the Himalayas twice as fast as the global average makes the region all the more precarious and prone to disasters. So-called developmental activities also contribute to vulnerability to disasters. Unplanned construction, deforestation, road expansion and other interventions can disturb the region's delicate ecological balance and increase risks to communities living in vulnerable areas.

As a geographical entity, the Himalayas have no national borders and form a single entity, and they need to be managed, protected and secured for safety through the collective efforts of all nations in the region, especially Nepal, India and China. This requires regional cooperation, scientific knowledge-sharing, early-warning systems, disaster preparedness and sustainable development. Protecting the Himalayan ecosystem is essential not only for the safety of mountain communities but also for millions downstream.

DAVID MILTON | TAMIL NADU

Teachers who shape young lives

There are teachers whose words remain with us long after we leave the classroom. Their influence becomes part of who we are. A teacher may teach a subject, but a true teacher teaches us how to face life. Student life is filled with dreams, confusion, hopes, failures and questions. At such a stage, teachers become guides who help students understand their abilities and discover their purpose. Behind many confident individuals is a teacher who once said, "You can do it" when they had stopped believing in themselves. Every student is different. Some excel academically, while others are creative or take time to discover their strengths. A caring teacher recognises potential and encourages students to grow at their own pace. Simple appreciation can inspire confidence. Teachers also teach honesty, discipline, patience, kindness, responsibility, respect and compassion. Marks measure achievement, but values shape character.

Teachers do not simply prepare students for examinations. They prepare them for life. They shape minds, build character, nurture dreams and give direction to young lives. On Teachers' Day, we celebrate a relationship that can last a lifetime. Behind every student who dares to dream, there is often a teacher who first taught them to believe.

NISARGA | UTTAR PRADESH

A practical path to cleaner steel

This refers to the article "India's steel sector and decarbonisation" (September 4). The proposed effort to reduce emission intensity in the iron and steel sector is an important step, given the industry's central role in India's economic growth. Steel will remain essential for infrastructure, housing and manufacturing, but its expansion cannot ignore the environmental cost of carbon-intensive production. The transition, however, must be practical and carefully designed. Different steel plants operate with varying technologies and levels of efficiency. A uniform approach may create difficulties for smaller producers. Emission targets should therefore be accompanied by realistic timelines, technological support and access to affordable finance.

The government should encourage cleaner production, energy efficiency, scrap-based manufacturing and technologies such as green hydrogen. Reliable emission monitoring and verification are equally important. Small and medium enterprises need financial and technical support for a smooth transition. India should view decarbonisation as an opportunity to strengthen industrial competitiveness through a clear and predictable policy framework.

K PALANIYAPPAN | CHENNAI

The SCO and the illusion of moral multipolarity

As the organisation evolves from a regional security forum into an ambitious network spanning finance, technology, energy and connectivity, its growing influence must be judged not by its opposition to Western dominance, but by the same standards of power, accountability and equality it demands of the West



NILANTHA ILANGUMWA

China's rise is real. The SCO's institutional expansion is real. The erosion of the old assumption of untested Western primacy is real. But the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Bishkek last week has once again confirmed

that global politics is moving away from the old assumption that one power can organise the international system largely on its own terms. The SCO also insisted that it is not a military bloc and does not seek bloc confrontation. Yet beneath the familiar diplomatic language lies a more consequential development. The organisation is no longer merely a forum in which China, Russia, India, Iran, Pakistan and the Central Asian republics discuss security. Its 28 outcome documents extend cooperation into counterterrorism, narcotics, information security, artificial intelligence, computing infrastructure, ports and logistics, energy, climate, biodiversity, nuclear security, emergency assistance and cultural cooperation. The SCO is becoming an institutional network, and that makes it far more significant than the slogan of a new multipolar world.

But there is a problem with the triumphalism surrounding this transformation. A world with several centres of power is not automatically a fairer world. Multipolarity describes the distribution of power; it does not determine how that power is used. This distinction is frequently lost in the political language surrounding the SCO. Western military intervention, sanctions, financial coercion and double standards deserve criticism where the evidence warrants it. Opposition to Western power is legitimate. But the fact that Washington has abused economic and military power in particular circumstances does not give Beijing, Moscow or anyone else a licence to exercise their own power without scrutiny.

The history of the SCO explains why this question matters. The organisation emerged from the Shanghai Five in 1996, when China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan sought to manage border disputes and build confidence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Uzbekistan joined in 2001, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was formally created. Its subsequent expansion changed its scale. India and Pakistan joined in 2017, followed by Iran in 2023 and Belarus in 2024. Calling such a collection an anti-Western alliance is analytically lazy. It is more accurately understood as a mechanism through which states with very different interests can cooperate without accepting a single political centre.

China's influence, and, in some respects, more consequential, Beijing has spent decades converting economic strength into structural influence. It has built trade relationships, financial infrastructure, expanded industrial investment, supplied telecommunications equipment, developed transport corridors and increased its role in energy and technology. In Central Asia, the Chinese presence is no longer confined to imported consumer goods or large infrastructure projects. It is increasingly entering production sectors. A Chinese-backed fertiliser plant in Kyrgyzstan's Osh region, for example, is intended to produce hundreds of thousands of tonnes annually, potentially exceeding the country's current domestic requirement. Such a project can reduce Kyrgyzstan's dependence on imports and create genuine industrial capacity. It can also connect production, Chinese technology, distribution networks and regional transport corridors more deeply to China's economic system. Neither interpretation can be excluded.

China has become an extraordinary export power and continues to run enormous trade surpluses. Chinese manufacturing has produced competitive machinery, electronics, electric vehicles, batteries, renewable-energy equipment and industrial products on a scale few countries can match. Developing countries buy Chinese goods because they often offer affordability and availability. That is not exploitation by definition. But neither is it evidence of equality. China's trade with Central Asia is heavily tilted towards Chinese exports. Chinese customs data put trade with the five Central Asian republics at more than \$100 billion in 2025, with China's exports substantially exceeding its imports. Discrepancies between Chinese and Central Asian trade statistics make the issue even more important because governments cannot properly negotiate equitable commercial relationships when basic figures are difficult to reconcile.



CHINA HAS BECOME AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPORT POWER AND CONTINUES TO RUN ENORMOUS TRADE SURPLUSES. CHINESE MANUFACTURING HAS PRODUCED COMPETITIVE MACHINERY, ELECTRONICS, ELECTRIC VEHICLES, BATTERIES, RENEWABLE-ENERGY EQUIPMENT AND INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTS ON A SCALE FEW COUNTRIES CAN MATCH. DEVELOPING COUNTRIES BUY CHINESE GOODS BECAUSE THEY OFTEN OFFER AFFORDABILITY AND AVAILABILITY

The writer is a columnist based in Colombo

China's enormous trade surplus with the world presents the same contradiction on a larger scale. Beijing can legitimately argue that its exports reflect competitiveness and that weak domestic demand contributes to the surplus. It can also point to the enormous quantities of goods that developing economies have obtained at relatively low cost. But a persistent surplus on this scale means that other countries are, collectively, running the corresponding deficits. It cannot be defined as Chinese wrongdoing, but it is certainly evidence of an imbalance with consequential effects. If Western governments are criticised for using financial and economic asymmetries to pressure weaker states, the same intellectual standard must be applied if China uses its industrial capacity and market clout to manipulate target countries. There cannot be a duality in morality.

The SCO's proposed Development Bank exposes the gap between political ambition and institutional reality. Yet the Bishkek summit did not launch an operating bank. Kyrgyzstan wants to host it, while Kazakhstan has offered to host the headquarters. Fundamental questions concerning capital, membership, governance and location remain unresolved. That is not a trivial administrative delay. It demonstrates how difficult it is to convert declarations about financial autonomy into a functioning alternative financial institution. An alternative world financial system cannot be created by speeches about de-dollarisation. It requires capital, liquidity, credible governance, settlement mechanisms, investor confidence and institutions capable of surviving political disagreements.

The same caution should apply to claims about alternative payment systems. China's CIPS and Russia's SPFS can reduce dependence on Western financial infrastructure in particular transactions, and local-currency settlement can reduce exposure to the dollar. But neither system has displaced the global importance of the dollar, and neither has reproduced the depth and liquidity of the international financial architecture centred on dollar markets. It is perfectly reasonable for countries to seek protection against the political use of financial sanctions. It is unreasonable to pretend that an alternative system already exists when it remains incomplete. The SCO's financial future will be judged by what its institutions can actually finance, not by how strongly its communiqués denounce Western financial dominance.

There is another contradiction that the SCO cannot permanently avoid. It speaks of sovereignty and non-interference while involving itself in the political future of Afghanistan. It speaks of equality while containing countries whose economic and military capabilities are separated by enormous margins. It condemns double standards while its members themselves interpret territorial sovereignty and international law according to national interests. The treatment of Ukraine and Iran illustrates the difficulty. The Bishkek declaration adopted strong language concerning military strikes on Iran but did not mention Ukraine. India, China, Russia and the Central Asian states have different interests in the Ukraine conflict, and those differences prevent a common position. That is not necessarily hypocrisy. It is evidence that the SCO remains a coalition of interests rather than a unified geopolitical ideology.

This is why the debate about the SCO should not become another morality play in which the West is portrayed as the old imperial power and China, Russia and their partners as the innocent architects of liberation. History is rarely that simple. The United States and its allies have repeatedly used economic and military power in ways that deserve serious criticism. China has every right to oppose sanctions that it considers illegitimate. Russia has every right to argue against a Western monopoly over international decision-making. India has every right to resist pressure from any bloc. But every one of these countries must also answer for how it uses its own power. Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif returned to Islamabad last week with the SCO presidency, setting up a potentially decisive year for the organisation — and perhaps its most intriguing moment if he, or whoever is Prime Minister then, must decide whether to invite his Indian counterpart to Islamabad. A country does not become benign because its rival is worse.

Janmashtami: The idol, the Gita, and the mirror



ACHARYA PRASHANT

The images arrive every year, each more elaborate than the last. A tiny Krishna is given admission to a school, taken for a heartbeat check, addressed as *mera laala*. Elsewhere, a human tower climbs a hundred feet so one young man can risk his neck to break a pot of curd and earn some merit.

A temple priest brought all this to me recently, a man who installs idols for a living. He asked a plain question: can such service, offered to the symbol, ever help in the melting away of the ego? Or has the deity himself become one more object of craving?

That question is the whole festival. It carries two Krishnas. One is fashioned: the butter-thief on his swing, dancing among the gopis, easy to remember, for he asks nothing of you. The other is the Krishna of the Gita, dangerous, asking for everything. Janmashtami remembers the first and forgets the second, because the second constructs something.

Notice why the first wins so easily. The Ramcharitmanas is a chronicle of hardship, and almost nobody wants that today; the Bhagavat Puran asks little of your discernment. The miraculous image built around Krishna is the very thing that took the Gita away: once he is made into Kanhā and laddu-gopal, the author of the Gita is nearly impossible to see in him. Stories and Krishna cannot run together; stories rise from the ego, and Krishna means its dissolution.

All of spirituality is for the ego, and the ego is a master of self-deception. Were it honest with itself, no method would be needed; your own honesty would be enough. Something outside is needed, then a mirror, because one held inside the ego shows only what the ego wants to see. The idol is neither good nor bad; everything turns on who you are and what you intend. The ego's oldest instinct is self-preservation; it takes whatever it is handed, idol included, and turns it into one more way of staying exactly as it is.

What, then, was the idol for? To be a mirror. You stand before Krishna, before Ram, and something in you is meant to feel small. A prince who let go of his kingdom, wandered fourteen years, won a city of gold and walked away from that too; and here is a man who cannot give up half a gram of silver. You go to hand him a certificate. He has no use for your medals. Krishna is not doing this work; you are, or you are refusing to. Ask of your own visits: did one belief crack? Leave as you came, and nothing broke. Nothing was worship.

When the saints attacked idol-worship, this is what they meant. If worshipping stone could deliver God, said Kabir Sahab, I would worship a whole mountain. The contempt is not for the idol but for the ego that polishes a stone and will not look at its own unpolished state. They were never against the idol, but against the ego that eats everything, guru, scripture, idol, truth itself.

Murti does not mean stone. Murti is the manifested, whatever has form: the book, the word, the thought, the direction you face in prayer. The whole world is *murti*, and the whole world is *not* murti. It is not the idol that is at every step. How, then, will you escape the idol when everything is an idol?

Krishna's own form is the Gita. The Krishna with form is a printed copy; the formless Krishna is its meaning. Krishna stands less in front of the eyes than behind them; the painted idol before you holds no power of its own. Krishna is *bodh*, an awakening; Krishna is Truth. Stand before his idol, and if the Gita does not rise in you, the idol has been misused. The temple may blaze with lamps, but if nothing lights in you, the worship went nowhere.

Krishna's life is contradiction upon contradiction, because *advaita* means all opposites are melted together. With Krishna there is no *maraya*. He is *darshan*, and if living dangerously is beyond you, then living is beyond you. The Gita is for those with some fire still in them; for the ones gone to dust and ash, there are the sweets. *Peda*, sweet, is cheap; *peeda*, pain, is the price of the Gita.

Prema is not the ego's convenience of 'Radha and Krishna loved too', but the melting of the ego. Let the intense curd, and the same devotion turns: 'Krishna ate butter,' it is said, and the eye slides away from the modern dairy, where a calf's milk is stolen so the taste can go on. To give that cruelty the name of one who is an ocean of compassion is the deepest insult truth can make.

How, then, is Janmashtami to be kept? Keep it if you are Krishna's birthday but as your own. Krishna is never born, for he never died; it is not as you needs a birth, having never been born. Look, then, not toward Krishna but toward yourself. Walk into my own room and you will find more than twenty idols; they watch you and you watch them, and whether they are decorations or mirrors is a matter of intent, yours, not theirs. Why look for me outside, said Kabir Sahab, I am next to you. None of the saints was breaking idols; each was pointing at the one who hides behind them.

The idol should reach you not as comfort but as challenge, as rebellion, as fire. Something should break, and whether it breaks no one can decide for you, not even Krishna. The Gita's own word, simply: 'He will not be born anywhere outside the Lord appears within, if only you will do battle with yourself.' Decide once to live in the truth, and a strength rises of its own; that strength is what the name Krishna points to. Do not outsource your life to the idol; whatever strength you needed was given long ago. The trouble is not that you are bound, but that you are asleep and dreaming. Trust the idol later. No hour is fixed for this waking, and no lateness is possible in it. The turn is here now, as it always has been.

Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life

Weight of a school bag: India's children are still bearing a heavy burden, literally



SUNDEEP BHUTORIA

Stand outside almost any school at any time, or closing time and a familiar sight unfolds: small children dwarfed by oversized backpacks, some seemingly carrying more than their own weight should be able to bear.

It would be one thing if India had never recognised the problem. But we have. It has been studied, debated and translated into a national policy that even sets out how much a child should reasonably be expected to carry. The reason exists, then, is not whether we know the burden exists. It is why so many children are still carrying it.

India has around 24.72 crore school students across roughly 14.67 lakh schools. Even a seemingly mundane question such as backpack weight, therefore, becomes an issue of enormous scale. During the exercise that led to the School Bag Policy, 2020, an overwhelming majority of responding parents said a heavy school bag was a serious problem for their child. The survey also showed how quickly the kilos accumulate. Textbooks could contribute anything from 500 grams to 3.5 kg, notebooks another 200 grams to 2.5 kg. Lunch boxes, water bottles and the empty bag itself add still more.

This is why calling it a 'bag problem' is slight-

ly misleading. The bag is merely the container. The real weight is created by decisions: how many subjects are taught on a day, how many notebooks each subject requires, whether supplementary books are prescribed, whether drinking water is readily available, whether books can remain in school, and whether every lesson necessarily requires a textbook to travel between home and classroom.

There is also a health case for being sensible, although we should resist exaggerating it. Singapore's public-health guidance similarly recommends keeping school bags around 10-15 per cent. India's own policy also calls for school bags themselves to be lightweight and ergonomically designed. That is important because reducing the burden is not simply about taking books out of a bag.

We have an implementation problem

A private member's Children School Bags (Limitation on Weight) Bill was introduced in the Rajya Sabha in 2006. It proposed limits on bag weight and storage facilities in schools, but the Bill eventually lapsed. More than a decade later, the Madras High Court directed the Centre to formulate a national policy. An expert group was constituted, and the Ministry of Education issued the School Bag Policy in November 2020 for implementation by States and Union Territories. Its recommendations are remarkably practical.

The 2018 judgment in *M Purushothaman v Union of India* was, in fact, the principal judicial impetus behind the national policy. The Madras High Court



asked the Union Government to frame a policy broadly on the models already being followed in Telangana and Maharashtra, ensure its adoption by all States and Union Territories, constitute special or flying squads for inspections, prevent schools from prescribing unnecessary books, and regulate subjects and homework in accordance with NCERT and National Curriculum Framework norms. In many respects, these directions anticipated what subsequently became the core of the School Bag Policy, 2020.

The judiciary returned to the issue in *Johny Cyril v MHRD* before the Kerala High Court in 2020. That judgment reinforced the measures already underway, emphasising that they needed to be implemented 'in letter and spirit' and backed by periodic inspections. Importantly, it also located excessive school burden within the wider framework of child rights and welfare, including Articles 21 and 39(e) and (f) of the Constitution.

The two interventions were worth reading together. The Madras High Court supplied the principal

push towards a national framework; the Kerala High Court underlined that having a framework was not enough without effective implementation and monitoring.

As per the 2020 policy, there should be no school bags for pre-primary children. From Class I onwards, the suggested ceiling is approximately 10 per cent of the child's body weight. So, depending on the child's weight, the indicative range is about 1.6-2.2 kg for Classes I-II, rising progressively through the senior classes. Schools are expected to weigh bags regularly, provide textbooks and notebooks, and design timetables that reduce the number of materials travelling each day.

The policy goes further. It recommends no homework for Classes I-II; up to two hours a week for Classes III-IV; around an hour a day for Classes VI-VIII; and up to two hours daily thereafter. Under the larger NEP framework, students in Grades VI-VIII are also meant to experience a '10-day bagless' period involving vocational and experiential learning. Dedicated guidelines for these bagless days were launched by the Education Ministry in 2024. What India needs is the less glamorous part of policymaking: implementation.

West Bengal issued fresh guidelines in May this year, setting the 10 per cent limit, requiring schools to display permissible weights and use weighing machines regularly. Chandigarh has gone a step further administratively: a five-member committee has been constituted to conduct quarterly inspections across government, aided and recognised private schools.

Maharashtra showed much earlier that moni-

toring can be done at scale. In 2016, the State informed the Bombay High Court that 2,463 officials had inspected 17,235 schools and checked 3,94,299 bags. It reported compliance of 87.45 per cent. What we need is relatively clear: put a weighing scale in every school, display the permissible range where parents and children can see it, conduct random checks, include one simple school-bag compliance measure within existing reporting systems, and ask schools to tell pupils in advance which books are actually required the next day. Small administrative changes can remove surprisingly large amounts of weight.

There should also be clear consequences for repeated non-compliance. At present, the larger challenge is that the School Bag Policy remains substantially an advisory framework. Stronger statutory or regulatory backing, accompanied by proportionate penalties or other regulatory action where schools repeatedly disregard the norms, would help ensure that implementation does not depend entirely on the enthusiasm of individual States, districts or school administrations.

The school bag can become a useful test of whether the philosophy of the National Education Policy is actually reaching the classroom. India has already decided what a reasonable school bag should weigh. Perhaps it is now time to weigh something else: how seriously we take our own policy.

The writer is a social activist working in the fields of welfare, international cultural cooperation, and the promotion and preservation of Indian arts, languages and culture

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Preventive justice

Protect children before punishment

A juvenile delinquent is often the visible end product of failures that began much earlier. The Supreme Court's latest observation that poverty, inequality, illiteracy and discrimination can trigger delinquent behaviour among children is therefore a reminder to look beyond the offence to the circumstances in which it occurred. This is not to suggest that poverty makes children criminals. Most children growing up in deprivation do not turn delinquent. But poverty can intersect with school exclusion, child labour, family instability, substance abuse, peer pressure and social discrimination, creating vulnerabilities that can push some children towards crime. The State cannot address these risks merely after a child reaches a police station or juvenile justice board.

The Supreme Court's concern that the protective provisions of the Juvenile Justice Act have not reached all vulnerable children exposes a serious implementation deficit. The law is premised not on retribution but on care, protection, rehabilitation and reintegration. Yet children can still find themselves caught in a system whose stakeholders may fail to recognise their juvenility or fully understand the safeguards available to them.

The answer lies in making juvenile justice genuinely preventive. School dropouts, child labour, homelessness, substance abuse and repeated contact with welfare agencies should trigger early intervention by trained social workers, counsellors and child-protection authorities. Juvenile justice boards need adequate professional support, while rehabilitation must continue after institutional care ends. The challenge has also acquired a new dimension. As the Supreme Court noted recently, children today are exposed to complex information, graphic content and adult experiences through technology and social media at an early age. The real test is whether society can intervene before a vulnerable child becomes an accused.

Hope for Manipur

Kuki MLAs' return to House is welcome

THE appearance of two Kuki legislators in the Manipur Assembly — for the first time since ethnic violence erupted in the northeastern state in May 2023 — is a positive development. It is a sign that democratic institutions can provide space for dialogue even amid deep mistrust. Kuki leaders had previously been reluctant to travel to Meitei-majority Imphal without tangible progress towards a political settlement. The return of MLAs Kinneo Haokip Hangshing and Haokholet Kipgen to the House — in defiance of a directive issued by the community's apex body — is an opening that all stakeholders must build on.

The scale of the humanitarian crisis makes such political engagement urgent. Around 60,000 people were "internally displaced" by the conflict, of whom about 24,000 are still living in relief camps. Returning home, however, does not restore a sense of normalcy overnight. Livelihoods have been destroyed, communities remain divided and many survivors continue to carry the psychological scars of prolonged violence. Chief Minister Y. Khemchand Singh is right to emphasise the need to bridge the trust deficit. His call for collective efforts and reconciliation deserves support. But appeals to "forgive and forget" cannot substitute for justice, accountability, security and political dialogue. Manipur needs its elected representatives to remain engaged, even when differences are profound.

It is also significant that the Assembly has adopted a resolution urging the Centre to update the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the state before conducting the Census; this is the third resolution in this regard since 2022. Meitei and Naga communities are apprehensive that a Census without the NRC could result in "demographic changes" in the state due to the alleged entry of illegal immigrants from neighbouring Myanmar. The Centre needs to handle this thorny issue deftly, lest it become another flashpoint in the strife-torn state.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 1926

Rai-Nehru controversy

THE resignation of Lala Lajpat Rai from the Swaraj Party has led to an unpleasant controversy between him and Pandit Motilal Nehru. We wish that the resignation had not been followed by an explanatory letter of unusual length which was published at a stage at which it should not at all have been published. When the resignation was first announced, the public was doubtless anxious to know what particular causes had led to it, but this anxiety should not have been gratified when there were controversial matters at issue and when the parties concerned had not come to a definite understanding on the subject. If these discussions and the correspondence had preceded the actual announcement of the resignation, there would have been no causes for unpleasantness at all. After all, two leading politicians can disagree on several matters and yet remain perfectly friendly to each other. As it is, Rai's resignation was first announced and then followed the communication of the reasons for it, in which matters of controversy largely figured. Nehru seems to have been put out by the premature publication of Rai's letter in the *Pioneer* accompanied by editorial commendation of Rai's action. This is only natural. Any party leader would be exasperated at such a happening. But Rai has clearly explained that it was no fault of his if his letter was published in a hostile paper with its own comment. He was only anxious that the reasons for his resignation should not be withheld from the public after the fact itself had been announced, as it would have caused misunderstanding.

Teachers must rise to save education

The stark decline of our academic institutions is taking its toll on students

AVJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

I have no hesitation in saying that I feel happy when my students send me their wishes on the occasion of Teachers' Day and recall those beautiful days of working and evolving together. And with deep gratitude, I too recall many great educationists who shaped my ways of engaging with the vocation of teaching. Of course, I invoke Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan — his scholarship and philosophical insights. I recall Savitribai Phule — her courage and dedication to spread the light of awakening among the oppressed and the marginalised in a patriarchal, caste-ridden society like ours.

And in my own way, I engage with the likes of Paulo Freire and bell hooks — the spirit of libertarian education through which they inspired us; or I love to be inspired once again by Rabindranath Tagore's lyrical essay "A Poet's School". Jiddu Krishnamurti's book *School Without Fear* and Gijubhai Badheka's amazing pedagogic experiment as articulated in his book *Divasvapna*. I feel happy that it was not the lure of power but the joy of learning/unlearning/teaching that shaped my destiny.

Yet, I must admit that in these turbulent times, some sort of anxiety has begun to confront me. Can I really feel happy and celebrate Teachers' Day when I witness the decline of our academic institutions and feel the agony of our students? I ask myself: is there any reason to celebrate this day anymore?

Think of the anguish of this



HIGH STAKES: The stress experienced by the young generation is a matter of concern. FILE PHOTO

generation of discontented students. Yes, they are uncertain of their future; and they are stressed and anxiety-ridden. No matter whether one is a student of a highly pampered elite institution or a young aspirant from a small town preparing for a high-stakes standardised test like NEET, the stress that this generation is going through is indeed a matter of concern.

As I write this piece, IIT-Delhi is on edge after the suicide of an MSc student and the administration's cold bureaucratic response to this tragedy. Likewise, it breaks my heart to know that several students died by suicide after the NEET cancellation and rescheduling caused by a major paper leak controversy.

As I look at the data provided by the National Crime Records Bureau — 14,488 cases of student suicides in 2024 — I realise the damage that the race for upward social mobility in this highly uneven and asymmetrical society has caused to the mental health of our students. Likewise, think of the

It is good to see our students raising their voices, taking all sorts of risks and protesting against the ongoing onslaught on education.

pathetic state of our schools and universities. While English-medium/private schools with fancy names can be seen even in little-known villages and small towns, government schools are in a terribly bad shape. As per a recent report published by NITI Aayog, 94,000 government schools were shut down in a decade. Not only that, see how the

establishment devalues and trivialises the vocation of teaching. Otherwise, how do we explain the way government school teachers are often asked to leave their classrooms and perform all sorts of non-academic/administrative tasks such as election work, Census operations and voter roll revisions?

Moreover, here is a system that demoralises those who love to teach. How can a teacher teach if young students refuse to attend classes and prefer to be taught by all sorts of coaching strategists? Yes, you and I must reflect on the close relationship between the normalisation of "dummy schools" and India's Rs 58,000 crore coaching industry.

When the traders of "success manuals" decide how physics, mathematics, chemistry and biology have to be taught, is there any space left for those who wish to teach deeply and meaningfully — not merely for NEET and JEE, but for nurturing young minds, sharpening their critical thinking and developing a truly democratic

and scientific temper?

Frankly speaking, as I see the colonisation of the realm of education by the coaching mafia, I find no meaning in celebrating Teachers' Day. Also, when academic freedom is denied in our universities and an environment of fear and surveillance continues to disrupt the flow of ideas, debates and contestations, Teachers' Day seems to have lost its meaning.

I am not sure whether as teachers we are realising the danger confronting the field of education. If the instrumental rationality implicit in the discourse of neo-liberalism reduces education to a mere training for jobs or a set of technical skills the techno-corporate industry needs for enhancing what it regards as "productivity", we cause severe damage to the very spirit of liberal/humanistic education.

This sort of instrumental learning erodes the very spirit of democracy. How can we teach critical thinking, gender studies and subaltern histories if we are told that the worth of everything has to be measured in terms of its monetary value? Likewise, as the agenda of hyper-nationalism becomes normal in these toxic times, the spirit of critical pedagogy is bound to die. Under these circumstances, will it be possible for a teacher to interrogate what the discourse of hyper-nationalism has normalised — militarism, social conservatism, majoritarianism and constant "othering" of the minorities?

Even amid this crisis, it is good to see our students raising their voices, taking all sorts of risks and protesting against the ongoing onslaught on education. As teachers, if we do not come forward, raise our voices and initiate a movement for saving education, is there any reason to feel good and congratulate ourselves on the occasion of Teachers' Day?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning. — Paulo Freire

No student is beyond redemption

URVASHI GOYAL

DURING my teaching career, I got an opportunity to gain familiarity with the Gurukul system of education. A new academic session had begun, and boys from nearby villages had just joined the institution. As per the rules, they were required to stay in the Gurukul boarding house itself.

One morning, a group of irate students approached the Chief Acharya (head of the Gurukul). A boy stood in their midst with his head down, looking downcast. They alleged that he had been caught stealing their belongings. They wanted him to be given exemplary punishment.

The Chief Acharya listened to them patiently. After a pause, he turned to the boy, gently raised his head with a hand and said, "My son! Stealing is a very bad habit. Take a pledge that you will not do it again." The child nodded, and all of them went back.

A fortnight later, the kid was caught stealing again by other students. Agitated, they went to the Gurukul head once more and issued an ultimatum this time: "Acharyaji, either you throw this boy out or we are all leaving. We will not tolerate this habitual thief."

The Chief Acharya remained unperturbed by their words. After thinking the matter over, he said, "My dear disciples, if you feel that your interests are better served by leaving this Gurukul, you may go. But as far as this boy is concerned, he will stay here."

The other Acharyas present were taken aback by this unexpected response. One of them asked, "Gurudev, your reply has perplexed us. We shall be grateful if you could explain the rationale behind this decision."

"There are two reasons," the Chief Acharya replied. "First, if I throw this boy out, I know that no other school will admit him with the taint he carries, whereas the other boys can easily get admission anywhere. Expelling him is the last thing I would do. Second, if he has developed this bad habit, it is due to the influence of the environment in which he grew up. My job as an Acharya is to reform him — just like a goldsmith who refines gold by removing impurities to create a beautiful ornament. I cannot abdicate my responsibility and leave this boy in the lurch."

Hearing these remarks, the students quietly began walking back to their classrooms. The guilty boy's eyes welled up with tears and he fell at the Acharya's feet. Some time later, I left the campus to take up a government job, but I came to know from my friends that the boy did exceptionally well in his studies and went on to serve in the armed forces with distinction.

It is rightly said that a good teacher explains, a superior one demonstrates and a great one inspires.

The writer is ex-principal of a govt school in Thero (Shimla).

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Probity within the judiciary

Refer to 'The case for jurists as judges'; whatever the mode of appointment, whether from the Bar or the Bench, a judge should be a person of impeccable integrity, sound legal acumen and above suspicion. The higher judiciary commands respect for being impartial, untainted and process-oriented in upholding the Constitution and the rule of law. However, lately, people's faith has been eroded due to incompetent persons being appointed as judges. The judiciary must take probity, transparency and accountability seriously; it cannot afford to let public confidence and faith slip. Urgent remedial steps are needed to stem the rot and clean the Augean stables within the judiciary at all levels. Justice is an ideal, and law is a tool.

ANIL BHATIA, HISAR

Wisdom of Constitution framers

Refer to 'The case for jurists as judges'; as per constitutional mandate, Supreme Court judges can be appointed from three categories — "distinguished jurists" being one of them. Strangely, no one has ever been appointed from this category till date. Ignoring this category and appointing judges from the other two categories raises questions. Firstly, it stands at variance with the cardinal principle of judicial independence. Secondly, it seeks answers to the failure to tap this category for decades — since the establishment of the Supreme Court itself. Thirdly, this fact also defeats the very purpose of the collegium itself. The only apparent explanation — that academicians are not well-versed in practical courtcraft — is too feeble to stand the test of history across the world. Therefore, the wisdom of our constitutional framers cannot be allowed to be eclipsed unconstitutionally.

ABHYAM SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Political will lacking in Punjab

Refer to 'Punjab's definition of success'; the social environment and governance in the state may not prove beneficial for reverse migration. Punjab has the capability, resources, knowledge and will to foster entrepreneurship, but the volatile market conditions have always discouraged modern farming. The Centre's import and export deals with developed nations have made modern farming uncertain. Farmers have to sell pota-

toes for Rs 20 a kg and the next year, they have to dump them on the roads. There is a need to improve the social environment and political will to retain the youth in the state.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RETD), MOHALI

Not every hospital error a fraud

With reference to 'Ayushman arrears'; it is the government's responsibility to prevent fraud in the Ayushman Bharat scheme. However, not every discrepancy, documentation error, coding issue or procedural lapse should be termed fraud. Unfortunately, the broad use of the term can create a perception that doctors and hospitals are routinely involved in fraudulent practices. This is unfair to the thousands of healthcare providers who serve beneficiaries honestly. Actual fraud must be dealt with firmly, but technical or procedural discrepancies should not be equated with fraud.

SUBHASH CHANDER GARG, KURUKSHETRA

Address employees' issues

The ongoing deadlock between the Punjab government and employees over DA and other benefits raises serious questions about governance. Employee concerns should be addressed through facts, merit and dialogue — not notices or unnecessary transfers. Even after court relief, employees are still waiting for their legitimate dues. If around 7 lakh employees and pensioners face such delays, one can imagine the difficulties faced by an ordinary citizen seeking justice from the government. When people stop raising their voice and choose compromise because of fear or delay, corruption grows and administrative arrogance increases. The government must take immediate measures for a fair resolution of their grievances.

AVINASH GOYAL, CHANDIGARH

Federer's humility wins hearts

Tennis legend Roger Federer was recently inducted into the iconic International Tennis Hall of Fame. True to form, he expressed gratitude to all the ball kids and the linespeople who form an integral, yet overlooked, part of tennis. Achieving fame was never his goal, he said. Owing to his on-court demeanour, grace and flawless technique, Federer still draws sold-out crowds at exhibition matches.

AADITYA, KARNAL

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@tribuneindia.com

Iran war opens new strategic frontiers



GADDAM DHARMENDRA
INDIAN FOREIGN SERVICE (RETI.)

THE US-Israel war on Iran has passed the six-month mark. What was touted as a 'short excursion' and confidently predicted to be a quick and easy victory, is locked in a stalemate with both aggressors desperate to extricate themselves from a quagmire. The political and military costs of this strategic blunder are playing out in real time where not one of the ever-shifting objectives have been achieved.

Instead the war propelled a little known strait, the Hormuz, on to the world's fragile commercial networks and to the centrality of hydro-carbon chains for our energy and food security as well as digital technologies.

On the political side of the ledger, all actors need to contend with fluid and uncertain scenarios. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump face crucial elections this October and November respectively. Each is seeking to escape the folly of their hubris in launching an unlawful war.

The outcome of the two elections will determine their

fate and historical legacy, both having added to an ignominious roster of US and Israel's forever wars.

On the other hand, Iran's elusive Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei, who is yet to appear in public six months since his appointment, is unencumbered by election cycles and is consolidating his position. He has appointed veterans of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war to key posts, essentially rewarding those who were instrumental in his appointment.

These include hardliners such as Mohsen Rezaee as Secretary and Supreme Leader's representative to the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC); Ahmed Vahedi as commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and, Hossein Taeb to lead the crucial paramilitary Basij Organisation which manages internal order. In essence, this is the IRGC's silent coup, advertising to all an unbridled 'offensive doctrine' as evident in Iran's missile strikes during the current hostilities.

In these conditions of 'now war, no peace', the IRGC's dominance of Iran's usually contested decision-making processes is now out in the open. There is also underway the securitisation of the Islamic Revolution, as the new principals assert control. Externally, they are managing the escalation ladder in pursuit of a long-term effort to secure an enduring deterrence vis-à-vis the US, Israel and their Gulf neighbours. In mapping out a template



REDLINE : There are reports that Trump did contemplate the use of tactical nuclear weapons. REUTERS

for West Asia's future strategic landscape, Khamenei and his advisers view the Hormuz as vital to Iran's deterrence. This they are unlikely to relinquish. Internally, they are stamping their authority on politico-economic decisions and directions, and manage underlying societal tensions.

On the other hand, Trump is doubling down, self-obsessed with not wanting to look a loser. Despite his unique ability to frame the narrative, his popularity is at its nadir, including amongst an increasingly restless MAGA base.

Militarily, all sides have suffered. Iran has endured significant military and infrastructure damage, with several thousands in civilian casualties. But Iran's counter-strikes have ensured that the US will come out of this conflict greatly weakened and with its famed

The political and military costs of this strategic blunder are playing out in real time.

military prowess in tatters. The US Central Command's filtering of news has failed to hide the severe losses suffered by the US. Satellite images reveal the destruction wrought by Iran's strikes leading to an emptying of its bases, in particular the US Navy's 5th fleet headquarters based in Manama.

The US is mitigating the losses by cannibalising and relocating military assets to shore up its depleted assets and radar sites across West Asia. For the first time in decades, the Indo-Pacific does not have a US carrier strike group nor a THAAD air-defence system on the Korean peninsula. The QUAD should rightly be concerned.

Trump's frustrations are well known, as he veers dangerously from putting 'boots on the ground' to threatening to bomb an ancient and proud civilisation to the Stone Age.

Concerning are emerging reports: that Trump did contemplate the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

He was talked out of this dangerous slide into the unknown but it shows the precarious calamity that one delusional man can inflict on the world. The fact that first-use of nuclear weapons is under discussion should be a redline as this overturns an eight-decade long norm against N-weapons use. In particular, India should be wary given Pakistan's history of voicing such threats.

Going forward, three issues require monitoring. First, the Mecca Alliance birthed by Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan. Its objectives and the type of burden-sharing it envisages are unknown. Its future expansion is inevitable.

Iran's media claim that it has been invited to join the alliance. The construction is underway of a post-war security architecture, poised on the cusp of a diminished US footprint. Israel will watch this development given its own tensions with Türkiye over Syria's neutrality.

Second, is the focus on maritime chokepoints: the Hormuz Strait and the Red Sea's Bab-al-Mandeb. So long as Iran controls the Hormuz with its missile deterrence, the US's return to its pre-war status and ability to rebuild its bases is the 'known unknown'.

Hence the determination to re-open the Strait. Yemen's Ansar Allah have tightened their grip on the Bab, for now restricting only Saudi ship-

ping. Both chokepoints are triggering workarounds.

The Saudis are using Egypt's SUMED pipeline while Iraq is shipping its crude via Syria, both landing on the Mediterranean, much to the relief of Europeans. Also in the offing is a network of alternative energy pipelines, led for now by the Emiratis. Russia is promoting its Arctic route. This should put in perspective Trump's designs on Greenland.

Lastly, Iran's economy is in dire straits. The US secondary sanctions, 'Operation Economic Outcast', are not new and appear designed to assuage Trump's desperation to do something. But the US naval blockade is having a severe impact, restricting Iran's oil exports and maritime trade shipments.

Inflation and unemployment are at record highs, while much of Iran's infrastructure is bombed out. This is acknowledged by a faction of President Pezeshkian that wishes to resist negotiations. Iran also has extensive land borders and its financial system, underpinned by hawala transactions, is designed to circumvent decades of US financial and economic sanctions.

But for the new cohort of hard-liners helming the Islamic Republic, the greatest danger comes from the underlying tensions of deep-rooted social disenchantment with a baked-in potential to trigger another round of anti-establishment demonstrations. Only time will reveal whose side it is on.

Dil Chahta Hai & bro-hood



SANDEEP GOYAL
MANAGING DIRECTOR, REDIFFUSION

FARHAN Akhtar's debut 25 years ago didn't just create a film. It gave an entire generation a personality disorder. Back then in 2001, three absurdly good-looking, impossibly rich South Bombay boys went to Goa, and Indian men have been trying to copy that trip ever since, with considerably less hair. This is the official test of a cult film. Not whether people quote it — they do — but whether it still works when you strip away the nostalgia. *Dil Chahta Hai* passes. Annoyingly well.

A quick recap: Akash (Aamir Khan), Sameer (Saif Ali Khan) and Sid (Akshaye Khanna) are best friends. They are so rich they have existential problems. Akash is a cynical cool guy who thinks love is a scam. Sameer is a soft-hearted romantic who falls in love with every woman who makes eye contact with him, including the air hostess who says 'welcome aboard.' Sid is a sensitive painter who falls in love with an older, divorced alcoholic woman, Tara (Dimple Kapadia), because he is the only one in the group who can read a book.

They fight, they separate, they grow up. That's it. That's the plot. There is no villain, no motherly dying of cancer, no India-Pakistan cricket

match to win for national honour. The conflict is that your friends can be idiots, and you love them anyway. Revolutionary.

What Farhan Akhtar did was commit a radical act: he let men be vulnerable without making it a joke and he let them be funny without making them buffoons. Before *DCH*, Bollywood bro-hood came in two flavours. Either the Amitabh-Dharmendra-Sholay model — bro-hood as blood oath. 'Tu mera bhai hai.' Or the 90s Karan Johar model — bro-hood as accessory — two guys fight over one girl, then one nobly sacrifices.

Akhtar invented a third. Bro-hood as irritating, low-maintenance, passive-aggressive group chat. These guys don't die for each other. They insult each other's shirts. They remember your ex-girlfriend's name just to annoy you. They know you are wrong and wait for you to realise it. Akhtar's genius was to not punish

any of them. Sameer, the butt of jokes, gets the best ending. He learns to shut up and listen, and he gets Sonali Kulkarni(!). Akash, the hero, has to be humbled by travelling to Australia and discovering that being a jerk is not a personality. Sid, the saint, has to learn that some loves are meant to teach you, not to stay.

And the women! This film respected them before it was a LinkedIn requirement. Priya (Preity Zinta) does not reform Akash. She just calls him bluff. 'You are not as cool as you think you are.' Tara Jaiswal is not a 'cougar' or a 'sympathy track.' She is a lonely, brilliant woman who drinks because the world is unkind to women who leave bad marriages. Shalini (Suchitra Pillai) is not a nagging girlfriend. She is a woman tired of a boy who hasn't grown up.

Technically, the film still feels like it was shot yesterday. Bombay like Bombay, not like a set. Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy's music — 'Koi Kahe Keha Rahe' — still sounds like someone just cleaned the dust off a guitar, and meant it. The humour still feels like it is character humour. Saif Ali Khan's 'Meri ungli ka gala ghat diya' or his interview with the psychologist where he says 'I love Pojti' for the 14th time. Aamir's 'Jeh tumhara college ka drama nahi hai.'

But here's the real reason it remains fresh: it doesn't want anything from you. At 25, *DCH* is not about youth. It's about memory. When we watch it now, we are watching our own 2001 selves. The ones who thought friendship would always be that easy. And that, to quote Sameer, is very, very... well, you know the line.

For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

Gloria Steinem's India



SHELLEY WALIA
FORMER PROFESSOR & FELLOW,
ENGLISH & CULTURAL STUDIES, PU

SHE died peacefully at home in New York. Ninety-two is a long enough life when death does not feel like a shock. But it saddens in the way we grieve those who, by force of personality and sheer persistence, had become part of the permanence of things. I had always imagined she would always be there.

Among the things being remembered about American journalist and social movement activist Gloria Steinem after her death is her fondness for the old practice of lighting signal fires on hilltops, one fire answering another across a valley, carrying a message from one distant place to the next, to 'light the way home for a great one.' She did not merely speak for women; she enabled successive generations to speak for themselves.

Before she became a defining figure of American feminism, Gloria Steinem spent two formative years here at Miranda House, learning to wear a sari, and travelling across the country to work with Gandhian and Sarvodaya movements in Tamil Nadu. India, for her, was the place where she had her first lessons in pluralism: 'I realised there was a terrible monochromatic quality to the people in my life, and that white people were a small minority in the

world. In India, I got accustomed to, and began to value racial diversity.'

Years later she described her time in India as very important and said she had been deeply influenced by the country. It was India that exposed the young Steinem to a society in which hierarchies of caste, class and gender was part of the visible organisation of everyday life. More importantly, it introduced her to the Gandhian idea that social change could begin with ordinary people rather than with institutions alone.

We do not know, for example, whether Steinem ever read the *Manusmriti* or thought of her later feminism in direct response to its prescriptions concerning women. History rarely works through such neat lines of influence. What India seems to have given her was an instinct for people, for movement, for listening, and for politics at ground level. She carried that

instinct back to America.

Steinem's particular gift was translation. She could take an argument from a book or a seminar room and put it into the newspaper, the television studio or the conversation around the dinner table. She gave ordinary experience a political vocabulary. What one woman had been told was ambition, vanity, hysteria or unreasonableness could suddenly be recognised as part of a pattern shared by millions. That was an extraordinary achievement.

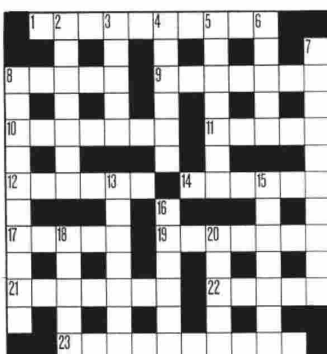
Interestingly, it was in India that she realised that 'culturally women are drawn to nonviolence. Probably because we are the major victims of violence, we become the major movers of peace.'

But it would be misleading to write Steinem's obituary as though her story ended in triumph. Yet reproductive rights remain contested and violence against women remains endemic. The digital world too has created new forms of harassment, humiliation and surveillance. The old order skillfully adapted but in many places carried on much as before.

Steinem's work is plainly unfinished and she herself seemed to know it. In what turned out to be her final piece of writing, published in the last days of her life, she took stock of what had actually shifted rather than what remained merely spoken about. Steinem called her autobiography *My Life on the Road*. The title indeed captured her faith in movement itself, in going where people were, listening to them, and then carrying what one had learned somewhere else.

For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- Straining credibility (3-7)
- Reasoned argument (5)
- A deadly poison (7)
- To struggle (7)
- A clearance (5)
- Fixed official allowance (6)
- Spin round (6)
- Receiver of stolen goods (5)
- Consolation (7)
- Travellers' bags (7)
- Monotonous routine (5)
- Eager for immediate action (6,2,2)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Ballot, 4 Precis, 9 Heave to, 10 Cause, 11 Speed, 12 Parsnip, 13 See eye to eye, 18 Cleaver, 20 Debar, 22 Own up, 23 Charade, 24 Tawdry, 25 Adroit.

Down: 1 Behest, 2 Leave, 3 Overdue, 5 Recur, 6 Chutney, 7 Steppe, 8 Coup de grace, 14 Even now, 15 Old hand, 16 Acrost, 17 Priest, 19 Viper, 21 Bravo.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

7	9	3	2	5	8	4	1	6
4	5	8	1	6	9	2	3	7
2	1	6	4	7	3	8	9	5
1	8	2	3	4	7	5	6	9
9	7	5	6	8	2	1	4	3
6	3	4	5	9	1	7	8	2
8	2	7	9	1	6	3	5	4
5	6	1	7	3	4	9	2	8
3	4	9	8	2	5	6	7	1

CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER 5, 2026, SATURDAY	
Shaka Samvat	1948
Bhadrpad Shaka	14
Bhadrpad Parvati	20
Hijri	1448
Krishna Paksha Tithi 9, up to 9:54 pm	
Vajra Yoga up to 12:47 pm	
Minghsikhika Nakshatra up to 9:31 pm	
Moon enters Gemini sign 10:19 am	
Shri Gugga Navmi	

FORECAST

SUNSET: 6:32 PM	SATURDAY 18:40 HRS	SUNDAY 18:42 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	35	24
New Delhi	30	25
Amritsar	34	25
Bathinda	35	25
Jalandhar	33	25
Ludhiana	34	25
Bhiwani	36	25
Hisar	37	26
Sirsa	35	25
Dharamsala	28	18
Manali	24	16
Shimla	22	16
Srinagar	32	18
Jammu	30	22
Kargil	30	14
Leh	26	12
Dehradun	31	21
Mussoorie	22	16

TEMPERATURE IN °C

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FINANCIAL TIMES

'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

Meloni's enviable stability – and missed opportunity

Prime minister marks Italy's longest continuous government since the war

Giorgia Meloni today notches up 1,413 days in charge of her rightwing coalition government. Hers becomes the longest continuous Italian administration since the second world war, surpassing the longest of Silvio Berlusconi's three stints in office. It is a considerable achievement given the government instability that has plagued postwar Italy. It also stands out in today's Europe, where stability and long-termism have become sadly underrated.

Britain has just acquired its fifth prime minister in four years. France is on its fourth since President Emmanuel Macron's gamble to dissolve parliament in 2024 left it paralysed. Even Germany is going through a period of turbulence, with Chancellor Friedrich Merz wobbling after barely 16 months in power.

A populist firebrand in opposition, Meloni has governed more astutely and pragmatically than Italians or Europeans could have hoped from the leader of a party with neo-fascist roots. She stamped her authority on a coalition comprising her rightwing Brothers of Italy, the late Berlusconi's centre-right Forza Italia and the anti-immigration League. She is tough, hard-working, holds her own with other world leaders and has a gift for political communication. She is unquestionably the dominant force in Italian politics.

Meloni has brought stability to Italy, governing not as the radical some feared but as a conservative. It is why she is revelled as a saviour by far-right hardliners in Germany, France and now in Italy too. To be sure, she has taken a strict line on irregular migration, setting up an offshore processing centre in Albania for asylum seekers. She has rounded on the judges who blocked the centre's operation and other parts of her agenda. She has clamped down on parental recognition for same-sex couples and banned surrogacy abroad. She also wants to tinker with the electoral system in ways that could boost her coalition in the next election, due by the end of 2027.

But Meloni has stuck to constitutional convention and to the foreign policy orientation of her mainstream predecessors. She has maintained fiscal discipline and cut the deficit, keeping bond yields relatively in check and investors happy. She has proved a co-operative player in the EU, working with other leaders, especially Merz, to pull it to the right on immigration, the energy transition and regulation. She remains a staunch supporter of Ukraine, in a country with widespread pro-Russian sympathies. Having aspired to act as a Maga-compatible bridge between Europe and the Trump administration, she has ended up clashing with the US president like everyone else.

Meloni's political capital remains intact because she hasn't tried to use it on painful economic, welfare and public

She has proved a co-operative player in the EU, working with other leaders to pull it to the right on immigration, the energy transition and regulation

administration reforms. Rome has worked with Brussels to spend a €200bn EU pandemic recovery fund, but has failed to use it as a unique opportunity for economic transformation. It is hard to identify a standout reforming achievement of her tenure, which may be why she and her allies make so much of her endurance in office.

Most importantly, given Italy's public debt mountain and the pressure on its industrial export model, Meloni has done almost nothing to raise growth potential. GDP growth has been feeble and living standards stagnant. This helps to explain why she now risks being outflanked on the far right by Roberto Vannucci, a pro-Moscow anti-immigration hardliner who claims that restarting cheap energy imports from Russia is the answer to Italy's woes.

Meloni has brought enviable stability to Italy but has not used it to transform her country's prospects. Nearly four years in office is an achievement, yet, but also a missed opportunity.

Opinion Policy

When is an economist not an economist?



Soumaya Keynes

Am I an economist? Since completing my undergraduate and master's degrees in economics, I've been in the Government Economic Service (briefly), been an economic researcher (less briefly) and written about economics (for ages). In Britain, no one ever questions the "economist" part of my identity, at least not to my face. But in America, as one of the tribe once matter-of-factly explained to me, I don't count. I don't have a PhD.

As one who falls into this grey zone, I roll my eyes when questions of who qualifies as an economist creep into the public debate. There is no economics licensing board. Whether used against America's Jay Powell, a trade lawyer turned top central banker, or Britain's Gary Stevenson, a YouTuber with a master's in economics

and strong views on tax, credentialism isn't cool. Still, many years for a definition. Partly that's because economists have influence over public opinion. A study by Hans Sievertsen and Sarah Smith of the University of Bristol estimated that in America, seeing an expert economist's view shifted the average person's view by 0.2 points on a five-point scale. In Britain, trust in economists, already admittedly low, has improved since 2017 to reach 37 per cent of the public.

Think of economists as a guild whose members police who is allowed to join and what counts as true economics. By guarding the definition of economic expertise, they preserve their influence over the public and public policy.

The trouble with the stricter definitions is that they don't really work. Portugal is unusual for having an industry association reserving the title for those with at least a university degree in the subject. In the US, where one really doesn't have to have studied very much economics to major in it, requiring a postgraduate qualification makes more sense. But requiring an economics PhD would exclude several at the pinnacle of the profession. Some 13 of the 96 economics Nobel Prize winners wouldn't qualify.

Discounting experience in paid work entirely feels silly. The economy exists outside of university walls – surely one can become a specialist later? That would bring in the 25 per cent of central bankers over the 2000s and 2010s who didn't have an economics degree. But it would upset some others. Years after becoming one of the world's top economic policy-makers, in 2024 ECB chief Christine Lagarde was still denouncing economists as a distinct "tribal clique".

The looser definitions come with challenges too. Economists are a diverse bunch, not easy to define from their assumptions or views. It's a caricature to say that economists believe people are rational, utility-maximising agents, though in the words of Jean Tirole of the Toulouse School of Economics, they do tend to subscribe to the view that incentives and behaviour of individuals are the starting point for understanding groups. But there is no consistent translation of that into policy advice. Even price controls have found some high-profile supporters within the profession.

Defining economists by their methods risks being too narrow as well. Many use empirical tools to tease out causal relationships from imperfect data. But many don't.

The vaguer the sniff test, the greater the risk that setting the boundaries of who counts as an economist descends into a nasty way of adjudicating intellectual disagreements. Denying someone the title of economist could be a lazy put-down, a signal that their ideas don't deserve credibility. Easier to deliver such a rebuke than to make the effort to explain why a particular take is wrong.

Researchers have captured the tendency of economists to be suspicious of those outside the mainstream. Mohsen Javadi of Simon Fraser University and Ha-Joon Chang of the School of Oriental and African Studies surveyed economists around the world about whether they agreed with various statements, and randomly attributed some sources to mainstream thinkers (such as Adam Smith) and others to less mainstream ones (such as Karl Marx). The trained economists were more likely to disagree with a take they thought was coming from that second group.

As the sociologist Marion Fourcade has written, whereas in Britain economic authority is "more fluid and informally defined", in America economic competence is "more firmly rooted in the possession of a specialist university degree". Which explains my own identity crisis. As the competition for public policy influence continues, don't expect the argument over who can claim the title to go away.

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Letters

Big Four networks face greatest threat since Arthur Andersen

The Hong Kong court's decision ("Evergrande's \$8.5bn claim against PwC poses questions for Big Four", Report, August 28) to allow the liquidators of China Evergrande to pursue PwC's international umbrella organisation, along with its Chinese and Hong Kong companies, presents the greatest threat to Big Four networks since the disintegration of Arthur Andersen in 2002 under its unbearable litigation exposure following the collapse of Enron.

Early commentary has left two major issues. First, while PwC faces exposure of its complex international structure

— designed to ringfence local liabilities while proclaiming itself a single source of multinational service — the scale of its China operations, both China-based clients and those doing business there, means that whether or not the umbrella entity is formally retained as a party, PwC cannot abandon its practices there without fatally harming the integrity of its global network.

Accordingly, PwC's litigation exposure will test its resources both globally and locally. The eventual outcome will be measured in the billions — the number to grow with the passage of time — against well-funded

liquidators capable of staying the course. Reference to PwC's in-house insurance is interesting but not relevant, as such facilities essentially represent timing differences on the shifting of past and future partner profits.

Which exposes the second issue: while PwC has capacity to withstand an outcome in the mid-billions, there are limits. A truly "worst case" outcome would be an Andersen-like disintegration.

That in turn would present an existential crisis for the global delivery of audits. Nobody seriously argues that

a Big Three model is sustainable, as the rules on independence and conflicts already severely restrict auditor choice. Collapse of the Big Audit model would require a years-long effort to redesign an assurance function out of the wreckage that would be fit for future purpose.

Costly and painful as it may be for PwC, the strategy of an early and least-cost settlement might be compelling.

Jim Peterson
Member of Arthur Andersen's in-house legal group and a partner in its worldwide organisation until retirement in June 2001, Chicago, IL, US

Frustrations of the graduate job applicant

Re Bethan Staton's Work & Careers feature "The companies desperate to hire graduates" (August 31), I am in my late twenties, so further along than a recent graduate, but as a career changer, I have been exploring and applying for a range of different roles that suit my experience.

Over the past four months, while working full-time, I have applied for a substantial number of positions, including some graduate roles. I have not been invited to a single in-person interview. I am lucky to have several successful family members who happily check my CV and cover letters, so I am confident that I am submitting well-written, articulate applications.

I was therefore excited to read your article, hoping it might highlight companies where applicants like me could find opportunities.

Unfortunately, when I looked into the companies mentioned — Heat Geek, Grainger & Worrall and FabricShift — I could not find a single advertised role that appeared suitable for a graduate. Europool had one vacancy, but the advert provided very little information about what the role actually involved. There was also a "Marketing Associate" vacancy at Heat Geek, but it still needed "3+ years' experience in social media management, community management, or a generalist marketing role".

I find this increasingly frustrating, particularly given the rhetoric in the article around the supposed abundance of opportunities available to young people in smaller companies. There are large numbers of highly educated and capable candidates with exactly the skills employers say they need, yet we are not even getting through the door.

And this is not just a problem for graduates. Career changers, older workers and, of course, women returning to the workforce are all facing similar barriers. Perhaps, rather than focusing on the companies that say they are struggling to find talent, it would be more useful to highlight the smaller businesses that are actively hiring graduates now. There is clearly no shortage of talented candidates!

Elisabeth Daly
Harpenden, Hertfordshire, UK

AI may become hard for any one country to control

Jensen Huang, the head of Nvidia, is right that America's AI challenge is increasingly one of adoption rather than invention (Report, July 25).

The market reaction to the recent release of Chinese models such as Moonshot's Kimi K3 and Alibaba's Qwen3.8-Max illustrates the point. Investors were not responding to



verified evidence that Chinese companies had suddenly overtaken their US rivals. Rather, they were confronting the possibility that advanced AI capabilities may become cheaper, more widely available and harder for any one country to control.

From an Asian perspective, that matters because the benefits of AI will not accrue only to those who build the most advanced models. They will increasingly accrue to those who are quickest to deploy them.

Across Asia, companies and governments are actively experimenting with AI to improve productivity, modernise services and support economic growth. For many organisations, the question is no longer whether they can access frontier AI capabilities, but how rapidly they can incorporate them into everyday operations.

This highlights a weakness in the current US debate. Export controls may help protect advantages in the most advanced chips, but they do little to address the slower and more difficult challenge of institutional adoption. Most barriers to deployment are organisational rather than technological: fragmented data, procurement delays, compliance concerns and resistance to change.

The countries that gain most from AI will be those that adapt their institutions fastest. In that contest, leadership will depend not only on who develops the most powerful systems, but also on who uses them most effectively.

Bruno S. Seng
Instructor at Harvard University's Sustainability and Global Development Practice Graduate Programmes, Cambridge, MA, US
Kevin Chen
Adjunct Associate Professor, New York University SPIS Center for Global Affairs; Chief Economist and CIO of Horizon Financial; and Partner and CIO of CoinBridge, New York, NY, US

Sudan government's view of UAE gold heist denials

Ahmed Bin Sulayem's letter ("UAE exchange boss rebuts Sudan gold heist claims", August 28) asks readers of the Financial Times to treat a reported airlift of stolen Sudanese bullion as a bookkeeping dispute.

He does not write as a bystander. He is the chairman and chief executive of the DMCC (Dubai Multi Commodities Centre), the free zone that licenses Dubai's gold traders, sets its gold-delivery standard and sells the emirate to the world as a global market for the precious metal.

He is not an observer of the architecture under examination. He is the operator.

Bin Sulayem's response to the FT investigation by William Wallis and Peter Andringa ("The UAE's imperial push into Africa", The Big Read, August 4) completely misses the fundamental issue.

The debate is no longer whether the UAE participated in one of the biggest gold heists in modern history. The real, urgent question is why a wealthy state is bankrolling the destruction of Sudan and how much longer will global silence reward such atrocities with impunity.

The letter does not deny that Sudanese gold reached the UAE; rather, it argues that the UAE state did not purchase that gold. But this argument dodges the real question.

The debate is not about who held the receipt, but how the UAE enabled an architecture that allows bloodstained gold to be smuggled, laundered and converted into revenue that sustains the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces' war machine.

This structural complicity is the true indictment, and no amount of semantic redirection can obscure it.

In fact the letter only highlights what it is trying to hide.

Amgad Faried Eltayeb
Political and Foreign Relations Adviser to the Chairman of Sudan's Transitional Sovereignty Council; Executive Director of Fikra for Studies and Development, Khartoum, Sudan

Bald men fighting over a comb. What an apt image

It took just a glance at the illustration accompanying Robin Harding's column on the public indebtedness of the west's biggest economies to get the point ("Whose fiscal problems would you prefer?", Opinion, September 1). Five bald characters, each with just a single hair, fighting over a comb. Maximum kudos to the artist. Whose fiscal problems would you prefer when the problems are all identical?

A good chuckle to start my morning.
Jon Johannessen
Venice, CA, US

The 'rare earth' I took home from Antarctica

I happened to be re-reading Peter Frankopan's book *The Silk Roads*, so became diverted by the author's Antarctic trip described in FT Weekend (Travel, August 8).

Perhaps the Oxford professor will be treated next time to a Ross Sea voyage, somewhat more luxurious I suspect than the vessel we chartered from Vladivostok when I did the trip in 1998.

We chose a March departure, luckily as it turned out, as in February the ship had not been able to penetrate the still-frozen Ross Sea.

He landed on Enderby Island, viewed the Victoria coast, and befriended some penguins, before heading down to Ross Island. After inspecting the three historic huts — Shackleton's, and Scott's — we strolled down into the American base. Snow gave way to bare land — no melt, as water immediately evaporated in the super-dry air. Friendly chaps in shorts on bicycles greeted us. Then coffee in the welcoming restaurant, before climbing Observation Hill (remarkable view), and a short drive to the compact New Zealand base.

Our short dinghy passage back to our ship passed hungry sharks chasing a few early-returning Emperor penguins. Coming on board, and after rinsing our footwear in the shallow basin provided (an essential task), I retrieved some pieces of grit from the bottom of my boots.

The whole of Ross Island is composed of volcanic rock spewed out over time. The exact composition of such isolated volcanoes can be unique. In fact only one other — in east Africa — exactly matches Ross Island.

I confess that I kept a handful of this "rare earth" to bring home.

Dr William Hudson
Hartley Wintney, Hampshire, UK

Should it rebrand itself as 'Just Stop Importing Oil'?

The revived debate over whether the Burnham government will allow North Sea drilling ("Fahnbullen's Aberdeen visit fuels oil hopes", Report, July 24) has triggered a re-run, and a short drive to the compact New Zealand base. Our short dinghy passage back to our ship passed hungry sharks chasing a few early-returning Emperor penguins. Coming on board, and after rinsing our footwear in the shallow basin provided (an essential task), I retrieved some pieces of grit from the bottom of my boots.

Paradoxically, a more immediate environmental gain, which increases UK tax revenue for investment in clean energy, would be to rebrand their protest movement as "Just Stop Importing Oil" and support North Sea expansion at Rosebank and Jackdaw.

Tony Barcroft
Chester, Cheshire, UK

Opinion

In an age of impunity, diplomats are more important than ever

Badr Albusaidi

In recent years diplomacy has been an unforgiving endeavour. A few provisional agreements have achieved limited de-escalations. But there have been no lasting resolutions to any of the dangerous global conflicts that directly threaten lives in Palestine, Iran, Yemen, Sudan, Lebanon, Israel and Ukraine, and which inflict serious damage upon regional neighbours and the global economy.

This is not for lack of activity: there have been numerous initiatives, mediations, negotiations, summits and memoranda, and many experienced diplomats have devoted time and ingenuity to these matters. Rather, it is the consequence of two troubling new dimensions of global politics, to which a collective response from the international community is urgently needed.

The first is a decline in adherence to

international law. Recent years have seen the consolidation of occupations, the increased use of assassination and abduction as tools of policy, and reckless attacks on civilians, alongside open contempt for institutions such as the UN, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. This threatens a return to an earlier era in which major powers could act with impunity but, this time, with weapons of mass destruction.

The second is the tendency on the part of some world leaders to decide that they can do diplomacy themselves, without involving diplomats. The problem is that they soon find they have very few tools at their disposal with which to advance their objectives. They are forced to resort either to the traditional 19th-century imperial method of "gunboat diplomacy" or to the more refined but equally destructive modern equivalent of using economic power to bully entire populations into submission, in the hope of "regime change" and the installation of a compliant proxy administration.

How are smaller states to act when the

rules that once restrained larger states are increasingly ignored? It may be that the best response is to start by patiently, even a little pedantically, insisting upon adherence to some of the old norms. Repeated invocations of international law may be dismissed as tedious by those whose instincts are to move fast and break things. But they are there to protect the vast majority of the global

The very idea that nations can resolve differences through dialogue is at stake

population. Now is not the time to give up on the principle that the law serves to constrain illegitimate uses of power.

In practical terms this means maintaining some faith in the process of diplomacy when it seems not to be working. In the face of apparent failure, an intractable problem or the intransigence of your interlocutors, the challenge is not to walk away. The task of the

diplomat – perhaps especially the diplomat from a small nation – is to be the persistent interlocutor who remains at the table even when there seems to be nothing left to explore. One who is always picking up the phone, suggesting just one more way to inch a dialogue forward.

A key focus for Omani diplomacy over the last months has been on trying to achieve an agreement that would restore freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. This is a complex negotiation conducted under the ever-present threat of war – and one with well-known implications for the global economy. It involves balancing the details of international law with acute issues of national security. A solution has not yet been reached. But we are not walking away. This is, of course, because there is too much at stake in the negotiations themselves. And it is because the very process of negotiation – the idea that nations can resolve differences through dialogue – is also at stake.

Oman is trying to achieve three objectives through its continued engagement. To protect our own sovereignty,

given that the present situation threatens the security of our territorial waters. To protect the interests of the international community, aware that it is inevitably the most vulnerable who will suffer most from the strait remaining closed. And finally, to affirm the continuing centrality of international law by opting to act securely within its framework.

All three of these are consistent with what Oman means by constructive neutrality. This means more than just being helpful or prepared to facilitate. It means simultaneously preserving and constructing public international law, which is more than a text; it is sustained and strengthened through the actions taken in its name. The aim is progressively to develop a workable framework of mutual commitments that can serve as a normative order. By doing this, smaller nations – the global majority – can protect themselves against the unpredictable actions of those whose power otherwise allows them to act with impunity.

The writer is the foreign minister of Oman

How state control of companies can drive innovation

Ravi Gurumurthy

Take back control", once the slogan for leaving the EU, is now the animating idea of the Burnham government.

Nationalising Thames Water or regulating local bus networks have been mooted as ways of protecting customers from rising costs and poor service. But state action can also create wealth. As India and China have shown, public control can stimulate market dynamism rather than replace it, nurturing world-class industries in turn.

Last year, the Chinese car company BYD overtook Tesla and sold more electric vehicles globally than any other company. The market for their cars would not have existed without state regulation, subsidies and the building of charging infrastructure. But rather than anointing BYD as a national champion, the Chinese state also created a fierce technology race, with competition driving innovation. It was this unusual combination of muscular state action to drive demand, alongside a Darwinian selection mechanism, that forged a world-beating company. India's digital revolution also shows how government intervention can drive innovation. Today, when you buy vegetables from a street vendor, you pay by scanning a QR code – the vendor pays no fee to anyone. Rather than allowing payments to be captured by Visa or Mastercard, the government built digital public infrastructure. Dozens of apps now compete fiercely on these digital "rails", carrying more than half a billion transactions every day. No platform has excessive market power, so no

As India and China have shown, it is possible to stimulate market dynamism

intermediary can squeeze consumers or merchants.

What are the lessons from these experiments? First, public control need not be a defensive project confined to old industries. It is more relevant when it comes to managing big transitions, from stewarding AI to electrifying the economy.

Second, it requires system architects. We need people with deep technical expertise in senior positions, rather than Whitehall generalists. These individuals need to sit within durable institutions capable of setting the direction for whole sectors, working closely with mayoral strategic authorities.

Even where the UK has created a system architect role – the National Energy System Operator, for example – decision-making authority is fragmented across multiple independent state institutions, from Great British Energy and the National Wealth Fund to Ofgem.

Third, the system architects need the power and resources to drive change. Big transitions are stymied by chicken-and-egg co-ordination problems. For example, EVs rely on charging infrastructure, but who builds it when the demand is uncertain? The government's answer – the zero-emission vehicle mandate, alongside capital grants for infrastructure – de-risked investment in this area. But outside of energy, interventions lack the same heft.

Fourth, India and China show that public control can enhance market competition. Much better to set a direction for a market and let a winner emerge than for the state to pick one.

Finally, we should look again at finance. Private investors in monopoly assets are often paid for a risk the public bears anyway. Regulators, as the water industry has shown, are being consistently outfoxed. Full state ownership may serve us better. Where the state is involved in shaping a market, and reducing risk through long-term contracts, it should own part of the upside – for example, through equity stakes. For the Brexiters, and now Andy Burnham, "take back control" has been clothed in nostalgia. Grievance is a place to start, not to govern from. The lessons of Bengaluru and Shenzhen are that a modern state can do more than reclaim the industries of the past – it can create markets and drive innovation. That is the version of control worth taking back.

The writer is group chief executive of Nesta, a UK innovation charity

Burnham tests the 'politics of trying'

BRITAIN
Robert Shrimley

Andy Burnham's Downing Street aides like to refer to "the politics of trying". It is not an original Manchester concept but it is a notion that captures the ethos of the new UK prime minister's first weeks in power.

Having identified a need to re-establish an emotional connection with voters, Burnham has worked to align himself with the priorities of those who feel unheard by politics. Cost of living measures to ease energy bills and reduce bus fares are both a signal and a palliative.

Yet there is more to this than short-term messaging, valuable as it is. Just as well, because conventional political wisdom puts time limits on this approach. Ultimately, there are no prizes for effort.

Team Burnham sees a longer-term benefit. It is widely understood that the government lacks the funds to do all it wishes. Even promises on defence are being blurred at the edges while, for all his patent sincerity, the new premier's core ambition to reform social care remains next year's aspiration.

But there is one even scarcer commodity: time. Burnham's deeper ambitions cannot be delivered on a three-year electoral timescale. A 10-year plan is prom-

ised for later this year. Even the effects of his important and more advanced devolution agenda will not be fully felt.

So the politics of trying is also a gamble that voters will go long on a man they believe shares their values and concerns. The theory holds that voters know times are difficult, that an appalling bequest of debt and austerity cannot be fixed overnight. So they can be won over by the sight of a seemingly decent man, with a cracking social media game, visibly trying to address their priorities.

In practical terms this means a continual twin-track approach. His deputy Louise Haigh has been charged with overseeing both the long-term goals and the short-term wins. A continued assault is promised on anything that can drive down household costs from parking charges to subscription traps.

This buys the time for the harder work. Burnham has offered a clear critique of Britain's ills: austerity, privatisation, deindustrialisation and Brexit. It is a bold big picture, but even if you share his analysis – those of us old enough to remember the '70s have a less rose-tinted view of the world before Thatcher – the gap between diagnosis and treatment remains vast.

He launches the higher energy and water bills that come from companies run in the private rather than public interest. But his hesitation in putting Thames Water into special administration shows a leader far from certain exactly how to meet his ambiguous pledge to exert more "public control" over privatised utilities.



But perhaps the most revealing episode so far has been his response to the furore over the planned early release of convicted criminals, particularly two men involved in the killing of a police officer, as part of a programme to avert a prison capacity crisis.

For Burnham this was an example of the politics of trying. He said he wanted to keep the men in jail, then told the justice ministry to find a solution even while admitting it might not be possible. Westminster wisdom questions the logic of saying you want to do things before you know you can. Burnham's insight, yet to be validated, is that there is a mood for a different, almost "reality politics", that takes voters with him on the journey even as he struggles.

The pollster Luke Tryl sees this as a

The prime minister has worked to align himself with the priorities of voters who feel unheard

potential antidote to "burn it down" populism. The hope is that this is a model for taking voters on the more arduous journey of rewiring Britain.

But this was also a politics that addresses symptoms more than causes. Early release is a function of overcrowding due to stiffer sentences and only a small rise in net capacity. The structural solution is more prison spaces or fewer and shorter sentences. In this instance Burnham blocked politically difficult releases at the price of keeping prisoners dangerously close to full. A new case to anger the public will soon be found.

Ironically, Burnham will be helped by Keir Starmer's sentencing laws, designed to cut the prison population and a genuine structural reform. Sadly, the former PM had no matching talent for taking voters with him.

And prisoner release is far from the hardest issue. Even the most deft leader cannot long out-run economic realities, chronically high debt and Donald Trump. Next month's Budget will see Burnham looking for money to fund the shortfall in defence spending.

His structural answer to cost of living pressures is "public control" of utilities, details to follow. The worry is that, as the political mood darkens, he leans on quick wins, keeping the country hooked on relieving the symptoms, often by transferring costs to general taxation. The real solution is an economy that leaves people with more money, through higher wages or lower taxes.

Voters are increasingly aware that Britain needs a major reboot and may grant breathing space to someone they perceive to be on their side. Many, especially on the right, question Burnham's prescription, but having chosen his course he must back it expeditiously.

So far his presentation skills have been pitch perfect. But he cannot lean on vibes indefinitely. The question is whether this new style of politics can keep people on side for the longer haul and harder choices of tackling causes rather than symptoms. If not, Britain will remain doomed to the politics of trying rather than succeeding.

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We need to keep an eye on surveillance pricing

TECHNOLOGY

John Thornhill



Sophie Vallier, the doughty daughter of an innkeeper near the rural French town of Pin Bouchain, was a bold practitioner of surveillance pricing. Local legend has it that in 1814 Napoleon stopped at her inn and ordered an omelette. When presented with the surprisingly large bill, Napoleon asked whether eggs were rare in that part of France. "Eggs, sir? No. But emperors? Yes," Vallier replied.

For centuries, this was the standard way of doing business. Prices depended on a buyer's ability to haggle and Napoleon did not appear to be very good at it. Fixed and transparent pricing only emerged gradually after the Quaker John Wanamaker first introduced price tags at his store in Philadelphia in 1874.

But older practices are being reinvented in our algorithmic age. Traveling emperors in bionic hats are easy enough to spot and gouge. But the vast amounts of personal information that data brokers systematically gather and sell today risk turning us all into unsuspecting Napoleons.

Like innkeepers, algorithms can calculate how able, ready or desperate we are to pay for a product or service, inferred from our location, behavioural, financial and demographic data. That sometimes works in a consumer's favour; often it does not. We might enjoy receiving loyalty discounts at our favourite online grocery. But we would be angry if an airline suddenly hiked the fare because they knew we were attending a funeral.

Last month, the US Federal Trade Commission warned consumer companies against unfair or deceptive practices when offering personalised prices.

The higher price paid by a consumer due to personalised pricing may be a substantial injury," it said. Although it admitted there was thin evidence for how pervasive the practice was, the

commission promised to use all its existing tools to protect consumers.

Such tough talk from regulators is welcome. Decisive enforcement of fair trading laws would be even better considering how poorly they have defended antitrust principles this century. But one tricky challenge is knowing when consumers have been the victims of discriminatory pricing. Often their personal data is gathered and sold with-

A federal privacy bill enshrining personal data rights would be the best consumer protection

out their knowledge. Prices for exactly the same goods and services can fluctuate widely, even on the same day. Research by the think-tank Groundwork Collaborative found that the price of a carton of eggs offered by Instacart could vary by as much as 25 per cent (the company said its pricing testing service was not based on personal informa-

tion and ended it). What is it about eggs?

Vigilant shoppers can use virtual private networks, private browsing, price comparison websites and AI agents to try to find the best price. But consumers should not have to haggle with a mighty machine. They have a right to expect the machine to operate fairly.

Amid the current cost-of-living furore, surveillance pricing is becoming an increasingly hot political issue in the US. Both state and federal politicians are itching to legislate. More than 40 bills have been introduced or passed in 24 states and cities this year to address the issue. The One Fair Price Act has already been passed by the legislature in New York, but is still awaiting signature by the governor Kathy Hochul.

It is not just Democrats who are banging this political drum. Some populist Republicans are, too. For instance, Josh Hawley, the Republican senator from Missouri, has denounced surveillance pricing as "one of the biggest scams in American history". It incorporated the "unholy trinity" of everything Americans most hated: spying on people, ripping them off and taking away jobs. Last

month, the Senate Judiciary subcommittee that Hawley chairs heard expert witnesses on the subject. Action was now needed, he concluded, to protect the moral foundations of the economy.

Price discrimination, like technology, is neither good nor bad, but nor is it neutral. What is certain is that a massive information asymmetry exists between online sellers and buyers, which opens the door for abuse. Dynamic pricing, such as ride-hailing companies use to entice more drivers to the streets during peak demand, can be valuable for consumers. But surveillance pricing, which aims to extract the maximum profit from information imbalances, is not.

A federal privacy bill enshrining personal data rights would be the best consumer protection. But that seems as likely under the Trump administration as the president renouncing golf. In its absence, consumer groups, lawmakers and regulators should continue to press for prices that are fair and transparent. That is a modern principle worth defending.

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Opinion

Is this quirky British man the future of Trumpism?

Steve Hilton wants to “Make California Golden Again.”

Samuel Earle

Steve Hilton, a MAGA-aligned Republican, wants to be the next governor of California. The main obstacle in his path may be President Trump.

Mr. Hilton spent much of the primary campaign courting Mr. Trump, rebuffing questions about the 2020 election result and lauding his presidential swagger. In April, he received the all-important endorsement: “a truly fine man, one who has watched as this once great State has gone to Hell,” Mr. Trump wrote on Truth Social. “Steve can turn it around, before it is too late, and, as President, I will help him to do so!”

Since qualifying for the general election in November, Mr. Hilton has changed his tune. “I get it, maybe you hate Trump, MAGA, whatever,” he declared at the beginning of his first campaign video, released on July 22. A few days later, Mr. Hilton placed a full-page ad in several Californian newspapers, emblazoned with the question: “Can you be anti-Trump but still vote for me?” The answer was apparently yes, so long as you agree with anodyne statements like “I just want California to be amazing, but we make it so hard to live here” and “I want to fight climate change, but \$6.00 gas is crazy!”

Mr. Hilton’s attempts to distance himself from Mr. Trump are hardly surprising in a state as blue as California. Registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans nearly two to one, and a majority has supported the Democratic nominee for president in every election since 1992. Mr. Hilton tries to use this dominance to his advantage, describing California as suffering from “one-party rule” and his opponent, Xavier Becerra, as a “puppet.” It helps his case that the Democrats have held the governorship for 16 years, overseeing a state that is creaking under a housing crisis and deep economic inequality. “They think that the just have to sit back and they’re gonna win,” he said. “It’s California, a Democrat always wins, the machine always wins.”

In that, he may be right. Mr. Becerra, a cabinet member in the Biden administration, is the clear favorite to succeed Gavin Newsom as the state’s governor. But California has produced conserva-

early 1990s, was tasked with rebranding the party. His main innovation was to associate the Tories with nature and environmental concerns. The Conservatives changed their logo from a hand carrying a torch to an oak tree and promised a “new green revolution.” Mr. Cameron began cycling to the office; on a trip to the Arctic, he posed for pictures with huskies. He started saying nice things about the National Health Service and multiculturalism. By 2010, the Conservatives were ready once again for office. The quirky Svengali had done his job.

Mr. Hilton is so associated with the project to detoxify the Tories that many have struggled to understand his conversion to MAGA politics. How could the man who made Mr. Cameron hug huskies embrace the “drill, baby, drill” vulgarity of Mr. Trump? But the truth is that he was always more Trump-y than his progressive-seeming marketing suggested. Beneath his attempts to soften the image of the Conservatives lay a coarser vision that, in the age of Trump, is all too recognizable: a norm-shattering quest to dismantle the state as quickly as possible, with no heed for consequences. He proves that the febrile and fanatical energy of Trumpism predates the president.

Mr. Hilton always craved creative destruction. He merely lacked the language for it. He called for up to 90 percent of the British Civil Service to be fired, in line with the much smaller work force that had overseen the country’s vast empire in its 19th-century heyday. When the Conservatives slashed the welfare budget by 18 billion pounds in two years, he called for a further 25 billion pounds to be cut — a figure that even the Conservatives’ miserly welfare minister called “absurd.” He also proposed a scheme called the Red Tape Challenge, in which the government would list over 20,000 regulations online and the public would vote on which ones to eliminate. That only the last of these ambitions were indulged was proof, in Mr. Hilton’s eyes, of the deep state’s insidious power.

And so, in a huff, he left and headed for California.

MR. HILTON HAD A SOFT LANDING on the West Coast. His wife, Rachel Whetstone, a fellow Briton whom he’d met while working for the Conservative Party in the 1990s, had a job at Google’s main office as the company’s head of communications and policy. They soon settled in Atherton, an enclave for billionaires in Silicon Valley.

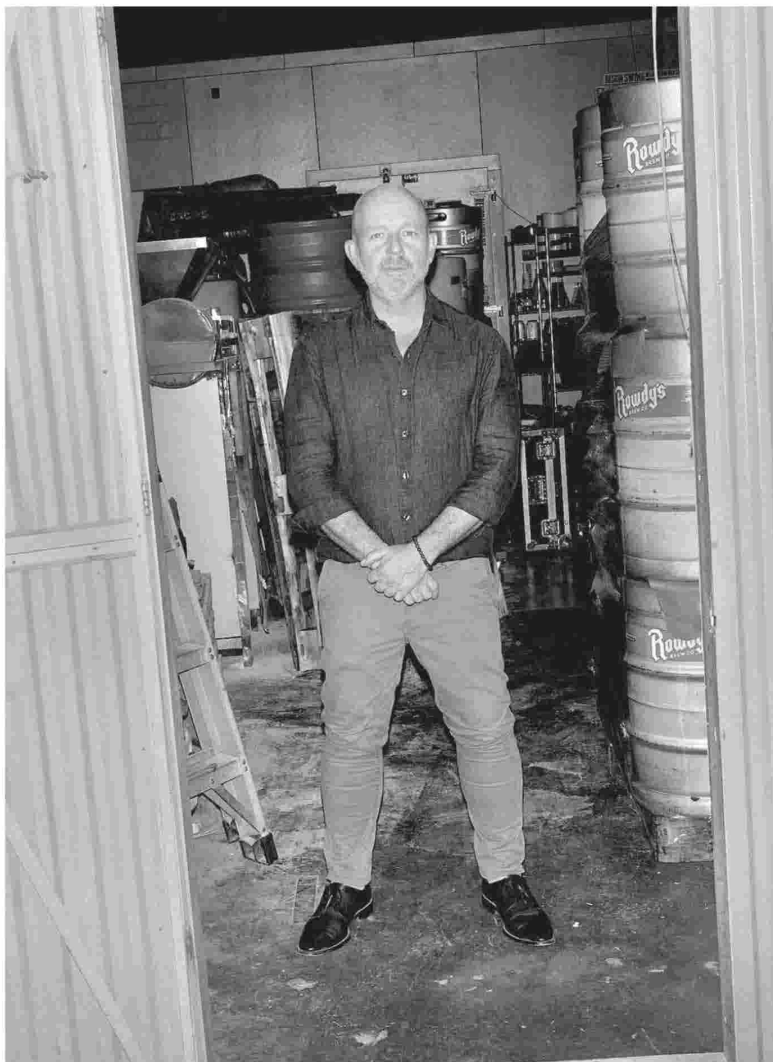
With time and space, Mr. Hilton began ingratiating himself with the tech elite. He taught at Stanford. He set up a digital platform, Crowdpc, which sought to democratize — and monetize — small-scale political donations and granted him the status of tech founder: an essential step on his path to Californian assimilation. He also wrote a book, “More Human,” which was full of platitudes about how start-ups and digital innovation can replace government services and bureaucracy. But business and books were never going to be enough for him. He hankered for a return to the political fray.

He got his chance at Fox News. He first appeared as a guest, discussing Brexit and the evils of the European Union. Then, in the summer of 2017, he was rewarded with his own show, “The Next Revolution with Steve Hilton.” The program celebrated Mr. Trump, cheered the rise of right-wing populism around the world and featured segments like “SwampWatch” and “Decadent D.C.” Within a year, he had reached his target audience. “Thank you Steve Hilton,” Mr. Trump tweeted in April 2018, in the first of what would be many supportive posts about the show. By 2023, the show had served its purpose. Mr. Hilton quit it and began laying the foundations for his bid to be California’s governor.

Mr. Hilton’s campaign takes obvious inspiration from the president. His slogan is “Make California Golden Again.” He has launched “Cal DOGE,” to expose Democratic waste and fraud. He says he wants California to be “the crypto capital of the world.” He has made both small rallies and Trump-style social media posting central to his campaign. He has also used A.I.-generated campaign videos that play on mythic themes and make politics seem like a game. One recent video showed Mr. Hilton fighting in the Coliseum to save ordinary Romans, who have been sent to their deaths simply for wanting cheap gas or affordable housing. Californian Democrats, depicted as Roman emperors, rejoice in the suffering of their people.

If Mr. Hilton’s diatribes against the deep state have been constant, one area where he has changed is green politics. He now treats environmental concerns with contempt, casting them as a spurious ploy by liberal elites to clean their consciences and make everyone else’s lives worse. “There’s no evidence that any of California’s climate policies are helping the climate,” he says. “All it’s doing is cause pain and suffering, especially for working-class Californians.” He claims that by axing these regulations and ramping up oil and gas production in California, he can bring the price of gasoline down from almost \$6 a gallon to \$3.

Already fanciful, that promise has become even harder to sustain over the



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMIE LEE TATE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



tives who, after initial setbacks, proved wildly influential. It is the state that gave us Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan and the ideologues at the Claremont Institute. No matter the result, Mr. Hilton will try to keep that tradition alive. He is already working to fashion a version of conservatism that fuses the complaints of the tech barons with the bombast of the Trumpists, piloting a path to the future.

First, though, Mr. Hilton will have to complete one of the toughest acrobatic acts in politics — that of a loyal yet ambitious politician trying to quarantine himself from a deeply unpopular leader and kiss the ring at the same time. As the Republicans contemplate life after Mr. Trump, they must weigh whether their future lies with someone who has the president’s blessing or someone untarnished by his divisive legacy. It is the party’s defining dilemma.

Mr. Hilton’s campaign suggests a possible third path: someone who can be both.

AT FIRST GLANCE, Mr. Hilton is an unconventional torch carrier for the future of Trumpism. The son of a Hungarian refugee parents who barely spoke English, Mr. Hilton was born in London, went to the University of Oxford and worked as a high-profile political adviser for the British Conservative Party. He moved to California only in 2012 and became an American citizen in 2021. In Britain, with its air of stuffy tradition, he always stood out as a wannabe renegade, so much so that he became an object of satire. A thinly veiled portrait of him appears in Armando Iannucci’s “The Thick of It,” poking fun at his socks and organizing yoga retreats. But for all his seeming strangeness, Mr. Hilton in many ways exemplifies the trajectory of the right.

Mr. Hilton came to public notice in 2006 as the chief strategist to David Cameron, who had just been elected Conservative Party leader. Mr. Hilton, a close friend of Mr. Cameron since the

course of the campaign. Amid the fallout of Mr. Trump’s war on Iran, which has cost the United States an estimated \$100 billion, the price of gas has risen over a third in six months. Like many Trump supporters, Mr. Hilton had previously cited the president’s opposition to foreign interventions as proof of his common sense. Now he finds himself in a bind. On Fox, he’ll extol Mr. Trump’s wisdom and foresight. To more liberal audiences, he’ll say that he prefers not to comment on foreign policy matters and that whatever

Hilton is so associated with the project to detoxify the Tories that many have struggled to understand his conversion to MAGA politics.

damage Mr. Trump may or may not have done, Democrats’ governance is far worse. Here is a key divergence from the president. Whereas Mr. Trump has said that he doesn’t “think about American financial situation,” Mr. Hilton has remained laser-focused on the cost of living in California. As a tactic, that makes sense. Despite boasting the fourth-biggest economy in the world, California has the worst poverty rate in the country, tied with Louisiana. The cost of gasoline and renting a home is higher than in any other state; electricity prices are the second highest. The construction of a high-speed rail linking San Francisco to Los Angeles is running almost 20 years behind schedule and almost \$200 billion over budget — a bonfire of money that encapsulates the dysfunction of California’s political system.

As Mr. Hilton attacks the Democrats and their record over the past 16 years, he has plenty of ammunition.

ONE NIGHT IN 2021, “The Next Revolution with Steve Hilton” took a surprisingly personal turn. The host delivered a eulogy for his mother-in-law, Linda Whetstone, and the work of her father, Antony Fisher. Ms. Whetstone had been a prominent free-market activist and the chair of the libertarian Mont Pelerin Society. Mr. Fisher had dedicated his life to fighting socialism and reversing the

rise of the welfare state after World War II. He set up an astonishing array of free-market think tanks, first in Britain and then, after he moved to California in the late 1970s, in America, including the Manhattan Institute, the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy and the Atlas Network. They became, as Mr. Hilton accurately declared on his show, “the birthplace for the free-market revolution that swept the world.”

Mr. Hilton clearly believes that another revolution is needed — and that he is the one to lead it. “We have to stand firm against the further rise of socialism in California,” he declared in a recent speech. “The threat to California workers’ jobs, incomes and quality of life comes not from some billionaire class, but from the socialist-leaning bureaucracy that class that’s been in power here for so long.” Never mind that in the past four decades, in no small part thanks to the free-market policies incubated by Mr. Fisher’s network of influence, the richest Californians have increased their incomes by more than two-thirds as the incomes of the poorest have barely risen at all. For Mr. Hilton, Democrats have turned California into the “Wuhan lab of modern leftism.”

Mr. Hilton’s powerful backers in California share his anxiety. This fall, the state will vote on a ballot initiative to

tax billionaires 5 percent of their net worths, something many of the state’s 200-plus billionaires have seen as an existential threat. “I fled socialism with my family in 1979 and know the devastating, oppressive society it created in the Soviet Union,” Sergey Brin, the Google co-founder with a net worth of around \$270 billion, said in a rare public statement. (Mr. Brin has already decamped to Nevada.) Even though Mr. Becerra also opposes the billionaire tax, Mr. Hilton has positioned himself as the defender of this oppressed minority.

Mr. Hilton might see himself as a maverick, but his program is part of a wider project of anti-leftism, backed by billionaires and aimed at eviscerating the state. The formula, as progressives make gains across the country, is to cast even minor wealth redistribution as proof of a socialist threat that must be crushed. Mr. Trump, who revels in chaos and sensationalism, is one form that this cause can take. Mr. Fisher, with his sober reliance on think tanks to influence the press and politicians, is another. Mr. Hilton offers something between the two: a style of politics that is uninhibited and sensationalist when necessary, and capable of rational debate and pragmatic rhetoric when not. We might call it MAGA with a nice accent.

That has allowed him to become the candidate of choice for an increasingly fretful and MAGA-curious tech elite. But his diagnosis of California’s problems is fundamentally unserious, failing to reckon with how the cost of living is rising everywhere during Mr. Trump’s second term, and his obsession with the tyranny of the state’s labor unions borders on bizarre. His opponent, Mr. Becerra, is also far more centrist than socialist, as is true of the previous Democratic governors: There is no looming socialist takeover here.

Yet for all that, the race remains worth watching. Even in defeat, Mr. Hilton may show where the right is heading — and how Trumpism can outlast Mr. Trump.

SAMUEL EARLE is the author of “Tory Nation: The Dark Legacy of the World’s Most Successful Political Party” and a Ph.D. candidate at the Columbia Journalism School.



OPINION

Make Mark Ruffalo Great Again



POTOMAC
WATCH
By Kimberley
A. Strassel

Hollywood academy and California's liberal political class.

And the Oscar for Most Self-Defeating Politics goes to...

"I am going to suggest that Republicans and Democrats get together, and immediately craft Legislation to save the Movie, Television, and Entertainment Business in America. Congress should approve, immediately, a Federal Production Incentive to create Entertainment Jobs in America." Donald Trump, emboldened by Truth Social Monday. This was followed by a Tuesday post praising the "great bipartisan response" to his great Hollywood bailout, then by yet another, of the president thumbs-upping it with his Hollywood ambassador, Jon Voight.

Feel better, voters. As gas prices rise, the president has George Clooney, Jeff Katzenberg, Sen. Adam Schiff and Gov. Gavin Newsom, covered.

The congressional response to adding billions in Hollywood subsidies to \$40 trillion in debt was notable, if not "great." Republicans—unable to pass capital-gains relief for homeowners or basic online safety legislation, or even to fund the mili-

tary—finally found an oppressed class worth uniting for: studio barons and megastars. "Whatever we can do to be supportive is a good thing," Florida Rep. Vern Buchanan saluted, taking a break from deficit laments. Plans are already afoot to drive a bill through the House Ways and Means Committee. Expect the topic to be central at next week's GOP "midterm convention" in Texas. The implicit Republican 2026 message: Make Mark Ruffalo Great Again.

Trump's Hollywood bailout is sure to bomb at the box office and the ballot box.

Democrats hear Christmas bells. The California delegation (85% Democrats) has made a cause of this bailout, and Mr. Schiff held a hearing on the proposal in March. The California senator—who as a representative led the charge to impeach the president twice—proposes Republicans and Democrats "work together... to get this done, and bring the movie magic back to America." Mr. Newsom, who last year proposed a \$7.5 billion federal tax credit, abandoned his previously scheduled Trump trolling and on Monday gold-stamped the president's plan with "Amen. Let's make it happen." It's "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," D.C.-spending style. On the merits, the proposal

is dreadful. Yes, the U.S. has seen a big drop in domestic movie production, partly a function of a global industry's adjusting to streaming services and falling ticket sales. The issue is cost. And no surprise California has led the way in shedding slots. Of the estimated 100,000 industry jobs nationwide lost since 2022, the biggest chunk dropped from the Los Angeles area. What movie-maker is eager to engage in a state with onerous "above the line" taxes, insane regulations, and actor and writer guilds that strike with the regularity of the ticking clock in "High Noon"? It isn't a trick question.

One solution—the one that ignores underlying economic reality, but makes politicians look proactive—is to join in the global subsidy race to the bottom, trying to lure production back with more giveaways at taxpayer expense. The president's claim that "money spent on Tax Incentives will be made up tenfold by the money pouring into the Treasury's coffers" is fantasy. California last year doubled its own film credit, and here we are. The other solution—less politically fun, lacking in spending gratification—is to demand California save its own industry, and its broader self, by reversing policies that are driving a "Ten Commandments"-style exodus from its state.

But it's the politics that are most self-sabotaging. The latest Reuters/Ipsos poll shows the single top issue this mid-term for a plurality of Americans is the cost of living, and

that 71% of respondents disapprove of Mr. Trump's handling of that problem. The country wants Republicans to provide them concrete wins on live issues: gasoline prices, inflation, taxes. Yet polls show the party's message, which now hinges on the year-ago accomplishment of a reconciliation bill—isn't landing. That's in part because the main messenger keeps bouncing from threats against Iran to vaccine plot theory to arguments over the appropriate name for the body of water between Rochester, N.Y., and Toronto.

There is at least continuity in the White House now positioning the GOP to roar into a midterm sprint as lead advocates for the Chanel class (just as that group gears up to bash the president at the Emmys, the Grammys and the Golden Globes). It's in keeping with the spring-through-summer obsession with other topics that blare a disconnect from average concerns, say a \$400 million, 90,000-square-foot, gilded ballroom. The GOP isn't only failing to get its message across; it's actively making itself look oblivious. It was a similar disconnect that helped Democrats lose in 2024.

Mr. Trump has pledged to spend the final 30 days before the election stumping for the GOP. He can use those stops to reassure voters that Republicans will improve their day-to-day lives—or he can pledge to spend their money on Tinseltown. Those messages don't go together.

Write to kim@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By John J. Miller

The Blade Looks Back

Impatience Is a Virtue

By Mitch Daniels

Lyons, 600 pages, \$39.95

Mitch Daniels was about to land his first job in Indiana politics. At the end of the interview, in 1971, his future boss made a crack to a colleague: "Have you checked his arrest record?"

It was no joke to Mr. Daniels, then 22. "I had prepared myself for that moment," he writes in his memoir, "Impatience Is a Virtue." A year earlier he had been, in his words, "scooped up in a local law enforcement marijuana crackdown." The young man came clean and confessed his crime to his fellow Republicans.

He still got the job and learned later that his interviewers had set him up, wanting to know if he'd own up to what they already knew. "I generally find it exaggerated and melodramatic when someone says that one event or moment changed the rest of their life," Mr. Daniels writes, but he insists that the claim is appropriate here.

"If I had not told the truth, completely and right on the spot, everything that followed would have been different." Everything that followed fills this detailed account of an accomplished career that brought Mr. Daniels to the brink of running for president. Amusing anecdotes and lessons strengthen an otherwise straightforward chronicle. During those early days of toiling for Republicans in Marion County, Ind., for example, Mr. Daniels learned the need to balance effective campaigning with the misguided expectations of politicians: "Billboard advertising is critical. You buy one giant board, depending on the candidate's house and the headquarters where you're sure he'll see it every day. And that's all you buy."

By 1977 Mr. Daniels was working in the office of Richard Lugar, a freshly elected Republican senator from the Hoosier State. "A Senate office was basically a personal PR firm," he notes, in an observation that is perhaps closer to the truth half a century later. Soon he became a political aide in the White House of Ronald Reagan. In the 1990s he joined the corporate world in an executive position at Eli Lilly. The pharmaceutical company was tangled in a public dispute over the allegedly harmful side effects of Prozac, its popular antidepressant. Mr. Daniels met with patient groups and journalists, in a successful effort to defend the drug. "I often wonder whether Prozac could have been saved in a social media world like today's," he writes. "I wouldn't want to fight that fight again now."

A decade later, Mr. Daniels was back in Washington, where he became director of the Office of Management and Budget under President George W. Bush. Mr. Daniels pushed for the administration's tax cuts of 2001 and their extension two years later. While he still supports them, he expresses "second thoughts" over what at the time was a major selling point: the removal of millions of Americans from the tax rolls. "By excusing so much of our population from taxation," he explains, "we have risked diminishing their sense of citizenship." He worries that, as voters, "they won't feel any stake in limiting government spending." He mentions that other countries have broad-based consumption taxes. "One day, we will need something similar."

After two terms championing free markets as Indiana's governor, Mitch Daniels was faced with the biggest political decision of his life.

Mr. Daniels devotes the longest section of "Impatience Is a Virtue" to his election as governor of Indiana in 2004 and his two terms in that office. Known as a budget hawk—Mr. Bush had nicknamed him the Blade—Mr. Daniels searched for ways to reduce state spending. "You'd be amazed at how much government you'd never miss," he told audiences. He delivered school-choice scholarships, a right-to-work law and what he calls "the largest privatization of public infrastructure in America," involving the Indiana Toll Road.

Letting a for-profit company manage the toll road made so much fiscal sense to Mr. Daniels that he was surprised to find resistance. "With all the facts, the data, the overwhelming public interest case for our transaction so plain, still we took victories, often personal abuse," he recalls. He concluded that "any change or reform worth doing will bring criticism, generally in proportion to its importance." He admits that he developed "scar tissue." It may have played a part in persuading him to forgo his greatest political opportunity.

As Mr. Daniels neared the end of his second term as governor, many free-market conservatives encouraged him to pursue the presidency in 2012. Mr. Daniels reflects on several factors that went into his decision. Though he quips about his short stature and receding hairline, he moves on to a substantive point about policy: His strong views on entitlement reform and debt reduction, he recognizes, "continue even at this writing to be politically fatal." In addition, his wife and daughters "hated the idea." He let them exercise veto power.

"This biggest decision of my life was among the simplest," he writes. "I have never felt regret." Even so, it's hard not to read a later comment about the 2020s with a sense of wistfulness: "Until public revulsion at the degraded nature of our political system demands something better, a lot of highly capable people are likely to steer away from public life."

The man who wouldn't be president of the U.S. instead became president of Purdue University. For a decade, Mr. Daniels kept tuition in check, promoted free speech and intellectual diversity, and opened the campus to in-person teaching when many other schools resorted to pandemic lockdowns. Today he's 77, having turned his long-forgotten record of arrest into a solid record of achievement—and a legacy that will always include the question of what might have been.

Mr. Miller is director of the Dow Journalism Program at Hillsdale College and a Free Expression columnist for The Wall Street Journal.

Coming in BOOKS this weekend

Life and work in George W. Bush's White House • Seeking the source of consciousness • Lafayette's return • The joy of American folk music • A history of leprosy • Frederick Douglass and the Constitution • & much more

Trump Picks the Wrong Christian Charity

HOUSES OF
WORSHIP
By Cliff
Smith

brought to an end the U.S. Agency for International Development, it is unsurprising that the Trump administration is seeking to mend fences with evangelicals by reinstituting \$2 billion in foreign aid, with government disbursements, capturing funds through Christian and other faith-based charities. Many churches are deeply entwined with groups that have received significant funds from USAID. One April poll showed that three-fourths of evangelicals were concerned about the dismantling of USAID.

What is surprising is that the Trump administration chose World Vision, a troubled evangelical international-aid charity, to oversee this project. World Vision has repeated and serious problems vetting both staff and programs, leading to significant amounts of money going to U.S. designated terrorist entities, including Hamas and Osama bin Laden affiliates. World Vision has repeatedly denied its culpability, acknowledged both by Israeli courts and key actors in the Senate.

World Vision's Gaza director, Mohammad Halabi, was arrested by Israeli police in June 2016 and convicted in 2022 for siphoning off up to \$50 million and diverting it to Hamas. World Vision and its partisans, such as the European Union Delegation to the Palestinians and Amnesty International, have insisted on Mr. Halabi's

innocence and criticized the court proceedings.

Last year, Hamas traded Israeli hostages taken after Oct. 7, 2023, to get Mr. Halabi out of prison. Tim Costello, a former chief executive of World Vision Australia, said he was enormously relieved that Mr. Halabi gained his freedom and "burst into tears." Earlier this year, Israeli forces captured documents in Gaza that demonstrated both that Mr. Halabi was a Hamas operative and that Hamas worked to disrupt his trial, viewing it as a threat to their security.

More troubling still is World Vision's stiff-arm to Congress. Sen. Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa) sought answers about the Halabi affair in 2023, demanding access to an audit World Vision had ordered of itself. "Congress and the American people deserve transparency with respect to the steps World Vision has taken to ensure taxpayer money is used as intended and not for illegal activity," Mr. Grassley wrote. World Vision refused to hand over the audit, claiming that contractual obligations allowed the organization to make it available only to certain governments and administrative agencies, including the State Department.

Mr. Grassley's suspicions are grounded in his previous experience with the charity. An investigation headed by his office found that World Vision's operations in Sudan provided hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Islamic African Relief Agency, a Sudanese charity

that had funded the Taliban, Hamas and one of Osama bin Laden's organizations. Mr. Grassley's team found that World Vision was "borderline negligent" and "ignored elementary level investigative procedures" in allowing taxpayer dollars to go to the Islamic charity.

Other World Vision scandals include alleged involvement with several branches of the Popular Front for the Liberation

World Vision has a history of sloppy vetting to the benefit of terror groups.

of Palestine, another U.S.-designated terror organization, in 2012 and 2020 and alleged further dalliances with Hamas officials and other Hamas funding organizations throughout the years.

This has disturbed some officials in the administration. A senior official with the Office of Management and Budget took shots at the State Department, telling the Jerusalem News Syndicate that World Vision is "severely compromised," while the State Department's response was to repeat talking points that resembled those from World Vision's press releases.

Clearly, the Trump administration wants to repair relations with evangelicals and believes that funding foreign programs under the oversight

of Christian charities will help. But State Department officials have paid too little attention to World Vision's history of serious problems. Now officials are caught in a bind, with warring sections of the administration having a public fight over their chosen partner.

Nothing suggests that World Vision will behave differently this time around. Mr. Grassley's report on the charity's financial mishaps in Sudan expressed "reservations concerning World Vision's ability to avoid [similar] situations," given its "posture" during the investigation in which World Vision abjured responsibility, according to the report.

A new partnership with the dubious charity undercuts the administration's message that foreign-aid cuts and reform were necessary because such funds often go to terrorists and are prone to widespread fraud and abuse. Moreover, it will hurt the administration's relations with its hawkish pro-Israel supporters.

The State Department should reverse course. There are excellent reasons to restore slashed USAID funds, when aimed at the correct targets. There are also excellent reasons to put America's Christian organizations at the forefront of such charitable work. None of those reasons require working in partnership with an organization that has World Vision's history.

Mr. Smith is a lawyer and a former congressional staffer.

There's A&W in These Woods

By Bob Greene

As summer enters its final laps, at last I have the answer to a question that has nagged at me for more than half a century.

As the 1950s made the turn to the 1960s, I attended a boy's summer camp in Wisconsin's North Woods. At Camp Golden Eagle, in Woodruff, Wis., all the usual activities were ours: baseball, archery, canoeing, swimming.

But one part of summer that most piqued our wide-eyed interest—that for all these years has felt like a dizzy dream—wasn't on the campgrounds at all.

Through the forest, out on a highway, was an A&W Root Beer stand. It wasn't like today's full-menu A&W restaurants—it sold root beer only, made fresh on the premises.

There was a rumor, passed down from older campers to younger ones. The root beer, we were told, had "a little bit

of alcohol" in it. The word was always stretched out.

Forbidden fruit. We would sneak through the forest, to Highway 51. A&W is known for frosty glass mugs, but our root beers came in quart-sized waxy paper containers shaped like traffic cones.

We'd gulp down the contents, then sneak back into camp, convinced we were tipsy. In retrospect it was absurd, yet all summer we believed it. Maybe it was the word "beer" in "root beer." Some counselors, with straight faces, swore that the A in A&W stood for "alcohol."

Over the years, every time I would see an A&W sign, I would hear that old phrase in my head. This summer I read in the Indianapolis, Ind., Independent Advocate that the town's A&W store was celebrating its 70th anniversary.

The owner—James McConnell, the fourth McConnell to run the place—didn't have the answer as to whether there

ally was a "little bit of alcohol" back then. But I couldn't let another summer end without knowing.

I called A&W Restaurants headquarters in Lexington, Ky. I reached the chairman, Kevin Bazner, 71, and started blathering on about Camp Golden Eagle and the stand on Highway 51.

Sixty summers later, I got to the bottom of a boys' camp tale.

He laughed and said instantly: "Your memory is correct." Not that the "little bit of alcohol" was or is accurate: There has never been alcohol in A&W. But the rumor, he said, was once absolutely rampant nationwide among young A&W drinkers, including Mr. Bazner himself, growing up in Michigan in the '50s and '60s.

"Freshly made A&W, in

those glass mugs, had a foamy head, like draft beer," he said. A&W never promoted the rumor, but pre-social-media it passed from person to person, a whispered and false secret. "I can never tell you how many times I've heard people say that," he told me.

So the "A" in A&W has nothing to do with alcohol? "A&W was named for our founders, Roy Allen and Frank Wright," he said.

But who would cherish a fact so "obscure"? Camp Golden Eagle closed in 1985. Last summer a group of old campers returned to Woodruff for a reunion. Online, I found a video of their celebration.

Many are grandfatherly-looking. In the video several are at a picnic table, laughing merrily in the midst of some sort of imbibing competition.

The old campers are chugging cans of A&W.

Mr. Greene's books include the novel "All Summer Long."

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Data-Center Dividend for Workers

President Trump has drawn condemnation for suggesting that communities that block data centers will end up "backwards and poor." His remark was hyperbolic, but he's right that areas embracing data centers are enjoying more jobs and faster wage growth.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics last week published industry-level data on state and county employment and wages through March of this year. We compared growth in Loudoun County, Va.—known as Data Center Alley—with other Washington, D.C., suburbs since early 2020 before the pandemic. The disparities are striking.

Loudoun has long been a hub for data-center development because of its easy zoning, relatively low-cost energy and geographical proximity to telecom network exchanges. It's an exurban county with more land for growth than older suburbs closer to D.C. But it has also embraced growth, unlike those older suburbs. Construction growth has accelerated amid the AI boom, with permitted data-center space increasing by some 150% between 2020 and 2025. Jobs have followed.

Most counties surrounding the capital have experienced little job growth since the pandemic. Loudoun is the exception, with employment surging 17.4% since early 2020. Jobs increased by 1% or less in Fairfax County, Va., and Prince George's County, Md. Virginia's Arlington County (-7.3%) and Maryland's Montgomery County shed jobs (-5.6%).

Construction jobs increased 63% in Loudoun, far more than in Fairfax (6.3%), Arlington (8.2%), Prince George's (8.3%), and Montgomery (a 12.8% decline). Job growth from data-center construction also appears to be having positive spillover labor effects in other industries.

Employment in leisure and hospitality in-

creased 6.8% in Loudoun while declining in other D.C. suburbs since early 2020. Average weekly wage growth for leisure and hospitality workers in Loudoun over this period (69%) was double that in Fairfax (26%), Arlington (29%), Montgomery (31%) and Prince George's (27%).

Building and operating data centers may have increased demand for blue-collar workers and bid up wages. Loudoun's fast-growing workforce may have increased spending at restaurants and tips for hospitality workers. If more construction workers are grabbing drinks after shifts, bartenders make more money.

Loudoun's prosperity isn't an isolated example. Meta's massive data-center project in Richland Parish in Louisiana is helping revive that poor, rural farming community. Since the first quarter of last year, private employment in Richland has grown 41%, and average weekly wages have shot up 61%. Neighboring parishes have experienced little or no growth.

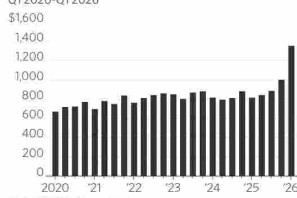
In a single year, Richland's construction workforce has risen more than 10-fold, with average weekly wages up 182%. That amounts to an annual \$86,000 pay increase for construction workers. Employment in leisure and hospitality has increased 21.5%, with average weekly wages in the industry soaring 34%.

While building data centers won't provide lifetime employment, many workers will be needed to run and maintain them, as well as the plants that power them. Politicians in both parties fret that AI will increase the concentration of wealth and leave rural communities behind. Folks in Richland who are prospering probably don't see it that way.

Data centers can help to spread prosperity without government intervention and income redistribution. Could that be the real reason America's political class is turning against them?

The Richland Parish (La.) AI Wage Boom

Average weekly wage in private employment, Q1 2020-Q1 2026



Note: Q1 2026 is preliminary

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

A Murder in Times Square and a Sick Culture

The murder of Erin Piacenti, the junior Bank of America executive and new mother stabbed Monday in Times Square, should be inspiring tough questions. For one, why are the mentally disturbed left to wander the streets until a tragedy results? Instead an Oscar-nominated movie director has taken the occasion to celebrate the murder as some kind of anti-Israel assassination.

Lexi Alexander, a Palestinian-American director, shared news of the murder alongside a meme of Batman staring up at a bat signal with the face of Luigi Mangione, who murdered UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson. Ms. Alexander explained that she advocates a boycott of Bank of America. Apparently the bank had issued a "buy" recommendation for banks in Israel, whose economic performance has surpassed expectations.

How dare BoFA offer professional investment advice. "Israel doesn't care about the woman who got killed, they care about the positive rating BoFA gave them in the middle of a genocide. There is huge money at stake," Ms. Alexander averred on X. Which shows there is no conversation into which some people won't shoehorn their anti-Israel derangement, and no low to which they won't stoop.

The attacker seems to have had no political message. She stabbed another passerby and then advanced on police, who shot her dead. This is pure projection on the part of Ms. Alexander and the like-minded on social media.

It also suggests they know well what it means to "globalize the intifada"—and support it. In the Second Intifada (2000-05), Palestinian terrorists carried out random stabbings, shootings and bombings that killed some 700 Israeli civilians. New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani defended that slogan during his campaign, and only with the greatest reluctance did he ultimately "discourage" it.

Jews are about 10% of New York's population, but they are the target of more than half of the city's hate crimes. In 2026 the city has seen 229 confirmed anti-Jewish hate crimes, compared with 29 anti-black and 27 anti-Muslim. These increased the past year even as crime fell.

In a grim milestone, annual security spending by the U.S. Jewish community has passed \$1 billion, up 33% since 2024, says the Jewish Federations of North America. The average cost is some \$225,000 per institution—and rising—to allow for prayer or school attendance. It has become known as the antisemitism tax.

Handouts for Hollywood—Really?

The second Trump Presidency has taken some strange policy turns, and the latest example is Mr. Trump's endorsement this week of a tax subsidy for Hollywood. Has the President lost the pro-growth tax plot that helped make his first term an economic hit?

"Congress should approve, immediately, a Federal Production Incentive to create Entertainment Jobs in America," Mr. Trump wrote on social media. "It can be done quickly, accurately, efficiently and, importantly, will benefit ALL of America. What we watch on the Silver Screen should be made in what was once the Movie and Motion Picture Capital of the World."

Well, no. A federal subsidy for entertainment production on its own won't create many jobs or enhance U.S. prosperity. It will enrich large Hollywood producers and prop up industry unions, which have struck labor agreements that make the U.S. a less attractive place to shoot TV shows and movies.

It's true that the share of films shot outside the U.S. has increased, though the overall amount of content has also grown. But the industry is also changing because streaming services provide a distribution platform for low-cost productions. Film makers no longer need large production companies, big crews or A-list stars to make a splash. Movie ticket sales have fallen some 40% since 2019, which makes it more challenging for studios to make money on expensive productions.

That's one reason the U.S. motion picture and video industry has lost 106,300 jobs over the last four years, 63,400 of them since the beginning of the pandemic. These job losses have notably coincided with the expansion of state

tax incentives for film and TV production. More than three dozen states offer subsidies for the industry.

Adam Schiff and Donald Trump unite to subsidize the rich and famous.

New York's tax credit covers 30% or more of production costs and is refundable—meaning producers get the money even if they don't owe state tax. These subsidies are a form of income redistribution to a politically favored industry, and not a poor one.

New York last year spent \$1.2 billion on production subsidies, which is more than twice as much as the revenue generated by its congestion tax on drivers entering Manhattan's business district. Yet the state has been bleeding entertainment production jobs since 2022.

California awards \$750 million in tax credits a year—more than double what it did in 2019—yet it has lost 19,200 production jobs. Mr. Trump has a point that "Hollywood is a Complete and Total Disaster! Despite the name, it is getting very little work. There is no incentive to be there." But businesses of all types are leaving La Land because of its high costs.

We wonder if Mr. Trump knows that the main champion of Hollywood handouts in Congress is California Sen. Adam Schiff, his impeachment nemesis. Press reports say Paramount Skydance CEO David Ellison has also lobbied for this corporate welfare. Why should taxpayers underwrite Mr. Ellison's business or Jeffrey Katzenberg's films?

Mr. Trump's 2017 tax reforms were successful because they were largely neutral and encouraged long-term investment. A production tax credit would provide a short-term stimulus for one industry, which primarily supports Democrats. The idea deserves to die on Congress's cutting-room floor.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

How Monopolistic Accreditors Enforce Ideology

The American Bar Association unfortunately isn't alone in having an accreditation monopoly ("Busting the ABA's Accreditation Monopoly," Review & Outlook, Aug. 29). The same is true for many other organizations, including the American Psychological Association Commission on Accreditation, whose status as an accreditor is now up for renewal. Like the American Bar Association, the American Psychological Association is a professional association with an in-house accreditation arm. And, like the ABA, the APA temporarily suspended its DEI standards in 2025. But suspension isn't the same as removal, and the Education Department is right to see to it that these standards are eliminated, as has been done by accreditors for schools of medicine, podiatry and optometry.

Worse, however, are accreditors unaccountable to the department. Take the Council on Social Work Education. Its standards are riddled with

DEI, including competencies aimed at ensuring social workers "demonstrate anti-racist and anti-oppressive" practice. In fact, in its most recent accreditation standards, those terms come up more than 10 times each. Yet, as a programmatic accreditor, CSWE doesn't need the Education Department to grant its authority. Rather, it's baked into state law or regulations—a fact CSWE doesn't hide, noting that in most states one must graduate from a CSWE-accredited program to get licensed or even sit for the licensing exam.

Breaking these monopolies will need to go beyond what the Education Department can do. States need to take action by introducing competition, thereby ending the days of monopolistic accreditors and their ideological requirements serving as prerequisites for professional licensure.

STANLEY GOLDFARB, M.D.
Do No Harm
Bryn Mawr, Pa.

Accountability for New York's Reckless Bikers

Regarding your editorial "Bring Your Crash Helmet to New York City" (Aug. 15): On June 22 of this year, while walking on the sidewalk in the East Village, I was struck head-on by a motorbike, pinning me to the doorway of an apartment building. Incapacitated with injuries and painting the sidewalk red with my blood, I looked up at the rider. He responded with expletives and reminded me that the accident was my fault before ripping the throttle on his motorbike and taking off. The rider made it clear that this type of behavior is acceptable and expected in today's New York City.

Broken bones and torn ligaments aside, what was particularly frustrating about my accident was what happened afterward. Camera footage of

the accident was available and obtained, and the suspect's unusual clothing that evening could have made him identifiable. Yet the New York Police Department closed the investigation, suggesting a police department that doesn't have the resources to hold criminals accountable and is influenced by a mayoral administration that allows this problem go unaddressed.

The responding officers, and others I've pressed on the issue, have all delivered to me messages to this effect: "City Hall doesn't let me do my job anymore." Or: "Our hands are tied."

I hope that my story, along with others, can help bring about the safe New York we all deserve.

BRIAN FOX
New York

A Return to Sound Money Will Fix Inflation

Regarding your editorial "The Hawk at Jackson Hole" (Aug. 29): Federal Reserve Chairman Kevin Warsh's Jackson Hole speech correctly acknowledges that inflation remains the Federal Reserve's central failure. But the solution requires more than adjusting the federal-funds rate upward or downward.

Today, the federal-funds rate is roughly comparable to the annual increase in the Consumer Price Index. That means holders of short-term Treasury securities are receiving little or no real return before taxes—and a negative real return after paying income taxes on their nominal interest income. Savers are still being penalized by inflation and taxation.

The Fed should stop trying to micromanage the price of money by targeting interest rates. Instead, it should stop expanding the money supply and allow short-term interest rates to reflect supply and demand in money markets, just as long-term interest rates are determined by market participants. Ending monetary manipulation would go a long way toward slaying the inflation dragon.

But Mr. Warsh should go further. America needs to restore a gold-backed dollar. Sound money would impose an institutional constraint on the creation of money and protect Americans from the continual

erosion of purchasing power.

With sound money and rising productivity, the economy could experience the natural, benign deflation of falling prices that accompanies technological progress. Productivity gains would then translate directly into higher living standards for all Americans—not merely into higher nominal incomes chasing ever-rising prices.

MURRAY SARBIN, Ph.D.
Associated scholar, Mises Institute
Naples, Fla.

Regulation by Litigation Is A Poor Way to Make Policy

Your editorial "Meta's Sensible Settlement" (Aug. 27) touches on a point my organization has made for decades: Regulation through litigation is no substitute for long-lasting legislation. Policy affecting an entire industry should be developed and enacted by elected lawmakers—not negotiated midtrial between trial lawyers and technology companies in an Oakland courtroom.

This is a pattern, not an anomaly. Trial lawyers have used the same playbook to target opioids, tobacco and other industries: sue repeatedly for big settlements, but leave the underlying problem untouched. That's not real reform. That's headlines, a big dollar figure, and new rules for one company or industry.

It's up to legislators to solve problems in a way that serves society's interests, including protecting both our children and American innovation. This settlement lets lawmakers and other public officials dodge their responsibility to do their jobs. But it's a stopgap the plaintiffs' bar prefers, because legislation is something they don't control and can't profit from. A settlement allows them to do both.

SHERMAN "TIGER" JOYCE
American Tort Reform Association
Washington

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"What do you have that pairs well with obituaries?"

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OPINION

America Needs Its Boys to Play Football

By Ben Sasse

It is here, football is back, and America's boys need to play it and be shaped by it.

As the son of a football coach, I'm admittedly biased. As a dad who has spent the past month driving a high-school freshman to two-a-day, often 100-degree practices, I'm deliriously invested. But you don't have to be a football fanatic to grasp that today, for 12- to 18-year-old boys, this sport has

The sport forms character by harnessing masculinity and directing it toward the good and the pure.

never been more important. While controversy surrounds the embarrassingly blurry line between college football and the National Football League, our culture needs to take a moment to commend and steward the glorious tradition of high-school football.

Across cultures and time, four major institutions have formed young men: family, religion, work and war. By demanding effort and sacrifice, each of these molds boys into men. Parents raised sons to be husbands and fathers. Scriptures demanded grappling with human nature, sin and salvation. Work looked at needs, and forged character and grit. War—or more broadly, the obligation to protect your community—harnessed strength as virtue.

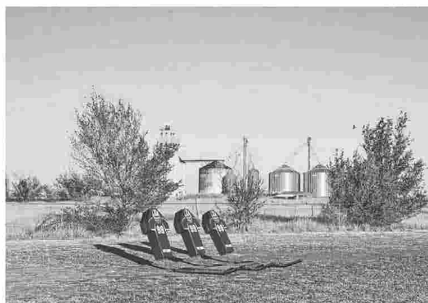
Today, war and work have faded.

Thankfully, violence has been pushed to the periphery of most societies to a degree ancient and medieval people never conceived possible. The world is still dangerous and humanity still capable of unspeakable evil, but most neighborhoods bear little resemblance to lawless frontiers of old. Our continental nation is blessed with good neighbors and big oceans, and most violence is constrained through ordered liberty.

This isn't cheap: The men and women who defend us pay a steep price. There's always the risk of imagining peace is the natural, autopilot order of things, rather than a stunning achievement that requires ongoing vigilance. But it's a blessing that less than 1% of the population serves in America's all-volunteer military.

Unfortunately, work has also faded as a formative experience. When I was growing up in Nebraska, detasseling corn was a rite of passage. We woke at 4:30 a.m. to slog through fields from cold morning dew through to blazing midday heat. Today, that Cornhusker tradition has been rendered all but extinct by new technologies. Farm country isn't the only place this is happening. Teenage work has been evaporating across the nation since the 1980s. Only 35% of teenagers had a summer job this year. Technology is on pace to eliminate many remaining starter jobs like flipping burgers and running checkouts. This is economic reality, and on the whole it leads to greater prosperity, but we should acknowledge the trade-off.

As war and work have faded, two new institutions have filled the void: bureaucratized schooling and



Tackling dummies at Boise City Elementary School in Boise City, Okla.

digital media. On net, both are developments for the worse. Institutionalized childhood is soul-crushing. In the early 20th century, we industrialized nearly everything, but a great way to manufacture cars is a rotten way to shape souls. An acorn doesn't become an oak on an assembly line. Factory-model education keeps young men passive, indoors, and on "receive" mode. Kids are naturally inquisitive, but modern schooling is too often designed to anesthetize curiosity.

The doom scroll makes matters worse. Digital media has a profoundly negative effect on young men. Temptations to distraction and addiction are real. According to the Institute for Family Studies, 27% of men 18 to 29 are daily porn consumers, and almost as many now gamble daily. They are withdrawing from the real world into loneliness and helplessness. Sixty-

one percent report feeling "little control over the things that happen" in their lives. That's a slow-burning crisis.

Young men need to celebrate and harness strength. Toxic masculinity isn't the entirety of masculinity. We need young men full of energy, ambition and growing self-mastery. Society needs strong men.

Football is a character-forming institution that channels strength. In a world of instant gratification, it teaches perseverance through early practices and aching muscles. In an era of isolation, football creates community. It forms brotherhood through both misery and joy. In a culture of passivity, football privileges action. In times of peace, football prepares us for war.

Football simultaneously celebrates and constrains violence. It teaches the difference between boyhood and manhood, between self-

indulgence and self-restraint. Football done right creates the conditions for less, rather than more, violence in bars.

For four quarters, offense, defense and special teams inflict maximum damage within the precisely bounded parameters of the game. When guided by seasoned coaches, football punishes hits after the whistle. It prohibits targeting defenseless receivers. It shames bullying in the locker room. It scorns those who won't shake hands with an opponent postgame.

To harness the necessary violence properly, teams ingrain virtues of delayed gratification and self-sacrifice. That's the value of one more rep on the bench when your head wants to give up but your muscles haven't given out. That's the reward for the pain of development. Young men, faced with a choice to strive and suffer on behalf of teammates, build virtue not chiefly through deliberation but through habit. Football forms and honors such habits.

The Apostle Paul never picked up a blitz. He never recovered an inside kick. But he taught that suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character. And that's something that will be rightly cheered under Friday night lights all across the country this fall. Paul was in the more important business of saving souls. The gridiron offers no eternal comfort, but East of Eden we'll always need strong and selfless men. That's why we owe our boys football.

Mr. Sasse is a columnist for the Journal and our Free Expression newsletter. He served as a U.S. senator from Nebraska, 2015-23.

Tolstoy's Debt Crisis: Each Country Unhappy in Its Own Way



POLITICAL ECONOMICS
By Joseph C. Sternberg

Misery loves company, so joy the global pity party that's developing over governments' fiscal distress.

America's \$40 trillion debt load is only the start. Britain's national debt, at £3 trillion, or 94% of gross domestic product, has become a political crisis for Prime Minister Andy Burnham, and he's been in office barely six weeks. His administration is getting rocked by government borrowing rates at their highest in decades (and higher than during the short, unhappy premiership of Liz Truss in 2022)—toxic in an economy with fairly rapid pass-through from government bond yields to mortgage rates.

In France, economists on the left now speculate about whether the European Central Bank could simply forgive some portion of the French government bonds it holds. It's a manifestly silly idea, but you can't fault the French some levity when laboring under a national debt of €3.5 trillion (\$4 trillion), or

117% of GDP. And looming over it all, Japan's national debt, generally figured at around 230% of GDP, remains the world economy's greatest imponderable.

Think of this as Tolstoy's debt crisis: Each country is unhappy in its own way. The taxonomy is instructive. Britain in theory has the political capacity to fix its public finances, but its political class professes to be desperately short of ideas on how to do so. Mr. Burnham sits atop a large majority of seats in Parliament for his Labour Party. He came to office by displacing an unpopular predecessor, Keir Starmer, and in his first weeks basked in an unusually intense honeymoon phase.

Britain's efficient system of legislating should give Mr. Burnham ample running room to pursue an agenda. Moreover, opinion polls regularly suggest voters trust Labour more than its opponents such as the Conservative Party on matters touching the welfare state, furnish Labour with the credibility needed to enact fiscally necessary reforms of social programs if Mr. Burnham wanted to.

But he doesn't want to. Mr. Burnham's Labour noisily campaigns

against the economic-reform agenda of Margaret Thatcher (who hasn't been prime minister for nearly 36 years and has been dead for 13). Despite occasional vague murmurs about very limited social-welfare reforms, Mr. Burnham doesn't sound like a politician who intends to shrink the rolls and push more adults back into work.

His administration instead is

The U.S. has an unlikely advantage: Social Security is running out of money, which will force a reform.

likely to float some tax increases this autumn, and to renege on promises of future defense spending, and then they'll be out of ideas. What a waste of Mr. Burnham's political good fortune, as bond investors have opined in real time this week.

France suffers nearly the opposite problem. Ample low-hanging reform fruit is available for any politician who wants to pluck it. A signature

example is pension reform, and in particular an increase in the retirement age from 62 to 64, as President Emmanuel Macron has attempted.

Mr. Macron draws a lot of flak (including in this column) for his imperious political method. But his problem has never been a shortage of viable economic and fiscal ideas. He has even chalked up some successes, including a reform of France's byzantine labor laws. Rather, France's political system on a fundamental level is incapable of implementing most reforms, and one starts to suspect this is only partly a consequence of Mr. Macron's own failures as a politician.

The systemic problem seems to be that most French politicians can see that a crash of some sort is coming sooner or later. Yet France's size and deep integration into the European economy—and particularly the euro currency—allow Paris to keep delaying its moment of reckoning. No politician or party other than Mr. Macron therefore wants to be the first to make any sacrifices in service of a reform agenda. A fractious national legislature absolves anyone of the responsibility of trying.

Most advanced economies fall

into one of these camps. Japan under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi suffers the British disease of political capacity devoid of ideas. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has plenty of good ideas, but like Mr. Macron the German leader finds it all but impossible to push most of them through a fractured legislature that lacks a sense of urgency about fiscal and economic reforms.

You'll be relieved (or not) to hear that the U.S. probably is the exception, although not as a result of any great virtue. Left to its own devices, Washington would most nearly resemble the French model of ample reform thinking with limited ability to implement anything.

But we do have the happy accident of a rapidly declining so-called trust fund for Social Security, our single largest entitlement and driver of so much of our overspending. After that fund is gone in 2032—if not sooner—Congress will address in some manner the fiscal drag of an expanding entitlement burden or the program will fix itself by cutting benefits by more than 20%.

Most countries stumble into fiscal crises. We've scheduled ours. Talk about American exceptionalism.

Lessons From Clinton to Cut Child Poverty

By Rahm Emanuel

It has been 30 years since Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D, N.Y.) predicted that President Clinton's welfare-reform plan would leave "children sleeping on grates, picked up in the morning frozen." Instead, child poverty fell from 27.9% in 1993 to 9.8% in 2024. We should launch a new campaign to halve child poverty again by applying the lessons of Mr. Clinton's successful approach and rejecting both parties' biases.

Over the past 30 years, those on the right have credited the decline in child poverty entirely to the work requirements in the 1996 law, based on their retrograde view that the best antidote to poverty is a swift kick in the pants. But there are also those on the left who are so resistant to change—those who refuse to acknowledge the pathology of dependency—that they credit the nation's progress entirely to other Clinton-era reforms, including increasing the

minimum wage, establishing the child tax credit, expanding the earned-income tax credit, creating the Children's Health Insurance Program and generally facilitating a strong economy that created more than 20 million new jobs by 1999.

None of these individual changes can reasonably be judged alone. Mr. Clinton began with a comprehensive goal—reducing child poverty—and while the 1996 law was the crown jewel of that campaign, his was a whole-administration effort to make work pay. He disagreed with many congressional Democrats who favored an ever-larger safety net over helping vulnerable Americans gain independence; he vowed to make welfare "a second chance, not a way of life." But Mr. Clinton also opposed the GOP's efforts to penalize the poor as if poverty were a choice. He vetoed one reform bill because, he wrote to Congress, it "cut deeply into Medicare, Medicaid, student loans, and nutrition programs." He vetoed a

second because it failed to "provide sufficient child care to enable recipients to leave welfare for work," to "reward States for placing people in jobs" and to "restore the guarantee of health coverage for poor families," among other objections.

The results of Mr. Clinton's approach, a strategy that amounted to more than the sum of its parts, are now evident. Those of us who want to reduce child poverty further can learn a lot from his approach. One important lesson: The cultural dimension matters as much as the economic. To claim the vital center—Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s term for setting aside each side's ideological preconceptions—the president wanted both to ensure that work was rewarded and to discourage a life of dependency. Democrats shouldn't scoff at the cultural importance of every child having an answer to his jobs" and to "restore the guarantee of health coverage for poor families," among other objections.

First, ensure that the minimum wage is \$20 an hour by 2030. If Republicans want more people to work, they should make work pay.

Second, to augment privately earned income, combine, simplify and expand the child tax credit and the earned-income tax credit into a single family credit. The current tax credits practically require citizens to become PwC-level tax accountants to file out all the paperwork. As a congressman and later as mayor, I regularly sponsored workshops to help Chicagoans fill it out. And neither tax credit has reached its full potential for poverty reduction. Adopting Rep. Kristen McDonald Rivett's (D, Mich.) bill to double the earned-income tax credit

for qualifying families with children under 4 would reduce child poverty by 7%. And moving toward former Sen. Mitt Romney's (R, Utah) proposal to make a fully refundable child tax credit would help us attend to children in poverty who lost an important resource when President Biden's expanded child tax credit expired.

On this front, we should also learn

His program—both welfare cuts and new benefits—is a model of how to set aside partisanship to help kids.

from the success of welfare reform's incentive programs and provide bonuses to families whose kids are in attendance at 85% of school days during a year. That would end Covid-era absenteeism while supporting families in need.

Simplifying the tax code should make Republicans happy, even as Democrats would support raising working families' incomes. But here's a sweeter: To secure the new, combined family credit, Congress should name it after Ronald Reagan, who called the 1986 tax reform bill, which contained an earned-income tax credit, "the best anti-poverty bill, the best pro-family measure, and the best job-creation program to ever come out of the Congress of the United States."

Third, expand and improve early childhood education, ensuring that programs like Head Start are more than glorified babysitting. We discovered in Chicago that the education benefits of pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds who attended full-day programs were much improved over those who

attended half-day or not at all. To that end, we should establish benchmarks for educational development—letters, colors, numbers, etc.—and reward those programs that are most successful at imbuing kids with foundational knowledge that will pay lifelong dividends.

Fourth, extend federal healthcare coverage to ensure work isn't penalized, similar to the way the 1996 welfare-reform law did. An untold story of the Clinton presidency is that the White House worried that if poor parents found jobs, their children would abruptly lose Medicaid benefits. To obviate that concern, Mr. Clinton insisted that Republicans allow for a yearlong Medicaid transition. The GOP acquiesced after he vetoed the two bills that lacked that guarantee. Future reforms should embrace the same ethos, ensuring that every low-income family is covered for three years after finding employment.

Our aim should be to write a new chapter similar to the one Mr. Clinton wrote 30 years ago. America should be a nation where free enterprise works for everyone. Even in the face of economic headwinds, inflation, budget deficits and more, Washington can do more to help wage-earners propel themselves up the ladder. That's what Mr. Clinton meant when he vowed to put people first. We should aspire to build on his achievements with a new campaign against child poverty.

Mr. Emanuel, a Democrat, served as a senior adviser to the president (1993-98), U.S. representative from Illinois (2003-09), White House chief of staff (2009-10), mayor of Chicago (2011-19) and ambassador to Japan (2022-25).

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EDITORIALS

Chicago had the fewest summertime homicides in 60 years. Good but far from good enough

The number of homicides in Chicago was lower in June, July and August than in any year since 1965. As we mark the bittersweet end of summer over the holiday weekend, this is undeniably good news.

The Chicago Police Department recorded 122 homicides in those three months, down from 129 in the same period last year and a still-staggering 271 in the post-COVID violent-crime peak of 2021, according to the various local reports.

Most other categories of violent crime are down, too.

We're grateful that Chicago is safer, at least statistically speaking, than it has been in decades.

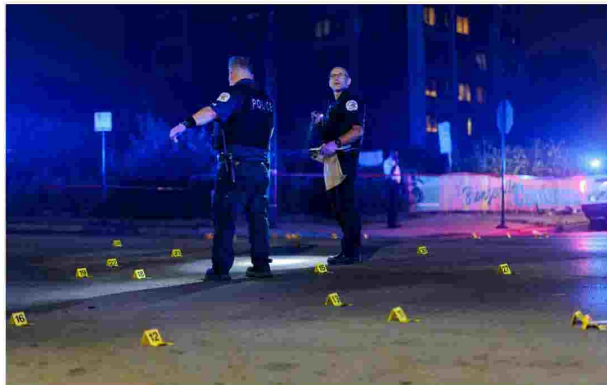
But keep in mind that Chicago is riding a potent national wave. And our city remains far more violent than our big-city peers.

New York City recorded its lowest number on record in homicides and shootings over the three hot-weather months. There were 66 homicides in New York in June, July and August, a little over half the toll in Chicago despite New York's population being more than three times that of Chicago.

In Los Angeles, there were 192 homicides in all of 2026 through Aug. 29, down from 219 at the same point last year, according to the L.A. Police Department. Through Aug. 30, Chicago saw 288 homicides, up slightly from 283 over the same period last year. At about 3.8 million, the population of Los Angeles is roughly 40% more than the population of Chicago.

In other words, Chicago still has a long, long way to go to be the "safest, most affordable big city in America," as Mayor Brandon Johnson frequently states is his goal. For all the statistical improvement, Chicago actually is lagging many peer cities' progress in making its streets safer.

So what explains the positive national trend? There are many theories but little consensus. One explanation we find persuasive is the growth in technology that makes it far harder to get away



Chicago police work the scene where four people were shot near the 5100 block of South Calumet Avenue in the Washington Park neighborhood on July 16. ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

with street crime. The proliferation of cameras at homes and businesses and on public transit, cellphone data that pinpoints the location of would-be perpetrators and more sophisticated law-enforcement tools almost certainly serve as deterrents to would-be criminals.

We think that trend benefits Chicago as well, but that's not to say individuals in key leadership positions here haven't played an important part. At the top of the list in our view is Larry Snelling, who as superintendent restored the Chicago Police Department's morale, which had been badly sapped in the wake of the pandemic, the George Floyd backlash to law enforcement across the country and the absurd defund-the-police movement.

Snelling's appointment proved to be Mayor Johnson's single best decision of his term and one for which the mayor, as he hears an announcement of his expected reelection bid, deserves credit.

But at the same time, we were

disappointed that Snelling opted to retire in mid-July, a decision that we had on good authority was due in part to the top cop's frustration with Johnson's chaotic fifth floor. So while Snelling is a feather in Johnson's cap, his exit is a demerit.

A more competent mayor's office would have ensured Snelling remained at his post at least through the coming election.

Johnson likes to emphasize his efforts to address the "root causes" of violent crime more than he does effective policing. The results of Johnson's investments in social programs and community violence intervention are harder to quantify than police-oriented stats like arrests and clearance rates for homicides and shootings.

But we're supporters of providing summer jobs to teens as an effective crime-reduction tool, which Johnson has lauded as a major prong of his strategy. You know who else was a big believer in the same thing? Former Mayor

Rahm Emanuel, whom Johnson derides whenever he gets a chance.

Whoever is mayor after next year's election should continue the emphasis on summer jobs within the confines of budgetary reality.

Last but certainly not least is the powerful impact of a local prosecutor who focuses on the main task of that job — prosecuting criminals. We met with Cook County State's Attorney Eileen O'Neill Burke earlier this week and, as we've felt in the other times we've had the opportunity to sit down with her, we were struck by the speed at which she's moved to restore an office left understaffed and demoralized by her predecessor.

In a year's time, the office has added 200 much-needed new attorneys, she told us. Given a \$30 million budget increase, her operation has filled all vacancies and now is fully staffed. That would suggest it is now a desirable place for a young attorney to work.

O'Neill Burke rapidly deployed a new digital evidence management system that greatly eases the sharing of the massive volumes of evidence, particularly videos, within the office and with defense attorneys during discovery. That will get more cases in front of judges or juries more quickly in a county whose record on speedy trials has been woeful.

And, at least as importantly, the office under O'Neill Burke has emphasized keeping the public safe from accused violent criminals as they await trial and seeking meaningful sentences rather than plea deals for those serious crimes. We've heard both from CPD brass and from O'Neill Burke that the relationship between police officers and the state's attorney office now is cooperative and productive, which it certainly wasn't before Snelling and O'Neill Burke arrived.

There are two things that deter crime: likelihood of being caught and likelihood of being punished," O'Neill Burke told us.

Amen to that, and we believe we're seeing the positive effects of the acknowledgment of such on the streets in the improved statistics as well.

Some are asking why candidates for mayor continue to say public safety is a major issue in Chicago when the numbers have improved as much as they have this year.

We believe the answer to that question is simple.

In too many parts of the city, people don't feel safe — and for good reason. Look no farther than Washington Park, the site on Aug. 30 of Chicago's worst mass shooting of 2026 when a hail of gunfire fired by at least one AR-15 with a loathsome automatic switch claimed the life of a man and wounded 14 others. That is just one example.

To our minds, any and all declarations of victory are absurd when New York has posted 115 fewer homicides than Chicago through August despite being more than three times as large.

Forget helicopter parenting. Let your children roam

Parenting is a relatively novel term for what humans have done since the dawn of humanity — keep their progeny alive. These days, it comes with a long list of confusing rules that often conflict with each other.

Let kids have independence, experts say. Put them on their bikes, strap on a helmet and send them out into the neighborhood. Or to school. By themselves.

On the other hand, in some places, giving a child the ability to move freely can still land a parent in court, or even on a child abuse and neglect registry.

Is it any wonder today's parents are anxious? And that their anxiety spreads to their children?

A recent story out of Virginia reported by Reason tells of Kary-

ann Parkinson, a Virginia mother who was convicted in August of contributing to the delinquency of a minor after letting her 5-year-old son walk about half a mile alone in their gated community. After a security guard noticed him, the boy was brought home, police and child protective services showed up, and the system threw the book at Parkinson.

Here in Illinois, we've had cases of our own that echo Parkinson's tale.

In 2018, a neighbor called the police on Corey Widen of Wilmette, who had let her then-8-year-old walk Marshalltown, the family dog, around the block. The Department of Children and Family Services launched an investigation, but dropped it

weeks later after concluding the case was "unfounded."

Five years earlier, Natasha Felix, a Chicago mom who let her three kids — ages 11, 9 and 5 — play alone at the playground next door as she monitored them out her apartment window, received a child neglect citation. She subsequently lost her job because of it and was prevented from helping out as a volunteer at her children's school. Two years later, in 2015, an Illinois Appellate Court threw out the citation.

Eventually, Illinois law changed. State lawmakers in 2023 passed a Reasonable Childhood Independence Law making it clear that parents can allow their children to enjoy reasonable freedoms like walking to school,

playing outside or staying home alone for short periods. Virginia passed a similar law around the same time, but Parkinson's case suggests parents can still face legal jeopardy under other provisions of state law.

With summer heat dragging on into September, we can imagine many Chicagoland kids would do well to exercise their freedoms this Labor Day weekend, unimpeded by their parents and guardians.

Letting them do so not only offers a good time in the short term, but greater confidence and resilience over the long haul.

"You want to know what's beautiful — really grabs you, makes you want to cry with joy? Watching a 5-year-old walk eight blocks

to school all alone," said former Chicago Mayor and former U.S. ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel in January. His remarks reflected his observations about differences between the U.S. and Japan as relates to childhood independence.

Of course, parents have to take into account legitimate safety concerns in their neighborhoods as well as their children's ages and maturity. But kids respond well to trusting moms and dads.

The helicopter parents may rest easy knowing their little ones are unharmed today, but too much hovering prevents children from later learning how to navigate the world on their own.

"I can do it myself" should be music to parents' ears.

ON THIS DAY 56 YEARS AGO
THE MADISON BOMBERS

A nationwide search is under way for four young radicals accused by the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the recent bombing of the Army Mathematics Research Center at the University of Wisconsin. The four fugitives are now presumed to have gone "underground," which means they seek cover from the network of persons and places that provide shelter for revolutionaries.

Two of the fugitives are brothers, residents of Madison. The others are former staff members of the Daily Cardinal, the campus newspaper. One came to Madison from Havertown, Pa., and the other from Wilmington, Del. Before enrolling at the University of Wisconsin the Wilmington student had attended the University of Delaware, where he was on the staff of a paper published by the radical Students for a Democratic Society.

In the underground the four accused bombers have joined 13

men and women indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of having conspired to "use bombs, destructive devices, and explosives to destroy police installations and other business and educational buildings throughout the country and to kill and injure persons therein." One of the 13 is Mark Rudd, leader of the 1968 revolt against Columbia University.

Last December, after a meeting of radicals in Flint, Mich., Rudd told reporters that the 1970s would see violence "that will make the '60s look like a Sunday school picnic." The prediction has come true. ... Perhaps the only hope for restoration of order and safety on university campuses is the FBI. ...

The bureau deserves credit for the progress it has made in the solution of the Madison outrage, and we hope arrests will soon follow.

Tribune editorial board,
Sept. 4, 1970

EDITORIAL CARTOON



JACK OHMAN/TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

OPINION



Residents pull a zipline to help people move across the Trishuli River in the aftermath of flash floods at Bidur in Nepal's Nuwakot district on Wednesday. RAJESH KUMAR SINGH/AP

Nepal's disaster is today's terrifying climate change reality



Elizabeth Shackelford

On the morning of Aug. 26, a catastrophic flash flood traveled around 60 miles along the Nepal-Tibet border region, destroying bridges, buildings and a border crossing. It swallowed entire villages and swept thousands of people along with it. Whole tour buses are still missing. More than 1,200 people have been confirmed dead, with thousands more still unaccounted for, including hundreds trapped in the tunnels of hydropower projects.

This shocking event, at the end of a summer when the world was already on fire, was yet another reminder that climate change is no longer a hypothetical threat to our future, but a deadly and ever-present threat that can strike us without warning at virtually any time, anywhere.

No rain was in the forecast. Many videos capturing the racing wall of water revealed blue skies above. Heavy rains can cause

raging waters too, but at a rate that people and communities can often respond to. This tragedy offered its victims little time to find safe cover. It was a nightmare come to life.

When it first occurred, the cause was a mystery, but scientists have since established, through before-and-after satellite images, that a 2,000-foot-wide chunk of ice snapped off a glacier at 17,000 feet and fell nearly three-quarters of a mile to the valley floor, triggering a massive landslide and the flood. The crash caused the equivalent of a 4.4 magnitude earthquake. The wave of water moved at an average speed of 120 mph. That means it advanced 14 miles in less than seven minutes.

Those who survived the horrors of the flood are now faced with the long-term struggle to survive in its aftermath with what little of value it left behind. The after scenes are apocalyptic. Buildings are gutted or gone. What was once a lush, green landscape is now broken and painted brown, covered in thick mud and debris.

This disaster was made possible by climate change. Warmer temperatures are melting ice rapidly, destabilizing glaciers that have stood for tens of thousands

of years and longer. While that period has seen ice advance and retreat at various times, the speed of melting today has no precedent. Since the 1980s, as global average temperatures have risen, ice melt has dramatically accelerated too. Although the specific tragedy in Nepal was unexpected, massive glaciers make the impact of climate change obvious to the naked eye.

I've seen the scale of that impact firsthand on France's largest glacier. For two decades, I've skied the Vallée Blanche in the Alps, a 14-mile run, considered the longest in the world, that descends the Mer de Glace, a glacier whose name translates to "sea of ice." The famous ski run ends at the Montenvers Railway, which has carried skiers and sightseers from the end of the glacier back to the village of Chamonix since 1909. Or at least that is what it did before the ice began its rapid retreat. A metal plate marks the spot where the ice reached in 1985, still nearly level with the station built almost 80 years before. In 1988, three steps were added to ease access to the station level as the glacier began to drop. By 1990, 12 steps were

required, as it receded at a faster pace. Only 10 years later, 118 steps. By 2015, 321.

The last time I skied the Vallée Blanche two years ago, its beauty and scale were still awe-inspiring, but signs of its decline in the face of a warming world were all around us, dampening our spirits as we wondered about the future, of the Alps and our world. When we reached the end of the glacier, we followed spits of snow across the dirt where the glacier used to be. It was much farther and more challenging than I'd remembered, and when we reached the end of the trail, we had to climb 580 metal stairs up to the station. I was clad in ski boots with skis on my shoulder as I solemnly followed the reverse chronology of the glacier's retreat. It was a striking visual of just how much and how fast global warming had changed the landscape there. The hike out became so difficult that a new lift was recently installed to bring tourists in and out instead.

Melting glaciers are more than a disappearing tourist attraction in Europe and America. While wealthier countries are often equipped with better tools to detect and respond to

climate change-induced crises than poorer ones are, they also face increased risks of landslides, catastrophic floods and rockfall. But you don't have to be near the glaciers themselves to be affected by them. Melting ice will affect us all, as the water makes its way from mountains to rivers to seas, raising sea levels and altering ocean circulation in ways that will affect populations everywhere.

Some climate change disasters are slow but steady, easy to track but also easy to ignore: rising temperatures of air and water, heat waves that get progressively worse, shrinking lakes and rising seas. Others, such as this flash flood, come fast and furious. What is even more alarming, though, are the climate change nightmares we haven't imagined yet, since we don't fully understand where the trajectory of rising temperatures will lead.

Elizabeth Shackelford is a foreign affairs columnist for the Chicago Tribune and a lecturer with the Dickey Center at Dartmouth College. She was previously a U.S. diplomat and is the author of "The Dissent Channel: American Diplomacy in a Dishonest Age."

City Council has chance to push ethics reform forward in Chicago

By Bryan Zarou
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

For a mayor who campaigned on breaking Chicago's old way of doing business, Brandon Johnson sure has spent much of his administration dodging questions about ethics reform. At almost every turn, he has fought good governance reforms with either stalling tactics or by lobbying to kill reforms at the committee level. This September, he has a rare chance to reset that narrative.

In a city where reform moves slowly — if at all — the chair of the City Council Ethics Committee and the outgoing executive director of the city's Board of Ethics are making another push, with a long-delayed package of updates to the city's ethics ordinance planned for a hearing on Wednesday.

The amendments, which draw on recommendations made by the Board of Ethics, would close various loopholes in the existing ordinance and address issues that have arisen in recent campaign cycles. Most of the proposals were introduced in May 2024 and have sat in committee without a vote ever since.

This is not a massive new compliance regimen. The proposed changes are small, commonsense measures bringing Chicago more in line with good government practices, including restrictions on the use of city property in campaign videos and images, and "stand by your ad"



Mayor Brandon Johnson appears during a forum on Aug. 25 at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

provisions that hold candidates responsible for their campaign communications.

Most significantly, the revised ordinance would hold the owners, operators and managing partners of businesses with city contracts to the same campaign finance restrictions as the businesses themselves. Under current law, contributions from "entities doing business with" the city are capped at \$1,500 — but in races with the caps lifted for indi-

vidual donations, which happens routinely, especially in more high-profile races, the owners of those firms routinely give tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars.

A Better Government Association Policy analysis of the previous mayoral race found over \$700,000 in donations to the incumbent and the two runoff candidates from the owners and senior executives of firms holding city contracts worth

hundreds of millions of dollars.

Restricting a corporate entity that does business with the city to a \$1,500 donation while the owner cuts six-figure checks makes a mockery of pay-to-play protections, which are nominal at best. With caps on personal donations almost certain to be lifted again in the next mayoral cycle, now is the time for the City Council to bring Chicago's laws in line with those of other major cities, including New York City and Los Angeles.

Meaningful reforms have happened during this administration, but not because of this administration. When the City Council unanimously passed a landmark ban prohibiting registered lobbyists from donating campaign cash to the mayoral campaign coffers, it was a victory driven by the City Council, the chair of the Ethics Committee and good government groups advocating for passage, not the fifth floor of City Hall. The same was true when council members made changes to the selection process for the inspector general, added term limits to that office, and garnered more protections and safeguards from executive interference in the inspector general's investigations. These reforms didn't pass because Johnson championed them; they passed in spite of his administration.

We are now seeing an executive director of the Board of Ethics retire without a known replacement, two members of the board serving on expired terms and no named chair of the ethics board, despite the BGA calling for one for over a year.

With a vote before them in the Ethics Committee, members of the City Council have an opportunity to set themselves apart from an administration that has lagged on ethics reform. The city is counting on them to make the right decision.

Bryan J. Zarou is vice president of policy at the Better Government Association.

OPINION

Is Qatar using deep pockets to encourage antisemitism on college campuses?

By Karen Paikin Barall
and Evan Slavitt
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The United States faces a conundrum when it comes to Qatar. On the one hand, Qatar is an important strategic player in the Middle East, particularly as the U.S. navigates the war with Iran and broader regional security concerns. On the other hand, Qatar is the leading foreign funder of higher education here. It has poured billions into American colleges and universities, including \$737 million to Northwestern University alone, raising serious questions about the influence it is buying inside some of our most important institutions.

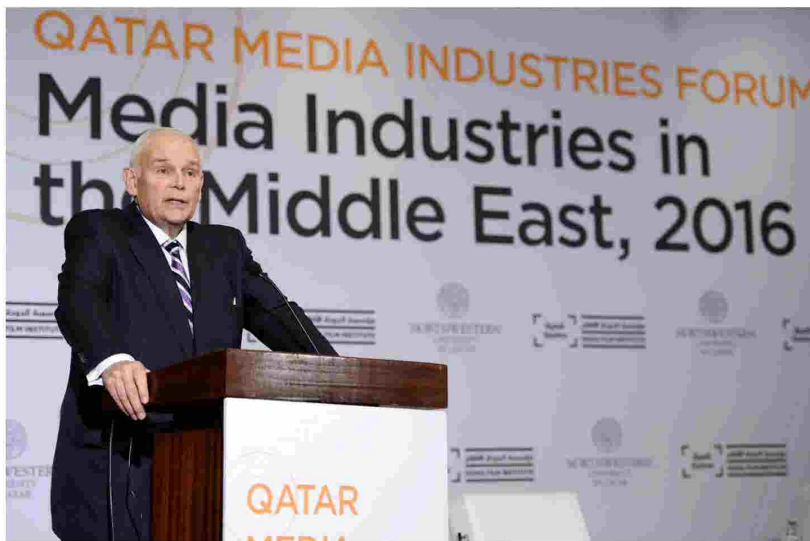
Those two realities need to be confronted together. A country can be a useful diplomatic or strategic partner abroad while it pursues an influence strategy that may undermine American interests at home.

The explosion of antisemitism on American college campuses since the Oct. 7 attacks should be viewed in this larger context. Social media and extremists on both the left and right have undoubtedly contributed to the problem. But we should also be asking harder questions about the role foreign governments and foreign money have played in shaping the institutions, professors, programs and ideas that influence how young Americans understand Israel, Jews and the Middle East.

While many nations participate in this influence game, Qatar deserves particular scrutiny. Unlike relatively obvious propaganda often seen on platforms such as TikTok, we believe Qatar uses its deep pockets with Qatar universities to its views. This is particularly pernicious because the product presents itself as academic, nonpartisan scholarship. Students and the American public may have no idea that the institutions shaping their understanding of the Middle East have received enormous sums from a foreign government with its own interests and worldview.

Start with Qatar's clear antisemitic viewpoint. Setting aside the nation's long-standing relationship with Hamas, school textbooks in Qatar teach its children that Jews are inherently disloyal. "This is not subtle," Treacher and Treason are among the traits of the Jews," one book states. Other books explain that Adolf Hitler was justified because the Jews caused the Germans to lose World War I.

Next, Qatar's large financial deals with universities such as Northwestern, Georgetown and Carnegie Mellon have been



Everette E. Dennis, then the dean and CEO Northwestern University in Qatar, speaks during a panel discussion on March 8, 2016, in Doha. JEFF SPICER/DOHA FILM INSTITUTE

documented. To argue that this significant funding does not affect the recipients flies in the face of common sense. Indeed, it has now come out that aspects of these deals give Qatar control and direction — or at least substantial influence — over the actions of the institutions. For example, there is an agreement with Qatar that requires Georgetown University to "consult" with Qatar when choosing themes and speakers for certain conferences and events.

All this should concern Americans regardless of their views on Israel. When a foreign government has a role in shaping the speakers, themes or programming presented under the banner of an American university, transparency is essential.

Similarly, in the immediate aftermath of the Oct. 7 atrocities, the Qatar Foundation, which is supported by the Qatari government, set up a call with deans of American universities in Doha, including Northwestern, on Oct. 17, 2023. The Washington Free Beacon reported. During this meeting, the foundation instructed Northwestern's communications team to be "aligned and in touch" with it, and it requested "information sharing and no surprises."

That exchange illustrates why

The American public deserves to know who is funding our universities, what those foreign governments receive in return, and whether that money is shaping what American students are taught and told.

the issue cannot be dismissed as simply a debate over academic freedom and raises a much larger question about foreign influence over American institutions and the messages those institutions transmit to students and the public.

It goes further. Qatar has a significant role in the selection of professors who teach at the Qatar campuses of these universities. For example, Northwestern's website announces that several faculty members are "available to discuss the complex history and broad impact of the war in Iran and various other conflicts across the Middle East." Among the experts that Northwestern has put forward as preferred experts is a faculty member of its Doha campus, Ibrahim Abusharif, an associate professor in residence in journalism. Abusharif is a co-founder of the Quranic Literacy Institute and was its treasurer from 1990 to 1998. The institute, an Illinois-based nonprofit, was found to be "a money-lau-

dering clearinghouse": In the early 2000s, it sent more than \$1 million to Hamas.

When an American university promotes a faculty member from its Qatar campus as an expert to explain Middle East conflicts to the American public, the university's financial and institutional relationship with Qatar becomes directly relevant.

It is for these reasons that the Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law has filed complaints under the Foreign Agents Registration Act with the U.S. Department of Justice against Northwestern and Georgetown. The FARA unit should now investigate, and these institutions should register as foreign agents of Qatar.

But the problem is broader than any individual university or legal complaint. The United States needs to understand whether foreign funding is shaping the way a generation of Americans views Israel, the Middle East and America's own strategic interests.

University students will become tomorrow's journalists, lawyers, professors, business leaders, policymakers and elected officials. If foreign governments can use American institutions to influence how those future leaders understand Israel and the Middle East, they can ultimately influence American foreign policy itself.

None of this means the United States should refuse to work with Qatar when our interests align. Foreign policy rarely offers such simple choices. But strategic cooperation abroad cannot require blindness to foreign influence at home.

The American public deserves to know who is funding our universities, what those foreign governments receive in return, and whether that money is shaping what American students are taught and told. Foreign influence is not some distant or theoretical threat. It is already reaching American campuses and institutions, shaping the thinking of the next generation in our own backyard.

Karen Paikin Barall is chief policy officer and Evan Slavitt is general counsel at the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law.

Voice of the people

Whipsaw of executive orders

Every U.S. president has the right to create his own executive orders or negate executive orders from prior presidents. Each time an executive order is reversed, there may be financial and process-oriented government actions that occur, paid for by American taxpayers.

Some orders, such as Donald Trump's recent vanity decision to rename Lake Ontario to Lake America in the United States, aren't financially draining. Others, though, such as his decision to direct federal agencies to align U.S. childhood vaccine recommendations with scientific evidence and practices in peer-developed countries, have costly implications.

Trump has signed more than 250 executive orders during his second term. He has also reversed dozens of executive orders by Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden, adding greater financial burden. If a Democrat wins the White House in 2028, chances are many of Trump's executive orders will be reversed, continuing this endless cycle of reverse and replacement.

This continual whipsaw of changes in which the opposite party wins the White House has never been a productive way to govern. It's time Congress looks at this arcane process and creates new laws to shape, clarify and limit what an incoming president can and cannot do after taking office.

— Rick Weber, Northbrook

Iran's pursuit of a nuke

Although Daniel DePetris opines that there is still "no clear winner" ("At 6 months, there is no clear winner in Iran war," Sept. 1) in the war on Iran and that President Donald Trump should extri-

cate the U.S. from this conflict, just this week, Trump told the world that Iran has been "totally defeated militarily," and last summer, Trump proclaimed that Iran's nuclear program had been "obliterated."

Of course, Trump's claims might not match up with the facts. No surprise there.

Still, DePetris also writes that Iran's supreme leader is intent on acquiring a nuclear weapon and Iran may have access to enriched uranium. If this is the case, would extricating the U.S. from the conflict be the right decision?

Given Iran's history of aggression and hatred for the West, as well as this regime's zealotry, could anyone be confident that Iran would never use a nuke?

— Terry Takash, Western Springs

Real winners of Iran war

I beg to differ with columnist Daniel DePetris' opinion that there is no clear winner in the Iran war. It is clear to me that demand for the weapons used (missiles, guns, drones, etc.) and the subsequent manufacture and sales of these weapons have made the arms manufacturers and suppliers to the war effort the real winners.

The clear losers (in addition to those who have been injured or killed) are the American taxpayers, who besides paying federal income taxes continue to pay an inflation tax every day.

— Wayne A. Mitchell, Crystal Lake

Can't we be better as a nation?

Immigration and Customs Enforcement now wants to purchase and use electric shock gloves on the immigrants and refugees it detains. And right now, immigrants from Haiti are being forced to wear ankle monitors. I do not have the words. I am

the granddaughter of an immigrant — and sure, she did it the "right way," but people showing up for hearings, trying to complete the process the "right way," have been detained and sent to our modern-day concentration camps, where the lucky ones who have been released report insects in moldy food, inhumanely crowded conditions and no medical care, even for those with extreme needs.

I'm alas aware that our country has never been perfect — from our treatment of people indigenous to this land, to slavery, the owning of fellow human beings that was legal for years. But can't we be better? Can't we at least strive to meet the ideals of each person being entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and the forbidding of cruel and unusual punishment?

— Diane O'Neill, Chicago

Ban mass mail-in voting

Regarding the Associated Press story "Across U.S., a race to defend vote" (in print Aug. 29): Are you kidding me? A race to defend the vote?

Mass mail-in voting started only six years ago because of COVID-19. For a few hundred years, we didn't have it, and nobody thought their voting rights were being infringed upon. I would be very suspicious of this.

We have four weeks of early voting, but we still need to be able to do this at home? Why do we even have polling places? When a person votes in person, we know who is casting the ballot. When they vote at home, we don't know who is filling out the ballot.

When a person votes in person, we know that person is voting in private. When they vote at home, we don't know if other people are telling them how to vote.

Mass mail-in voting should be banned. At the very least, no ballots should be accepted after the polls close on Election Day. If you can't get your vote in by then, then that is on you.

— Larry Craig, Wilmette

Renaming of Lake Ontario

Now that President Donald Trump has signed an executive order renaming Lake Ontario "Lake America," we're all being forced to witness yet another round of knuckleheaded nomenclature nonsense. Let's see if we can guess which of three things will likely happen next.

One: A whole bunch of people, who I will decline to name here, will finally be able to identify on a map where Lake Ontario is? Two: Those same people will finally be able to admit the president's not doing a damn thing for anybody but himself? Three: Do I even need to ask?

— Jim Koppenshtein, Niles

Remember this from 1979

Americans should be outraged because of President Donald Trump's shameful treatment of Canada.

Trump seems to have no clue concerning the gallant role the Canadian Embassy played in sheltering six American diplomats after Iranian students seized the American Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 and held the occupants hostage. The Canadian Embassy harbored the diplomats who eluded capture and then gave them fake Canadian passports that enabled them to escape from Iran early in 1980.

Trump's treatment of our great

neighbor to the north is a national disgrace.

— Neil Milbert, Wilmette

The country that we want

Are you living in the kind of country you want?

Our republic is a representative democracy. This means we the people have the power to choose who will do our bidding in "the room where it happens." How do we accomplish this? We talk with our neighbors about our needs and wants, and we find someone who will speak and work for us at local, state and national levels.

Those representatives must be willing and able to serve us for a period of time. Also, they must reflect our needs and wishes in local, state and national managing bodies.

This all depends on our communication, not only with one another, but also with the representatives we choose. Further, it depends on these representatives communicating with us about their work in those local, state and national bodies.

Questions: How do we discuss with one another and prioritize our needs and wants? How do we find people who can and will represent these needs and wants? How do these representatives continue to know what we need and want? And how do we know they are, in fact, serving us the people? And finally, is this the way our democracy — our republic — is working now?

To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin summarizing the fragility of this form of self-government: We have "a republic, if we can keep it."

— Bill King, McHenry

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OPINION

A simultaneous publication from
ISLAMABAD, LAHORE, KARACHI, GWADAR & QUETTA
Chairperson/Publishing Editor
RAMEEZA MAJID NIZAMILegacy of our Founding Chairman
MAJID NIZAMI
Editor
SALMAN MASOOD

Stoking War

The Middle East appears to be sliding once again into a renewed phase of kinetic escalation. The US strike on a redding in southern Iran, combined with a fresh wave of American raids, has become another flashpoint in a conflict that has repeatedly moved from tentative diplomacy back towards open warfare.

Iran has responded with attacks on US military positions across the region, including bases in Kuwait, while Washington continues to threaten further strikes and expand its campaign of economic pressure. Tehran, meanwhile, has hardened its own posture, maintaining pressure around the Strait of Hormuz and signalling that its military strategy is entering another phase.

More revealing still is Washington's decision to extend the deployment of thousands of American troops and military assets across the Middle East into 2027. Around 50,000 US personnel are already stationed in the region, alongside warships, fighter aircraft and air-defence systems. Whatever language is used about preserving "options", this is plainly preparation for a prolonged confrontation.

The Islamabad Accord, which briefly appeared to offer a diplomatic pathway out of the conflict, now seems almost forgotten. Once again, negotiations and understandings have been overtaken by bombs, retaliatory strikes and threats of further escalation.

The pattern is becoming impossible to ignore. Whenever space opens for diplomacy, another Israeli or American military action appears to drag the region back towards war.

Washington and Tel Aviv may continue to insist that they seek stability, deterrence or negotiated outcomes. Their actions increasingly suggest otherwise. A military presence being extended into 2027, repeated attacks inside Iran and continuing threats of further strikes point not towards de-escalation but towards institutionalising war. It is increasingly fair to conclude that, despite their rhetoric, the US and Israel deeply desire continuous conflict with Iran. Through repeated escalation, they are ensuring that this is precisely what the region gets.

Levy Adjustments

The decision by the federal government and Jamaat-i-Islami to form committees on reducing the petroleum levy is a welcome attempt to break a standoff that has dragged on for nearly three weeks.

The public has every reason to be angry. Petrol and diesel prices feed directly into transport costs, food prices, electricity generation and the wider cost of doing business. When fuel becomes more expensive, the impact does not remain confined to the pump; it travels through the entire economy, worsening an already punishing inflationary burden on households.

It's agitation has not always been convenient. Sit-ins at multiple locations and the threat of a nationwide strike can disrupt daily life and commerce, adding another layer of difficulty for citizens already under pressure. But the political point behind the protest cannot simply be dismissed. The petroleum levy has become an easy revenue instrument for the state, while ordinary consumers bear the consequences.

That is why negotiations are the correct way forward. The government's proposal for expert committees, matched by a JI team, creates space for a practical settlement rather than an endless contest of protests and counter-statements. If a workable reduction in the levy can be agreed within two weeks, the government should move quickly.

Fuel pricing and taxation change repeatedly in response to international prices, fiscal targets and exchange-rate pressures. Against that broader fiscal picture, a limited concession to ease the levy would represent a minuscule revenue sacrifice compared with the economic and political cost of prolonged confrontation.

The government must therefore treat the talks seriously, and JI should negotiate in good faith. A modest compromise that lowers fuel costs, eases pressure on households and ends the standoff would be a far better outcome than allowing another avoidable political dispute to deepen public frustration.

Wheat's Woes

Punjab's golden wheat fields have fed its people for centuries. They are more than crops stretching to the horizon; they are a symbol of abundance, continuity and the province itself. It is therefore bitterly ironic that wheat, the grain most synonymous with Punjab, now seems unable to escape scandal.

Flour millers say wheat supplied from Passco warehouses contains excessive moisture, mould and foul odour, rendering it unsuitable for processing. Passco and Punjab food authorities reject the broader allegations, insisting that grain is inspected and moisture levels verified before release. The dispute must now be investigated quickly and transparently.

Wheat has already endured one crisis after another. Hoarding and price manipulation have repeatedly distorted the market. Farmers have struggled with poor-quality pesticides and rising input costs. Stubble burning remains an environmental consequence of agricultural mismanagement. Now questions are being raised over whether grain stored by the state itself has been damaged or mishandled.

This cannot be treated as merely another commercial dispute between millers and a government agency. Wheat is Pakistan's principal staple and one of the foundations of national food security. Breakdown in procurement, storage or distribution eventually reaches the consumer through higher prices, lower quality or shortages.

It also exposes a wider rot in the agricultural system: too many opportunities remain for profiteers, middlemen and negligent officials to extract value while farmers and consumers absorb the losses.

Punjab's wheat should represent security and prosperity. Increasingly, it represents something else: a system failing the crop, the farmer and the consumer alike.

The government must establish what happened to the disputed stocks, fix responsibility where warranted and strengthen storage and inspection systems. Pakistan cannot secure affordable food or improve agricultural exports while its most important crop remains trapped in recurring scandal.



Latif's Women, Today



Danish Bhutto

The writer is an author, researcher and columnist based in Lahore. He can be reached at danishalee017@gmail.com

Sindh has a curious way of loving its women. It has sung about them for centuries, turning Marui, Sassui, Sohni, Noori, Moomal, Lilan and Sorath into cultural icons, reciting their stories at gatherings and placing them deep inside its cultural imagination. Yet outside poetry, the freedom these women represent remains painfully unfinished.

Perhaps the most uncomfortable way to read Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai today is not to ask what he said about women, but what his women would make of Sindh today. Would Marui accept a life in which a woman's choices are treated as a family's honour? Would Sassui seek permission before beginning her journey? Would Sohni quietly accept customs standing between her and the man she loved?

Latif's women are remarkable because they do not remain where society expects them to remain. In Shah Jo Risalo, women occupy the centre of some of its most powerful journeys. Scholarship on Latif describes Marui, Sassui and Sohni through autonomy, agency, strength and resistance to patriarchal norms. His heroines are remembered for bravery, integrity, loyalty and their willingness to stand against oppressive circumstances.

Marui is offered wealth, comfort and a palace by Umar, yet refuses to exchange her identity and homeland for privilege. Her strength lies in saying no when almost everything around her tells her to say yes. Sassui is not a woman waiting at home for the hero to return. She becomes the traveller, crossing mountains and wilderness in search of Punhun. Latif gives her movement in a world where women's movement itself could be a transgression.

Sohni crosses the river at night, repeatedly risking her life for a love society does not sanction. She is not simply the object of desire; she acts upon her own desire.

sire, Noori, a fisherman's daughter, enters royalty without becoming ashamed of where she comes from, unsettling boundaries of caste and status. Latif's women come from different social positions, but their inner worlds matter.

This is why the Seven Queens have survived. They are not memorable simply because they suffered. They are memorable because they chose. And this is where the poetry begins to expose the present.

In April this year, protests were held across several Sindh districts following cases of violence against women, including the alleged honour killings of Khalida Chandio and Shumaila Chandio and the reported suicide of medical student Fahmida Laghari. Activists raised concerns about Karro-kari, parallel jirgas, forced marriages and other forms of violence. The same month, a Shahdadpur court sentenced Ali Bux to death for murdering his daughter Uzma in the name of so-called honour in 2022. A father, who should have been his daughter's protector, became her killer.

These are not abstract statistics. They are the lives of women who, unlike Latif's heroines, never had the privilege of becoming metaphors. The problem also extends beyond violence. The latest Labour Force Survey shows women's crude labour-force participation in Sindh at just 12.8 per cent, compared with 51 per cent for men. In rural Sindh it rises to 19.5 per cent, while in urban Sindh it falls to just 7 per cent.

There is a strange distance between the woman we celebrate and the woman we permit. We celebrate Marui's refusal, but how much room does an ordinary Sindh woman have to refuse? We celebrate Sassui's journey, but how much freedom does a young woman have to decide where she goes, whom she marries or what she becomes? We celebrate Sohni's defiance, but what happens when a living woman defies her family?

These questions turn Latif from a cultural ornament into a mirror. There is, of course, a dan-

ger in making him into a twenty-first-century feminist before his time. He belonged to the eighteenth century, and his poetry exists within a deeply mystical universe. His heroines are both women of folk narrative and vehicles for spiritual longing. Modern readings have also noted caste and gender hierarchies within some of these stories.

That complexity should not be erased. But neither should the extraordinary place Latif gave women. A 2024 study of Sassui argued that her portrayal can be read as a challenge to social, psychological and legal restrictions on women. In January this year, scholars at the Larkana Arts Council again gathered to discuss Shah's heroines. The irony is difficult to ignore: we still celebrate their courage inside literary halls while women outside continue negotiating the consequences of exercising similar courage.

There has been progress. Sindh's conviction rate in rape cases rose from 5 per cent in 2020 to 22 per cent in 2025, aided by specialised investigation units, gender-based violence courts and improved evidence collection. Yet most disposed cases still ended in acquittal and a considerable backlog remains. Progress, certainly, but not victory.

Perhaps this is Latif's enduring lesson. His women matter because they are alive: they desire, doubt, travel, rebel, suffer and choose. For centuries, Sindh has remembered these women better than it has protected many of their living counterparts.

The best way to honour Marui is not merely to sing about her love for her soil, but to create a society in which a woman can choose her relationship with that soil. The best way to remember Sassui is not only to admire the woman who crossed mountains, but to ensure that today's women can walk through their own lives without fear. Latif's heroines may have been telling us something about Sindh all along. We simply have not listened closely enough.

Bishkek SCO 2026

The 26th Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which concluded in Bishkek on September 1, 2026, marked an important moment in Pakistan's regional diplomacy. At the closing session, Kyrgyzstan formally handed over the annual chairmanship to Pakistan, with Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif assuming the SCO Chairmanship for 2026-27. For Pakistan, a full member since 2017, the responsibility is both an honour and an opportunity.

The summit brought together leaders from China, Russia, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, with UN Secretary-General António Guterres also attending.

Held under the theme, "25 Years of the SCO: Together Towards Sustainable Peace, Development and Prosperity", the summit focused on security, trade, energy, connectivity, climate change, artificial intelligence and the digital economy. Pakistan's chairmanship theme, "Turning Vision into Action: Connectivity, Innovation and Shared Prosperity", reflects Islamabad's intention to move beyond dialogue towards practical cooperation.

In his address, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif highlighted water security as an issue of vital regional importance. He stressed that shared water resources must never be weaponised or used as political pressure, and called for adherence to international law, treaty obligations and peaceful dialogue. For Pakistan, this is not merely a diplomatic concern. The Indus River system sustains agriculture, food production and economic activity. Any serious disruption to water flows could affect millions. By raising the issue through legal and diplomatic principles, Pakistan presented itself as committed to peaceful dispute resolution.

Security and counterterrorism remained another major focus. The prime minister reminded participants that Pakistan has paid an enormous price in the fight against terrorism, with more than 90,000 civilians and security personnel losing their lives over the past two and a half decades, alongside economic losses exceeding \$150 billion. These sacrifices underline Pakistan's contribution to regional security.

Islamabad also drew attention to threats posed by terrorist groups operating across its borders. Situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, Pakistan faces persistent security pressures from both eastern and western frontiers. Its counterterrorism efforts therefore contribute to wider regional stability.

Afghanistan remained central to the discussions. Pakistan reiterated its support for a peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan, while emphasising that Afghan territory must not be used by terrorist groups to attack neighbouring states. This reflects Islamabad's preference for engagement combined with collective responsibility.

Regional connectivity is likely to be one of the defining priorities of Pakistan's chairmanship. Its geography gives it the potential to serve as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor provides an existing foundation, while Pakistani ports can offer landlocked Central Asian states access to the Arabian Sea and global markets. Expanded road, rail, energy and trade networks could stimulate growth, attract investment and create employment. For Pakistan, such integration would strengthen its role as an economic hub while supporting shared prosperity among SCO members.

Pakistan's wider priorities include energy cooperation, trade facilitation, poverty reduction, healthcare, education, disaster management and cultural exchange. Sustainable peace cannot rest on military security alone; it also depends on economic opportunity, social progress and human development. Greater cooperation can help member states respond to climate change, food insecurity and natural disasters.

Pakistan assumes the SCO chairmanship at a time of major geopolitical and economic change. As Asia grows in global influence, Islamabad has an opportunity to strengthen its diplomatic profile, expand economic partnerships and promote deeper regional integration. The next major milestone will be the SCO Heads of State Summit, scheduled for Islamabad in 2027.

The Bishkek summit has opened a new chapter in Pakistan's regional diplomacy. The success of its chairmanship will depend on whether it can convert ambition into results. If Pakistan can advance connectivity, trade, technological cooperation, security collaboration and human development, its tenure could make a meaningful contribution to regional peace and prosperity. From Bishkek to Islamabad, the challenge now is to turn vision into practical progress.



Amna Samar

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There is a strange distance between the woman we celebrate and the woman we permit.

The Bishkek summit has opened a new chapter in Pakistan's regional diplomacy.

OPINION

The Makkah Defence Alliance

PART-I



Imran Malik
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The Makkah Defence Alliance (MDA) is imbuing deep, multi-dimensional paradigm shifts in the regional-global geopolitical, geostrategic and socioeconomic domains. The regional-global balance of power is shifting very perceptibly away from the US-led West to emerging power structures, especially in Europe and the Middle East (ME). This has been precipitated by the US's waning clout, control, credibility and exceptionalism in regional-global affairs. It has been further compounded by the US-led West's obsessive, compulsive, irrational bias towards Israel, its horrendous genocide in Gaza-Palestine and its unjust, aggressive expansionist designs in the region. Furthermore, the Iran war has summarily exposed the limits of the US-Israel Combine's power in all its manifestations — moral, coercive, military, economic, diplomatic, technological, political, etc. Crucially, the core pillars and strategic direction determined by the US's National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategy now favour an "America First" policy, which is stridently isolationist in tone and tenor. It shifts the US's focus from enervating global interventionism towards the defence of the Western Hemisphere, the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) and Continental USA. It seeks pronounced, meaningful burden-sharing by all its allies worldwide. Crucially, it intends to only deter China through strength. Period!

Are post-US regional and global geopolitical orders already crystallising? In the geopolitical dimension, the US is clearly recoiling from its position as the sole, pre-eminent global leader as well as an imposing Asian and ME hegemon. The consequent strategic vacuum is being readily filled up by regional and extra-regional powers. The MDA, a fresh regional defence and security structure, has thus emerged as an alternative Centre of Power to the US in the larger ME region. It aims not only to deter war, aggression and coercion but to create, foster and preserve peace! A critical factor of the MDA is that it has been formed by three US allies of varying hues/commitments. Türkiye is a part of NATO, the

KSA has always been inclined towards the US and Pakistan has been an on-again, off-again ally, contingent upon the US's strategic compulsions at any particular point in time. This state of affairs could potentially lead to varying geopolitical scenarios: one, the US could allow the MDA to emerge as an alternate Centre of Power; two, it could let it become the net stabiliser and net security provider of the ME but retain controlling oversight on its evolution, aims, objectives, strategic autonomy, sphere of influence, strategic reach and, in particular, relationships with China and Russia; three, allow a certain degree of strategic autonomy to the MDA but without prejudice to Israel's security and hegemony in the region; four, a fiercely independent MDA, with unrestrained strategic autonomy, will inevitably circumscribe Israel's hegemony and usher in the direly needed nuclear-strategic balance of power to restructure the regional order for good.

However, critical contradictions abound in the current geopolitical spectrum. If the US retains controlling oversight on the MDA, then where does this leave Israel in the region's geopolitical and geostrategic realms? Its arrogant hegemony and supremacy will be summarily thwarted/neutralised. Can the MDA and USCENTCOM co-exist in the now-congested strategic space in the ME? Are they protagonists or antagonists? Do their aims, objectives, interests and spheres of influence complement one another, converge, diverge or clash? The MDA and USCENTCOM must have absolute, unambiguous strategic clarity on this aspect. This complex and complicated geopolitical-geostrategic imbroglio will need to be comprehended, incisively rationalised and resolved as a prelude to the MDA emerging as a viable, potent, unimpeded, alternative Centre of Power! Period.

Regardless, many fundamental changes will inevitably emerge in the region's geostrategic domain. The Nuclear Fac-

tor will initiate the most critical ones. (The Nuclear Factor, by this scribe, The Nation, 16 & 17 May 26). One, by its mere presence in the MDA, nuclear Pakistan will generate its own dynamics to transform the entire geopolitical-geostrategic structure of the region at large; two, the nuclear-missile factor will become inescapable in regional geopolitics, reinforce deterrence manifold and bring the nuclear-strategic balance of power to an even keel; three, the stakes in the nuclear-strategic environment will rise, leading to a virtual balance of terror (and peace) in the region; four, Israel's nuclear exceptionalism will stand nullified; five, the nuclear shadow that reigned over the ME would be removed/countered and the prospects of nuclear blackmail, threats and aggression will be effectively scuttled; six, although the nuclear-missile factor lurks in the background, nuclear umbrellas, nuclear sharing and nuclear stationing will become real, relevant, viable and inevitable concepts in the region's strategic milieu; seven, hostile forces/powers will now have to consider the vital nuclear-missile factor in all their future operational strategies and hypotheses, conventional or otherwise, against any one or all regional states. This will become the most critical deterrent; eight, Israel's aggressive expansionist drives and ambitions, its vile freedom of action to violate international borders and its audacious hegemony will all be severely circumscribed; nine, the Abraham Accords could very well become redundant, isolating Israel in the region; ten, the very emergence of the MDA will thus deter war and stimulate peace dividends; eleven, the stability and security thus engendered could potentially create the strategic environment conducive to the peaceful resolution of the Gaza-Palestine issue as well as ending Israel's occupation of territories in Gaza-Palestine, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon; twelve, crucially, mainland Pakistan itself could come into the nuclear club; thirteen, hostile forces can be vulnerable/subjected to first and/or second strikes in a potential nuclear environment, showdown or exchange! (To be continued)

#Whatstrending

The top opinions on Twitter

- Niraj Warikoo** @nirawarikoo
Speaking Sunday to a Pakistani-American group in metro Detroit, Abdul El-Sayed said the only Urdu words he knows are "Your eyes are beautiful" after learning them to charm his wife.
El-Sayed added his wife is "desi...from the other side of the partition" and has roots in the southwestern part of Karnataka state in India, familiar with "unwritten dialects" from that region.
- Umbra** @umbra2022paf
"Abhinandan never even claimed that he shot down the F16. The kill was simply credited to him because there was no one else in the area"
- Without fabricated stories these guys have nothing to survive on.
- Lord Drey** @lorddrey
Elon Musk has not said anything about this because the criminals are white.
None of them is brown, yellow, black, or an African immigrant.
- King Arthur Fan** @brandillwells
163 missing children were found in Florida.
- Sarah Wilkinson** @swilkins...
If you think the Israelis won't use their AI killing machine outside of Gaza on you, in your own home, you're an idiot, says @HussainShafiei
- Israel Exposed** @xisraelExp...
A searchable database of pro-Israel political money in US politics.
It includes:
11,168 named donors, searchable + employer
523 members of Congress and the money behind each one
Senate + house votes on resolutions to block arms transfers
165 candidates the network built fundraising pages for
105 recipient committees in the Democracy Engine conduit data, every row linked to its FEC filing.
Full methodology, sources, and a member-by-member reconciliation
How we got it:
One of these networks misconfigured its website/ left its front door open, and a member of our team was able to walk in and take the info. They've patched it since, but not before the data was downloaded and secured.
We encourage you all to look up your own representatives.
- Dewan Sachal** @essel1
In Pakistan, I a Hindu can easily go to any mosque I like. Noone bothers me. (Usually I have to go because of Nazam-e-Jana of a friend's parent) And when it's time to pray and I'm just standing there someone does ask, why am I not praying and I tell the truth, I'm a HINDU.
No one has ever asked me to leave even after that.
They respect my presence without any animosity. (Even the Mullah of that Masjid)

Past in Perspective

"The only way to deal with dictators is to cut off their head. Not with a sword, but with a pen, you cut off the head."

—Aung San Suu Kyi



The signing of the Magna Carta was a landmark event in the history of governance and human rights. The Magna Carta was a legal document signed by King John of England in 1215 in response to the demands of rebellious barons. It established certain fundamental rights and limited the authority of the monarchy, providing the foundation for modern constitutional law. The Magna Carta laid the groundwork for principles such as the rule of law, due process, and individual liberties, which have had a lasting impact on the development of democratic societies worldwide.

Letters to the Editor

Views expressed in articles and letters on these pages are not necessarily shared by the newspaper. E-mail alerts! Writers for Opinion and Analysis pages are requested to send their contribution to editorial@nation.com.pk. E-mails for notes to this editor should be addressed to readerscolumn@nation.com.pk. — Editor

Justice in Pakistan

Pakistan's criminal justice system urgently needs comprehensive and sustained reform. An effective justice system is the foundation of public order, fundamental rights and the rule of law. Yet weak investigations, ineffective prosecution, prolonged trials, inadequate witness protection and outdated institutional practices continue to widen the gap between the constitutional promise of justice and the experience of ordinary citizens. Reported conviction rates highlight the seriousness of the problem. PILDAT has reported a conviction rate of 8.66 per cent, while ISSRA has suggested around 50 per cent. Even the higher figure is concerning when compared with reported rates in countries such as India, the United Kingdom and China. More importantly, the variation highlights the need for reliable, transparent and standardised criminal justice data.

The problem begins with police investigations, which often rely on conventional methods rather than modern forensic techniques and scientific evidence. Arrests may be made on suspicion without sufficient evidence, while allegations of false FIRs, delayed investigation reports and custodial violence further undermine public confidence. A modern justice system must rest on professional investigation, scientific evidence, due process and respect for the rights of both accused persons and victims.

The prosecution system must also function as an effective legal filter between investigation and trial. Prosecutors should scrutinise police files, identify weaknesses and ensure that only legally sustainable cases proceed to court. When this does not happen, weak cases consume years of court time before ending in acquittal, serving neither victims nor accused persons.

Courts themselves face chronic delays caused by repeated adjournments, incomplete investigations, absent witnesses, lawyers' strikes and administrative deficiencies. Such delays prolong uncertainty for the accused while denying victims timely justice. The solution is not to lower the standard of proof, but to ensure professional investigations and reliable evidence so that guilt can be established beyond reasonable doubt.

Witness protection is another neglected area. Witnesses who fear intimidation or retaliation cannot be expected to testify freely. Inadequate protection can cause them to withdraw or refuse to appear, while informal settlements in cases where the law does not permit compromise undermine the purpose of criminal justice.

These weaknesses have consequences beyond individual cases. Repeated experiences of arbitrary arrests, weak investigations and years-long trials erode public confidence in state institutions. The crisis is therefore not merely one of judicial delay, but also of governance and the rule of law.

Previous reform efforts have delivered limited results because of inadequate implementation, insufficient resources, institutional resistance and a lack of sustained political commitment. Many criminal laws and procedures also have colonial origins and require modernisation to address contemporary crime, digital evidence, forensic investigation and constitutional safeguards. Reform must therefore address both legislation and the institutions responsible for enforcing it.

The way forward requires a coordinated, long-term strategy. Police investigations should be strengthened through forensic science, digital evidence, professional crime scene management and specialised training. Prosecutors need adequate resources and the ability to

scrutinise cases effectively. Courts require stronger case-management systems and measures to prevent unnecessary adjournments. Witness protection, legal aid, probation and correctional services also need proper institutional and financial support. State institutions such as NADRA and forensic laboratories should be integrated into a secure evidentiary framework. Traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms, including jirgas, must remain subject to the Constitution and cannot replace lawful judicial processes.

The objective should not simply be to increase conviction rates. A credible justice system must ensure that the guilty are convicted on reliable evidence, the innocent are protected, victims receive justice, and every accused person receives due process.

Justice is the foundation of good governance, public confidence and social stability. Pakistan does not merely need more laws; it needs institutions capable of enforcing existing laws fairly, efficiently and without discrimination. The time has come for serious, coordinated and evidence-based reform so that the constitutional promise of equal protection and access to justice becomes a meaningful reality for ordinary citizens.

SYEDA FATIMA ADA BUKHARI,
Jhang.

Freelancing Future

Pakistan has one of the world's largest young populations, yet many educated young people continue to face limited employment opportunities. At the same time, the digital economy is opening new opportunities through freelancing, allowing young Pakistanis to work with clients and companies worldwide without leaving the country.

This article explores how freelancing can provide opportunities for employment, financial inde-

pendence and participation in the global digital economy. It also examines challenges such as limited practical skills, intense competition, unreliable internet connectivity and difficulties accessing international payment systems.

With the right skills, education and digital infrastructure, Pakistan's youth can become not only job seekers but global service providers and contributors to the national economy.

I believe this topic is particularly relevant as Pakistan seeks innovative solutions to youth unemployment and broader economic challenges. I hope you will consider the article for publication.

HUDA ARIE,
Karachi.

Premature Birth in Pakistan

Premature birth is a major public health issue in Pakistan. Every year, thousands of babies are born before completing 37 weeks of pregnancy, putting them at greater risk of health complications.

The main causes include poor maternal health, inadequate prenatal care, malnutrition, and poverty. In many rural areas, women do not receive regular pregnancy check-ups, contributing to the number of premature births. Pakistan currently ranks second globally in the total number of premature births, with an estimated 860,000 to 900,000 premature deliveries each year. It is also estimated that around 102,000 babies die annually.

The government should take urgent steps to address this problem by raising public awareness and expanding access to maternal healthcare, particularly in rural areas. Families should also encourage pregnant women to eat nutritious food and attend regular medical check-ups.

QAMBER SHARIF,
Turbat.

COMMENT

Editorials

US' groundless COSCO smearing aimed at protecting its own hegemonic interests

In yet another attempt to crack down on Chinese shipping enterprises, two senior officials from the United States administration have made baseless allegations against COSCO Shipping Holdings, claiming that the Chinese company uses "concealed equipment" on its ships to "spy on" military communications near the coastlines of target nations, including the US.

This false accusation is merely a rehash of the give-a-dog-a-bad-name-and-hang-it tactic, which Washington has repeatedly used to justify its suppression of Chinese companies. It is a strategy designed to undermine fair competition, tarnish reputations and advance geopolitical agendas under the guise of "national security".

The accusation further extends the US administration's attack on COSCO and reflects its focus on maritime transport amid the broader geopolitical competition between the two countries.

The US has targeted COSCO on multiple fronts. In January 2025, the Pentagon linked COSCO on its list of "Chinese military-linked companies", subjecting it to reputational damage and procurement bans. Concurrently, the US administration proposed imposing billions of dollars in port fees on Chinese shipping companies ostensibly to revive US shipbuilding. These protectionist measures are in fact aimed at stifling Chinese competitors.

Using its global infrastructure, telecom and financial networks and tools as well as satellites to collect intelligence on other countries around the clock is probably routine business for the US. That is precisely why its politicians so naturally project their own country's practices onto others.

The ill-motivated allegation that COSCO engages in "covert espionage" is not only insulting to a company that has earned its reputation through decades of reliable and professional service in global trade, but also telling of the lengths the US is prepared to go to in a bid to contain China.

The Chinese embassy in the US has unequivocally rejected the US claims. "We oppose vilifying China by peddling the so-called 'intelligence collection' narrative, which is totally baseless," a spokesperson for the embassy said.

The way the latest US allegation was made against COSCO follows a familiar pattern. The officials cited in the Reuters report are anonymous and provide no specific details or even cite verifiable incidents. Instead, they use vague language about "sophisticated signals intelligence collection" platforms.

The US has a long history of weaponizing such unwarranted accusations to systematically target Chinese enterprises across virtually every strategic sector. Huawei and ZTE have long been subjected to the US' global smear campaigns and procurement restrictions. Chinese banks, including major State-owned financial institutions, have been repeatedly threatened with secondary sanctions and cutoff from the dollar-centered financial system for conducting normal business with countries that the US considers adversaries.

The US practices constitute a blatant violation of international law. These coordinated assaults have disrupted global supply chains and harmed Chinese entities' legitimate rights and interests. Rather than protecting US safety, these measures are aimed at preserving US hegemony.

The backlash against such US hegemonic behavior has become evident. A record number of US people now believe there is widespread corruption in the US government, reaching the highest level of distrust in two decades, according to a Gallup poll released on Wednesday. A Pew Research Center survey conducted in July also revealed that even among many of US allies, the perception of the US has significantly deteriorated.

By prioritizing political self-interest over the public good, some US politicians have systematically eroded governmental credibility and sparked discontent among their own people and the international community. The US administration's accusations of COSCO only serve to expose Washington's own diminishing credibility and hegemonic desperation.

Fostering cooperation to sustain prosperity

The Asia-Pacific Media Forum, which will open on Saturday in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, with the theme "Building a Path to Shared Prosperity for the Asia-Pacific Community: Media Consensus and Action", comes at a time when the Asia-Pacific's economic success is being tested not only by tariffs and trade barriers but also by the stories told about them.

The region needs media exchanges precisely because its economic cooperation has become too important to leave that narrative to those who see every commercial relationship through the lens of geopolitical rivalry.

The journalists and media executives attending the forum have been visiting Guangzhou, Foshan, Dongguan, Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Zhongshan before the forum starts. These trips provide a walk through the physical landscape of the Chinese economy: factories, ports, technology companies and supply chains that demonstrate something easily forgotten by some policymakers — prosperity is built through connections, not barricades.

Since the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation mechanism was launched in 1989, trade in goods and services in the region has expanded from roughly \$3.1 trillion to \$30 trillion, hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty and regional supply chains have become so deeply intertwined that intermediate goods account for more than 60 percent of intra-regional trade.

These achievements have been built on predictability and cooperation. Yet this basic economic logic has increasingly collided with Washington's unilateral and protectionist practices.

Since around 2018, the United States has promoted tariffs, technology restrictions, investment controls and supply-chain "de-risking" as instruments of transaction. The language sounds "reassuring". The consequences are less so. A region whose production networks have been assembled over decades is being encouraged to rip them apart in the name of "security".

There is a peculiar contradiction here. Economies are urged to diversify their supply chains, then threatened with tariffs when their exports become successful. Businesses are told to absorb the cost of geopolitical restructuring while US politicians congratulate themselves for having made trade "safer". This is not strategic sophistication. It is economic whiplash.

The costs are visible. The APEC region's economy expanded by 3.3 percent in 2025, and growth is expected to moderate to 3.2 percent in 2026 and 3.0 percent in 2027, weighed down by rising energy prices and geopolitical tensions. Merchandise export volume growth is projected to slow from 7.6 percent in 2025 to between 3.3 percent and 3.7 percent annually from 2026 to 2028, as temporary drivers fade and trade-restrictive measures multiply.

But economics is only half the story. The other half is language. A tariff is a policy instrument. Call it a "shield" and it becomes a symbol of protection. Call a trading partner a "threat" often enough and cooperation begins to look naive. Call supply-chain disruption "de-risking" and the disruption itself disappears behind a reassuring euphemism. This is where the media's responsibility becomes difficult to evade.

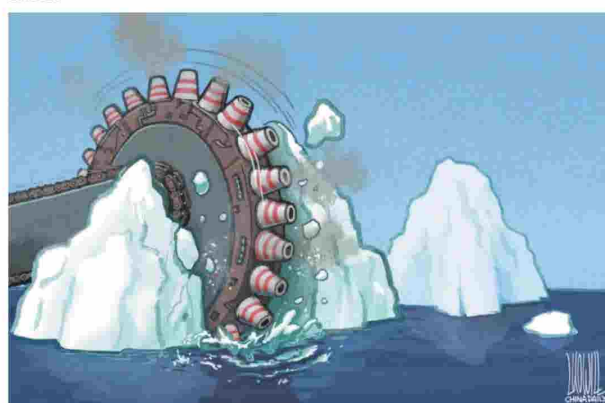
Journalists, editors, broadcasters, platforms and self-media creators do not simply record the world. They help decide which part of it become politically visible. Through headlines, metaphors, repetition and algorithms, they shape what investors fear, what consumers expect and what some policymakers believe they can get away with.

In the age of social media and AI, this power has become more potent and more dangerous. A "trade war" is easier to circulate than a description of the benefits that flow along a semiconductor supply chain. A dramatic claim about economic betrayal can reach millions before a sober correction has even been considered. Therefore, the media has the responsibility to prevent unilateral and protectionist political rhetoric from masquerading as a description of reality.

The media should ask who ultimately pays for tariffs, who benefits from technology restrictions, how much supply-chain relocation actually costs and whether "de-risking" reduces risk or simply moves it — at a higher price — onto businesses and consumers. That makes the Shenzhen forum more than a meeting of media professionals. It is an attempt to strengthen the region's awareness of the value of connectivity when its connectivity is under attack.

The challenge facing the Asia-Pacific is whether disagreement must always end in economic separation. The region's history offers a better answer. Its prosperity was built by exchange across differences. Its future should be too.

Luo Jie



Opinion Line

'Kill birds' claims disguised attack on solar power industry

A recent study published in the journal *Science* on the impact of China's solar power expansion on bird diversity has triggered a heated discussion. Based on data covering 2,344 county-level areas from 2014 to 2023, the study argues that photovoltaic development was associated with a decline in local bird diversity, mainly because some projects were converting cropland and grassland into developed areas, thereby reducing vegetation.

Although some observers have criticized the report as one that depends heavily on bird-watchers' records, the study deserves attention. No form of human development leaves nature untouched, and solar power is no exception. Almost every modern infrastructure — be it roads, cities, farms, mines and dams — reshapes ecosystems in one way or another. Therefore, it is not whether solar energy development has any adverse ecological effect, but how that effect should be assessed and reduced in a broader balance sheet.

That is where media coverage has fallen short. Some Western media outlets have framed the study in highly negative terms, with one headline saying solar panels in China are "killing" bird diversity. The wording might be eye-catching, but it risks turning a complex governance issue into a simplistic accusation. The study itself does not conclude that solar power is inherently harmful. Nor does it deny the significant role renewable energy plays in mitigating the threat from climate change that has been looming larger.

After all, climate change itself is triggering extreme weather events and destroying habitats, exacerbating global biodiversity loss. By mitigating climate change, the development of solar energy can play an important role in promoting biodiversity conservation.

A balanced assessment will show that China's solar panel boom has made a major contribution to clean energy development, lowered the cost of renewable technologies worldwide and helped reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

In fact, in some arid regions, solar projects have even reversed desertification, and enabled the recovery of vegetation and new models of rural development, showing that the climate and ecological benefits of solar energy development far outweigh its costs.

In discussions on social networking sites in China, many, including industry insiders, have raised questions about the study. They noted, for example, that the bird-watchers' records may reflect uneven observation intensity that deserves professional scrutiny.

That does not mean the concerns raised by the study should be dismissed. On the contrary, green development must be judged not only by installed capacity, but also by planning quality, ecological management and long-term monitoring.

Greater emphasis should be placed on biodiversity assessment in the planning phase, especially in areas with complex habitats, rich bird diversity or important migratory routes. Sensitive habitats and migration corridors should be avoided. More attention

should be given to solar projects that do not invade natural spaces, such as rooftop solar, distributed solar and agrovoltaic projects. In large solar farms, ecological restoration should focus on diverse native vegetation rather than replacing complex habitats with single cash crops or monotonous greenery.

The government is already treading cautiously. In late 2024, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment released a draft notification to solicit public opinion on strengthening ecological and environmental protection for land-based wind and photovoltaic power projects.

The document calls for full life-cycle environmental management of such projects while advancing the green and low-carbon energy transition and supporting the country's climate goals of peaking carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and realizing carbon neutrality before 2060. It includes stronger policy and planning-level environmental impact assessment, improved project-level environmental impact assessment, enhanced supervision during and after construction, and ecological restoration after decommissioning.

The green transition in China will not happen overnight. And there will be challenges, including how to ensure biodiversity conservation while developing renewable energy. But the transition to renewable energy is not a choice between climate mitigation and biodiversity protection. Done well, it can and should serve both.

— HOU LIQIANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Guideline an overseas road map for automakers

Editor's note: China has released a guideline to regulate the overseas competitive practices of its automakers and enhance corporate compliance for the orderly global expansion of its auto industry. China Central Television spoke to Sun Xiaohong, former secretary-general of the automotive division of the China Chamber of Commerce for Import and Export of Machinery and Electronic Products, on the importance of the guideline. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

The guideline is designed to promote the high-quality development of China's auto exports. Building on the experience gained over the past five years, it lays a solid foundation for the industry's next phase of development and provides companies with practical guidance. This is crucial for businesses and serves as a road map for the industry to better meet the needs of overseas consumers.

In the first seven months of this year, China's auto exports reached 6.4 million vehicles, averaging around 900,000 vehicles monthly. At this rate, annual exports could potentially surpass the 10 million mark by the end of this year, making this guideline particularly timely.

A key focus area in the document is pricing strategy. It calls upon companies to avoid frequent or substantial price changes and to adopt reasonable pricing practices. While price is a critical competitive tool in the auto industry, companies also compete through value, technology and brand strength. But traditionally, price competition has been most widely used by Chinese companies. It is also a dominant

feature of competition in overseas markets.

Price competition can quickly boost sales and market share. At the same time, it can also create several problems. For example, it can destabilize the market, especially with the profusion of new energy vehicles. Excessive price cuts can erode the technology premium that these vehicles should command.

Moreover, price competition can lead to dissatisfaction among market stakeholders and negatively affect consumer sentiment. Overseas markets assign considerable importance to vehicle residual values and the total cost of ownership over a vehicle's entire life cycle. Frequent and steep price cuts can make consumers concerned about the future residual value of their vehicles, leading to various adverse effects.

Apart from the pressure from price competition, data is another major challenge facing new energy vehicles and intelligent connected vehicles. Companies not only have to comply with local regulations on consumer data protection, but also pay close attention to issues such as the sovereignty, access, flows and storage of data.

Localization and compliance are closely linked. In practice, localization runs through the entire compliance process and has a more profound effect on compliance compared to traditional trade exports or semi-knockdown assembly.

Only when both localization and compliance are properly implemented can a company achieve comprehensive adherence to regulations, supporting its broader compliance efforts in other areas and stages of overseas operations. The underlying logic is that compliance drives localization, while localization continually brings new issues to the fore, prompting companies to address them.

Chinese automakers are increasingly facing barriers as they expand overseas. Alongside traditional barriers, new tariff and nontariff barriers are emerging. Tariff barriers are relatively straightforward and mainly involve import duties. Nontariff barriers, by contrast, take many forms. Chinese automakers operating overseas are now subject to multiple constraints, including antitrust requirements, data regulations and technical regulations.

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VIEWS

Kairat Osmonaliyev

Digital Silk Road a growth engine for SCO



SONG CHEN / CHINA DAILY



The historical Silk Road carried silk, spices and ideas. The new one will carry data, knowledge, technology and talent.

In the 25 years since its establishment, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has evolved into an important platform for political, economic and humanitarian cooperation across Eurasia.

The Bishkek summit has given the organization's next phase a clearer shape, with digitalization, artificial intelligence, connectivity and other emerging areas gaining greater prominence in its development agenda.

The global economy is rapidly changing. While traditional drivers such as natural resources, manufacturing, transport and trade still matter, data, artificial intelligence, digital platforms and online services have become the new drivers of growth.

Digitalization should not be seen merely as another sector; it is the backbone of a new Eurasian economy. The historical Silk Road connected regions through trade, transportation, and the exchange of technologies and knowledge. The modern Silk Road can do the same through digital technologies.

Consider the journey of a shipment crossing borders. Along with the goods come customs declarations, certificates, payment records, origin data and logistics information. The modern economy depends not only on how fast a train or truck moves, but on how quickly information moves with it.

Enter the Digital Silk Road, a digital environment that integrates transportation, trade, finance, manufacturing, public administration, and human capital. The SCO has already laid the groundwork, adopting a cooperation framework on digitalization and information technologies in 2019, followed by a digital transformation action plan in 2025.

The Bishkek summit has now added new substance to this agenda. Among the 28 outcome documents adopted at the summit were a concept for developing regional data centers, computing capacity and the artificial intelligence industry, an intergovernmental memorandum on AI cooperation, and a plan for international information security cooperation for 2026-28. These measures suggest that digital cooperation is moving from a broad policy aspiration toward infrastructure, institutional frameworks and practical cooperation.

The digital agenda is therefore becoming an integral part of the SCO's institutional development. The SCO's strength lies in the vast economic space its members represent. China boasts one of the world's largest digital markets and a powerful technological base. India is a world leader in IT and digital services.

Russia offers significant expertise in software development, AI, and digital public administration. Central Asian countries have substantial potential for digitalizing trade, transportation, energy, agriculture, and public services. When these capabilities are interconnected, they can form a vast digital ecosystem.

However, one common mistake must be avoided: the Digital Silk Road should not

become merely a mechanism for exporting technologies from advanced countries to less developed ones. Genuine integration is when joint projects, local centers of expertise, new companies, jobs, and regional value chains are created.

E-commerce is a practical place to start. For Kyrgyzstan, this is particularly important. A small enterprise in Bishkek or Osh could potentially sell its products to consumers in China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, India, or Iran. Achieving this requires addressing a complex range of issues related to payments, logistics, certification, customs procedures, consumer protection, and digital identification.

Therefore, the next step should not be expanding e-commerce but making cross-border digital trade easier. This could include mutual recognition of electronic documents, digital certificates of origin, simplified customs procedures, and interoperable systems for tracking goods.

E-commerce could be the first building block of the Digital Silk Road, and AI could be the next. AI can optimize transportation routes, forecast demand, manage energy systems, improve agricultural productivity, detect financial risks, and automate public services.

This is why the SCO has developed several new platforms for cooperation, including areas related to the digital economy and AI. China has launched seven platforms covering green industry, digital economy, scientific and technological innovation, energy, higher education, vocational and technical education, and artificial intelligence, involving more than 160 projects.

A digital economy cannot function without trust. The SCO must therefore establish common rules for data protection, cybersecurity, digital identity and the responsible use of AI.

The integration of digital and transport

agendas is particularly promising. For Kyrgyzstan, this directly connects with the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway. While a physical transport corridor facilitates the movement of goods, its efficiency increases substantially when paired with a digital corridor.

Imagine cargo data reaching customs and logistics systems before a train arrives at the border. Documents are verified electronically, goods are tracked in real time and payments move through compatible systems. The border then becomes less of a barrier.

That is why the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway should be seen as more than a railway. It could become part of the digital infrastructure of 21st-century Eurasia. For Kyrgyzstan, the SCO's digital transformation offers an opportunity to carve out a niche in digital logistics, e-commerce, fintech and AI for mountainous regions.

Human capital will be critical. By training programmers, engineers and AI specialists, Kyrgyzstan can export digital services, not just goods. Its 2025-26 SCO chairmanship has already prioritized digitalization, hosting an AI forum and a meeting of digitalization officials in Bishkek, followed by talks on industrial digitalization and innovation.

But digital integration also poses risks, from technological dependence and cybersecurity threats to data protection and digital inequality. The goal should be to not only connect countries but also empower local businesses, universities and entrepreneurs to build the digital economy.

The SCO should work toward common standards for electronic documents, digital identification, cross-border payments, data protection, cybersecurity and AI. This is an opportunity to turn broad declarations into practical rules for a cross-border digital economy.

The Digital Silk Road can indeed become a new engine of economic growth for the SCO, but only if it is understood not as a collection of IT projects, but as a new model of Eurasian economic connectivity, linking digital infrastructure, AI, e-commerce, transport, talent and common rules.

For Kyrgyzstan, this is a chance to turn geography from a constraint into an advantage. Sitting at the crossroads of China, Central Asia and South Asia, it can aspire to be both a digital bridge and a transit hub. This is one of the most promising outcomes of Kyrgyzstan's chairmanship of the SCO.

The historical Silk Road carried silk, spices and ideas. The new one will carry data, knowledge, technology and talent.

The author is a professor at Kyrgyz National University, former ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary of the Kyrgyz Republic to the Republic of Azerbaijan and concurrently to Georgia, and a former member of the Central Electoral Commission of Kyrgyzstan. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



Chen Weihua

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End the conflicts for the sake of humanity

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has once again called for an end to two major conflicts that are profoundly affecting the world today. Speaking at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Kyrgyzstan on Tuesday, Guterres emphasized that after more than four years of hostilities, it is high time for a full and immediate ceasefire in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

In the Middle East, Guterres appealed for maximum restraint in a message on X, referring not just to the war between the United States and Iran since the US and Israel launched unprovoked strikes on Iran six months ago, but also to the conflict in Lebanon and Gaza, where Israeli forces have continued military operations.

I can't remember how many times the UN Secretary-General has made such appeals. His calls reflect the thinking of most people in this world, including the people in countries directly involved in the conflicts, as various polls have indicated.

Leaders from the conflicting countries have also publicly expressed their intent for negotiations, although there are significant differences in the conditions they laid out.

The situation on the ground is looking increasingly bleak. The tit-for-tat escalation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict has continued, with both sides targeting energy, infrastructure and logistics facilities. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy even warned airlines on Tuesday to avoid Russian airspace, which he said would be "completely unsafe" under Ukraine drones.

These conflicts have inflicted huge suffering on the people in these countries.

Meanwhile, in renewed hostilities this week, Iran targeted US bases in the Gulf region after the US military attacked Iranian military facilities, including a missile strike that killed five people at a wedding celebration.

These conflicts have inflicted huge suffering on the people in these countries. Casualties in the Russia-Ukraine conflict have been high for both countries, according to various reports.

The global repercussions have been equally severe, with the two major conflicts disrupting the global economy, driving up energy and food prices and disturbing global supply chains. That is especially daunting for many developing countries with limited capacities to deal with such shocks.

It is absurd for some in the West to claim that China is the biggest winner in the US-Iran conflict, citing a loss of US credibility in the Gulf region and opportunities for China's clean energy initiatives.

Like most countries, China has opposed both conflicts from the very beginning. It has consistently called for immediate ceasefires and negotiated settlements.

As a major trading partner for more than 160 countries, China's interests are best served by peace and stability in every part of the world, especially in strategic regions such as the Strait of Hormuz.

China's interests would have been best served if the US and Israel had not launched attacks against Iran in the first place. And if the US had not waged wars from Afghanistan to Libya, wars that many in the US also regard as strategic blunders.

On the Russia-Ukraine conflict, concerns over reckless NATO expansion, which was a major reason for Russia's special military operation in February 2022, should be addressed.

I have repeatedly argued that solutions cannot be found on the battlefield, only more death and destruction, and the risk of a wider, even nuclear, war. It is perplexing that political leaders don't share such common sense. During my time in Brussels, European Union and NATO leaders seemed more focused on defeating Russia instead of pursuing relentless diplomacy.

Public fatigue with the Ukraine conflict is steadily rising in Europe.

It is disheartening to see the EU prioritizing the development of defense industries over its once-landmark European Green Deal or digital and technological ambitions.

The situation might have been very different if Ukraine and the EU had supported, instead of pouring cold water on, China's peace efforts, including the 12-point position paper on the Ukraine crisis in February 2023 and the diplomatic mission led by its special envoy Li Hui.

Diplomacy and negotiations are always preferable to war and bombings. It's difficult to understand why some political leaders still stubbornly believe otherwise.

Adnan Akfira

Mecca pact signals new era in regional security

The Joint Defense Agreement signed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in Mecca on Aug 7 signifies an important shift toward regional autonomy in West Asia's security landscape. No sooner was the agreement signed than hasty interpretations were put forth. Some labeled it a "Sunni NATO" aimed against Iran, while others saw it as a new tool in the United States-Israel regional strategy.

However, facts show precisely the opposite. Rather than strengthening the US-centric security framework in West Asia, the Mecca Agreement signals its unraveling. Regional countries no longer want to rely on a single external power for their security. They are establishing their own security mechanisms despite existing tensions.

The critical question is: Who will decide the future of West Asia's security?

After the Gulf War, the US had promised to ensure the security of the Gulf and West Asia, establishing a massive military presence there. This led to the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, attempts to fragment Syria and the unresolved Palestinian question. Israel's military superiority became a permanent feature.

However, all this failed to provide true security in the region. Instead, the system led to wars, terrorism, weakened states and displaced peoples.

There are two distinct visions of security in West Asia. The first approach aims to make Israel a regional center, rally Arab countries around it and preserve US dominance in security affairs. But despite US backing, Israel could not cut Iran from the regional equation militarily. It also

could not rally Arab nations against Iran or resolve the Palestinian question. Military superiority did not translate into political leadership.

Israel's conflict in Gaza, attacks on Lebanon and Syria, and the major conflict with Iran demonstrate the futility of an Israel-centered regional order.

The second approach reflects the determination of regional countries to steer their own destiny, a resolve that acquired an institutional form through the Mecca Agreement. This second path does not imply all issues with Iran have been resolved. Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries still have security concerns regarding Iran. The Mecca Agreement also aims to curb Iran's proxy support in neighboring countries. Turkey and Pakistan do not want regional instability to spill over into their territories.

Iran, too, will have a place in the evolving security framework inspired by the Mecca Agreement.

Israel's dominance will be rejected, but its existence won't be denied. Relations with the US will be maintained, but Washington won't be seen as the sole arbiter of the region's security. The essence of the new direction is clear: No single external power should determine West Asia's destiny. The countries of the region will determine their future.

The quest for a new regional order is closely linked to the reconciliation China brokered between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023. The agreement reached in Beijing not only restored diplomatic ties, but also demonstrated that security can be forged through dialogue and mutual assurances, not exclusion and encirclement.

While the US builds military blocs, China brings adversaries to the negotiating table. This approach embodies the Global

Security Initiative proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, which emphasizes that one country's security cannot be built on another country's insecurity. The GSI advocates common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, favoring partnerships over bloc formation and dialogue over confrontation.

The Mecca Agreement is not yet a full realization of these principles, but it aligns with the trend of enhancing regional ownership and reducing external dependence, while remaining open to broader participation.

Turkey has a distinctive place in this emerging order, given its stable relations with multiple countries both within and beyond the region.

This is a significant opportunity. Turkey aims to unite regional powers on common security grounds, including Iran. Ankara's long-term goal is for each country to guarantee the sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of others.

The Mecca Agreement will not become a "Muslim NATO": West Asia doesn't need a new military camp or become a new front against any country. What it needs is an inclusive order in which the region's key countries — above all Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan and Egypt — recognize one another's legitimate security concerns.

Palestine must be central to this order, as no security structure can be legitimate or lasting if it disregards Palestinian rights. Israel's security will be sustainable only by recognizing the right of the Palestinian people to establish a state.

Security and development are inseparable. The region needs transport corridors, energy cooperation, reconstruction, trade, and water and food security. Lasting security cannot be built without jobs for young people and development opportunities for

countries. This is where the Belt and Road Initiative can play a key role. The BRI is not just an infrastructure program but also a framework for cooperation that links countries' economic interests, raises the cost of external aggression and strengthens the foundations of peace.

The Mecca Agreement is a work in progress. A regional security architecture has not been established yet. The priorities of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are also not entirely aligned. Distrust between Iran and the Gulf countries persists. Egypt's place in the new mechanism has yet to be settled. The US military presence in the region continues. Israel has not abandoned its aggression.

The agreement is also not a perfect solution. But it is the nucleus of a future "West Asian Union". New orders emerge if the old order cannot resolve issues.

For more than a century, West Asia has paid the price of outsiders drawing their borders, imposing wars and importing security systems. Now the countries of the region are seeking an order in which they can resolve their differences of their own accord.

If China's mediation experience, Turkey's regional initiative, Saudi Arabia's diversification of its security options, Pakistan's strategic capacity, Iran's regional weight and Egypt's historical position can converge in the same constructive direction, a new era may begin in West Asia.

Security cannot be imposed. Peace cannot be imposed. A regional order is built through the will of regional peoples. This is the real message coming from Mecca.

The author is the chairman of the Turkish-Chinese Business Development and Friendship Association. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.