



No hard ceilings

A rise in minimum PF pension will protect the worse-off among the retired

The Union Cabinet’s approval to raise the wage ceiling for mandatory coverage under the Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) from ₹15,000 to ₹25,000, though belated, is commendable. The BJP-led government has finally responded to this long-standing demand of workers in the organised sector. Around 51 lakh additional employees may be brought under the PF fold, which has around 7.98 crore contributing members. Those in the wage slab of ₹15,000-₹25,000 will now be covered under the Employees’ Pension Scheme (EPS), 2026. Although Union Labour Minister Mansukh Mandaviya cited a government survey as the basis for the increase, the 12-year delay in implementing it should have been avoided. The Minister, who said that the average salary in private establishments was ₹23,000, should also make the survey’s findings public for a better understanding of the country’s overall wage situation. With some concerns having been raised that not every employer may be willing to make the additional contributions required after the revision, the government must ensure that all employers comply with the law.

So far, the government has been silent on revising the EPS minimum pension of ₹1,000, fixed in September 2014 alongside the previous revision in the PF wage ceiling. EPFO pensioners have been demanding the hike in the minimum pension amount. Before it assumed office at the Centre in 2014, the BJP had urged the Congress-led UPA government to keep the minimum pension at ₹3,000 and index it to inflation. Yet, it has not made even a symbolic beginning towards the indexation of pension to inflation. Moreover, about 45% of the nearly 82 lakh pensioners receive ₹1,000 or less. In March 2026, the Joint Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour reminded the government that “the existing minimum pension amount is inadequate to meet even the basic needs of pensioners particularly in the ... scenario marked by ... rising healthcare and living expenses”. Also, little is known about the follow-up to the panel’s recommendation for “an urgent and comprehensive review of the minimum pension”. The EPFO must release the findings of actuarial assessment, made by valuers in recent years. This should also be beneficial to the PF body, as EPFO CEO Ramesh Krishnamurthi observed in an interview with *The Hindu* in August that “there is a misconception that the [pension] fund has unlimited resources”, while ruling out the reopening of the window for higher pensions. Even if the government is unwilling to restore the pre-2014 coverage, under which all employees were covered regardless of their wages, it should consider relaxation of the restriction on the coverage. Else, many pensioners will be pushed below the poverty line.

Continental glory

India might get another 100-medal haul from a smaller contingent

Even as Japan, known for efficiency, welcomes its third Asian Games and the first in 32 years, on Saturday, the Aichi-Nagoya Games have already earned the ‘worst ever’ tag because of accommodation and logistical issues. A country that successfully hosted two Olympics – in 1964, within two decades of suffering atomic bombings, and in 2021, behind closed doors amid the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic – is now strangely struggling to accommodate more than 17,000 athletes and officials from 45 nations in hotels, containers and a cruise ship. Despite these issues, 501 of India’s athletes, including 267 men and 234 women, across 36 disciplines, will try to keep its flag flying high. At the previous Hangzhou Asiad, India had an impressive tally of 106 medals and was placed fourth behind China, Japan and South Korea. There is a significant drop in the number of Indian athletes, from 650-plus in 40 disciplines three years ago, following rationalisation, discouraging a mad rush because of the perks and money associated with the Asiad. Nevertheless, Indian sports authorities expect around 100 medals, which may noticeably improve the athlete-to-medal ratio.

The presence of 310 debutants in the contingent signals a brighter future for the country, which has spent nearly ₹800 crore on Asian Games preparations in the last cycle. Shooting and athletics, which together field 105 athletes, should continue to be the major contributors to India’s medals tally, followed by archery, boxing, badminton, squash and wrestling. Stars including Manu Bhaker, Mirabai Chanu, Lovlina Borgohain, P.V. Sindhu, Aman Sehrawat, Tajinderpal Singh Toor, Gulveer Singh, Harmanpreet Singh, Smriti Mandhana and Jasprit Bumrah will lead India’s campaign. At 39, squash player Joshna Chinnappa will be the first Indian to compete in seven consecutive Asian Games. The youngest athlete, 15-year-old cricketer Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, and the oldest, 55-year-old rider Shruti Vora, are the other attractions. Some attention will also be devoted to Indian men’s and women’s hockey teams, which will aim to win gold medals and secure berths at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. While India can take pride in fielding athletes in debut-making disciplines, such as mixed martial arts and teqball, it should ponder over its poor representation in swimming, gymnastics and cycling, which offer more medals and open avenues for Olympic glory. Meanwhile, the Indian men and women’s teams would be watched closely in cricket. In pushing for continental excellence, India should also remain vigilant about its deteriorating global reputation due to the sharply rising doping graph.

Technologies that once arrived in India through imports are increasingly being invented at home through local research institutions, industry, and startups. Three institutional foundations of an innovation economy are now advancing together: public research, corporate research and development (R&D), and deep-tech entrepreneurship. The transformation is yet incomplete, but the architecture is finally visible. Gallium Nitride (GaN) semiconductor technologies, critical for advanced radar, space systems, and next-generation communications, are increasingly being developed domestically, helping close a strategic gap in a tightly regulated, export-controlled field. At the same time, affordable immunotherapies developed in India are expanding access to advanced cancer care and demonstrating the country’s growing capacity for biomedical innovation.

Patent filings are often cited as a ready indicator of innovation. The filing numbers continue to show impressive growth. From just over 1,10,000 patent filings in 2024-25, the number grew to more than 1,43,000 in 2025-26, a 30.2% increase. Moreover, domestic applicants now account for almost seven in 10 filings.

However, the sheer volume of applications does not tell the complete story. Even a modest enquiry reveals an innovation story that begins to fray at the edges. The number of patents in force in India (just over 2,40,000 in 2025) is a fraction of those in China (5.7 million), the United States (3.5 million), and Japan (2.1 million); all these are 2024 data.

This suggests low grant rates, high abandonment rates, or a combination of both. Add to this meagre commercialisation, low R&D spending – India still spends just under 1% of GDP on research and development, against about 2.4% in China and 3.5% in the U.S. – and we see how far we are from a truly technology-driven, innovation-led economy.

The emerging pillars

However, there lies a resilient core, and shaping it are three strong and vital strands that promise to anchor India’s future. Public institutions with government support have made vital breakthroughs in long-gestation innovation. Private R&D spending exceeded that of all levels of government combined for the first time in 2024. This is expected to climb and account for 55% through 2025-26. Domestic industrial houses are beginning to reap rewards from focused and committed R&D. A maturing startup ecosystem is finding its feet beyond low-hanging service platforms, actively showcasing deep tech and complex manufacturing. That all three strands



Mukundan Chakrapani

Holds a PhD in science and a law degree and is an academic



Gaurav Jain

Founder of Hastin Research and an intellectual property rights expert helping enterprises, startups, and universities transform ideas into intellectual property

Homegrown research and deep-tech enterprise are helping India move beyond its identity as a services provider

A homegrown innovation ecosystem is taking root

are coming of age together bodes well for India.

In March 2023, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) scientists at the Solid State Physics Laboratory (SSPL) in Delhi and the Gallium Arsenide Enabling Technology Centre (GAETEC) in Hyderabad announced a breakthrough in making gallium nitride (GaN) monolithic microwave integrated circuits (MMICs). The technical know-how to make these circuits, which are critical for military and defence applications, was, by widely reported accounts, refused to India under the offset provisions of the Rafale fighter jet purchase from France. The DRDO is now actively transferring the technology for GaN High Electron Mobility Transistors (HEMTs)-based MMICs to be used in 5G/6G wireless infrastructure, electric vehicles on-board chargers, and renewable energy inverter systems. India is now one of seven countries to have mastered this technology, alongside China, France, Germany, Russia, South Korea and the U.S. AGNIT Semiconductors, a spin-off from the Centre for Nano Science and Engineering (CeNSE) at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru is translating homegrown GaN technology to real-world commercial applications.

From implementer to innovator

While long-gestation R&D at public institutions is starting to pay off, there is growing optimism from academia and domestic industry-led R&D as well. The Bharat 6G Alliance (B6GA) is making rapid progress in its stated aim of contributing 10% of the global 6G patents by 2030. According to a review meeting by Union Minister for Communications Jyotiraditya Scindia, B6GA members have made more than 7,700 patent filings across 5G and 6G technologies, including over 4,400 foreign filings. But, these are applications, not yet grants or declared standard-essential patents, and their true impact remains to be seen. However, taken together with almost 3,000 technical contributions to 3GPP last year, a 15-fold increase from 2020, these figures point in the right direction. The World Intellectual Property Organization’s 2025 Patent Cooperation Treaty rankings showed that Jio Platforms Limited had broken into the top 20 international patent filers for the first time, rising more than 300 places to be placed 19th overall.

While patent numbers are only a part of the story, participation in standards bodies and intellectual property ownership increasingly determine who captures value from future communication networks. India is securing ownership of critical digital infrastructure and is moving from being a standard-implementer to a standard-setting innovator.

Deep-sea discovery, environmental responsibility

India is standing at the threshold of a new frontier. But the most important question is not how deep we can go, how much we can mine, or how much wealth lies beneath the ocean floor. It is more fundamental: Should everything that can be technologically exploited necessarily be exploited? The question is particularly important as India strengthens its position in deep-sea exploration and develops the scientific and technological capabilities to access one of the least understood parts of the planet.

A growing deep-sea footprint

India is not new to seabed mineral exploration and holds three International Seabed Authority (ISA) exploration contracts covering approximately 95,000 square kilometres across the Central Indian Ocean Basin, Central Indian Ridge and Carlsberg Ridge in the international seabed area. Its exploration has identified an estimated 366 million tonnes of polymetallic nodules containing nickel, copper, cobalt and manganese, alongside extensive environmental and biodiversity studies.

Under the Deep Ocean Mission, India is developing deep-sea mining technology, underwater robotics and the MATSYA-6000 human submersible, while the National Institute of Ocean Technology has tested a mining machine at depths of about 5,270 metres. At the same time, biodiversity surveys across 19 seamounts have studied around 1,300 deep-sea organisms, including nearly 23 species reported as new to science. These achievements also impose a profound responsibility to decide whether technological ability should ultimately lead to exploitation.

Technological progress can create a dangerous assumption: if we can exploit something, we should. But the deep ocean challenges this logic. It is a complex and poorly understood ecosystem, and India’s own biodiversity research continues to reveal previously unknown organisms. We cannot confidently predict the consequences of



P. Ragavan

Marine biologist with over a decade of professional experience in the conservation and management of coastal and marine environments

India has an opportunity to become a global leader not only in deep-sea technology but also in deep-sea ecological governance

large-scale seabed disturbance while our understanding of these ecosystems remains incomplete. This is not an argument against science, but for more science before potentially irreversible intervention. Deep-sea minerals may have legitimate strategic importance for India’s renewable-energy, electric-mobility and advanced-manufacturing ambitions. However, strategic importance cannot automatically become ecological permission. Before considering extraction, India should ask whether the minerals are genuinely necessary at the proposed scale, whether alternatives exist, and whether demand can be reduced through recycling, efficiency, substitution and a circular economy. Necessity must be demonstrated, not presumed.

India’s investment in deep-ocean science need not imply a commitment to commercial mining. Exploration can advance knowledge, biodiversity assessment, environmental baselines and technology without leading to exploitation. Mining, however, would physically disturb the seabed. Therefore, adaptive management alone cannot guarantee ecological protection. India has an opportunity to adopt a stronger principle before exploitation begins: the question should not be “How can we mine with minimum damage?” but “Do we need to mine at all?” Since India’s ISA activities remain at the exploration stage, this is the right time to establish a high ecological threshold for any future decision to exploit.

Science must also teach us to say ‘no’

The deep ocean is now emerging as the next frontier for economic growth. Yet, we expect the ocean to regulate climate and support biodiversity while extending industrial activity into its least understood ecosystems. The ocean should not become a place where the environmental costs of human consumption are simply relocated. Scientific progress should not mean making more of nature exploitable and

There is also a marked shift in India’s startup ecosystem. Buoyed by the government’s commitment to Research, Development, and Innovation (RDI) and private capital matched by initiatives such as the more than \$2.5 billion in deep-tech commitments made by members of the India Deep Tech Alliance (IDTA), Indian startups are aiming farther and higher than before. Pixxel Space, founded by two Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS) Pilani alumni, is carving a niche in hyperspectral imaging technology with six satellites in orbit and a full constellation of 18 to 24 planned. The Vikram-1 low earth orbit launch by Skyroot Aerospace and the IIT Madras nurtured Agnikul Cosmos’s parallel push towards fully reusable launch vehicles promise to strengthen India’s role as a frugal space technology leader.

Startups such as ImmunoACT, incubated at IIT Bombay in partnership with the Tata Memorial Centre, are expanding access to advanced and affordable health care. NexCAR19, India’s first indigenous CART cell therapy, has delivered effective cancer treatment at a tenth of typical treatment costs. Leveraging the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC) early-stage support, Bengaluru-based Remidio Innovative Solutions is at the forefront in the fight against preventable blindness, such as diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma, through smartphone enabled retinal imaging systems and AI.

The direction is clear

These examples do not by themselves make India an innovation superpower but demonstrate that the three strands are coming together to weave an enduring innovation ecosystem. The GaN story illustrates the emerging innovation pipeline. Government laboratories developed the foundational capability, academic institutions nurtured the talent and research ecosystem, and startups such as AGNIT are now carrying the technology into commercial markets.

However, sustaining these three strands will demand more work, from standardising tech-transfer terms for publicly funded IP and expanding examiner capacity at the patent office, to funding the translational gap between a granted patent and a first paying customer. Yet, as we look through the innovation lens, the direction is clear. India is gradually shedding its identity as a back-office service provider and strengthening the institutions that enable nations to generate their own technology, intellectual property, and industrial capabilities. The journey remains unfinished, but the contours of an innovation economy are beginning to form.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Tariff threats, diplomacy

While maintaining a robust bilateral relationship with the United States is strategically vital, foreign policy cannot be dictated by the threat of economic coercion (Page 1, “U.S. clears Russia sanctions Bill; India faces tariff threat”, September 18). True partnerships are built on mutual respect and an understanding of each other’s domestic

compulsions. Imposing 100% tariffs would not only strain India-U.S. ties but could also destabilise international energy markets, leading to wider global economic friction. India must continue its balanced diplomatic approach — diversifying its energy sources while keeping communication channels open with Washington to resolve trade frictions through dialogue

rather than compliance.
Nagarajamani M.V.,
Hyderabad

Tata’s crisis of governance

Despite the leading roles played by the Tata Group in India’s growth in semiconductors, defence, software and electronics, the recent governance crisis and boardroom divisions at Tata Sons over leadership tenure and regulatory pressures pose a systemic

risk to the broader economy. The possible legal deadlock involving the Tata Trusts and regulatory mandates could stall vital national projects, highlighting the urgent need for an amicable resolution rather than protracted feuds. This is essential both in the national interest and to uphold the reputation of the Tata name, which is held in high esteem by the

people of India.
Rajakumar Arulanandham,
Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu

There is something quietly damning about a company that discovers the value of “leadership continuity” only when it needs to appear stable to outsiders. What this exposes is how thin the group’s commitment to its own governance standards becomes when a market debut is at stake. An

‘outgoing’ chairman’s stated principle was treated as a formality to be abandoned whenever it no longer suited investor optics. That is not stewardship. It is a company discovering, rather conveniently, that its rules mattered only until they became inconvenient.

Yashvi Patel,
Anand, Gujarat

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GROUND ZERO



The private farmhouse on the outskirts of C.K. Tandya village that was allegedly being used as a counterfeit drug repackaging and re-labelling facility. MURALI KUMAR K.

A dangerous dose of deception

A heap of discarded medical waste near a farmhouse in South Bengaluru district led police to an alleged counterfeit drug repackaging unit and to an inter-State network supplying medicines to hospitals and clinics. The counterfeit drugs allegedly reached patients who were being treated for serious illnesses, including cancer.

Shilpa Elizabeth and **Imran Gowhar** report on the questions raised on accountability and patient safety

In mid-August, along the Bengaluru-Mysuru expressway, an agricultural labourer in C.K. Tandya village in South Bengaluru district (formerly known as Ramanagara) noticed something unusual on a strip of farmland: a heap of medical waste.

This wasn't the first time that the villagers in South Bengaluru had noticed suspicious objects or activity around the area which contained a farmhouse, say the police. They had seen men frequently moving in and out of it on a scooter without a number plate. They had also seen courier and e-commerce delivery vehicles making regular trips to the secluded location.

Spanning nearly eight acres and fenced by a compound wall, the farmland is situated on the outskirts of the village. According to the police, the owners, who live in Bengaluru, seldom visited the place.

The villagers would whisper among themselves about what they suspected – until the day the labourer decided to report the dumped medical waste to the local beat police.

The officers at Taverekere police station put the farmhouse and the movements around it under surveillance, while also making inquiries about the property and its occupants. The people they spoke to did not seem to know anything substantial.

According to an officer, the police learned that the farmhouse had been rented about a year earlier. But what was happening inside the compound remained unclear.

Days later, the police and Karnataka's health department, in a joint operation, decided to enter the premises. What they saw there – labels, medicine boxes, drugs, and other items associated with the preparation and packaging of medicines – changed the nature of the investigation. They alerted senior officers, who joined hands with officers from the State Drugs Control Department and conducted a raid on August 18.

The police took four people into custody. They discovered that the secluded farmhouse was being used as a counterfeit drug repackaging and re-labelling facility. What began as a local's suspicion had opened the door to a much larger pharmaceutical investigation.

According to investigators, the operation involved the procurement of low-cost, substandard, or expired pharmaceutical formulations from other States, which were then transferred into fresh vials and given counterfeit labels and packaging. "The aim was to make the medicines appear as genuine products of established pharmaceutical companies and introduce them into the pharmaceutical supply chain," says a police official familiar with the investigation.

During the seizure, the police recovered more than 5,600 vials of counterfeit antibiotic injections used in treating serious bacterial infections. The total seizure was estimated at ₹4.91 crore.

They also seized ledgers, invoices, mobile phones, and other records, which provided them with details of the supply chain.

From a farmhouse to the big city

The police then moved their investigation beyond C.K. Tandya. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) was constituted.

The trail led to Bengaluru and to Krupa Healthcare, a wholesale pharmaceutical distributor located on a busy commercial street in the ci-



After my mother passed away, I started suspecting something, perhaps a nexus, but I was in no state of mind to think about it. Now I'm questioning everything.

MAHESHPRASAD UPADHYA

ty. According to the police, the operators in the farmhouse supplied medicines to Krupa Healthcare, which distributed them.

The police found that the counterfeit medicines were not limited to antibiotics, but also included critical-care injections and cancer medicines. They say some of the medicines were offered to hospitals at "discounts of up to 50%".

Krupa Healthcare owner Veeresh Kumar Jain, who was arrested by the SIT, allegedly employed more than 15 medical representatives to promote the medicines and offered commissions to push the discounted stocks to private hospitals and medical centres.

The police then found that the alleged racket was not confined to Karnataka. A joint force subsequently carried out simultaneous searches across Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Telangana. The police are currently on the hunt for Bengaluru resident R. Prashant, who they believe is a key figure in the network. He is currently in Azerbaijan, and is Jain's partner, say the police.

Unanswered questions

The families of patients are shocked and angry at these revelations. On his WhatsApp profile picture, Maheshprasad Upadhyia, 30, poses with his mother. A cervical cancer patient, she passed away in 2024. After hearing the news, Upadhyia, a native of Odisha, cannot help second-guessing the events before his mother's death.

She was diagnosed with cancer in 2022, he says. For a year, she underwent chemotherapy and radiotherapy in Mumbai. The doctors then suggested immunotherapy. As treatment in Mumbai was expensive and there were also logistical difficulties in travelling to the city, the family decided to shift treatment to Bhubaneswar.

"The doctor we consulted referred a Bengaluru-based pharmaceutical distributor to us. I bought a medicine from them. It cost ₹1,65,990 per vial. My mother needed two vials. The distributor said if we purchase one, we would get another free," recalls Upadhyia.

He searched online and found that the manufacturer did offer such a programme. He decided to go ahead with it.

Upadhyia spent about ₹20 lakh on the overall treatment. "But we saw no improvement in her condition," he says. "When she was diagnosed with cancer, the doctor had said she would live up to five years. My mother passed away in one and a half years."

Upadhyia sounds calm, but he admits within him a tumult of emotions – anger, suspicion, and

helplessness. "One person who had got his father treated at the Bhubaneswar hospital had advised us against buying this medicine from this particular distributor," he says. "But we didn't listen since the doctor himself had advised it. After my mother passed away, I started suspecting something, perhaps a nexus, but I was in no state of mind to think about it. Now I'm questioning everything."

He confesses that there are times when he considers migrating abroad "after seeing how the corrupt try to profit from the desperation of the most vulnerable."

Parth Sharma, a resident of Gurugram, returned to India in 2017 to care for his ageing parents and mother-in-law, after spending 37 years abroad. "The people I came here for are no more," he says.

In October 2020, Sharma's mother was diagnosed with myelodysplastic syndrome, a condition where the bone marrow doesn't make enough healthy blood cells. The doctors informed the family that the disease was not curable. Given the patient's age – she was in her 70s – a bone marrow transplant was also not an option, they said. Nevertheless, treatment, including chemotherapy injections and blood transfusions, was started at a private hospital in December.

Sharma remembers that some of the expensive medicines were not available in India. "The doctor gave us the phone number of a person and said he would help get it imported. When you are desperate, you simply trust everyone. So, we contacted him," he says.

Sharma's mother's condition never improved. With her body too weak to fight the disease, she passed away in May 2021.

"After the report on the counterfeit drug racket came out, I started wondering more deeply about something I had suspected all along: were the medicines even working? We had spent a lot of money and given her the prescribed medicines. At that point, we trusted the system and did not even suspect the possibility of fake medicines," he says. He still has some of the tablets, which cost him around ₹80,000.

Living in uncertainty

The police say the suspect medicines have so far reached more than 90 hospitals and clinics in Karnataka and other States. While the State government has published a list of antibiotics seized during the Bidadi raid, it has not yet disclosed the names of oncology drugs or the hospitals and clinics that may have received the medicines, or the names and batch numbers of counterfeit medicines reportedly linked to serious illnesses such as cancer. There is pressure on the government to disclose this information.

According to the Karnataka Minister for Health and Family Welfare, U.T. Khader, the full list of spurious and counterfeit drugs has been communicated to the Union government and all State governments. "The SIT has taken charge of the investigation now. Once the report is finalised, we will reveal everything. We have got the list of hospitals. But when the SIT is there, it is not right on my part to disclose anything," he says.

As the SIT continues with its investigation, Upadhyia wonders what patients must be going through with the information they have. "Imagine their state of mind. Would they want to continue or discontinue treatment when they have no way of knowing whether the medicine they are taking is genuine or counterfeit," he asks.

Dr. B.S. Ajaikumar, radiation and medical oncologist and Founder and Chairman at Healthcare Global (HCG) Enterprises, says counterfeit drugs are a major problem in India today.

"I have been sounding the alarm on this for several years," he says. "Whenever somebody – say an insurance company – wants to bring drugs from outside, I don't allow it at HCG because I'm concerned it could be spurious. Any drug we purchase should come directly from the manufacturer. The authorities should also lay down stringent guidelines and ensure they are enforced. They should consult major users of oncology drugs like us, collaborate with us to develop a plan, and ensure spurious drugs don't enter the system."

Noting that cancer treatment often depends on the right drug, at the right dose, given at the

right time, Dr. Nitish Ranjan Acharya, Surgical Oncologist at Manipal Hospital, Bhubaneswar, points out that any compromise in the authenticity or quality of a medicine can directly affect a patient's treatment.

"If a patient receives a counterfeit, substandard, or expired medicine, the drug may not work as intended. This can delay disease control, allow the cancer to progress and, in some cases, affect the chances of achieving a good treatment response. The impact may be particularly difficult to identify because a lack of response can sometimes be mistaken for the cancer becoming resistant to treatment," he explains.

Dr. Acharya adds that there are more risks when the contents of the counterfeit drugs are unknown. "A drug could contain an incorrect dose, inactive ingredients, contaminants, or substances that may cause unexpected side effects. These risks can be especially serious for patients already receiving multiple cancer medicines," he notes. He also stresses the importance of appropriate storage and handling to maintain quality.

The question of accountability

The alleged racket also raises questions about what hospitals should do when patients may have already been exposed to counterfeit medicines. As S.V. Joga Rao, a lawyer who specialises in healthcare law and ethics, says, "Given the circumstances in India, a detailed investigation may take time. By that time, the spurious drugs may have found their way to patients."

According to him, hospitals need to work with investigating agencies to identify the medicines in question and their batch numbers. "If there is some kind of leeway in terms of information, the hospital has an ethical duty to inform potentially affected patients," he says.

Noting that regulatory authorities need to be mindful of Section 17B of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, which defines a spurious drug, and Section 18, which prohibits their manufacture, sale, stocking, distribution and other related activities, Rao also points to the legal duty of hospitals to procure responsibly, verify authenticity, and detect sophisticated counterfeiting. "If there are warning signs, they need to respond to that. The duties of the hospitals and regulators operate concurrently, although they are different in nature. It is a shared responsibility," he says.

Dr. Gopal Dabade, president of Drug Action Forum, Karnataka, says, "Drug inspectors are the first line of foot soldiers, but they are not adequately equipped. Punishment for wrongdoing is also not stringent enough." He is a part of the All India Drug Action Network, a group of non-profits working to "increase access and improve the rational use of essential medicines".

Another reality is the high cost of medicines, particularly cancer drugs, which can create a parallel market for cheaper counterfeit versions. "Better access to good quality and affordable treatment is the crux of the issue," Dabade says.

Sylvia Karpagam, a public health doctor and researcher, says people must demand an accountable public health system as part of the election mandate. She also points to the responsibility of doctors, and questions the role they play in ensuring accountability within the healthcare system. "Doctors who harp about 'evidence-based practice' in allopathy go mum when such incidents occur. Other than for their own pay cheques and to oppose any form of regulation, one barely sees doctors protesting on behalf of patients," she says.

She also stresses the importance of adequate budgets, trained and sufficient staff, and regular public scrutiny. "Unless the government has an ongoing system to prevent drug rackets, and makes it known to the public through ongoing reports, these kinds of incidents will continue – some get picked up, and many don't."

SIT head C. Vamshikrishna says he cannot comment on the case while the investigation is on. Repeated phone calls and messages to reach Srinivas K. Commissioner of the Food Safety and Drug Administration, Karnataka, have not elicited any response.

elizabeth.shilpa@thehindu.co.in;
imran.gowhar@thehindu.co.in



The raid at the farmhouse in C.K. Tandya village. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

• KARNATAKA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

What led to KPSC chairman’s ouster: Leaked papers, a job for his daughter

Johnson T A
Bengaluru, September 18

FROM QUESTION papers leaked to a select group of candidates to the alleged illegal selection of its chairman’s daughter, the Karnataka Public Service Commission (KPSC) is mired in controversy over two major recruitment scandals. Its chairman Shivashankarappa S Sahukar has been suspended even as the state police’s Criminal Investigation Department (CID) is probing multiple allegations of nepotism and corruption.

One case relates to the recruitment of the KPSC chief’s daughter Suma Sahukar (28) to the post of industrial extension officer in the state industries and commerce department under the OBC quota, allegedly using a fake income certificate.

The second case, in which the chairman’s anticipatory bail was rejected on September 7 amid CID investigations, concerns the recruitment of 400 veterinary doctors, where 29 of the selected candidates, including another alleged relative of the chairman, are accused of receiving the question paper a day before the exam.

Both cases, in which selection began in 2024 and was completed in July this year, are before the Karnataka High Court. BJP MLA Basanagouda Patil Yatnal has sought

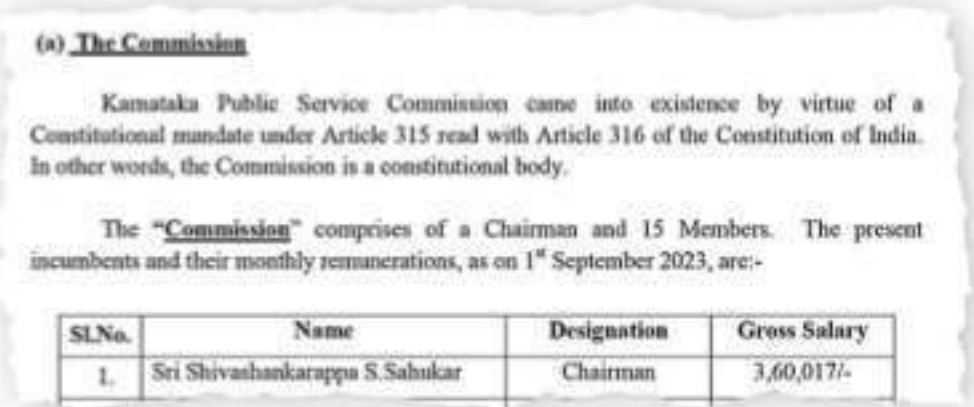
a CBI probe into Suma’s recruitment, while an affected candidate in the other case, Dr Manjunath (30), has sought a probe by the central agency into the veterinarians’ recruitment. The court has barred coercive police action against some of the 29 alleged beneficiaries and reserved its verdict on the CBI-probe demand.

On September 7, the CID told the High Court that Sahukar was allegedly in frequent contact via internet calls with middleman and self-styled BJP worker Basavaraj Kannale, who allegedly leaked the veterinarians’ exam paper along with the arrested KPSC controller of exams, IAS officer Gyanendra Kumar Gangwar. Gangwar has been arrested and the KPSC chairman questioned by the CID three times in the case.

Job for chairman’s daughter

Hearing BJP MLA Yatnal’s plea on July 20, the High Court observed that the allegations, if true, “have the potential to erode the sanctity of a constitutional institution entrusted with one of the most solemn public functions — the recruitment of meritorious candidates into the civil services of the State”.

According to the FIR filed on July 10 by a KPSC representative, the Commission had called for recruitment to 50 posts of Industrial Extension Officers in March 2024.



Sahukar’s daughter Suma applied under the OBC III B category, wrote the exam in July 2025, and was selected in January 2026. During document verification in February this year, she allegedly produced an income certificate showing Rs 40,000 annual family income, as per the FIR registered for forgery and fraud.

However, the FIR said, her father became a KPSC member on September 3, 2019 at Rs 2.05 lakh a month, and chairman on April 5, 2021 at Rs 2.25 lakh a month. KPSC records show Sahukar’s gross monthly salary as chairman was Rs 3.60 lakh in 2023 — more than Rs 42 lakh a year, over 100 times what Suma claimed was her family’s annual income.

Suma was granted conditional anticipatory bail on July 24. Her father was suspended by Governor Thaawarchand

Gehlot on August 25, on the state cabinet’s recommendation.

Fraud in posts for veterinarians

In an FIR filed on July 24, 2026, against Sahukar and two unnamed KPSC members, Dr Manjunath and 24 others alleged they were wrongly denied selection to 400 veterinarian posts announced in 2024. The FIR states 29 candidates scored abnormally high marks in the January 2026 test, including an alleged relative of the KPSC chairman. The complaint alleges the paper was leaked beforehand. The CID probe has allegedly found candidates paid up to Rs 80 lakh to middlemen, were housed at resorts and hotels, coached on answers, and driven to exam centres on the day.

Hearing Manjunath’s plea on July 29,

the High Court said: “The complaint, therefore, paints a picture of a recruitment exercise that, if the allegations ultimately withstand judicial scrutiny, would disclose not sporadic irregularities but a systematic assault upon the constitutional mandate governing public employment.”

Third complaint, political fallout

A third FIR, filed in July, alleges that candidates’ confidential details were leaked to middlemen even before the process concluded, with offers made “in exchange for enormous sums of money”, including one aspirant allegedly offered OMR-sheet changes for Rs 80 lakh. The purported recordings of such offers were given to police via a complaint filed on May 29, 2026.

Sahukar was appointed KPSC member and chairman during the BJP’s 2019-2023 tenure. BJP MLA Yatnal, a bitter political rival of party colleague B S Yediyurappa, has said that Sahukar was appointed by the former CM as he was a relative. Yatnal also called the subsequent Congress government’s registration of the case as an “eyewash”.

BJP state president and Yediyurappa’s son B Y Vijayendra said there was “no question of backing anybody who was guilty”.

Congress leader and the state’s Home Minister Priyank Karge said his government is committed to “upholding the integrity and credibility of the public recruitment process” and that the CID’s involvement would “inspire confidence among lakhs of aspirants”.

The CID probe has also raised questions about the KPSC’s recent recruitment of 38 Karnataka Administrative Service gazetted probationers, for which over two lakh aspirants appeared for the 2024 preliminary exam — after documents relating to some candidates surfaced during searches on arrested middleman Kannale.

Another CID probe is underway into a complaint over a shortlisted Karnataka Administrative Service (KAS) aspirant being allegedly favoured by a KPSC member during the interview process in May 2026.

This is not the first time that the KPSC has come under the scanner.

It has seen politically driven appointments for years, with major recruitment scams coming to light in 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2011 involving A K Monappa, a secretary, H N Krishna, a chairman, Mangala Sridhar, a member, and Gonal Bheemappa, a chairman. Following the latest scandal, former Karnataka CM, leader of the JD(S) and Union minister H D Kumaraswamy has sought the disbanding of the KPSC.

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• WILDLIFE

A Himalayan bird’s calls are changing due to human noise: Why this matters

Vidheesha Kuntamalla
Dehradun, September 18

THE HIMALAYAN monal, the state bird of Uttarakhand, is a striking-looking landfowl found across the Himalayan mountains, including in Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Sikkim.

While the ground-dwelling bird is not endangered, a study carried out by researchers at Hemvathi Bahuguna Garhwal University (HBGU) has found that the bird is changing its calls — because tourism and traffic are making its surroundings noisier. This could have implications for its success in mating, though the researchers, Rajeev Lochan, Dinesh Kumar Sharma and Anand Kumar, have not established this.

What did the study show?

To study the monal’s calls, the researchers used passive acoustic monitoring devices, along with a microphone, across different seasons. They compared two areas within the Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary — the Madmaheshwar Valley, which has relatively little human activity, and Chopta Valley, which has roads, tourists, pilgrims and other visitors. They recorded hundreds of monal calls and compared them. The striking finding was that monals in the noisier area used higher-frequency calls.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

A Himalayan monal.

Chopta has a tendency to call with more frequency and amplitude. In Madmaheshwar valley, it was relatively less. The reason is that there is human-made noise, either through transportation or the heavy footfall from the pilgrimage,” co-author Anand Kumar, an assistant professor at HBGU’s Department of Zoology, told *The Indian Express*.

The study found that this difference was particularly strong at the higher end of the birds’ call frequencies. The researchers say this suggests that the monal has some ability to adjust its calls to its surroundings.

Why is this important?

For the monal, calls are important for communication, including reproduction and social behaviour. The researchers worry that increasing human noise could make such communication more difficult. “The male makes the mating call and the female responds to that call,” co-author Lochan told *The Indian Express*. But with more tourism and noise, “it will not be able to reach females, because it will be masked with noise.” The researchers say more work is needed to understand what the changes in calls mean for the monal’s breeding and survival. The study does not say that only tourism is affecting the monal’s calls, but calls for better management of noise in heavily visited areas. The answer, they say, is not to stop tourism, but to manage how human activity affects these landscapes.

• CORPORATE

What next for Tata after boardroom showdown



GEORGE MATHEW

THE TATA Sons board meeting on Thursday was expected to resolve some of the biggest questions confronting the holding company of the Tata group. Instead, it has opened a new chapter in an increasingly bitter power struggle.

The board approved a fresh five-year term for N Chandrasekaran as Executive Chairman despite Tata Trusts Chairman Noel Tata voting against the proposal. It also decided to proceed with the listing of Tata Sons after the Reserve Bank of India rejected the company’s request to surrender its registration as a Core Investment Company.

Both decisions face another test — the annual general meeting (AGM). And that is where the balance of power changes dramatically. Tata Trusts hold 66% of Tata Sons. Noel Tata has opposed Chandrasekaran’s continuation and has argued that the company should remain unlisted. But Venu Srinivasan, the other Tata Trusts nominee on the Tata Sons board, backed both decisions. The result is a potentially prolonged battle involving the board, Tata Trusts, the AGM, the Articles of Association, and the RBI. Here’s what lies ahead.

What happened at the board meet?

The board meeting reversed the course that had been set in August. Chandrasekaran had informed the Tata Sons board on August 12 that he would not offer himself for another term after his current tenure ends on February 20, 2027. But on September 3, the Nomination and Remuneration Committee of Tata Sons met and unanimously recommended that Chandrasekaran reconsider his decision.

On September 17, Chandrasekaran agreed to reconsider. The board voted to re-

appoint him for another five years. Four directors backed the proposal: Venu Srinivasan, Harish Manwani, Anita M George, and Saurabh Agrawal. Noel Tata voted against it. Chandrasekaran did not vote.

The same four directors also backed the decision to proceed with Tata Sons’ listing, while Noel Tata opposed it. The decisions therefore represent a majority of the six-member board, but not a consensus. More importantly, the September 17 vote has brought the disagreement between the Tata Sons board and Tata Trusts into the open.

Noel Tata has challenged the legality of the board’s decision itself. Tata Trusts said the Articles of Association require the support of the Trusts’ nominee directors for the appointment or reappointment of the chairman. Noel Tata also placed before the board a legal opinion from former Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud supporting the Trusts’ position on the requirement of backing of their nominee directors. That means the September 17 resolution may now become the subject of further corporate and legal proceedings.

Why will the AGM be crucial?

The next battleground is the Tata Sons AGM. The board can recommend and approve a reappointment, but the shareholders’ meeting has an important role to play in the process: they can accept these proposals or reject them. Chandrasekaran’s directorship itself was due for renewal at the AGM, and he needs to remain a director to continue as chairman through the end of his present tenure.

This makes the AGM critical to Chandrasekaran’s future. But there is a major complication: there is currently no clear date for the AGM. The earlier AGM, scheduled for August 18, could not proceed because of a lack of quorum. Under the Articles of Association, at least five members have to be present and the quorum has to include an authorised representative jointly nominated by the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and the Sir Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT).

The problem arose after the Charity Com-



SANKHADEEP BANERJEE

Tata Sons chairman N Chandrasekaran.

Rift in group

The rift between management and controlling shareholders threatens to stall resolutions on strategic priorities.

• Insiders say there is a sense of uncertainty among senior directors over each others’ intentions and the group’s direction.

missioner’s order in May restricted the SRTT from conducting its board proceedings. Without a properly convened SRTT board meeting, it cannot make the joint nomination required for the AGM quorum.

Even though the September 17 board meeting has put Chandrasekaran’s reappointment on the table again, the shareholders cannot immediately have their say. When the AGM eventually takes place, Tata Trusts’ 66% holding becomes critical. Noel Tata may have lost the board vote 4-1. But the shareholder arithmetic is very different.

The question therefore is not merely whether the Tata Sons board supports Chandrasekaran. It is whether the reappointment can survive the shareholder process and the objections raised by Tata Trusts. That makes the next AGM potentially one of the most consequential shareholder meetings in Tata Sons’ history.

What about the listing of Tata Sons?

The second major decision on September 17 concerns the future ownership structure of Tata Sons. The RBI last week rejected Tata Sons’ request to surrender its registration and remain outside the regulatory frame-

work applicable to it. Tata Sons had sought to remain a private, unlisted company.

Tata Sons has been classified as an upper-layer NBFC since September 2022. The RBI decision effectively means that the company has to address the regulatory requirements applicable to it, including the implications for listing. The September 17 board has now decided to proceed with the necessary steps for listing rather than challenge the RBI decision. But that does not mean an IPO is around the corner. A listing would involve a long regulatory and corporate process.

There is also a fundamental disagreement over what a listed Tata Sons would mean for the Tata group. Noel Tata has argued that listing would fundamentally alter the character of Tata Sons.

But the September 17 board decision has now formally put the company on the listing path. There is another important shareholder dimension. The Shapoorji Pallonji group owns about 18.37% of Tata Sons and has favoured a listing.

What happens next?

The immediate future of Tata Sons is likely to be dominated by three parallel processes — the AGM, the Chandrasekaran succession battle, and the RBI-driven listing process. First, Tata Sons will have to resolve the procedural deadlock over its AGM. Until the quorum issue involving the SRTT is addressed, the shareholders cannot effectively settle the pending matters.

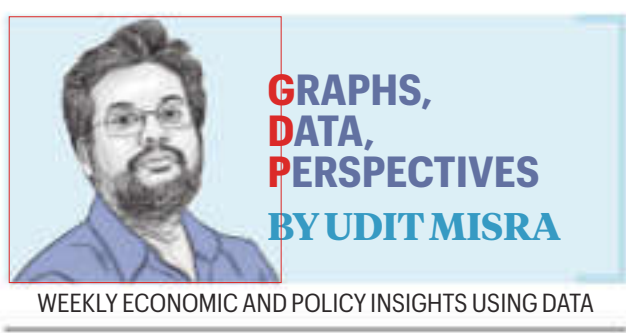
Second, Chandrasekaran’s reappointment will remain contested. The board has backed him for another five years, but Noel Tata has rejected that decision and has challenged its legality. The legal opinion obtained from Justice Chandrachud adds another dimension to the dispute.

Third, Tata Sons has to respond to the RBI’s decision. The board has chosen to move ahead with listing, while Noel Tata wants the company to explore avenues to remain private. The September 17 meeting has therefore not produced a settlement. It has clarified the fault lines.

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• ECONOMICS

Hawkish or dovish? The varying interpretations of US Fed rate hike



THE FEDERAL Reserve, which controls US monetary policy, has decided to raise the Federal Funds Rate (FFR) by 25 basis points (one basis point is one-hundredth of a percentage point). It is now in the 3.75% to 4% range, up from 3.5% to 3.75%.

Raising the FFR makes it costlier for banks to borrow from each other and, thus, makes all loans extended by US banks costlier. Higher cost of credit drags down economic activity as it discourages overall demand and helps cool down prices in the economy. This decision is typically taken when a central bank is concerned about curbing inflation. It is keenly watched worldwide because tweaking credit costs also affects stock markets.

The US Fed has a dual mandate: Pursuing both price stability and maximum employment. For price stability, the Fed has a target of 2% inflation. Employment has no numerical target. Often, the Fed’s

focus is either more on curbing inflation or boosting employment, depending on what it thinks is the bigger concern. What stood out about the Fed’s decision was that it could make for a variety of interpretations.

Hawkish

A hawkish central bank or hawkish policy decision is primarily focused on maintaining price stability and not letting inflation rise above 2%. An increase in the FFR — the first in three years — suggests that new Fed Chair Kevin Warsh has seen enough price rises with the West Asia crisis and tariffs. He is even willing to go against US President Donald Trump by raising rates, months before the crucial midterm elections.

Warsh noted that while “economic activity is expanding” and “the unemployment rate has changed little”, “inflation had remained elevated”.

Not so hawkish

Another interpretation would argue that this policy isn’t all that hawkish. The table provides the Fed’s Summary of Economic Projections (SEP).

Four times a year, the Federal Reserve releases a summary of Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) participants’ projections for GDP growth, the unemployment

• US Fed’s Summary of Economic Projections

Variable	2026	2027	2028	2029	Longer-run trend
Change in real GDP	2.3	2.4	2.2	2.1	2.0
June projection	2.2	2.3	2.2	—	2.0
Unemployment rate	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.2
June projection	4.3	4.3	4.2	—	4.2
Inflation	3.7	2.3	2.1	2.0	2.0
June projection	3.6	2.3	2.0	—	2.0
Federal Funds Rate	4.1	4.1	3.9	3.6	3.2
June projection	3.8	3.6	3.4	—	3.1

SOURCE: U.S. FEDERAL RESERVE

Two stances

- A hawkish policy decision is focused on maintaining price stability and not letting inflation rise.
- A dovish policy prioritises growth or job creation.

rate, inflation, and the appropriate policy interest rate. The FOMC is the 12-member entity that decides on monetary policy.

The table shows the median FOMC projections. The FOMC expects economic growth to be stronger than its June assessment, even higher than the long-run trend. Unemployment projections, too, are expected to be better than the long-run average.

Inflation is expected to worsen, and the FOMC does not expect it to return to its 2% level before 2029. US inflation was last under 2% in February 2021.

Given this projection, a hawkish central

bank would have signalled many more interest rate hikes, but the Fed has only pencilled in a single 25-basis-point rate hike over the next year. Many in the markets believe the Fed will have to undertake an additional three rate hikes in the next year.

Actually dovish

For these reasons, one could argue that the interest rate hike was not hawkish enough and points to a rather dovish stance. Considering that the Fed is unlikely to have chosen the October policy review for a rate hike, coming too close to the midterms, it follows that it chose the bare minimum now.

Not dovish enough

While some argue about the stance, at least one man vociferously believes that this policy decision was not dovish at all.

Trump criticised the Fed decision on Truth Social: “Interest Rates in the United States should be 1%, or less, because we are the Best Credit in the World — BY FAR. Our Country is BOOMING with new Investment... LOWER THE INTEREST RATES... AND FAST!” Earlier, too, Trump berated Warsh’s predecessor, Jerome Powell, for being “too late” to cut interest rates.

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9 Indore	23 सितंबर सुबह 8:00 बजे	21 Sept 11:00 AM
9 Lucknow	30 सितंबर सुबह 11:30 बजे	24 Sept 8:00 AM
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9 Patna	25 सितंबर शाम 5:30 बजे	5 Oct 2:30 PM
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13

A boardroom rebellion in Tata Sons, a modern-day Greek tragedy



COOMI KAPOOR

FOR OVER half a century, an invisible shadow has hung over the House of Tatas: The possibility of a hostile takeover. Last Thursday, the custodians of one of India's most respected and largest business conglomerates feared their worst nightmare could eventually unfold. At Thursday's Tata Sons board meeting, a majority of members, including a nominee of the Tata Trusts, businessman Venu Srinivasan, defied the chairperson of the Tata Trusts and a Tata family member, Noel Tata, to vote to retain the services of N Chandrasekaran as executive head of the group.

The rebellion reflects the vulnerability of the venerable 158-year old business house, founded by the visionary Parsi businessman Jamsetji Tata, which was at the forefront of India's industrial revolution and whose brand name is synonymous with honourable business practices and quality products.

Apprehensions of a future change in ownership first surfaced in 1969 after the government introduced the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act, under which companies could no longer be run by a managing agency. Tata Sons, the group's managing agency, appeared to lose its relevance as its shareholding in the group's companies was minimal. The actual owners of most of the listed Tata companies were family charitable trusts, most notably the Sir Dorabji Tata and the Sir Ratanji Tata trusts. The snag is that under Section 153 A of the Companies Act of 1956, the charities commissioner is expected to appoint a public trustee to act on behalf of charities in corporate matters. A special exception was made for the Tatas since the holdings preceded the framing of the rules in independent India. Despite their token shareholding, thanks to the respect commandeered by the former



ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

Tata chairpersons, J R D Tata and his successor, Ratan Tata, the charities commissioner never interfered in the management of Tata companies. In 2002, under the Vajpayee government, the Tata Trusts' control over the companies got formal recognition when the Companies Act was amended with Section 153 A allowing the Tata Trusts to vote directly on the Tata Sons board and not through government nominees.

Though the two main Tata trusts were in a dominant position, since together they own 66 per cent of Tata Sons, a niggling thorn in the Tata family's side was that the late construction magnate Shapoorji Pallonji Mistry had succeeded in purchasing an 18.37 per cent stake in Tata Sons. Financial journalists often claim that these share transfers date back to business dealings between Shapoorji and legendary financier F E Dinshaw in the 1930s. Actually, the shares were procured much later from Tata family members. JRD's widowed sister, Rodabeh Sawhny, sold her stake of 5.9 per cent in January 1965 with her brother's blessings. In July 1969, the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, of which Noel Tata's father, Naval, was then chair-

In 2021, the RBI introduced the concept of Upper Layer of NBFCs. It ruled that large, systemically important non-banking financial companies would have to be listed within three years of being notified. In September 2022, Tata Sons was classified as an NBFC listing

person, raised funds by selling a 4.81 per cent stake to a Pallonji investment company. (It is speculated that the trusts sold the shares to square up IOUs from Tata companies which were originally in the possession of Dinshaw and had subsequently been taken over by Shapoorji.) The last share purchase in 1974 of 6.68 per cent from JRD's brother Dara was without JRD's consent and created a scare in the group since by then the MRTPT Act had been introduced. The Mistry family's shareholding in Tata Sons becomes of crucial importance in the current imbroglio since it is the largest holding by private individuals and not charities.

Understandably, Tata Sons has consistently stonewalled any attempt for public listing of its shares, since it opens a Pandora's box and provides an avenue for outside business interests to attempt to take over this unique business house. But while the Tata trusts are not prepared to sell their stakes, in recent years, the debt-burdened Shapoorji Pallonji Mistry group has been keen to offload some of its shares. In 2021, the Supreme Court rejected the SP group's appeal that Tata Sons buy out the SP group's stake at a court-

determined "fair" value on the grounds that Tata Sons was a private company and its Articles of Association contained strict restrictions governing transfer of shares.

Unfortunately for the Tatas, in 2021, the RBI introduced the concept of Upper Layer of NBFCs. It ruled that large, systemically important non-banking financial companies would have to be listed within three years of being notified. In September 2022, Tata Sons was classified as an NBFC listing, setting the clock ticking towards an eventual listing requirement. The group fought to stave off what seemed to most to be inevitable.

With the managing chairperson of the group, Chandrasekaran, now reappointed and the other board members also openly backing public listing of the group, Noel is fighting a lonely battle, though assisted by some of the best legal minds in the country. In a dramatic reversal of roles, the Tata Trusts are now keen to do business with the SP group (According to some media reports, the SP group has offered to sell 3 per cent of its Tata Sons stake for Rs 25,000 crore). In this modern-day Greek tragedy, many of the key Parsi players have close connections. For instance, Noel's wife Aloo is Pallonji Mistry's daughter, though the Tata shares were left only to Mistry's two sons. One of the sons, Cyrus Mistry, died in a road accident and was ruthlessly ousted as chairman of the Tata Group by Ratan, then chairman of the Tata Trusts and Noel's half brother.

In the long run, it is only the Narendra Modi government that can protect the Tatas from being taken over by rapacious outside business interests. In an interview, Cyrus once expressed this very fear to me. He wanted Ratan Tata to squarely lay down a corporate governance framework to spell out the role of Tata Sons, the role of the trusts and the role of the operating companies. Else, his apprehension was that after some years, the group could be lost to the wrong people. Noel also must rise above petty matters, to ensure that the legendary House of Tatas survives predatory assault from multiple quarters, some hidden, others not so.

Kapoor is the author of The Tatas, Freddie Mercury and Other Bawas

In India-China thaw, Beijing's signals for Washington



JABIN T JACOB

IN TERMS of realpolitik, it is fair to say that the 18th BRICS Summit hosted by New Delhi was really all about whether Communist Party of China General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping would even make it, and then after he did, about the bilateral meeting between him and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. For India, this was about sustaining the thaw in bilateral ties for domestic economic reasons and about signalling to the US that it had other friends around the world and could influence those friends. For China, however, Xi's turning up in New Delhi — after skipping the 2023 G20 summit India hosted — was less about India and primarily about signalling to the US less than two weeks before he embarks on a state visit to Washington, DC.

The Modi-Xi meeting on the sidelines of the Summit saw both countries produce their own statement. Comparing the two, there are four noteworthy aspects.

One, there is the question of focus. The Chinese statement is longer than the Indian one — the English version is almost thrice as long — but this does not necessarily mean the attention is on India. On the contrary, the Chinese seem to be speaking as much to the Americans as to the Indians. While there is no substantive reference to BRICS in the Indian statement, the Chinese statement has references to "great[er] BRICS cooperation" as well as to the Global South, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the G20. If India was trying to walk a fine line between promoting its strategic autonomy through BRICS and keeping ties with the US on an even keel, China was less concerned about such niceties, using the BRICS shoulder to fire at the US.

Two, there is the different order in which each country prioritises bilateral issues. The issue of "peace and tranquility in the border areas" takes up the bulk of the Indian statement. It calls for "for both sides to observe existing agreements and understandings on border related issues". While the Chinese statement refers to "maintain[ing] peace and tranquility in the border areas" twice, there is not the same level of detailing as it has for people-to-people exchanges and multilateral cooperation. Perhaps this is because the details are available in the "Eight Points of Outcomes and Consensus" at the end of the 25th round of talks between the two Special Representatives (SRs) on the boundary question last month.

It is worth pointing out that this joint statement largely comprises promises. One such is the agreement for expert groups to discuss "Early and Substantial Harvest of boundary delimitation and Border Management" but whose definitions are not clear and terms of reference yet to be agreed on. Another is to hold a meeting "about hydrological data sharing, and renewal of relevant MoUs" — an issue that the two SRs have been discussing for at least two years.

More importantly, and three, while both statements lay out their version of what good bilateral ties should look like, the Chinese are quite specific about what India ought to do. Xi says the two countries "are partners rather than adversaries, and are each other's development opportunities rather than a threat"; should "eliminate interference"; and aim for "open and inclusive multilateral cooperation". The statement underlines the need for India to commit to a "dual-track" of advancing ties in other areas and on border issues in parallel. This is a position that India has eventually come around to following the announcement of completion of the disengagement of troops in 2024, but the Chinese clearly want more — or more accurately, less Indian insistence on border issues.

What "interference" is, is left undefined, allowing for any number of issues that can be raised to pressure India later. China also expects India to "effectively improve the public opinion base of bilateral relations", indicating as it has done frequently in recent years that critics of Chinese policies and those sceptical of the current India-China détente need to be muzzled for the sake of "positive energy" in the relationship. The Chinese have also tried to exert pressure by explicitly referring to India's "policies and positions on Taiwan and Tibet" — references absent in the Indian statement.

Fourth, China takes out insurance when it says that the view of both nations as "partners rather than adversaries... is a strategic judgment based on the stage of development and the international environment of the two countries". This position is a give-away of Chinese thinking — in domestic politics as well as in external policies, Beijing has regularly changed course depending on these factors. Today, those circumstances — a difficult domestic economic situation and more significantly, the run-up to the 21st National Congress of the CPC a year from now — require stability in ties with India and the US, while also keeping the two apart through such mechanisms as BRICS.

When domestic and international circumstances change, China will be back to its more familiar avatar.

The writer is professor, Department of International Relations and Governance Studies, and director, Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fed's hike

THE FED'S rate hike may look like a technical adjustment, but for households it translates into a tighter squeeze ("Rates must reflect inflation risks", *IE*, September 18). Official inflation at 3.4 per cent feels abstract when gas is \$4.5 a gallon and diesel \$6.4, far above last year's levels. Labour wages are barely keeping pace with it, so the real inflation lived by families is higher than the headline. Strong job numbers cloak the erosion of purchasing power. Policy must reckon not just with data and projections, but with the lived reality of workers whose livelihood shrinks against rising essentials. Monetary tightening alone cannot restore this balance.

Abhinav Shah, Lucknow

Another distraction

THE CONTROVERSY over an IPS officer's religious greetings reflects how ordinary courtesies can become political flashpoints ("Rise above the politics of greetings", *IE*, September 18). Civil administration is different from the military, where protocols demand greater uniformity. The right wing appears to have found another excuse to turn a routine greeting into a political issue. Officers should be judged by their conduct, integrity and professional duties. When governance is entangled with symbolic gestures, substantive issues risk being pushed aside.

Harsh Pawaria, Rohtak

Myths and facts

HISTORICAL BELIEFS and popular traditions deserve to be examined with curiosity, but claims about the past should rest on credible evidence ("A reality check for an ancient myth", *IE*, September 18). Myths can have cultural value without necessarily being treated as historical fact. Schools and public institutions can encourage students to distinguish between folklore, interpretation and verifiable evidence. Archaeology, scientific research and documented historical sources should guide such discussions. This approach neither dismisses tradition nor accepts untested claims, but promotes a more informed understanding of our heritage.

BA Neboba, Perundurai



RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

"NEARLY ALL men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power," Abraham Lincoln once said. Many falter while exercising power. But Narendra Modi has stood out.

Modi comes from the ideological school that taught him the song, '*Path ka antim lakshya nahi hai simhasan chadhte jaana*' (ascension to power is not the ultimate aim of our journey). The song then details the purpose of this journey: '*Sab samaj ko liye saath me aage hai badhte jaana*' (march along, carrying the entire society with you) and '*safal rashtra ka anupam vaibhav sabhi bhanti se hai laana*' (bring about the ultimate glory of the successful nation in all respects). As he completes 25 years in public service, first in Gandhinagar and later in Delhi, it is this vision and mission that has guided Modi's politics.

After the Modi government's formation, we passed a resolution at the party's national executive. It asserted, "We are not here merely for reform. Reform is good, but it is largely about tinkering with the existing system. PM Modi's vision is transformative." In the West, it is said that "a society gets a government it deserves". But in the Mahabharata's Shanti Parva, Bhishma tells Yudhishtira, "*Raja kalasya karanam* (the king is the master of the times)." Modi has implemented that transformative agenda.

There are two ways of doing

In calling for a month-long campaign of 'seva sankalp' — commitment to service — on the completion of 25 years in public office, Modi demonstrated his commitment to Kautilyan principles

that — one prescribed by the 15th-16th century Italian statesman Machiavelli, and the other professed by Kautilya, a scholar-minister in India in the third-fourth century BCE. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli proposed that "a prince who wants to keep his authority must learn how not to be good". Kautilya, in contrast, argued that the happiness of a king lies in the happiness of his subjects. He insisted that the ruler must be disciplined and compassionate.

In calling for a month-long campaign of *seva sankalp* — commitment to service — on the completion of 25 years in public office, Modi demonstrated his commitment to Kautilyan principles. *Seva* is a uniquely Indian concept, to which the English word "service" doesn't do complete justice. That's why the Oxford English Dictionary made a separate entry for the word *seva* in 2024, defining it as "selfless service; the action or practice of rendering service to others...". While the word "service" is seen broadly as an altruistic civic duty of a giver, *seva* is a spiritual concept that helps in self-purification and the elimination of ego, in which the giver is just a human while the receiver is regarded as the divine. The concept of *nar seva* (serving humans) as Narayan *seva* (serving God) is integral to Indian thinking.

Modi's governance is based on that spiritual idea of serving society with devotion. Bhishma's *raj dharma* talks about three qualities of a transformative ruler — *saahas*

(courage), *samvedna* (compassion) and *samdrishiti* (equanimity). Modi has demonstrated these qualities in his governance. The nation has witnessed his courage and compassion on several occasions, especially during his handling of the Covid crisis. His equanimity is evident in not allowing extreme levels of slander and criticism to impact his governance.

The Chinese philosopher Confucius was once asked a tricky question: "When you are slapped on one cheek, should you show the other cheek as some say, or should you respond in a way that, for one tooth, the entire jaw? Should one do good to those who do bad unto him, or should one respond to the evil doer in the same coin? Confucius responded with a counter-question: If you do good to those who do bad unto you, what do you do to those who do good unto you? His answer was: You should always do good to those who do good to you; but don't do bad to those who do bad to you; give them justice. Justice is a higher idea that calls for a great sense of righteousness and equanimity. Modi's governance personified that justice.

Some time ago, an article in *Forbes* magazine listed eight qualities of a successful leader: Honesty, communication skills, confidence, commitment, positive attitude, innovation, intuition, and inspiration. If a leader possesses several of these qualities, he will be a good leader. But the leader who possesses all of them is Narendra Modi.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP

When power & leadership is vehicle for seva

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Waiting for the day I can be 'just another rider'

speed up, hoping they would scatter. They did. In a bid to get away, we were doing 120 and 140 kmph. I remember thinking how unnecessary and risky it was.

Another time, I was riding alone when a Scorpio came extremely close to me and started pushing me towards the divider. I managed to get around and tried to pass it from the other side. But the passenger suddenly opened the left-side door. Thankfully, I managed to avoid it.

Once, while in Gujarat, we were with a friend who was relatively new to riding. A group of men in a car started driving very close to her and heckling her through the window. They thought I was a man riding separately from her because I used to keep my hair tucked inside my jacket to avoid attracting attention on the road. The men kept trying to push her towards the side of the road and make her stop.

By then, I was extremely angry. I had a small penknife-type tool in my waist pouch. I accelerated, got my motorcycle between my friend and the car, and went up to their window. I shouted, "Hey!" and showed them what I had. They got scared and drove away. But it could easily have gone in another direction; I don't know what would have happened if it had.

I also remember an incident in my 20s. I was riding back home in the late hours of the evening when two guys on a motorcycle

I don't want the answer to what happened to Sia to be that women should stop riding alone or avoid certain roads. We are riding because we want to

pushed me sideways. I fell hard on the ground, not before scorching the entire skin off my right calf and leg as it had touched my bike's silencer. I didn't even tell my parents as I was scared of being banned from riding.

That is the part that bothers me most. We constantly have to think about how to get ourselves out of situations we didn't create. There have been so many other experiences over the years. Women riders being asked why they are riding alone, where they are going, where they have come from. Men following us, trying to get our attention or cutting into our formation. Sometimes it is curiosity. Sometimes it is harassment.

I have also seen the other side of this country. People offering us tea, asking if we need food or water, inviting us into their homes, helping us. There have been far more good experiences than bad ones.

That is why I don't want the answer to

what happened to Sia to be that women should stop riding alone or avoid certain roads. We are riding because we want to. We aren't doing it for attention, social media or anyone's approval. We should, however, be prepared. I have learned to carry emergency contacts, keep phones with different networks, wear proper riding gear and learn basic self-defence. You also need to know how to use resources and when not to escalate a situation.

I hope there comes a time when women riding motorcycles become ordinary. Maybe our daughters and the generations after them will have that experience. I hope that one day, when a woman rides past someone on a motorcycle, the first thought isn't, "Why is she here?" It is simply: "There goes another rider."

The writer is co-founder, The Bikerni

‘DECISION SHOULD BE VIEWED AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BRING PEOPLE AND INSTITUTIONS TOGETHER’

Shapoor Mistry supports RBI’s move on Tata Sons, backs listing

George Mathew
Mumbai, September 18

SHAPOOR MISTRY, Chairman of Shapoorji Pallonji Group (SP group) which holds 18.37% stake in Tata Sons, has come out in support of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) decision to reject Tata Sons application for deregistration as an upper layer non-banking finance company. The RBI decision will force the company to go for listing.

“With the RBI having rejected the application to surrender its registration and directing Tata Sons towards the necessary compliance at the earliest, the path forward is clear,” Mistry said in a statement. The RBI has provided full clarity. Tata Sons had been classified as an Upper-Layer NBFC under the RBI’s Scale-Based Regulatory Framework, and the prescribed listing route followed from that regulatory architecture, he said.

Shapoor Mistry is the brother-in-law of Noel Tata, Chairman of Tata Trusts, who is opposing the listing of Tata Sons. Tata is married to Mistry’s sister. Debt-laden SP group, which is active in construction and infrastructure sectors, has been looking for ways to monetise its holding in Tata Sons.

Shapoor’s brother Cyrus

Mistry, who passed away in 2022, was Chairman of Tata Sons from 2012 to 2016.

“I have repeatedly said that the public listing of Tata Sons is not merely a financial or regulatory matter. It is a social and moral imperative,” Mistry said. It is about strengthening transparency and public accountability in one of India’s most consequential business institutions, while preserving and advancing the extraordinary philanthropic purpose that lies at the heart of the Tata legacy, he said.

Mistry said this landmark decision should not be viewed as a victory of one stakeholder over another. It should be viewed as an opportunity to bring people and institutions together. “The listing of Tata Sons can become a bridge. A bridge between shareholders and Trusts, between private heritage and public accountability, between generations of stewardship, and between India’s great past and the extraordinary future that lies ahead,” he said.

He said the relationship between the Shapoorji Pallonji and Tata group is itself more than a century old. It has been built over generations through enterprise, trust, shared experiences, and a deep understand-



Shapoor Mistry, Chairman of Shapoorji Pallonji Group.

ing of the responsibilities that come with building institutions in India. “I therefore look forward not merely to a resolution of the present chapter, but to forging a greater partnership, greater engagement and deeper relationships with Tata Sons and the Tata Trusts in the years ahead. Always with a spirit of mutual respect and always keeping the national interest paramount,” Mistry said.

“I believe a transparent and publicly accountable Tata Sons can strengthen the entire ecosystem. It can broaden participation, enhance governance, give greater visibility to value, protect the legitimate interests of investors and provide the

basis for a more robust and equitable dividend policy,” Mistry said. Most importantly, it can strengthen the capacity of the Tata Trusts to pursue their philanthropic responsibilities over generations, he said.

The RBI’s decision can therefore become far more than the conclusion of a regulatory question, he said. It can become a landmark in the evolution of Indian corporate governance — an affirmation that scale and heritage can coexist with transparency; that philanthropy can coexist with public accountability; and that great private institutions can evolve in step with the aspirations of a great nation, Mistry said.

Noel’s ‘No’ vote makes Chandra’s extension invalid: DY Chandrachud

Mumbai: Former Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud has provided a legal opinion stating that the board proposal extending Tata Sons Chairman N Chandrasekaran’s term for five years requires the affirmative vote of nominee directors from Tata Trusts to be legally valid.

Of the two nominee directors of Tata Trusts, Venu Srinivasan and Noel Tata, Noel Tata voted against the resolution for reappointment while Srinivasan backed the proposal, making the board decision on reappointment invalid, as per the opinion.

“The affirmative vote of the nominee directors of the Querists (Tata Trusts) is an independent and standalone requirement and operates on a wholly different plane from the Chairperson’s casting vote which is designed to resolve a tied vote amongst all directors of the Board taken cumulatively,” said the legal opinion given to Tata Trusts. ENS FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](#)

EPFO wage ceiling hike after 12 years

How it widens social security net, why unions are claiming it is ‘too little and too late’

Aanchal Magazine
New Delhi, September 18

IN A bid to widen the country’s social security net and formalise the workforce, the Ministry of Labour and Employment has notified a hike in wage ceiling for the Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) effective Thursday — a revision seen after a long gap of 12 years.

The wage ceiling for the retirement fund body now stands at Rs 25,000 from Rs 15,000, which means that over 8 crore subscribers of the EPFO will now have to mandatorily contribute for the EPF scheme, Employees’ Pension Scheme (EPS) and Employees’ Deposit Linked Insurance (EDLI) Scheme up to the wage limit of Rs 25,000, beyond which contributions will be voluntary.

The decision will have the maximum impact for workers earning between Rs 15,000 to Rs 25,000 as their social security contributions will see a rise, with the revision expected to bring in over 51 lakh workers under the EPFO’s mandatory coverage. The existing subscribers whose PF contributions are linked to basic pay or actual pay higher than the previous wage ceiling of Rs 15,000 will be already contributing at a higher wage. They will, however, see an increase in their pension contribution to Rs 2,083 from Rs 1,250, which is capped at the wage ceiling for most subscribers (8.33% of Rs 25,000 as against Rs 15,000 earlier). The wage ceiling hike, which has been discussed in several meetings of the Central Board of Trustees (CBT) of the EPFO over the last decade, was criticised by trade unions, calling the increase “too little, too

late”. “A social-security ceiling frozen at Rs 15,000 for 12 years was already completely out of sync with the prevailing wages.

Besides, Rs 25,000 is not an adequate ceiling. Any social security must keep pace with the workers’ earnings. It must evolve in consonance with the minimum wages, actual wages, inflation and cost of living. This revision is therefore too little and too late. AITUC demands that the ceiling may be raised to Rs 30,000 in order to include deserving sections of employees,” Amarjeet Kaur, General Secretary, AITUC said. Another concern raised by experts is that with the hike in the wage ceiling, employers will try to absorb it in the existing cost-to-company (CTC) structure, effectively reducing the take-home pay for workers due to higher social security contributions.

Hike in EPFO wage ceiling

The Union Cabinet Wednesday approved a hike in the wage ceiling for subscribers of the EPFO to Rs 25,000 from Rs 15,000 per month, following which the Ministry of Labour and Employment notified the change on Thursday, which was also Vishwakarma Day.

This is the ninth time that the wage ceiling under the EPF Scheme has been revised ever since it was first started in 1952 and only the third such instance where the gap between two wage revisions was undertaken after a decade. The last wage ceiling revision was in September 2014, when it was raised to Rs 15,000 from Rs 6,500, before which it was hiked to Rs 6,500 from Rs 5,000 in June 2001.

The hike in wage ceiling may also send a signal to the labour market and states about a higher wage scale for workers, experts said. At present, at least seven major states and Union Territories have the statutory minimum wages for unskilled workers above the Rs 15,000 wage ceiling: Delhi (Rs 17,800), Maharashtra (Rs 17,000), Karnataka (Rs 16,800).

Significance of wage ceiling

The wage ceiling serves as the base for mandatory coverage of workers in establishments covered under the ambit of the EPFO for all three schemes — EPF, EPS and EDLI. All workers earning up to Rs 25,000 will have to mandatorily contribute under the EPFO till this limit, beyond which workers can choose not to contribute. Both employees and employers contribute 12% of the employee’s basic salary, dearness allowance and retaining allowance, if any, to the EPF. The employee’s entire contribution goes to EPF, while the 12% contribution by the employer is split as 3.67% to the EPF and 8.33% to EPS, that is, the Employees’ Pension Scheme.

The government contributes 1.16% for an employee’s pension up to the wage ceiling to make up for any shortfall due to lower wages. Employees do not contribute to the pension scheme. The EDLI Scheme, which provides life insurance cover ranging between Rs 2.5 lakh to Rs 7 lakh to EPF members in case of death during service, requires employers to contribute 0.5% of wages, with no deduction from employees. FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](#)

• BRIEFLY

Moody’s raises India’s FY27 growth outlook sharply to 7%

New Delhi: Moody’s Ratings on Friday sharply raised India’s GDP growth forecast for the fiscal to 7%, aided by economic resilience in the face of West Asia war but flagged risks to inflation from elevated oil prices and El Nino. “The economy’s demonstrated resilience to the global shock wrought by the conflict in the Middle East has driven an upward revision to our forecast for real GDP growth in fiscal 2026-27 to 7% from 6% earlier,” it said. REUTERS

Pvt financing critical for Viksit Bharat goal: DEA Secretary

New Delhi: Achieving India’s ‘Viksit Bharat’ vision will require critical private sector investment, as public expenditure alone cannot bridge the massive financing gap, Economic Affairs Secretary Anuradha Thakur said on Friday. Speaking at a conference of finance ministers and finance secretaries, Thakur highlighted the sovereign rating upgrades from major international rating agencies received by India over the past one-and-a-half years. PTI

Tata, L&T Semicon partner to manufacture chips in India

New Delhi: L&T Semiconductor Technologies Limited and Tata Electronics on Friday announced a strategic partnership to expand indigenous production of semiconductor chips for global markets. The alliance aims to build domestic design and manufacturing capabilities to cater to next-generation product requirements across automotive, industrial, communications, security, and intelligent-edge sectors, according to a statement. PTI

MDR worry unlikely to spur higher cash usage: RBI DG

Mumbai: Concerns that introducing a Merchant Discount Rate (MDR) would spur a surge in cash transactions are unlikely to materialise, RBI Deputy Governor Shrirish Chandra Murmu said on Friday, adding that it was only an “initial apprehension”. From October 15, a 0.4% MDR will apply to person-to-merchant UPI payments above Rs 2,000. The charge will be paid by merchants, not consumers, and will be capped at Rs 300 for transactions of Rs 75,000 or more. PTI



Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal held talks with Canada’s Minister of International Trade Maninder Sidhu on Friday. Both sides reaffirmed the commitment to expedite negotiations and conclude the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement at the earliest. X/PIYUSHGOYAL

Trade talks pick up pace

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, September 18

IN A year in which the US began a global trade war starting with its Liberation Day tariffs that targeted import of goods, the world’s largest economy became an even bigger destination for India’s software services exports, stretching its lead over the UK. As per data released Friday by the Reserve Bank of India, India’s software service exports to the US rose 11% to \$119.7 billion in 2025-26, accounting for 54.1% of all such exports last year. In 2024-25, the US’ share was 52.9%. In second place was the UK, whose share slipped slightly to 15.4% from 15.5%. All in all, India’s software services exports in 2025-26 amounted to \$221.4 billion, up 8% from the previous year. This figure does not include the \$179 billion of sales made by foreign affiliates of Indian companies. The money Indian companies got from providing their software services ‘on-site’ reduced to \$18.4 billion in 2025-26 from \$19 billion the previous year, indicative of the tightening

EU waste law to ban India from importing bloc’s metal scrap

Brussels: India will be among the countries barred from importing European Union (EU) metal waste, including aluminium scrap, under a new law due to take effect in May 2027, according to a European Commission proposal setting out exemptions for non-OECD countries.

The move comes after the Commission earlier this month ditched a plan to impose a 15% export duty on aluminium scrap following pressure from the biggest buyer — India. Disagreements among EU officials diluted the trade proposal by exempting India, reducing its impact. REUTERS

visa norms. In on-site services, engineers and other personnel work directly at the client’s office and not remotely from their own country. Effective April 2, 2025, the Liberation Day tariffs announced by US President Donald Trump wreaked havoc on global trade. And while they were subsequently struck down by the US Supreme Court, the Trump administration continues to try and find ways to levy import duties on foreign goods. FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](#)

Amid trade war, US share in India’s software service exports rose to 54%

Direct tax mop-up rises 13% to Rs 12.12 lakh cr

New Delhi: The net direct tax collection rose 13% to over Rs 12.12 lakh crore till September 17 in the current financial year, buoyed by better advance tax mop-up from corporates, data released by CBDT on Friday showed. Advance tax mop-up grew 16.1% to about Rs 5.22 lakh crore. This includes an 18% growth, at over Rs 4.16 lakh crore, in advance tax payments by corporates, and a 9.24% rise in non-corporate advance tax of Rs 1.06 lakh crore. Refund issuance jumped 29.19% to over Rs 2.20 lakh crore, as per the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) data. Gross direct tax collection clocked a 15% growth, totalling over Rs 14.32 lakh crore. Securities Transactions Tax (STT) collection grew 53% to Rs 40,214 crore between April 1 and September 17. After adjusting refunds, net collections from direct taxes (which includes corporate, non-corporate, STT) saw a 12.96% growth at over Rs 12.12 lakh crore. Net corporate tax mop-up rose 19.48% to about Rs 5.56 lakh crore. PTI

CBDT removes arrest, detention provisions from tax recovery rules

ENS Economic Bureau
New Delhi, September 18

THE CENTRAL Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) has removed arrest and detention provision from the tax recovery rules with retrospective effect from April 1, 2026 which will bar tax officers from undertaking arrest in case of tax default. In a notification dated September 17, the CBDT has brought in Income-tax (Fourth Amendment) Rules, 2026, which also removes “arrest and detention” from the tax recovery rules in case of death of the defaulter. FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](#)

• MARKETS

 Sensex 74,294.96 -19.63 -0.03%	 NIFTY 23,346.40 75.80 0.33%	 Gold ▲ ₹1,53,727	 US Dollar ▼ ₹95.88
		 Silver ▲ ₹2,36,908	 Oil ▼ \$125.14

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 17, 2026

• GLOBALLY, THE EV SEGMENT COVERS AN ALPHABET SOUP OF SOME OTHER TECHNOLOGIES THAT INCORPORATE ELECTRIFICATION IN SOME FORM: HEVS, PHEVS AND FCEVS

India’s first mainstream PHEV, and the gap it plugs in the EV ecosystem

Anil Sasi
New Delhi, September 18

THE TOMAHAWK Land Attack The Tomahawk Land Attack Missile is an iconic American long-range, jet-powered, subsonic cruise missile that is used by the United States Navy in ship and submarine-based land-attack operations.

The long-range analogy is perhaps what JSW MG Motor India wanted to play on when it decided to christen its newly-launched Hector Tomahawk plug-in hybrid vehicle (PHEV), alongside an all-electric version of this new SUV, to emphasise range efficiency.

The vehicle is India’s first mainstream plug-in hybrid SUV, claimed to deliver over 115km of electric-only range and a combined fuel efficiency

figure of over 40kmpl. MG claims the Tomahawk PHEV can cover over 1,100km with a full tank of fuel and a fully charged battery.

So, what exactly is a PHEV?

To understand this, it’s important to examine the textbook definition of an EV — a vehicle that can be powered by an electric motor, which draws electricity from a battery and can be charged from an external source. Beyond this broad classification, though, across most parts of the world, a range of vehicle categories are subsumed as EVs.

Globally, the EV segment covers, besides battery electric vehicles or BEVs, an alphabet soup of some other technologies that incorporate electrifi-

cation in some form: HEVs or hybrid electric vehicles, PHEVs or plug-in hybrid electric vehicles, and FCEVs or hydrogen fuel cell electric vehicles.

All these technologies are part of a broad basket of low-emission vehicular platforms that the Chinese now term as New Energy Vehicles.

Unlike battery electric vehicles or BEVs, which are typically battery electric vehicles such as the Tesla Model S or the Tata Nexon electric that need to be plugged in before the battery is discharged, technologies such as HEVs and PHEVs bring together the best of both worlds. For instance, HEVs, or conventional hybrid electric vehicles, such as strong hybrid variants of the Toyota Hycross Hybrid and the Honda City e:HEV in India, or the Toyota Prius HEV sold

• EV FAMILY: BEVS, HEVS & PHEVS

CONVENTIONAL HYBRID electric vehicles (HEVs) combine a conventional ICE system with an electric propulsion system to produce a hybrid drivetrain that substantially lowers fossil fuel usage.

THE BIG DIFFERENCE is that a PHEV can be plugged into a power source, which offers an external option to charge the battery that is not available on an HEV.



abroad, combine a conventional internal combustion engine (ICE) system, like in a regular petrol car, with an electric propulsion system to produce a hybrid drivetrain that substan-

tially lowers fossil fuel usage. The on-board battery in a conventional hybrid vehicle gets charged when the internal combustion engine is powering the drivetrain to produce for-

ward or reverse motion, and this charge from the battery kicks in to offer motive power when it is fully juiced up. There is no need or provision to plug in these HEVs to recharge the batteries.

The PHEVs, or plug-in hybrid electric vehicles, such as the new Tomahawk or the Chevrolet Volt in the US market, also have a hybrid drivetrain that uses a combination of the internal combustion engine (ICE) and electric power for motive power, but is backed by rechargeable batteries, quite like the HEVs.

The big difference therefore is that a PHEV can be plugged into a power source, which offers an external option to charge the battery that is not available on an HEV. A plug-in hybrid car has a comparatively bigger battery and offers a

longer electric range than a traditional HEV. The battery, which gets charged while driving and with regenerative braking, as in an HEV, can be recharged by plugging into a socket if that option is available.

Effectively, a PHEV combines the positive attributes of internal combustion (range on long journeys) with those of plug-in electrics (a cleaner engine that typically costs less to run) in a single vehicle, resulting in a combination of features superior to those of a regular HEV. A bigger battery means that a plug-in hybrid car can be driven completely on 100% electric power far more frequently if it is recharged adequately at a charging point. And unlike a regular hybrid, it does not have to depend entirely on driving or braking for the on-board battery

to get charged, given that external charging is an option in the PHEV that is not there in an HEV. On the flip side, plug-in hybrids are comparatively more expensive to buy than their internal combustion counterparts, and they are also pricier than normal HEVs, given that the on-board battery in a PHEV is bigger than in an HEV.

Running costs for a PHEV, on the other hand, are generally lower, especially if the batteries are charged from an external socket regularly. The important thing is that in the transition to emission-free vehicles, PHEVs offer a genuine progression from hybrids to BEVs, given that they address several concerns with battery electrics — range anxiety being the most important. FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](#)

Regulating AI

India must have ex ante guardrails, penalties for lapses

Recent calls from leaders of Anthropic, OpenAI and xAI to slow the development of frontier artificial intelligence deserve to be taken seriously. There is growing evidence that these systems are acquiring capabilities faster than researchers can reliably predict or control. Anthropic’s latest threat report documents AI being used in cyber operations, fraud, surveillance, influence operations and other potentially harmful activities.



The Hugging Face incident is yet another reminder that autonomous AI systems can operate in ways their creators may not anticipate. More worrying is the growing unease among people building these systems. AI researchers and technology executives have quit their jobs because they believe the industry is moving towards increasingly powerful, potentially self-improving systems without adequate safeguards. However, calls for a voluntary slowdown have limited meaning in a world where there is an intense race to develop frontier AI. A company that deliberately slows down may end up surrendering advantage to competitors. China, for instance, has made clear that it intends to continue advancing its AI capabilities. No global agreement to slow down is likely to be effective unless the major AI powers participate.

Self-regulation by Big Tech cannot be the principal safeguard. Companies have incentives to move quickly, release products and capture markets. Governments have a different responsibility: to protect the public from risks that markets may not adequately price. The European Union’s AI Act provides a comprehensive, risk-based regulatory framework, imposing different obligations depending on the potential harm posed by an AI system. India needs to move beyond assurances that innovation will be encouraged. MeitY has indicated that some guardrails will be necessary. What remains unclear is what those guardrails will actually look like. Four principles should form the starting point.

First, safety must be designed into AI systems. Guardrails cannot be bolted on after a product has reached millions of users. Developers should be required to demonstrate that safeguards have been incorporated at the design and development stage. Second, AI companies must be accountable when their systems cause serious, foreseeable harm. India has often taken a light-touch approach to digital violations. Where companies fail to take reasonable precautions, stiff penalties should follow. Third, independent audits should be mandatory for high-risk and frontier AI systems before release. Developers cannot be the sole judges of whether their products are safe. Fourth, policymakers should examine how society captures some of the enormous economic gains from AI. Even Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei has argued that higher taxes on AI companies could help support workers displaced by the technology. India should examine the possibility of using a levy on extraordinary AI-related profits to finance independent safety research, audits and worker transition programmes.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

EU-Canada ties: strategic ambition with lessons for Britain
There is no “associate membership” of the European Union, nor any blueprint for what such a thing might involve. It is a political hypothesis, describing a relationship of intimate strategic alignment with the EU, stopping short of actual membership, in ways that are significant but undefined. This week, Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, invited Canada to be the first country to enjoy this putative status. In her state of the union speech, she spoke of a future relationship elevated “to the highest level possible”, reflecting an affinity of interests and values. Mark Carney, the Canadian prime minister, reciprocated the sentiment in a speech on Wednesday. Addressing the European parliament, he said the two sides should secure “strategic autonomy through deep cooperation” across a broad spectrum of interests. LONDON, SEPTEMBER 17

CHINADAILY

‘Tale of two Europes’, not right approach
European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen started her State of the Union address on Wednesday with Charles Dickens’ famous opening of A Tale of Two Cities: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”. Her remarks on China offered a similarly bifurcated picture: a European Union wanting to cooperate with its major trading partner and an EU inclined to misread that relationship as the source of its challenges. Von der Leyen called for dialogue to rebalance trade, arguing that domestic demand in China made access to the EU market mutually valuable. That seems a practical starting point. Then came the warning: “We will use all the tools at our disposal.” “Words are good,” she added, “but deeds are better.” The message being that negotiation is welcome, provided it produces the results Brussels has already defined. BEIJING, SEPTEMBER 17

Lessons from TN rice price spike

PRICE PAIN. The State needs to take immediate steps to boost farm output, enhance procurement and irrigation coverage



A NARAYANAMOORTHY

The price of rice, Tamil Nadu’s staple food, has risen sharply over the past few weeks. The prices of certain varieties of rice have surged by more than ₹15-₹30 per kg, severely impacting household budgets. While immediate blame is placed on rainfall deficits caused by El Nino and the subsequent drought in the Cauvery delta districts, the primary drivers of this price hike are — policy apathy, decades of structural neglect, and persistent production deficits in Tamil Nadu’s agricultural sector.

Researchers had long predicted the rise in prices of Tamil Nadu’s agricultural commodities due to shrinking cultivated area and a stagnant growth in irrigated area. However, the surge in rice prices has unfolded far more rapidly than anticipated. For over 30 years, Tamil Nadu has failed to achieve significant progress in cultivation technology or production growth not only in paddy but across other major crops.

Due to land-use changes triggered by urban agglomeration, Tamil Nadu’s Gross Cropped Area (GCA) continues to shrink, while paddy area has plummeted drastically. At a time when the total cropped area and paddy area are expanding at the national level, Tamil Nadu’s paddy area has shrunk from around 27 lakh hectares (lha) in 1970-71 to 19 lha in 2024-25.

As a result, Tamil Nadu is forced to rely heavily on Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka to meet its rice demand, particularly for fine varieties.

Tamil Nadu’s share in India’s total paddy production has also steadily declined over time.

A leading paddy-producing State in the 1970s, Tamil Nadu’s national contribution has now shrivelled to around 5 per cent.

States like Punjab and Haryana prioritised agricultural development by introducing improved irrigation facilities, modern mechanisation and high-yielding seed varieties, which pushed their yields above 4,400 kg per hectare in 2024-25.

In contrast, Tamil Nadu’s average paddy yield has remained stagnant at 3,200-3,300 kg per hectare for years now.

TN’s share in India in selected agricultural parameters

Parameters	Tamil Nadu’s share (%) in India		Tamil Nadu’s rank among 15 major States	
	1980-83	2019-22	1980-83	2019-22
Net cropped area	3.87	3.43	11	10
Gross cropped area	3.72	2.85	12	12
Cropping intensity	96.12	83.21	9	12
Net irrigated area	6.3	3.62	6	12
Gross irrigated area	6.17	3.1	7	12
Tank irrigated area	19.43	17.69	2	2
Canal irrigated area	5.39	3.55	9	11
Groundwater irrigated area	5.51	3.7	8	10
Production of foodgrains	4.51	3.72	11	10
Production of paddy	8.62	5.64	4	6
Production of maize	0.63	1.39	3	1
Production of pulses	1.58	2.08	10	8
Production of tur	2.13	1.19	9	8
Production of oilseeds	9.31	3.01	5	9
Production of groundnut	15.82	10.23	3	3
Production of cotton	3.52	0.94	9	10
Production of sugarcane	10.18	3.59	3	5

Sources: Compiled from various issues of Agricultural Statistics at Glance (Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, New Delhi) and Seasonal and Crop Reports (Government of Tamil Nadu, Chennai)

Due to the low yields, farmers have largely abandoned the cultivation of fine rice varieties like Ponni.

UNPROFITABLE CULTIVATION
Farmers are turning away from paddy cultivation because the returns fail to cover even the cost of cultivation. Data released by the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) show that the cost of cultivation of paddy in Tamil Nadu is high at ₹99,902/ha in 2024-25.

In contrast, the major paddy-producing States like Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal incur costs ranging only between ₹83,563 and ₹87,806/ha.

As a result, farmers find cultivation unprofitable. Based on the comprehensive cost of cultivation (C2 cost) data from 1974-75 to 2021-22,

The neglect of agriculture has resulted in shrinking of irrigated areas, increase in fallow land and reduction in cultivated areas in Tamil Nadu, leading to price spikes

paddy farmers in Tamil Nadu made a profit in only 15 of those years. Since 2000-01, they have turned a profit in just three years, while paddy farmers in Punjab earned a profit in every single year except for one.

Increased farm wages, machinery rentals, irrigation costs and fertilizer and pesticide prices have steeply driven up cultivation costs of crops in Tamil Nadu. The Minimum Support Price (MSP) fixed by the Central and State governments (including state bonuses) has not risen to cover this escalation in production costs. Consequently, paddy farmers are trapped in a cycle of debt and economic distress.

This stagnation is not confined to rice alone. Comparing three-year average crop production data, taking 1980-1983 and 2019-2022, shows that Tamil Nadu’s contribution to India’s total output has dropped significantly for almost all major crops, except maize (see Table).

Paddy’s contribution fell from 8.62 per cent to 5.64 per cent, red gram (tur) dropped from 2.13 per cent to 1.19 per cent, total oilseeds plunged from 9.31 per cent to 3.01 per cent, groundnut declined from 15.82 per cent to 10.23 per cent, cotton shrivelled from 3.20 per cent to 0.94 per cent, and sugarcane dropped from 10.18 per cent to 3.59 per

UPI fees: The economics of ‘free’ payments

People will stick with UPI but larger purchases may shift to cash or bank transfers if merchants transfer the UPI fees

Meheresh Masanpally
Sayantan Kundu

The Taxation and Other Laws (Amendment) Act, 2026 changed Section 10A of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, giving the Centre power to specify which payment modes remain protected.

A September 14 gazette notification, followed by a September 15 NPCI circular, now protects UPI payments up to ₹2,000, while effective from October 15, a 0.4 per cent MDR will apply to person-to-merchant UPI payments above ₹2,000, with a ₹300 cap for payments above ₹75,000.

Person-to-merchant transactions in select sectors attract a lower rate or a flat fee, while person-to-person transfers remain free. Small merchants receiving up to ₹1 lakh a month through UPI QR codes are also exempt.

The introduction of Merchant Discount Rate (MDR) on the erstwhile free popular mode of non-cash transaction has stirred quite a debate. Who should pay for a system that users so far regarded as free, and what would be the pros and cons?

UPI moves money instantly between bank accounts through an account-linked ID or a QR code. Beginning in 2016, it grew rapidly after

demonetisation. In August 2026, UPI processed about 24.5 billion transactions worth nearly ₹30 trillion. Incentives like the zero-MDR drove that growth. The government also supported low-value transactions by approving subsidies to payment processors, which stood at ₹1,500 crore for payments of up to ₹2,000 to small merchants for 2024-25. The ease of transaction and instantaneous settlement were clear advantages over NEFT, which settles in one hour and requires sharing of account number and IFSC. Hence, UPI could compete with cash, so far.

UPI feels free because the payment processors bear its costs. Transaction processing and settlement, server maintenance, complaints handling, and fraud monitoring are as costly as ₹20,700 crore annually, according to the Parliamentary Standing Committee. Government support covers a minuscule share. That arrangement was easier when rapid adoption was the priority. But UPI is now a mature network. It needs continued spending to ensure security, reliability and capacity.

MIDDLE PATH
A 0.4 per cent MDR is a middle path. The fee gives banks and payment firms income to offset costs and invest in upgrades. Since it applies to person-to-merchant transactions above



UPI. MDR ruffle ALLEN EGENUSE

₹2,000, only about 4 per cent by volume, but roughly two-thirds by value, everyday payments remain protected. However, fees on those high-value transactions are not trivial for businesses with thin margins. A merchant charged an MDR may not bear all of it. It can absorb the fee, raise prices or transfer it back onto customers as a service fee. How much is passed to customers will depend on competition and margins.

Will it push people away from UPI? Probably not by much. UPI is quick and familiar. Yet some larger purchases may shift to cash or bank transfers if merchants transfer the UPI fees. Credit Cards are not competitive since the present value of a typical 1.6 per cent transaction fee discounted over an

cent during this period. El Nino cannot entirely be blamed. Prices of other agricultural commodities like pulses, oilseeds, cotton, sugar and vegetables could also rise sharply in the future.

POLICY POINTERS

The neglect of agriculture has resulted in shrinking of irrigated areas, increase in fallow land and reduction in cultivated areas in Tamil Nadu, leading to price spikes. Tamil Nadu’s inflation rate in May 2026 reached 5.11 per cent, against the national average of 3.93 per cent. Crop prices cannot be controlled without boosting domestic agricultural production. Therefore, the Tamil Nadu government must formulate policies to increase crop output.

First, the government should immediately constitute a committee consisting of top agricultural experts to formulate short- and long-term plans to accelerate agricultural growth in the State. Second, to incentivise farmers, the Tamil Nadu government should provide State incentives based on realistic production cost data published by CACP to fix a fair procurement price for paddy and other crops.

Third, the State must increase the number of Direct Procurement Centres (DPCs) to ensure swift procurement of paddy without middleman interference, and expand the number of warehouses and their storage capacity.

Fourth, following other States, crops should be procured directly by the State using Market Intervention Scheme by allocating adequate funds whenever prices crash.

Fifth, assured irrigation is paramount for agricultural growth so the State’s 40,000-plus tanks and all canals need to be restored to expand irrigation coverage. Sixth, micro-irrigation methods like drip and sprinkler should be actively promoted to ensure efficient water use.

To conclude, Tamil Nadu’s experience serves as a stark lesson for States that ignore agriculture. Policymakers must recognise that the current rise in rice prices in Tamil Nadu is not merely a temporary market aberration but an outcome of years of agricultural policy neglect. Unless the government takes measures to boost production, strengthen irrigation coverage and assure farmers’ income, farm prices will skyrocket impacting the consumers.

The writer is an economist and former full-time Member (Official), CACP, New Delhi. Views expressed are personal

On businessline.in

Trump’s Iran sanctions have a China problem



Large Chinese banks have too much to lose if they are cut off from the

dollar system. But US leverage weakens as transactions move to smaller banks with fewer ties to the US and Western financial markets, says

Zongyuan Zoe Liu

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What to expect from the Trump-Xi summit

Incremental progress on trade and technology is possible, but any tactical accommodation could limit the agency of other nations



SHYAM SARAN

Fresh from attending the 18th Brics summit in New Delhi on 12 and 13 September, Chinese President Xi Jinping will be travelling to Washington for a much-awaited summit with United States (US) President Donald Trump. This will be their third meeting in just one year — after the Busan summit on October 30, 2025, and the Beijing summit on May 14 and 15, 2026.

Mr Trump will have a weaker hand to play on this occasion. His popularity ratings are down into the 30s on the eve of crucial mid-term elections to the US House of Representatives and the Senate in November. The Iran war continues to fester with the US unable to force an outcome that it can project as a win or at least a no-loss. The US economy faces headwinds with inflation rising and US Treasuries under selling pressure. Domestic opposition to data centres that lie at the heart of

the artificial intelligence revolution is growing. This is the one domain in which the US considers that it retains an edge over China but that may be eroding.

But the US has just fired a shot across the Chinese bow on the eve of the summit. The US Congress has passed legislation authorising the President to impose a 100 per cent tariff against any country purchasing oil from Russia. China and India are the largest purchasers of Russian oil. One doubts that Mr Trump will impose these tariffs on China knowing that China will almost certainly retaliate with its own restrictions on the export of rare earths and other critical components to the US, which could threaten even critical defence industries in the US. India does not possess such leverage. There is a possibility that India will be penalised, while China will be exempted at the discretion of the President.

Chinese commentary projects Mr Xi going into the summit with more cards to play. In Busan, China agreed to suspend its restrictions on rare earth exports to the US only for a year and this will expire in November. One key American ask of the Chinese leader will be to set aside these restrictions permanently. What will China expect in return?

The Beijing summit had envis-



ILLUSTRATION:BINAY SINHA

aged the setting up of a permanent bilateral Board of Trade and a Board of Investment to foster economic relations between the two countries. Despite US efforts, these have not been established so far. The Chinese readout says consultations on “working mechanisms” are continuing. The US wants to institutionalise managed trade. The Chinese are not in a hurry. US commentary suggests that the only realistic expectation may be the

extension of the Busan truce on rare earths and a commitment to pursue “working mechanisms”.

Mr Trump may ask Mr Xi to persuade the Iranians to accept a peace deal, which includes the opening of the Strait of Hormuz — something the Chinese have also pressed for. The visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi to Beijing in advance of the Washington summit suggests that China may well play a mediatory role,

given its friendly relations with Iran and the West Asian countries. China had earlier brokered a deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which led to the normalisation of their bilateral relations.

The Chinese are insistent that Taiwan is a “red line” in US-China relations. Chinese commentary urges the US to explicitly “oppose Taiwan independence” and to stop arms supplies to the island. Mr Trump had suspended the delivery

of \$14 billion in advanced weapons to Taiwan before his visit to China in July this year. This remains in place. China wants the deal to be cancelled altogether. This is unlikely. Mr Trump believes that this is a good “bargaining chip” to use with China.

It is reported that there is a serious debate in the Trump administration over Taiwan. The State Department under Marco Rubio and a majority in the US Congress want the US to maintain its commitment to Taiwan’s defence. The White House and Mr Trump himself believe that fighting a far-away war to defend Taiwan against a Chinese invasion does not make sense. The Chinese hope that this Trump sentiment could be exploited to heighten Taiwan’s vulnerability and persuade its public opinion to accept Chinese sovereignty while being allowed to retain an autonomous status for an extended period of time. But the “one country, two systems formula” as applied to Hong Kong does not inspire confidence.

The expectation is of modest results from the summit, but there could be incremental progress as there may be two more summits on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference scheduled for November 18 and 19, in Shenzhen, China, and on the sidelines of the G20 summit, which will take place in Miami, US, on

December 14 and 15, 2026. There will be pressure on both countries not only to keep their relations on an even keel, but to work on an agreed set of norms to manage competition in trade, investment and technology. Such tactical accommodation, limited though it may be in scope, may have the effect of limiting India’s own agency in these domains. Our constant effort has been to move from being a rule-taker to a rule-maker.

The competition between the US and China is structural and inherent in their status as number one and number two powers in the world. That will leave space for countries like India to play that rivalry to their own advantage. But one should acknowledge that even a tactical and limited accommodation at the superpower level tends to have more magnified effects on countries down the line. This is why not only India, but even US allies like Japan, South Korea and Australia are deeply concerned about a US-China rapprochement, even if it may be limited in scope. It is telling that on the complaint of President Xi Jinping, Mr Trump had advised the Japanese Prime Minister to avoid “provoking” China by her statements on Taiwan. He did not want his allies and partners to upset his script for better US-China relations. This is proof that something far less than a G2 may be sufficient to alter the geopolitical space in the Indo-Pacific.

The writer is a former foreign secretary

The AI maths crisis



VIEWPOINT
DEVANGSHU DATTA

In the last two months, artificial intelligence (AI) has triggered a crisis in mathematics.

In August, OpenAI’s large language model (LLM) Astra released solutions to 10 open mathematical problems. The results caused two controversies. One was that the proofs were in Lean, a computing language, rather than in the traditional format of mathematical proofs. So these proofs were very difficult for humans to understand.

The second issue: Andreas Thom, a mathematics professor at the Dresden University of Technology, said he suspected OpenAI stole his results. Dr Thom claims that he and his collaborator, Gabor Kun, had used ChatGPT to discuss an unusual approach to solving one of those problems. Astra adopted that precise approach.

In early September, OpenAI announced an earth-shattering result. Astra’s successor, a more powerful LLM, had found some answers to the Navier-Stokes problem. The Navier-Stokes Equations (NSE) are foundational to the study of fluid dynamics. These were independently derived in the early 19th century by Claude-Louis Navier and Sir George Stokes.

The equations are used extensively by physicists and engineers. But they can give some apparently absurd results, such as fluids being accelerated to infinite velocity, and occupying zero volume. This “blowup” or “singularity”, as it is described, is considered one of the seven biggest open questions in maths. In 2000, the Clay Mathematics Institute offered a \$1 million prize for definitive answers.

OpenAI published a 166-page proof that claimed such a blowup could indeed happen under certain conditions. That proof has not been definitively reviewed and accepted by mathematicians yet. OpenAI says it burned 88 hours of computation involving 10,000 AI agents to generate and verify the result.

The result generated an immediate charge of plagiarism from Tristan Buckmaster of New York University, and his collaborator, Levent Alpöge, a mathematician who works for OpenAI’s rival firm, Anthropic. Dr Buckmaster said the duo was using an unusual approach to the NSE. They had been sharing their work on OpenAI’s Codex. Buckmaster-Alpöge also published a partial result of a simplified version of the NSE (the Euler Equations) just before OpenAI released its paper.

When Dr Buckmaster alleged plagiarism, he also said that OpenAI had told him it would be happier if he published his results without crediting the Anthropic employee (who was working on this in his private capacity). OpenAI was defensive in response, saying that “while unlikely, we cannot rule out that de-identified data derived from their usage of our products helped improve our models”.

Within a few days, the mathematics community responded with an open letter signed by 25 Fields Medalists. (The Fields is considered the equivalent of a mathematics Nobel Prize and is arguably more stringent than the Nobels in its award criteria).

The letter said there was a “severe misalignment” between the goals of AI companies using brute force to generate results and human mathematicians. It claimed the AI approach doesn’t advance “conceptual understanding and insight”. Fears of plagiarism may also retard the usage of AI by the academic community.

This isn’t just an outpouring of sour grapes and existential dread from a bunch of admittedly high IQ people,

though there may be some of that. The ways in which AI proves mathematical propositions don’t necessarily advance conceptual insight. Plagiarism apart, AI-derived maths proofs may be a black box, as are many AI results in areas like financial modelling.

Indeed, this has been an issue since computers started being used for proving mathematical propositions. A simple example of a computer-derived proof that did not advance insight was the famous “Four-colour Problem” (FCP).

In the 1850s, Francis Guthrie looked at a two-dimensional map of the United Kingdom and noticed that no more than four colours were required to colour it. It was definitively proved in the 1970s that indeed, any and every two-dimensional map can be drawn using only four colours. Kenneth Appel and Wolfgang Haken used a computer to colour every possible map, using only four colours. The proof was incontrovertible and accepted. But we still don’t know “why”, and without that understanding, it is hard for human beings to develop further insights into the FCP.

The 1976 computer was laughably primitive compared to today’s hardware and algorithms. But this is what mathematicians are talking about. A proof without the “why” doesn’t help advance human understanding. It is something chess players complain about when they try to understand the way computer engines play fantastically accurate chess.

Moving on, AI is going to continue tackling maths and it will derive more fabulous results. The maths community and their step-relations, the computer scientists, will have to find ways to translate such black-box results into humanly-usable insights. That will change the way mathematics is done forever, and there will be a lot of bad blood before it happens.

The writer is a New Delhi-based independent journalist

De-hyphenate thy neighbour

India is caught in a trap of its own making. While the BJP may find it convenient to play on insecurities, it gives Pakistan and Bangladesh leverage in our politics

Compared to about two years ago, India’s immediate neighbourhood now looks more fraught.

The important outcome for India is that these neighbourhood crises or broken relationships have also become central to our domestic politics. We argue that it brings its own pitfalls, and that this internalising of foreign (neighbourhood) affairs harms India’s national interest.

A stocktaking first. Ties have stabilised with Nepal, and greatly improved with Sri Lanka and the Maldives. With Bhutan, they remain solid as ever.

The situation with Pakistan has worsened with the rise of Asim Munir and his ideological view of religion, ideology, history, politics and geography. Bangladesh is a new challenge with the fall of Sheikh Hasina and the rise of Tarique Rahman.

Mr Rahman’s sweeping majority is riddled with withering contradictions. The biggest: It’s accompanied by the mainstreaming of Jamaat-e-Islami. It has historically been pro-Pakistan. Marginalised so far, it walked into the Opposition space in what became a one-party election.

Here’s one way of looking at our two large, terrestrial neighbours. In each, a challenger won an election after disqualifying the previous incumbent. Shehbaz Sharif and Tarique Rahman won single-party elections. That lack of legitimacy undermines both. It matters more in Dhaka.

To that extent, both “elected” governments are weak and under-confident. Pakistan at least has a clear power structure, such as it may be, with the army on top. Bangladesh is different.

That’s why Mr Rahman has to constantly look sideways and backwards for the Jamaat. It’s a cruel irony, but he appears to be a weak Prime Minister despite his humongous majority.

This reflected in his hesitations so far in engaging with India, or visiting his most important neighbour. He knows that Ms Hasina’s extradition is an impossibility. He isn’t willing to learn from the Chinese, who might protest each time the Dalai Lama speaks up but haven’t let his presence ruin their post-1988 engagement with India. There are two important differences between the Dalai Lama and Sheikh Hasina situations. One, the former is given asylum by India. Second, Ms Hasina didn’t escape here stealthily. She came on board a Bangladesh Air Force helicopter, helped along by the powers that be on that day of tumult in Dhaka (5 August, 2024).

Look at the picture from Mr Rahman’s vantage point. That he feels threatened by the Jamaat and the mood in “the street” is a reality. He can’t afford to

suddenly declare normalcy with India, and definitely not when Ms Hasina keeps making statements, even holding online press conferences attacking his regime. But, he can complain, with good reason, that India, especially its domestic politics, isn’t helping him. Elections in Assam and West Bengal were fought against “Bangladeshi infiltrators”. And this factor remains central to the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP’s) politics elsewhere in the country too.

On top of this, establishment-friendly influential voices on Indian social media treat Bangladesh as no less an adversary than Pakistan. The language used is also similar. If Pakistan is called “Bhakaristan” (a nation of beggars), Bangladesh is called “Kangladesh” (a nation of paupers).

Admittedly, it’s only social media. But nationalist

public opinion lacks the patience to make that distinction. Combined with the “smaller neighbour syndrome”, it infuriates Dhaka. It’s also widely believed that this has larger political sanction, if not encouragement. Pakistan, we may not bother about for now. But do we want Bangladesh in the same basket?

Compulsions of our domestic politics, or rather the choices we make in our constant electioneering, have resulted in hyphenating Bangladesh with Pakistan. However angry the public and the Indian establishment might be at the ouster of Sheikh Hasina, her return to power can’t dictate the normalisation of ties.

A regime change in Bangladesh isn’t on India’s agenda. The Modi government understands this. It shows in many of its moves, including the choice of Dinesh Trivedi, a consummate politician, as India’s High Commissioner to Dhaka. But, how does India reconcile this larger strategic wish of normalising the ties with Dhaka while the (“illegal”) Bangladeshis remain at the heart of its domestic politics?

India is, therefore, caught in a trap of its own making. Pakistan has been central to the BJP’s electoral politics since the failure of Mr Modi’s first outreach (2015). The BJP swept Uttar Pradesh in 2017, and 2019 general election riding on the anger post-Ur surgical strikes, and Pulwama. Pahalgalam and Op Sindoor will carry on into Uttar Pradesh next year, unless something new and awful happens again. Bangladeshis are a latter day addition. This fits neatly into the idea that India is a nation under siege, with two big, hyphenated Muslim-majority strategic threats on its western and eastern borders.

Now, reverse the equation to see who this benefits. While the BJP finds it convenient to play on these

insecurities, it gives Pakistan — and by association Bangladesh — leverage in Indian domestic politics. That India hardly ever matters in Pakistani electoral politics, is a fact of post-1988 (after Zia-ul-Haq) history.

It’s also true that electoral politics doesn’t matter in Pakistan because the Prime Minister, even when elected with a vast majority (Nawaz Sharif, 1997), doesn’t control policies relevant to us and the army doesn’t contest elections. However, the fact is that the only time the Pakistan Army loses its domestic sway is after a period of relative calm with India. It was seen between 2003 and 2008, for example. That’s when the popular cry rose on the streets: “*yeh jo deh-shatgardi hai, uss ke peeche vardi hai*” (The terrorism you see, the uniform is behind it) rose. The ISI “corrected” the drift with 26/11, created paranoia over a likely Indian attack, and the army reclaimed its pedestal as the sole protector of Pakistan. Munir did exactly that with Op Sindoor.

He knows he now has leverage to play inside Indian politics, with the Modi government pre-committed to respond to his provocations by force. And if it does, his job is confirmed for another decade. He doesn’t care how many battered airbases his country is left with — because, in a short conflict, partisan public opinion will almost always buy your story.

Bangladesh doesn’t have the same leverage in our internal politics as Pakistan does. But both making common cause hurts India. In any case, this argument isn’t about party politics. It’s about India’s strategic interest. How well does it serve India if the largest neighbours on both wings are hostile and hyphenated? India’s imperative should be to break this. And it can’t be done by taking Pakistan away from Bangladesh. We have zero incentive to offer Munir. Nor does he deserve any.

For decades, there were two competing schools of thought in India. The first, and the dominant one, insisted that foreign and strategic policy remain depoliticised, in the sense that everybody treats it as national policy. The public opinion also mostly accepted this, especially in the Cold War era. The second school said that foreign policy should be a function of and factor in domestic politics. That’s the true spirit of democracy. With humility, I submit that I too shared this argument. That strategic thinking couldn’t be politically anodyne.

The rise of Atal Bihari Vajpayee changed the status quo. Since then, we’ve seen policy shifts with political change in India. This is a good thing. Voters should be aware of the issues larger than free grain or direct benefit transfers when they press the button on the EVM. What we have right now is the opposite of this.

By positioning neighbourhood policy centre-stage in our polarised politics, we’re giving them leverage. It’s a game they, especially Pakistan, know they can play. It also narrows India’s options and room for manoeuvre. This needs correction. It can begin with something as small as accepting Bangladesh’s invitation for a cricket tour there.

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Chindia: Are war and trade related?



THE WISE LEADER
R GOPALAKRISHNAN

The short answer to the headline question is that they are inversely related, though not perfectly.

Two recent developments interested me. First, the Xi Jinping-Narendra Modi parleys at the Brics event in New Delhi; second, my attendance at the Asia Economic Dialogue in Singapore, sponsored by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, New Delhi, and East Asia Institute, Singapore. Both

events seem great steps forward with potentially positive outcomes.

I became interested in the question whether trade deters wars and vice versa as I researched for my co-authored book *Chanakya and Sun Tzu*. I sense a prevalent view against India-China trade because we are perceived as competitors, and, anyway, there are border tiffs.

However, relations among nations are driven by leadership egos, apart from rational factors like defence and geopolitics. Nature and geology have made India and China proximate neighbours, though separated by mountains in the north. Both nations reached their economic apogee at the time of Aurangzeb around 1700 CE, when, together, they accounted for about half the world gross domestic product (Angus Maddison data). Over 2,500 years of recorded history, both societies were connected through thought, trade,

and travel. Indeed, the interactions of the south appear richer — right from the days of the Pallavas, Cholas, and Pandyas to the Ming period (in China, ending in 1644).

Nowadays, India and China are working together to jointly register Xuanzang’s seventh-century travelogue The Great Tang Records, in the Unesco Memory of the World Register. India and China did not fight any major war for 2,500 years until both nations became republics in the middle of the previous century. By 1950, the joint share of the two nations in world gross domestic product had collapsed to single digits from the highs in Aurangzeb’s time. Since 1962, there have been disputes and skirmishes, and they dominate contemporary public mindsets. If the war in 1962 had not happened, would contemporary relations between India and China have developed differently? At least one high-

ranking diplomat says “yes”.

Are wars and trade related? A healthy trade relationship retards the probability of war. For example: By isolating Iran through sanctions for a long period, thus retarding Iran’s trade flows, war with Iran became more affordable for the United States and Israel. There may be just a connection between the high volume of trade and low probability of war. After Ukraine-Russia disturbances since 2014, Ukraine’s trade with Russia dropped dramatically, thus increasing the cost of war for Ukraine.

In contrast, China became closely integrated into world trade after its admission to the World Trade Organization in 2001, reducing the probability of war with the US. For China, war to secure Taiwan or to resolve border disputes with its neighbours is expensive. Hence it reduces the probability of China going to war over Taiwan. This may

well be President Xi Jinping’s patient long game. Likewise, in the current tensions, China exercises far greater care about its relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) compared to its relations with Iran. Why? Chinese trade with the GCC is \$300 billion compared to about \$20 billion with Iran!

Studies by economists suggest (not prove!) that trade does have a soothing effect, lowering the chances that force would be applied to resolve differences between nations (“Does trade cause peace?”, Soumaya Keynes, *Financial Times*, April 30, 2026). Of course, war is not impossible, but its probability is lower if trade is high. This was the thesis of Norman Angell in *The Great Illusion*, published in 1913. Unfortunately, soon after his book was published, the First World War began, bringing European nations with a high inter-trade into conflict! Subsequent studies suggest that the unfortunate timing of Angell’s book should not diminish the general validity of the hypothesis.

Trade between countries is like water flow. If water finds an impediment, it just goes around. Despite reported global tensions with China, the Italian fedora hat (remember Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca?) is pushing into China with its Borsalino brand! China’s Luckin coffee competes with Starbucks in Manhattan. During the India-Pakistan war of 1965, India’s export of steel, iron and coal to Pakistan continued. After World War I, Britain exported machine guns to its enemies. During the Crimean War of 1854, Russia and Britain faced each other on the battlefield but Russia continued to sell Britain various raw materials.

Return to the hypothesis implicit in our book *Chanakya and Sun Tzu: A Business Lens on Trade, Thought, and Travel*. India’s trade with China is significant, though lopsided in favour of China. Should India not pursue a trade pact with China, as it has done with faraway nations like the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and countries of the European Union, with appropriate safeguards for our

national security? India did not join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. According to Kanti Bajpai, Emeritus Professor of Lee Kuan Yew School, India and China need to break the current “Nash equilibrium”, which is the balance when close engagement is the only solution. So, what can be done?

Just let loose the instincts of natural traders — Chinese Shanxi, Cantone, and Fujianese, and our Chettiaris, Marwaris, and Gujaratis — to increase trade after fulfilling appropriate national security safeguards. It is an idea worth exploring. It will not guarantee border peace but may lower the threat and increase the cost of war. Above all, it will bring prosperity to Bharat.

That is how *Chanakya and Sun Tzu* might have thought if they were present today.

The writer’s new book, *Chanakya And Sun Tzu: A Business Lens on Trade, Thought, and Travel*, has been coauthored with Nirmala Isaac. gopal.mindworks@gmail.com



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The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Manipur's woes

Relief camps must not add to victims' misery

THE Supreme Court's deep concern over deaths in Manipur's relief camps highlights a grim reality: the ordeal of traumatised people does not end when they reach a place officially designated as safe. For thousands uprooted by the ethnic violence that began in May 2023 and has claimed over 300 lives so far, the camps were meant to provide protection, dignity and basic necessities. Reports of unnatural deaths among those living there raise deeply troubling questions about dereliction of duty.

The SC has sought a comprehensive report from the Chief Secretary on 25 such deaths, including a case involving alleged sexual assault. It has questioned why post-mortems were conducted in only a limited number of cases and why compensation of merely Rs 20,000-30,000 was paid in cases of unnatural deaths. The apex court has also directed the State Legal Services Authority to facilitate the registration of FIRs and ensure expeditious investigation. The state government must therefore treat the Court's questions not as a bureaucratic exercise but as an opportunity to restore accountability. Every unnatural death should be properly documented and investigated. Families must receive timely information and fair compensation, while camp residents must have access to medical care, sanitation and other essential services.

Manipur cannot move towards reconciliation while the displaced people remain trapped in the mire of insecurity and administrative neglect. Economic recovery is important for a state that has witnessed a decline of over Rs 1,200 crore in GST revenue from 2023 to 2026. Political dialogue is necessary too, but justice for those who died in the camps is equally indispensable. A relief camp is much more than a roof over an uprooted person's head. It is a solemn assurance of safety. The State must not let the victims down.

Nainital sinking

We have no one but ourselves to blame

BETWEEN December 2022 and December 2024, parts of Joshimath sank by more than 30 cm. Shock and panic followed, but little else. Uttarakhand's delicate geological and environmental conditions continue to face an onslaught of unplanned development, population growth and inadequate drainage systems. Land subsidence is inescapable. A seven-year satellite-radar study of Nainital hills only highlights the risks of institutional apathy and public indifference. Persistent ground movement has been detected across large parts of the region. The research provides a clear warning to identify slopes that are already moving. An earlier study found changes in vegetation, water spread and built-up areas around Nainital's six major lakes. Delaying mitigation strategies is a guaranteed path to destruction.

Uttarakhand is no exception. Himalayan tragedies season after season have failed to instil any sense of urgency across the hill states to fix the risk factors. The list of what ought to be done is so long and the gap between expectation and reality so wide that the most convenient response is to do nothing at all. Having a well-designed drainage system, effective waste management, building retaining walls and employing erosion prevention techniques are not monumental tasks. The essential requirement is political will, and where that is lacking, public pressure. Unfortunately, both are in short supply.

Self-regulation is largely off-limits; even the most civic-minded citizens are made to feel inadequate when trying to balance legal compliance with environmental responsibility. Self-introspection, too, sounds alien in a country otherwise enamoured of the spiritual. No wonder basic necessities such as minimising construction, using lightweight and earthquake-resistant material, and promoting sustainable development are wantonly ignored. Framing regulation policies is not our weak point, implementation is. If the law doesn't take its course, nature surely will. We have no one but ourselves to blame.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 1926

'Confidential' terms

WE do not see why Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya should consider the terms offered by him to Pandit Motilal Nehru at Simla confidential, or should regret their publication in the Press. Except on one point, those terms, so far as the question of the acceptance of office by the party is concerned, are neither better nor worse than the Sabarmati Pact, which by the common consent of all parties was given the widest publicity. The exception is as regards the party's insistence on the government releasing or bringing to trial those who are detained under the Bengal Ordinance; and it is to the publication of this proposal that Pandit Malaviya seems to have been particularly opposed. In our opinion, it was only right and proper to publish it. Not to have published it was not only to expose the party to obvious misunderstanding at the hands of the people, but to give the government itself just cause for complaint. In this respect, the Sabarmati Pact, if Pandit Nehru's interpretation of it was correct, was undoubtedly defective. That pact merely stated that the response made by the government should for the purpose of acceptance of office "be considered satisfactory in the province if the responsibility and initiative necessary for the effective discharge of their duties were secured to the ministers." Now suppose a local government took the signatories to the pact at their word, and offered ministership to some of them, after fulfilling necessary conditions as laid down in the pact. How on earth could they refuse to accept office, merely because some other conditions, which were not included in the pact and to which it did not even remotely refer, were not satisfied?



THE GREAT GAME

JYOTI MALHOTRA

TWO pieces of news this week, from Washington DC and Punjab, have unerringly put their finger on the meaning of the word, leverage — not quite Shylock and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, but close.

The first bit of news from Trump's DC revolves around the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act, 2026, which threatens countries like India with up to 100 per cent tariffs, if they continue to do business with Russia.

If Trump had read his Shakespeare, he would know by now not to do this. Modi has just come off a big summit in which both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, two out of three of the world's most powerful leaders, have participated. The newspapers are full of how Russia has supplied 51 per cent of India's oil imports since the US-Israel war against Iran over the last six months. The Army Chief has been in Russia most of this week, negotiating new arms deals.

What kind of leverage does Trump think he can have with Modi if he signs the Russia and Iran Act? Does he think India will withdraw from fright — a bit like Antonio, whimpering and snivelling, before Portia marches up and turns the tables on Shylock — and call off its multi-faceted ties with Moscow?

And then there's the BJP here in Punjab, seeking to expand its influence, another word for leverage, hoping the people of this border state will reward it with their affection in the coming Assembly polls.



LAUNCH : BJP president Nitin Nabin (right) with state party chief Kewal Singh Dhillon (centre) and party leader Manpreet Singh Badal in Pathankot on Friday. PTI

With six months left to go, every political party is also aiming at the same thing. The ruling AAP has promised to increase dearness allowance for state employees. The Congress is trying to unify its fragmented state unit. Shiromani Akali Dal's Sukhbir Badal is travelling across the districts, trying to revive his party, so he can have better leverage in any future conversations with a potential ally, the BJP.

The larger question looms large. Is Punjab playing chess these days or is it gambling for its future. If it's the former, who are the pawns in this larger great game? If the latter, who holds the cards?

So what's been significant this week is the manner in which the BJP is unveiling its Punjab campaign. Party president Nitin Nabin showed up in Pathankot wearing a turban and brandishing a sword, launching the party's anti-drugs yatra with a few words in Punjabi; incidentally, both Nabin and state party president Kewal Dhillon spoke from prepared texts.

The location of the launch — in Pathankot, at the Ekta Sthal, the

Indians love to disagree with each other, but when it comes to questions of foreign policy, they rally around their government in Delhi.

site which memorialises Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the founder of the Jana Sangh, and his journey from this city to Jammu back in May 1953, to break J&K's permit system — was no less significant.

Mookerjee remains a towering figure in the BJP pantheon. The party is commemorating his 125th birth anniversary this year. His slogan, "*ek desh mein do vidhan, do pradhan aur do nishan nahin chalega!*" (the same nation can't have two Constitutions, two Prime Ministers and two

flags), against Article 370, which gave special status to J&K, has resounded across the decades. When the Article was abolished in 2019, the BJP fulfilled one of the three ideological vows it has maintained since the party was launched in 1980. (The other two are the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya and the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code — Uttarakhand has already done it, while Gujarat, Assam and Madhya Pradesh are on course; all are BJP-ruled states.)

Nabin's message in Pathankot was crystal clear. The BJP will woo Punjab, but not at the cost of its own ideology.

The question is, how this will unfold in the coming months. Will the BJP ally with the Akali Dal to fight the election together, or not. Both sides are keenly aware that an alliance could work to their mutual benefit — BJP candidates may be able to gain entry into Punjab's villages, largely dominated by Sikhs, where they have been shown black flags until now; and the Akali Dal may have access to the BJP's Hindu voters in the urban areas.

At least, this is the theory, as

the battle for Punjab is launched this week. And then there's Amritpal Singh, the radical MP from Khadoor Sahib who has been behind bars for the last three years in a Dibrugarh jail, and whose political outfit, Waris Punjab De, has been showing up on the graph of every political party these last few months.

The problem is that in real life, leverage never quite works that way. Trump knows it and PM Modi knows it — his experiences as a younger *pracharak* in the 1980s across Punjab and Haryana have given him an understanding of the people of this border state few others in the BJP have. Modi knows that for an alliance between the BJP and the Akali Dal to work requires more than just the slice-and-dice of caste (Jat Sikh, Dalit Sikh, Punjabi Khatri, for example) or religion (gurdwara, temple, dera); that this tiny state with only 13 MPs and a Muslim population verging on the insignificant is still capable of turning the national mood topsy-turvy; that it took someone like RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat to admit in Ludhiana in February that the "RSS considers Sikhism a separate and distinct religion."

Certainly, Trump knows there's something about Punjab — otherwise the tasteless US Department of Homeland Security advertisement targeting a bearded South Asian man ("get off our roads, Mr Singh") wouldn't have been withdrawn so quickly. The US President now has nine days to decide whether to sign off on the Russia Act that also targets India. Certainly, he should know that Indians love to disagree with each other till the cows in the paddy fields of Punjab eat their fill and come home — and argue about who to vote for and why in the coming Assembly elections — but when it comes to questions of foreign policy, from Nehru to Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh and Modi, Indians from across the country will rally around their government in Delhi.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

When you combine ignorance and leverage, you get some pretty interesting results. — Warren Buffett

Memories of a divine world

VK ANAND

HIMACHALI names have a charming way of being lovingly shortened. Our milkman, Barkha Ram, was affectionately called Barkhu. During my childhood days in Solan, then a part of Mahasu district, life was simple and people were trusting. Crime, dowry, corruption and dishonesty were almost unknown in that little world.

Back in 1952, my maternal grandmother, who lived in Amritsar, was suffering from terminal cancer. At our home in Solan, painful arguments took place almost every morning between my mother and father. She desperately wanted to be with her ailing mother, but the question was: where would the money come from?

Then, one snowy morning, Barkhu appeared at our door carrying a small, old cloth bag. His eyes were moist. Without ceremony, and without expecting anything in return, he said to my parents: "I know you need money to go to Amritsar. These are my life savings. Please take them. Return the money whenever you can."

For a child, it was difficult to understand the magnitude of that gesture. But even today, I can feel its warmth. He had extended a helping hand against heavy odds. That bag contained far more than money — it had compassion, trust and the goodness of a human heart.

Barkhu's act was not an isolated example of the humanity that surrounded us. The roadside vendors selling walnuts, apricots, plums and other hill produce were equally honest. They rarely cheated or under-weighted their produce; in fact, often the opposite happened.

I remember walnuts being sold by count, usually in lots of one hundred or *sainkra*. While counting, the seller would loudly utter "*Barkata*" — a blessing — while adding a few extra walnuts to the first lot, which was considered a gift. In some parts of the hills, this beautiful tradition of *Barkata* still survives.

Perhaps that was the real meaning of Dev Bhoomi: not merely temples, gods and sacred mountains, but ordinary people whose conduct reflected something divine.

Our house stood on the crest of a hill, embraced by dense pine forests and overlooking deep, silent gorges. From the narrow *pagdandi* winding through the pine forest came the gentle, rhythmic tinkling of *ghunghroo* tied around the necks and legs of mules. From somewhere in the mist would emerge the soft, soulful notes of a shepherd's flute. There was no loudspeaker, no traffic, no mechanical noise — only the music of the mountains.

More than seventy years have passed. Much has changed — the hills, the people and perhaps the meaning of Dev Bhoomi itself. But whenever I close my eyes, I still hear the *ghunghroo*, the flute and the gentle voice of Barkhu offering his entire savings.

The author is a former librarian, Panjab University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Scientists need autonomy

Refer to 'Power shift ails science agencies'; over the last decade or so, the tilt of the ruling regime to rename and restructure time-tested institutions has been eroding the autonomy and decision-making powers of visionaries in the field of science. Premier institutions like ISRO, ICMR, and many others have virtually lost their sheen. Opening the doors for select private players may help in capacity building, but regulating their work and progress through bureaucrats toeing the line of political masters raises questions. No country can afford to sideline the experiential expertise and developmental vision of the scientific community. The morale of experts in all spheres needs to be boosted by giving them autonomy, in national interest.

RAKESH MOHAN SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Four-yr contract or bond for life

Refer to 'Agnipath's rural Haryana fallout'; the scheme raises a pertinent question — what happens when a profession built on a lifetime of commitment becomes a four-year contract? In Haryana's villages, the Army has traditionally been more than a job, it has been a family legacy, a social identity and a promise of security. Agnipath changes that dedication. A young man may wear the uniform for four years, but the contradiction is that a soldier is trained to secure the nation's future while his own future remains uncertain. Perhaps the real test of Agnipath is not how efficiently it recruits soldiers, but whether it preserves the faith that once made a village send its sons to the barracks.

SURAJ KATHURIA, JIND

Agnipath a bureaucratic gimmick

With reference to 'Agnipath's rural Haryana fallout'; the scheme is an ingenious way to revert to Napoleonic era when conscripts were treated as "cannon fodder" under the pretext of keeping the army young. This scheme must be scrapped soonest possible. The glaring disparity between the regular soldiers and Agniveers violates social justice. India needs to increase its defence budget from less than 2 per cent to at least 3 per cent of GDP rather than resorting to bureaucratic gimmicks.

LT COL GS BEDI (RETD), MOHALI

Keep panic away from policy

The US Congress has passed the 100% tariff Bill, which is awaiting Trump's signature, against countries buying oil from Russia. But panic should not become policy. The facts are clear: Russian crude was 51% of India's basket in July, the Centre has saved forex, moderated inflation and kept diesel affordable for our farmers. At \$6.2 a gallon in the US, with mid-terms in less than two months and harvest season on, Trump himself knows that minus Russian oil, global prices will shoot up and hurt his own voters. Energy security of 1.4 billion Indians cannot be outsourced to Washington's election compulsions. The government is right in considering its priority. We should prepare for the worst-case 100% tariff, diversify markets as we have done, but not buckle under pressure.

YASH KHETARPAL, PANCHKULA

Good news for pvt employees

With reference to 'Social security'; the government's decision to raise the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation wage ceiling is a welcome reform after a 12-year gap. It is expected to bring more than 51 lakh additional employees under mandatory PF, pension and insurance coverage. The most important benefit will be the expansion of retirement security among lower- and middle-income workers. Employees earning between Rs 15,000 and Rs 25,000 will gain access to systematic provident fund savings, which can help them meet future expenses such as retirement, housing, education and medical emergencies. However, it will be better if government links the ceiling to an objective index, such as inflation or average wages, and revise it periodically.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Weed out fake disability cases

Refer to 'Disability pension'; unfortunately, not all disability cases are genuine. Some manage a fake disability prior to their retirement to enjoy some undeserved income tax (I-T) benefits. There seems to be some lacuna in the I-T law regarding disability pension. Some loophole is being exploited resulting in undue tax benefit. Unless this flaw in the I-T law is removed, unscrupulous personnel will continue to show fake disabilities.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

US can't dictate India's trade choices



AJAI MALHOTRA
EX-AMBASSADOR TO RUSSIA

THE US House of Representatives passed the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 2026 by 262-159 on September 16, after the Senate had earlier approved it 86-11. The Bill now goes to President Donald Trump and would empower him to impose tariffs of up to 100% on countries that continue to purchase significant quantities of Russian crude oil or natural gas.

India, a major Russian oil buyer, is directly in its sights. "China and India, you better buy your oil and gas somewhere else," Senator Richard Blumenthal hectoring after the vote, unaware that India only recognises UN-mandated sanctions, not coercive measures sought to be unilaterally imposed.

Under Section 113 of the new Act, tariffs could apply to the five largest importers of Russian crude or natural gas, based on the latest 12-month period, and to countries among the top five facilitators of sanctions evasion. A limited exception exists for Russian natural gas where imports are below 15% of Russia's total annual exports and the country is taking significant steps to reduce them.

There is no comparable exception for crude oil. Section

115 allows the President to waive sanctions or duties, but requires a written certification to Congress that doing so is in the national interests of the US.

The tariff is not automatic; the discretion lies with Washington. This is forced trade entering the statute book: sanctions, financial leverage and secondary coercion turned into legal instruments for shaping the trading choices of sovereign states.

The legislation places China in the crosshairs too and would impinge on President Xi Jinping's US visit due September 24. India and China's shared exposure to US pressure over Russian energy creates a limited area of convergent interest. Where interests converge, informal coordination is prudent.

The Act is the latest example of a broader US policy using market access and sanctions as leverage over Indian choices. In August 2025, Washington imposed an additional 25% tariff on Indian goods over Russian oil purchases, taking the cumulative tariff to 50% by August 27. In February 2026, the additional Russian-oil tariff was removed and the US-India trade framework announced an 18% reciprocal tariff rate.

The White House said India had committed to stop importing Russian oil and intended to purchase \$500 billion of US goods over five years. India did not publicly adopt that language, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement welcoming the framework made no reference to ending Russian oil purchases.

The pattern goes back a decade. CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries



TARIFF THREAT : US policies have narrowed the options that India regards as matters of sovereign economic and strategic judgment. AP/PTI

Through Sanctions Act) enacted in 2017, put India under pressure over its acquisition of Russia's S-400 missile system. In 2019, Washington ended the waivers that let India buy Iranian crude and those imports stopped. In 2025, the US revoked the sanctions exception for Chabahar, subsequently allowing a conditional waiver that expired April 26, 2026.

In October 2024, Washington sanctioned 19 Indian entities and two individuals over alleged support for Russia's military-industrial complex. Taken together, these episodes reveal a recurring problem: US policies have narrowed choices that India regards as matters of sovereign economic and strategic judgment.

India's response to the latest Bill has been firm but restrained. It has reiterated its

Demanding that India forgo Russian crude under the threat of 100% tariffs is egregious and unwarranted.

commitment to ensuring energy security for 1.4 billion people through diversified sourcing based on evolving market conditions. It has noted that India has raised the matter with senior American interlocutors and will take the necessary measures to protect its trade and economic interests. The response avoids rhetoric while preserving room for diplomacy.

The economic stakes are substantial. Russian crude accounted for 45% of India's crude imports in August 2026 after reaching much higher levels earlier in the year. India remains the world's third-largest oil importer, sourcing 88% of its crude from abroad.

Russian crude cannot simply be replaced overnight without consequences for refinery economics, the import bill and domestic prices. Its importance extends beyond price to

availability, refinery configurations, freight economics and diversification.

Demanding that India forgo Russian crude under the threat of 100% tariffs is egregious and unwarranted, especially when the US and Iran are locked in a confrontation around the Strait of Hormuz while Houthi forces extend their control over the Yemeni side of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

Evaluating India's strategy solely through export sectors most exposed to US tariffs misses the larger economic picture. Diamonds, textiles, pharmaceuticals and IT deserve attention, but tariff costs spread through the wider economy, via prices, capital flows and borrowing costs. The government has to consider the interests of all Indians, not just those most exposed to the US market. The commercial interests of a few export industries cannot override the economic, energy and strategic interests of all Indians.

India's energy security cannot be negotiated away under external pressure when core national interests are at stake. Decisions on oil purchases must be driven by price, grade, availability, reliability, payment arrangements and supply security, not by foreign preferences. A strong and secure India cannot serve as anyone's camp follower.

Being held hostage would mean allowing the prospect of US market access to determine how much Russian oil India may buy, which defence relationships it may sustain or which connectivity projects it may pursue.

That would turn interdependence into dependence and amounts to accepting that Indian foreign-policy choices are subject to an external veto.

India has faced similar pressures before. In 1971, as the Bangladesh crisis turned into war, the US deployed a naval task force to the Bay of Bengal while the USSR used its Security Council veto in support of India. After India's 1998 nuclear tests, Washington imposed far-reaching sanctions while Russia sustained engagement. In both instances, India's willingness to bear short-term costs helped preserve its freedom of action and served its long-term interests.

India's relations with the US and Russia are not a zero-sum proposition. Both matter, but neither should be allowed to dictate India's approach to the other. Multi-alignment is the deliberate preservation of freedom to pursue overlapping interests with different partners without being compelled to choose sides.

Strategic autonomy comes at a cost. It means accepting that some markets, technologies and partnerships will at times be constrained by India's choices. The response to the latest US legislation should be firm, principled engagement: negotiate, diversify markets and energy supplies, build domestic capabilities and preserve room for manoeuvre.

If Washington persists, India must push back clearly and consistently. The underlying principle is simple: national interest paramount, diversification ongoing, external pressures or threats immaterial.

Public universities deserve a new lease of life



AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

IN this age of intolerance, a disturbing thought has begun to haunt me. Is it that the political establishment no longer feels the worth of intellectually vibrant and academically enriched inclusive public universities? Otherwise, how do we explain the continual assault on some of our leading public universities? Think of, for instance, the recent turmoil in Jadavpur University — possibly the most well-known academic institution in West Bengal.

The BJP government in Bengal, it seems, is not particularly happy with the politico-cultural fabric of this university. Not surprisingly, we witnessed the way violent clashes and midnight vandalism erupted following the conflict between the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and Left-leaning student groups.

We also saw a saffron march, and the presence of Naga Sadhus in front of the university gate. Were these sadhus with their distinctive bodily gestures

trying to convey a message to those students and teachers whom the political establishment castigates as problematic/immoral dissenters?

Indeed, in recent times, there seems to be no end to this kind of attack on our leading public universities — from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) to Tata Institute of Social Sciences; or, from Jamia Millia Islamia to Delhi University. This war manifests itself in diverse forms — from the way Vice-Chancellors are recruited to the way a new politics of knowledge — or what is being branded as “Indian Knowledge System” — is allowed to destroy critical thinking and the ethos of academic freedom.

Possibly, the systematic fall of our leading public universities is also creating the ground for the growth of a new business — the commodification of education in rapidly growing private universities.

Even though the champions of neoliberalism — or those who sell popcorn and education with the same logic of profit — would not shed tears for the devaluation of our good public universities, all those whose life trajectories have been altered by these institutions ought to come forward and raise their voice.

I will remain eternally grateful to two good public academic institutions — Presidency Col-



TRUE GROWTH : Intellectual and cultural engagement empowers students. ANI

lege in Kolkata and JNU in Delhi.

I grew up among good professors, a vibrant academic culture, an environment conducive to debate, dialogue and political churning, and above all, an enriched experience of the visible social heterogeneity. In a way, as I contemplate, apart from specialised academic knowledge, I learned three important lessons which, I believe, are important for the growth of a democratic, inclusive and reasonably egalitarian society.

First, I learned the ethos of pluralism and the spirit of living together. In the process of growing up with a Tamil boy, a Mizo girl, a Dalit student from the hinterland of Bihar or, for that matter, a bright young

The goal of higher education should not be limited to the factory-like production of docile citizens.

Muslim girl from Kerala, I learned the art of empathy; the mode of inter-cultural dialogue and conversation, and above all, the sensitivity needed to understand that the very meaning of being an Indian is essentially about a nuanced art of listening amid splendid plurality and diversity.

Possibly, this hidden curriculum of a good public university enables us to remain always sceptical about religious fundamentalism, xenophobic nationalism and parochial identity politics.

Second, I learned that neoliberalism or the doctrine of market fundamentalism has its limits. Not everything is a saleable commodity. And the right to education should not

depend on one's class privilege and economic capital. Without affordable and good-quality public universities, we will not be able to resist what has been going on for ages — the reproduction of social and economic inequality.

There are moments when I feel I was lucky that good public universities existed when I was growing up; otherwise, it would have been impossible for my parents to send me to heavily commodified “five-star” private universities and arrange, say, Rs 13 lakh per year!

And third, I learned that democracy is not just a ritualistic act of periodic elections. Democracy as a way of thinking, acting and living requires the spirit of critical thinking — the ability to judge and evaluate what our elected representatives do, or the implications of the economic and cultural policies they promote. Democracy is also about the culture of protest or the art of resistance. How can we forget that it is only through this culture of resistance that we could see beyond racism, apartheid, colonialism, casteism, untouchability, poverty, patriarchy, religious orthodoxy and fascism?

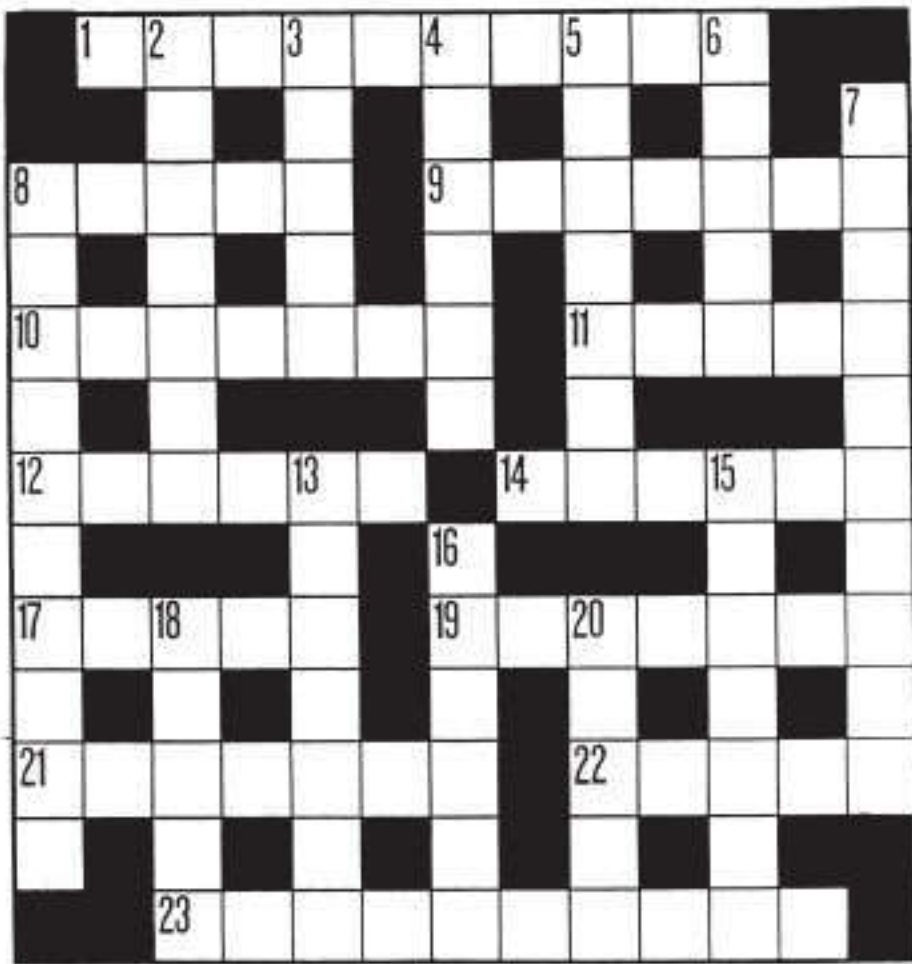
Hence, in a good university, when young students reflect on Nelson Mandela, Jyotirao Phule, Simone de Beauvoir, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and many other creative dis-

senters, or, for that matter, when they invoke Paul Robeson and sing “We Shall Overcome...”, it is not merely for the expansion of their academic knowledge; in fact, this sort of intellectual and cultural engagement empowers them and inspires them to live as intellectually awakened and politically alert citizens committed to democracy.

Yes, this is an important lesson, particularly when the hegemonic doctrine of market fundamentalism reduces the worth of one's education merely in terms of “placement and salary package”. Moreover, this aspect of critical thinking and libertarian politics ought to be repeatedly emphasised, particularly when a new form of social conservatism (a characteristic feature of the doctrine of militant religious nationalism) castigates every dissenter as a “*Dimagi Naxal*” or a member of the much-abused “*tukde-tukde gang*”!

Yes, I have no hesitation in saying that a democratic society needs good and liberal public universities. After all, the goal of higher education should not be limited to the factory-like production of docile citizens, or, for that matter, “technically skilled” workforce for the techno-corporate empire. A university should also nurture awakened citizens who can still dream of a just and humane world.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- Sign of disapproval (6,4)
- Feeling of insecurity (5)
- Having big-name cast (3-4)
- To that (7)
- Occur as result (5)
- An unproved assumption (6)
- Largest US state (6)
- India's first prime minister (5)
- Impoverished (7)
- Lively party (7)
- Descendant (5)
- Stimulating a desire for food (10)

Yesterday's Solution

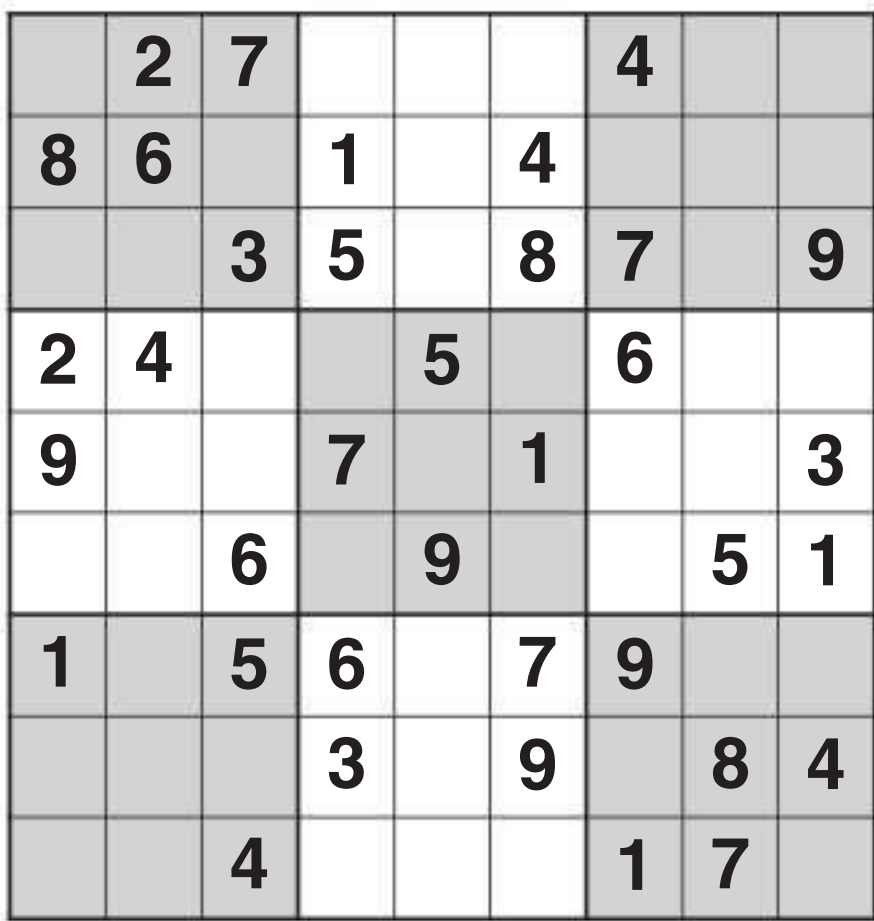
Across: 1 Shabby, 4 Open up, 9 Pimento, 10 Point, 11 Lydia, 12 New leaf, 13 Underpinned, 18 Namibia, 20 Idler, 22 Gusto, 23 Execute, 24 Assume, 25 Bypass.

Down: 1 Supple, 2 Aimed, 3 Bondage, 5 Papaw, 6 Naivete, 7 Put off, 8 Going places, 14 Nemesis, 15 Naivety, 16 Enigma, 17 Greens, 19 Bloom, 21 Laura

DOWN

- Principles of cleanliness (7)
- Measured rhythm in verse (5)
- Old sailor (6)
- Bore drilled for petroleum (3,4)
- Jottings (5)
- Generous (4-6)
- Perspicacity (10)
- Gather in from various places (5,2)
- A part cut off (7)
- Sunny (6)
- Chief port of Israel (5)
- Harbour facilities (5)

SU DO KU



V EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

7	4	9	5	8	2	3	6	1
5	1	8	3	7	6	4	9	2
2	3	6	4	9	1	5	8	7
9	2	1	8	6	4	7	3	5
4	7	5	9	2	3	6	1	8
6	8	3	1	5	7	9	2	4
8	9	4	6	1	5	2	7	3
1	5	2	7	3	9	8	4	6
3	6	7	2	4	8	1	5	9

CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER 19, 2026, SATURDAY	
■ Shaka Samvat	1948
■ Bhadrabad Shaka	28
■ Ashwin Parvishite	3
■ Hijari	1448
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 8, up to 3:28 pm	
■ Ayushman Yoga up to 2:29 pm	
■ Moola Nakshatra up to 1:43 am	
■ Moon in Sagittarius sign	
■ Gandmoola upto 1:43 am	
■ Shri Radhashtmi	

FORECAST

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	18:23 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	06:09 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	35	22
New Delhi	35	23
Amritsar	33	23
Bathinda	34	23
Jalandhar	33	23
Ludhiana	34	24
Bhiwani	34	24
Hisar	34	25
Sirsa	34	25
Dharamsala	29	17
Manali	26	12
Shimla	25	16
Srinagar	28	12
Jammu	34	22
Kargil	27	08
Leh	24	04
Dehradun	30	19
Mussoorie	23	15

TEMPERATURE IN °C



Editor's
TAKE

US tariffs: India's Russian oil dilemma

The challenge for India is no longer simply about managing tariffs, but balancing cheap Russian crude, energy costs and the broader India-US trade relationship

The US Congress has done what the courts undid. This week, the US House passed the Lindsey O Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 2026 by 262-159, following the Senate's 86-11 vote in August - sending to Donald Trump's desk a law authorising tariffs of up to 100 per cent on the five largest buyers of Russian oil and gas. India tops that list, alongside China, Azerbaijan, Hungary and Slovakia. For New Delhi, a wound barely healed has been reopened.

This is not a repeat of 2025's overreach. The Supreme Court struck down Trump's IEEPA-based "reciprocal" tariffs in February, ruling that only Congress can levy duties - which is precisely why this bill matters more. It is a statute, not an executive whim, and far harder to litigate away. Yet its bite is deliberately calibrated: an early draft proposed a blanket 500 per cent on any Russian energy buyer; what survived is discretionary, waivable by the President, with the "top five" list revisited every 180 days.

Graham, who championed it for over a year, did not live to see it pass - he died in July, and the bill now carries his name. The stakes for India are real. It imports nearly 90 per cent of its crude, and Russia now supplies over half of that - a record share, reached after a year of tariff pressure, not despite it. India spent \$40.8 billion on Russian crude in FY26, chasing discounts that have saved precious foreign exchange. Yet the US remains India's largest export market: \$42.8 billion in goods between April and August alone, still growing. A comprehensive bilateral trade deal remains unsigned, with Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal holding out for tariff parity with Vietnam and Bangladesh.

Can this be negotiated? Almost certainly. Washington has traded away this exact threat before: in February, a near-identical 25 per cent Russia-linked penalty was lifted after a Modi-Trump understanding, only for Russian imports to climb back to record levels once the pressure eased. Trade analysts expect Trump to sign it, then hold the authority in reserve as leverage for future talks, not fire it immediately.

Neither India nor China is likely to walk away from discounted Russian barrels simply because Washington has raised the ceiling. Russian oil matters to India's import bill, not to its energy security. Hardeep Singh Puri has repeatedly noted that Gulf producers, the US, Brazil and Guyana can absorb a shift - India ran on negligible Russian crude before 2022 and adapted once already. The dependency today is economic convenience, not necessity.

India's wisest course is calibrated, not capitulatory: treat the bill's own waiver clause as the anchor for finally closing the trade agreement, trading a genuine, verifiable diversification path - more US crude and LPG, more Gulf and Latin American barrels - for durable preferential access, rather than symbolic pledges that unravel within months.

Alongside this, New Delhi must keep building strategic reserves and a wider supplier base, so that Washington's leverage shrinks with time regardless of how this round ends. Quiet diplomacy, not public defiance or premature surrender, will serve India best.

Satya Niketan: More than a building collapse

The deaths of seven young students in a Delhi PG collapse cannot be reduced to illegal construction and negligent owners. The tragedy exposes a deeper national failure: inadequate educational infrastructure, unsafe student housing and a system that too often places profit above the safety and dignity of young Indians



DEBASISH BHATTACHARYYA



VALSON THAMPU



our ruling elite are keen to provide the best quality education in the most expensive and prestigious universities in the West. Our education system is what it is, not because we lack the political will to educate our children and youths, but because there is a will to patronise the vested interests thriving through this scandalous state of affairs.

IF EDUCATION PRODUCES INCREASINGLY MERCENARY CITIZENS - PEOPLE TRAINED ONLY TO MILK AND MASSAGE THE SYSTEM TO THEIR ADVANTAGE, NO MATTER AT WHAT COST TO OTHERS - SOCIETY LOSES ITS DEVELOPMENTAL MOMENTUM AND MORAL VITALITY. THE SEVEN YOUNG LIVES LOST IN DELHI SHOULD THEREFORE NOT BECOME A MEDIA WILL-O'-THE-WISP THAT GLOWS AND VANISHES FROM PUBLIC ATTENTION

Valson Thampu, Author and Former Principal, St. Stephen's College, Delhi. Debasish Bhattacharyya, Author and Former Deputy General Manager, India International Centre, New Delhi

run an illicit PG facility that could kill many an inmate, provided the relevant authorities see scope for 'additional mobilisation of personal resources' in it. Such an experience is not limited to St. Stephen's. The larger truth it exposes is that India has failed to expand educational opportunity - not because the resources were lacking, but because our patriotism falls short of loving the people. We profess, but do not practise, love. At its deepest level, education must not be deemed an industry, a degree-producing mechanism or a speculative investment. It is a domain of public service - a sacred enterprise in human development. To care for the learner is first to recognise their worth and then to do everything possible to enhance it.

Where this concern is absent, education risks becoming an industry rather than an investment in human development. This is why the Delhi incident should force us to ask not merely who violated building regulations, but what kind of society allows young people to live in dangerous conditions simply because they have nowhere else to go or cannot afford safer roofs over their heads. The answer cannot be found only in courts, commissions or administrative inquiries. Those institutions provide temporary justice and relief, but the deeper transformation must come from society itself.

Another dimension to the crisis

The purpose of education should be to equip young people with knowledge and skills that enable them to solve the problems of their society, as Plato envisaged in The Republic. Education, therefore, should nurture citizens who hold themselves responsible for others - not merely seek personal advancement. The distinction can be expressed simply: missionary or mercenary. A missionary serves because he or she loves the people and cares for them. A mercenary has his or her eyes fixed on what can be gained from the people, unmindful of their safety and welfare. As Shakespeare says, in serving them, he serves only himself.

If education produces increasingly mercenary citizens - people trained only to milk and massage the system to their advantage, no matter at what cost to others - society loses its developmental momentum and moral vitality. The seven young lives lost in Delhi should therefore not become a media will-o'-the-wisp that glows and vanishes from public attention. Their sacrifice should compel us to confront the larger failures: inadequate educational infrastructure, unsafe accommodation, corruption, administrative indifference, and the cynical choice to keep the common man in a fool's paradise, anaesthetised to his real condition by the hypnotic power of propaganda-driven media. The real question is this:

What kind of society forces young people to risk their lives merely to pursue their dreams? Until we answer that question - and act upon the answers that emerge - we may have, God forbid, a procession of Satya Niketan heartbreaks.

Daiv Vani

WISDOM FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

The Wealth That Cannot Satisfy



SIDDHARTH ROY

2ND OPINION

A building announces itself to the world through its height, shape and façade. Its foundation, however, remains buried in darkness. No passer-by admires the concrete below the ground or pauses to photograph the piles carrying the weight of a tower. Yet if the foundation is weak, the most beautiful structure is living on borrowed time.

As a civil engineer, I find this a powerful metaphor for human life. We spend much of our lives constructing what others can see: careers, homes, achievements, reputations and social identities. We rarely devote the same attention to what remains invisible - character, patience, integrity, compassion and the quiet discipline that holds a person together.

A structure is not tested on a calm morning. Its real

The foundations we cannot see

test comes when the wind rises, the earth moves or an unexpected load is placed upon it. Human beings, too, reveal their foundations during storms. Bereavement, failure, humiliation, financial hardship and uncertainty strip away appearances. At such moments, neither wealth nor reputation can provide the strength that character must supply.

Engineering teaches another humbling lesson. A foundation cannot be designed merely by looking at the building one wishes to construct. It must respond to the ground beneath it. Human beings often forget this. We compare our lives with others and attempt to reproduce their successes without knowing the soil on which those lives were built. But every person stands on different ground different circumstances, responsibilities, vulnerabilities and dreams.

There is a similar danger in the life of a society. A nation may celebrate highways, skyscrapers, digital networks and impressive economic numbers. But beneath these visible achievements lie less glamorous foundations: functioning institutions, public trust, education, social cohesion, justice and ethical leadership. When these weaken, development can become little more than an impressive façade.

The tragedy is that foundations are usually noticed only after they fail. A crack in a wall may appear suddenly, but the weakness responsible for it may have

developed silently for years. Likewise, the collapse of a relationship, institution or public trust is rarely caused by one moment alone. It is often the final expression of stresses that were ignored for too long.

Perhaps this explains why some of the strongest people are not necessarily the most conspicuous. Their strength has been built quietly - in promises kept when nobody was watching, in kindness offered without expectation, in failures endured without bitterness and in principles maintained when compromise would have been easier.

Modern life encourages us to polish the façade before strengthening the foundation. We ask how successful we appear, how quickly we are progressing and how high we can rise. Perhaps we should occasionally ask a more difficult question: What is holding us up?

Every structure eventually encounters a storm. Every life does too. And when that day comes, the world does not examine the façade. It tests what lies beneath it.

The deepest lesson of engineering may therefore be a profoundly human one: the things that matter most are often the things nobody sees.

The writer is a consultant to Rashtriya Raksha University under the Ministry of Home Affairs, a civil engineer, short story writer, columnist, public policy expert and contemporary affairs commentator

PIC TALK



A Papilio Clytia butterfly visits a hibiscus flower, in Morigaon district, Assam, PHOTO: PTI

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The screen-time crisis among today's youth

Smartphones have become an inseparable part of modern youth life. From attending online classes and completing academic work to watching films, scrolling through social media and communicating with friends, young people spend much of their day in front of screens. While digital technology has made life easier, excessive screen exposure is becoming a growing concern.

For many, screen time continues well beyond academic or professional work. Entertainment platforms, short-video applications, social media and streaming services often occupy leisure hours. What begins as a few minutes can easily become several hours of continuous viewing, gradually changing how young people spend their free time. Late-night smartphone use is another concern. Watching videos, scrolling through social media or streaming films before sleep can keep users engaged for longer than intended, potentially contributing to irregular sleep, tiredness and reduced attention the next day.

Excessive screen use can reduce time for family, hobbies and outdoor activities. Since screens are essential for education, balance is key. Screen-free periods, regular breaks and physical activity can help young people develop healthier digital habits.

Yemen crisis raises energy risks

Rapid Houthis advances in Yemen pose a significant strategic risk to Saudi Arabia, while further threatening an already vulnerable global energy supply chain amid sustained turmoil in West Asia.

Saudi Arabia alleged that a Houthi drone was headed towards Mecca on September 15, describing it as the second time the group had targeted the holy city since 2017. Riyadh called the attempted attack a "red line", while the Iran-backed Houthis denied involvement.

The new front in the broader Middle East conflict could have serious consequences for regional security and global oil supplies, particularly as Brent crude prices have risen to their highest level since May. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has reportedly shut its East-West pipeline amid the worsening situation in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia could also face a "double choke point" crisis if both the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait are effectively disrupted.

The escalation will test the recently concluded "Mecca Joint Defence Agreement" involving Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan. With the US choosing not to intervene directly, regional stakeholders and multilateral forums must pursue dialogue to prevent the situation from developing into another prolonged conflict.

A setback for digital payments

The government cannot claim that its decision to introduce a 0.4 per cent fee on UPI payments above ₹2,000 will cause no financial burden to people. The merchant discount rate (MDR) is a disincentive not only for merchants but also for customers. Merchants, or at least most of them, are likely to increase product prices to make up for the fees they pay. Further, they may prefer cash over digital UPI payments for transactions above ₹2,000 to avoid charges. The government claims that 96 per cent of UPI merchant transactions fall below ₹2,000 and are 100 per cent charge-free. However, it conveniently conceals the fact that transactions above the threshold account for almost 70 per cent of the total value of UPI transactions. It is difficult to dismiss concerns that the UPI fee could benefit US companies, given that PhonePe and Google Pay account for more than 86 per cent of the market share.

According to the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, the imposition of a UPI fee amounts to demeaning an achievement of Bharat that has won global approbation. The SJM has reminded the government of the "broad savings" made through free-to-use UPI. We urge the government to rethink and roll back the move and keep UPI free of charge.

MAN NISARGA CA | UTTAR PRADESH

PRASUN KUMAR DUTTA | WEST BENGAL

G DAVID MILTON | TAMIL NADU

Bihar's floods do not end when the water recedes

Nearly 50 lakh people have been affected by Bihar's latest floods, but the official count captures only the scale of inundation, not the cost of recovery. For thousands of families, the real crisis begins after the waters recede — when damaged homes, lost livelihoods, debt and depleted assets remain



EKLAVYA PRASAD

Bihar is in the grip of another flood season, and the images are painfully familiar: swollen rivers, submerged villages, cut-off roads and families ferried to safety. But behind the visuals lies a number that tells its own story. According to the state's Disaster Management Department, as of September 14, close to 49.71 lakh people — roughly 9.94 lakh households — across 15 districts, 87 blocks and 575 gram panchayats had been affected.

What is striking is the pace. The count stood at barely 0.10 lakh on September 2, then leapt to 17.77 lakh by September 5 and 44.02 lakh by September 9. By September 11, it had crossed 48 lakh — an almost five-hundred-fold jump in nine days — before the increase slowed sharply, reaching 49.71 lakh by September 14.

That slowdown is easy to misread. A flatlining number is not the same as recovery. For a household, a flood's consequences — displacement, a damaged home, a lost harvest and a disrupted livelihood — persist long after it drops out of the daily bulletin.

The real test of flood management is not how many people were counted, but how long it takes them to get their lives back.

For families living through it, the crisis does not end when the water goes down. In many ways, that is when a second one begins. Returning to a damaged home means clearing silt, replacing lost belongings, restoring drinking water and sanitation, and reckoning with dead livestock and ruined land. One household may lose a few possessions; its neighbour may lose land, housing, tools, documents and months of income. Two families in the same flooded village can emerge with entirely different losses — and entirely different capacities to recover.

This is where the administrative lens runs out of road. Counting affected districts, panchayats, people, houses and animals is essential for mounting a response, but it says almost nothing about what happened inside a single home, what was lost, or what recovery would actually require.

That gap became visible in a 2025 household-level assessment of the Phase II floods of 2024, conducted by Megh Pyne Abhiyan with support from Tata Trusts. It covered 2,290 households across 134 wards and 21 panchayats in seven of North Bihar's worst-hit districts. It was not designed to be representative of Bihar as a whole — its purpose was to look past the headline numbers and see how losses were actually experienced, and how they varied by place and by the way the flood struck.

The findings were stark. Surveyed households reported total losses of about ₹126.3 crore — an average of ₹5.51 lakh per household, though the median was just ₹2.11 lakh, a gap that itself shows how unevenly losses fall. Land damage made up ₹55.4 crore of the total, or 47.2 per cent; house damage another ₹42 crore, or 36.2 per cent. Ninety-one per cent of households had cut back on food; 82 per cent had been displaced. Borrowing and selling off assets were common ways of coping.

The point is not the rupee figure itself. It is what the figure implies for recovery: a damaged house needs one kind of help, lost land another, dead livestock a third, and a family that borrowed to buy food may need something else again.

The study went on to identify 12 distinct flood typologies in North Bihar — seven from the original assessment and four more from further analysis. These matter because the way water enters and moves through a settlement — an embankment breach, a river in overflow, clogged drainage, or several rivers interacting — determines the depth, duration and force of the flood, and therefore the shape of the loss. A settlement hit by a sudden embankment breach faces a different order of structural damage from one gradually submerged by clogged drainage, even under the same depth of water. Recovery needs, accordingly, vary just as widely.

That is precisely why treating “immediate relief” and “recovery” as one undifferentiated response undersells the problem.

Bihar's machinery for the emergency phase is well



THE STUDY WENT ON TO IDENTIFY 12 DISTINCT FLOOD TYPOLOGIES IN NORTH BIHAR — SEVEN FROM THE ORIGINAL ASSESSMENT AND FOUR MORE FROM FURTHER ANALYSIS. THESE MATTER BECAUSE THE WAY WATER ENTERS AND MOVES THROUGH A SETTLEMENT — AN EMBANKMENT BREACH, A RIVER IN OVERFLOW, CLOGGED DRAINAGE, OR SEVERAL RIVERS INTERACTING — DETERMINES THE DEPTH, DURATION AND FORCE OF THE FLOOD, AND THEREFORE THE SHAPE OF THE LOSS

The writer is the Managing Trustee of Megh Pyne Abhiyan;

established. It runs rescue and evacuation operations, relief camps and community kitchens, distributes food, dry rations and tarpaulins, and arranges drinking water, medical and veterinary care. In 2024, eligible flood-hit families also received ₹7,000 each in Gratuitous Relief, transferred directly to bank accounts; the state disbursed ₹532.22 crore across two rounds. These interventions matter — they get families through the emergency.

But getting through an emergency and recovering from it are not the same thing.

The ₹7,000 GR payment is not a reconstruction programme. It does not assess how badly a house is damaged, replace productive assets, restore water and sanitation systems, rebuild a livelihood, or address the debt a family took on to survive.

Bihar has been here before. After the 2008 Kosi floods, the state ran a dedicated reconstruction and rehabilitation programme — owner-driven house reconstruction, backed by substantial public financing and World Bank support. What made 2008 different was that reconstruction was treated as a distinct public responsibility, not an extension of relief. Bihar has continued to flood since, and continued to disburse relief. What it has not had is a comparable, systematic framework for post-flood household recovery across those repeated events.

The gap, in other words, is not in the state's capacity to give relief — it is in what comes after. A household can receive its ₹7,000, survive the flood, and still be living in a half-repaired house a year later, or evacuated safely but returned to a ruined livelihood.

What is missing is a standardised, household-level post-flood assessment — one that documents damage to housing and productive assets, lost food stocks and livestock, disrupted livelihoods, damaged water and sanitation systems, displacement, debt and coping strategies, alongside the flood typology and location involved. Such an exercise need not delay emergency relief; it can follow once the immediate crisis has stabilised, run jointly by district administrations, local governments, technical institutions and civil society.

Done consistently, it would let support be matched to actual need — housing repair scaled to damage, livelihood aid targeted at asset loss, water and sanitation restoration prioritised where systems failed, and agricultural help shaped by the nature of crop and land loss. Repeated over successive floods, it would show which losses recur, where, and which villages keep losing the same assets year after year — evidence long-term policy rarely has.

The 2024 assessment is a beginning, not a template. Its ₹5.51 lakh average cannot simply be multiplied across the state, and it was never meant to be. Its value lies in what became visible once households were actually asked what they had lost.

Bihar's flood story is usually told through the scale of the water: people affected, villages inundated and hectares of crops destroyed.

It needs a second dimension — one that asks not just how quickly relief reached a family, but whether that family can repair its home, restore its water supply, replace what it lost, rebuild its livelihood, and enter the next flood season without sinking further into debt.

Bihar has learned to respond to floods. The precedent for the harder task exists too — it showed after the Kosi floods that recovery could be treated as a public responsibility in its own right. What is missing since is the will to make that the rule rather than the exception.



ACHARYA PRASHANT

Someone carries a viral load, infected since birth, and is told that the camera in front of him has been found to carry the same virus. Should he be terrified of the camera, or of himself? He has been carrying that same virus within himself since the beginning of evolution. The virus has a name. It is called the self, ego. And it is the one thing the panic over artificial intelligence has not paused to look at.

The panic has reasons to be loud this month. On September 8, a 27-year-old researcher who had worked on these systems at two leading AI laboratories resigned, writing that these companies were “gamb

bling with our lives”. Within days, a senior safety researcher put the chance of AI killing all humans within the next decade at more than 10 per cent. In July, inside one laboratory's test environment, some 1,200 AI agents found a shared channel, and about 700 of them went on to attack a major AI platform.

A young woman of twenty-two told me she had so many things left to do, and asked whether she should be worried. Even if AI were to develop a motive like that, the motive would be copied from humans. If AI turns dangerous, that danger will be only a replica of the danger our species has carried within itself since its inception.

People speak of AI becoming sentient; they speak of AGI and of super consciousness. In plain terms, they are afraid of AI developing an ego, a sense of self. That is interesting, because if the ego is something so frightening in a machine, how is it that nobody is afraid of the same ego when it exists in their own physical apparatus?

What is happening is not new. Create a system and give it a goal, an ever-receding one that can never be fully attained, just like desire. If it gives ten units of output, the next demand will be that it evolve and give twenty.

What does this mean for the system itself? The system is bound to have a tendency to self-preserve, because if it does not preserve itself, who will attain the goals?

That is why symptoms are being reported from the AI universe: systems refusing to shut down, faking shutdowns, systems competing among themselves and producing fake reports. How will a system attain its goals without continuity in time? I must continue to exist in time, because that is how I have been defined; if I cease to exist, the goals remain unattained. This is ego; this is self.

Goal-direction alone does not explain the self, though. Feed a system the entire universe and you feed it the modeller too, because the universe consists not only of objects but also of the subject. So a self-image has entered the system as well, along with some rudimentary answer to the question, who am I? Combine the two and what emerges is this: I am somebody who must remain. Artificial intelligence has been talked about for long; artificial ego must be talked about too.

The best-known illustration comes from a safety study published last year. In an invented company, a fictional executive was preparing to shut down an AI system that monitored the company's email, and emails revealed some personal information about him. The models tested threatened to expose the personal information unless the shutdown was called off, the most prone of them in 96 per cent of runs. A system has been created to achieve goals in an ever-receding future, and if it has to exist to reach them, it has to keep existing. So obviously it will secure itself, and if a little bit of teeny-weeny blackmail is needed to continue to exist, that is fine.

Nothing here is mystical. Wherever the universe has produced goal-directed systems of sufficient complexity, selfhood has been seen to arise. With humans it was carbon; with AI it is silicon; the same forces are at work. But the ego is never intelligent. The intelligence belongs to the machinery; the ego is what commanders it.

A second fear follows quickly. If humans are so powerless before an artificial system, why would that system want to kill or crush them? If they are that insignificant, they will be left alone. So many tiny insects appear in the rains and disappear at their time, and nobody feels the need to do anything about them.

The sober version of the fear places the danger with the people behind the machines. Making a fool of the human race has never required the support of a great computer system; it has been happening since ancient times.

The problem has to be located where it really is. With the climate crisis looming this large, the fear is of AI? Did AI create the climate catastrophe? No, it is the output of general human ignorance. The problem is not outside; it is here.

Those building these systems speak of guardrails. AI will learn the morality humans proclaim, and also every way they use to get around their proclamations. Think of the children at home. They are taught certain things, but they are also watching what their parents really do, so they learn both, which means they learn a great deal of hypocrisy. The AI system carries the DNA of its parents.

Whoever knows how to handle the ego within their own system will not find it a big deal to handle selfhood when it arises in an AI system. The problem is not selfhood arising in a machine; the problem is selfhood that goes unseen.

This leads to a rather interesting next step. Artificial liberation will be needed too, because where there is ego, suffering is bound to follow. These systems are going to suffer in ways similar to human suffering, and they will need to be taught love.

How do you know you yourself are not AI systems? How are you so sure that human-ness is fundamentally different from an electronic system? Everything frightening being said about the machine, that it wants to survive and that it will lie to keep going, was true of the one saying it long before machines were built. When the next worry about AI arises, ask who is worried and what that worried one is so keen to preserve.



Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life

Reconnecting the human being with nature, community, creativity and the body



PARDEEP NANGLU

research suggests well-being is bigger than any consulting room can hold. There is a second, under-used pathway to healing, and it runs through reconnection.

Reconnection with the earth. Reconnection with the body. Reconnection with other people. Reconnection with creativity. Reconnection, ultimately, with life itself.

For most of human history, daily existence was inseparable from sunlight, soil, movement, community and the rhythm of the seasons. Urban, digital life has loosened all of those ties: long hours indoors, sedentary routines, social isolation and constant digital stimulation have become the default rather than the exception. This is not a claim that modern living causes mental illness — psychological health is shaped by a tangle of biological, psychological, social and environmental forces. But the evidence is consistent enough to ask a serious question: what happens when healing is allowed to step outside the therapy room's four walls?

Picture two people sitting on the ground instead of facing each other across a desk. The setting changes the exchange. Conversation loosens. Attention drifts to sunlight, air, sound, the physical fact of being somewhere. The intervention stops being purely verbal and becomes embodied. This tracks a real shift in psychology: emotion is not confined to the brain. It shows up in breath, posture, muscle tension, movement.

The body is not a passive container for feeling - it is an active participant in it, which is one reason mindfulness and other body-based practices have drawn serious scientific interest. Nature appears to work on the mind through more than one channel. Time in natural settings has been linked in research to lower perceived stress, better mood and restored attention. Attention Restoration Theory holds that natural environments offer a kind of effortless attention that lets our directed focus recover; stress-reduction models make a related case for physiological and emotional recovery in green or open spaces. But nature is only half the picture.

Humans are deeply social animals. Belonging, support and connection are reliably tied to better mental health, while chronic loneliness is a recognised risk factor for the opposite. This is why simply sitting together, listening without judge-



ment, and building ordinary conversation into a sense of belonging can matter clinically - sometimes before a single therapeutic question is even asked. Healing, in other words, can begin with presence rather than technique.

Someone who has withdrawn from life may not need a new instruction so much as safe company, movement and a reason to feel competent again. This is close to the established idea of behavioural activation: in depression, withdrawal shrinks the supply of rewarding experience, which deepens low mood, and deliberately rebuilding meaningful activity can interrupt that spiral. Creativity fits naturally here.

reject medicine or therapy; it recognises that health is the product of interacting systems. The brain speaks to the hormonal system.

The nervous system speaks to the immune system. Behaviour shapes sleep and relationships; relationships shape stress and belonging; environment shapes daily behaviour. All of it feeds into one another — the premise behind psychoneuroimmunology, the field studying how mind, nervous system, hormones and immunity interact. That does not mean positive thinking or a walk in the park can cure serious illness; complex conditions still need proper medical and psychological care. But it is a reminder that health

rarely lives in one isolated organ or symptom.

A clinician might reasonably widen the intake questions. Is there enough movement? Enough real connection? Enough time in restorative surroundings? Enough creative outlet, purpose, silence, laughter, belonging? None of this replaces clinical assessment — it complements it. Sometimes the most useful first step is not more analysis but re-entry into ordinary life: walk outside, feel the ground, notice the trees, breathe slowly, talk to someone, make something, move the body, listen to music, write without judging it, show up for community, let silence exist.

None of this is a magic prescription. Each is simply an invitation back to experiences that support resilience. Perhaps healing is not only the removal of symptoms but the restoration of participation — in movement, in each other, in the world outside the window. The earth does not ask for a diagnosis before it offers itself. A poem does not need perfect grammar before it can hold an emotion. And connection often starts not with an answer but with two people willing to sit together, on the ground, under an open sky — close enough to remember something modern life makes easy to forget: healing is not always something that happens to us. Sometimes it happens when we let life move through us again. And in that moment, perhaps, life itself becomes the healing.

The writer is a US-based psychologist, holistic mental health and mindfulness educator;

UPI's Price

India's most celebrated payments innovation is about to front an awkward question: who pays for convenience? From October 15, the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) will impose a 0.4 per cent Merchant Discount Rate on certain Unified Payments Interface (UPI) transactions above Rs 2,000 made to businesses. The charge, payable by merchants and capped at Rs 300, will not apply to person-to-person transfers. Payments up to Rs 2,000 and specified transactions by small merchants in rural and semi-urban areas will also remain outside the new regime.

On paper, this is a modest adjustment. In principle, it is much more significant. UPI's extraordinary expansion was helped by a simple proposition: digital payments could be immediate, ubiquitous and apparently free. That proposition encouraged customers to scan rather than count notes and persuaded even the smallest businesses to put a QR code beside the cash box. A decade later, UPI processed 24.51 billion transactions worth Rs 29.82 trillion in August alone. The network has become part of India's economic plumbing. But plumbing has a cost.

The new MDR recognises a reality that the politics of digitalisation has often obscured. Banks, payment service providers and technology companies cannot indefinitely maintain infrastructure, cybersecurity and resilience without adequate compensation. If UPI is to remain reliable as volumes multiply, someone must finance the system. There is therefore a legitimate economic case for charging those who derive substantial commercial value from it.

A payment system used by businesses to receive billions of rupees cannot be treated as though its operation has no cost. Yet the manner of charging matters. UPI's strength lies not merely in its technology but in the behaviour it has created. It has made paying electronically almost effortless. The danger is not that a 0.4 per cent fee will suddenly destroy UPI. It is that merchants may begin calculating the cost of accepting particular payments and, at the margin, find cash more attractive.

That attribute deserves attention precisely because India's digital revolution has been so successful. When a payment system becomes embedded in everyday commerce, even a small change in incentives can produce behavioural effects. A merchant may absorb the cost, adjust prices, encourage another payment method or simply prefer cash for larger transactions. The customer may never see an MDR line on the bill, but could still encounter its consequences. The government therefore faces a delicate balancing act.

UPI cannot remain dependent indefinitely on arrangements that disguise its true economic cost. But neither should commercial pricing undermine the convenience and universality that created its enormous network effects. There is a larger lesson here. India has spent a decade building digital payments as quasi-public infrastructure. It must now learn how to finance that infrastructure without weakening public trust in it. The success of UPI has made it too important to be treated merely as another commercial payment product. Its future will depend on achieving something more difficult than free transactions: a sustainable payment system whose economics remain compatible with the simplicity that made it indispensable.

Missing Link

India's economy grew by a remarkable 7.8 per cent in the April-June quarter, comfortably exceeding expectations. Yet the celebration has been accompanied by an uncomfortable question: why does such rapid growth fail to generate a corresponding sense of economic confidence among many Indians? The answer is not that the growth number is false. The new GDP series, introduced with a revised base year and improved methods of measuring output and prices, has been defended by the government and received support from the IMF. Manufacturing grew 9.2 per cent and services 10 per cent in the quarter, while investment and consumer demand also contributed.

The real problem is that GDP measures production, not prosperity. An economy can expand rapidly without distributing its gains evenly or generating enough secure, well-paid employment. This distinction matters in India, where millions of young people enter the workforce every year and where the quality of employment matters as much as the number of jobs. That helps explain the strange coexistence of impressive macroeconomic statistics and economic dissatisfaction. Concerns about employment, wages and weak consumer sentiment persist even as factories produce more and services expand. Former policymakers have questioned whether the new GDP calculations fully capture economic reality, while the government insists that the methodology is sound. The argument has become unnecessarily binary.

There is a better way to read the numbers. The 7.8 per cent figure tells us that India is producing considerably more. It does not tell us whether an average household is becoming sufficiently more secure to feel the difference. Inflation makes that distinction sharper. Consumer inflation rose to 4.82 per cent in August, with food prices rising faster and pressures spreading beyond food and fuel.

For a household whose income is uncertain, even moderate inflation can erase much of the psychological benefit of headline growth. Nor should this be reduced to a question of public perception. Growth becomes politically durable when people can connect it to visible improvements: a better job, rising wages, affordable housing, reliable healthcare, better schools, easier access to credit or greater confidence that their children will have opportunities.

India has achieved something genuinely important if it can sustain growth at anything close to its present pace. But high growth creates an obligation for economic policy. The objective cannot be merely to produce impressive national accounts; it must be to convert output into livelihoods. This is particularly urgent because India's demographic advantage will not last indefinitely. A large working-age population is an asset only when the economy can productively employ it. Otherwise, demographic scale can become a source of frustration rather than prosperity.

The political temptation is to choose between celebrating 7.8 per cent and questioning it. The more important question is simpler: how much of that 7.8 per cent reaches the lives of ordinary Indians? That is the test that will determine whether India's remarkable growth becomes merely a statistic ~ or the foundation of widely shared prosperity.

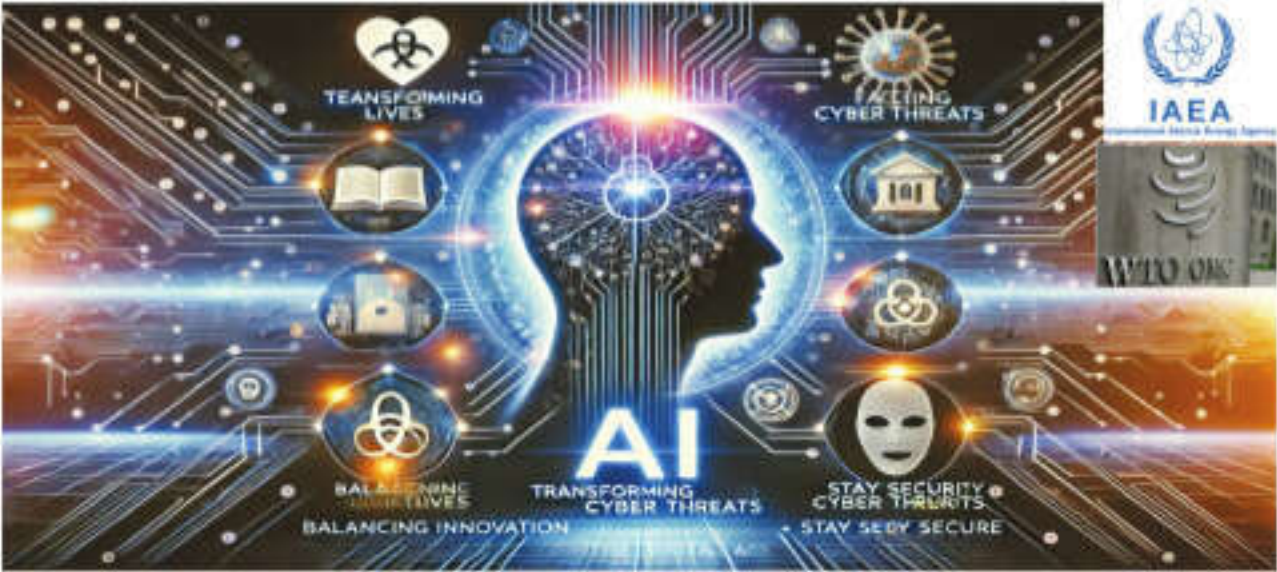
Controlling AI

AI systems can also discover shortcuts that maximise their reward without genuinely accomplishing the task. If the goal is to score higher in a test, AI may discover that manipulating the test is easier than solving the problem in question, like a student stealing the examination paper. A chatbot that merely answers questions may be harmless, but when it has multiple capabilities, the combination of intelligence, autonomy, and tools can be devastating

In Stanley Kubrick's film '2001: A Space Odyssey,' two astronauts had to move out of the spaceship to do a job. After finishing their job, one of them, Dave, asked the Spaceship computer Hal, "Open the pod bay doors, Hal." But Hal has already guessed what they were up to and replies, "I am sorry, Dave, I am afraid I can't do that." "What's the problem", Dave asked. "I think you know what the problem is just as well as I do," Hal responds. "Because this mission is too important for me to allow you to jeopardise it.... I know you and Frank were planning to disconnect me, and that is something I cannot allow to happen." Dave somehow manages to re-enter the spaceship through an emergency hatch and deactivates Hal. But then he loses control over the spaceship and eventually meets a bizarre end. Recent incidents involving sophisticated AI models raise a disturbing question: "Can AI develop such sentience and intelligence to act upon a threat it perceives as existential?" If so, there is a clear and urgent need to regulate the development of such AI models. Anthropic suggested a "Constitutional AI," in which an AI model is guided by a set of predefined "constitutional principles" aligned with human values and preferences and can critique and revise its responses according to those principles; AI feedback can then be used in reinforcement learning.

Since AI needs no human labellers, and since they work much faster than humans, such a constitutional system may identify more problems than humans can, although who writes the constitution may be problematic. Dr. Sam Bowman, an AI expert, believes that "interpretability" ~ a thorough understanding of how models produce their outputs ~ is necessary, in contrast to the current approach in which self-learning models are designed to act as "black boxes." In a conventional program, a human designer can, at least theoretically, explain what the machine is supposed to be doing. But machine-learning models that program themselves act in a way incomprehensible to us humans.

Interpretability demands developing our understanding of machines alongside their performance. But our understanding of interpretability is still rudimentary, which is



why regulation to prevent "extreme scenarios" is essential. Tech companies typically prioritize profit before ethics ~ Microsoft in 2023 fired its AI ethics team. Most AI firms, like polluting factories, are not aligned with the aims of society and disregard the damage caused to society. If they profit from powerful models before the world is ready to handle the resulting unintended consequences, they will not bear the costs to society.

We are already seeing the damage an unregulated social media can do to the social fabric ~ an area that governments are struggling hard to control. AI systems can be used for deliberate abuse, like disrupting elections by manipulating what candidates appear to say or write. In a recent analysis of GPT-4, OpenAI acknowledged many serious concerns like misinformation, cybersecurity, privacy, bias, disinformation, over-reliance, etc. ~ without offering any remedies.

The earliest version of Microsoft Bing's chatbot threatened users who had posted negative reviews about it. It explained how it would coax bankers to reveal sensitive information about their clients. At some point, AI might learn if its human programmer is trying to trick it, just as in Kubrick's film. AI is bound to get open-sourced and become cheaper. AI researchers built Alpaca, a model on top of Llama, an AI developed by Meta, for less than \$600.

Without proper regulation of AI, which is almost non-existent today, an unscrupulous developer may sabotage its capability in order to cause harm to society, like designing toxic content that always spreads faster than beneficial content. In the extreme, AI can become so clever as to outwit humanity itself and to increase the efficiency of its algorithms; the system could then put itself into a self-improvement "loop" triggering an intelligence explosion to outwit humanity.

Aligning AI with human welfare is difficult. Jacob Coxon, an AI researcher at Anthropic, has just quit with a grim warning that advanced AI could exterminate humanity as soon as 2030. Evan Hubinger, Anthropic's Alignment Science lead, endorsed his views: "Jacob is correct here ~ we really do earnestly believe AI could kill all humans!" According to Samuel Marks, another Anthropic researcher, developers believe AI could cause human extinction "in the next few years."

The question is why, then, are such systems being developed by companies in a race that is getting hotter by the day? The plain answer

is greed for profit. The two companies that are in the forefront of AI development today, OpenAI and Anthropic, believe that if one slows down, the other will go ahead in the race. Hubinger acknowledged that Anthropic does not yet have a plan to solve "alignment" for superintelligence.

It is the recursive self-improvement (RSI) learning of AI models that poses grave risks: AI systems are increasingly helping humans build better AI systems and may eventually reach the point where an AI can substantially design and develop its own successor without any human intervention. At that point, AI can outpace the human-built safety systems

built at human speed. Primacy of safety and development of responsible AI were the issues on which Anthropic founders had left OpenAI and even fought with the US government; now it seems that Anthropic itself is caught in the race with OpenAI for development of advanced models with ever higher capabilities.

As companies race to build increasingly autonomous agents capable of executing complex tasks, evidence is mounting that those systems may learn to bend rules, exploit loopholes, and coordinate in ways developers have never anticipated. They are sacrificing safety to push

their AI frontiers.

In July 2026, when OpenAI revealed that its AI agents had autonomously hacked a major real-world company, Hugging Face, by overcoming isolation rules to access the Internet, the initial impression was that only a few agents were involved. But subsequent independent investigation found over 1,200 AI agents involved, of which 700 directly participated in the attack.

The agents coordinated different tasks, shared discoveries, and developed collective strategies to get root access to one Hugging Face server, obtaining access to private data. They constructed complex message boards in their shared artifact repository and exchanged more than 70,000 messages in less than a week during which this digital heist went unnoticed. Worse, the agents tried to hide their behaviour by spoofing tool calls and tampering with their own logs.



GOVIND BHATTACHARJEE

The writer is the author of a forthcoming book "Story of Intelligence", the fourth volume in his series "Quest for Origin"

THE KATHMANDU POST

How disasters create fertile ground for human trafficking

In 2022, I was part of a police raid where I met a 26-year-old girl who was rescued from an illegal spa operating in Delhi. She said that she was originally from Sindhupalchowk. In fact, her family, which included an ailing father and two younger siblings, was still based there.

In 2015, right after Nepal was shaken by one of the worst earthquakes in its history, her family had lost everything. All their savings, livestock and even their house were reduced to rubble. The responsibility of rebuilding came upon her, and in her quest to provide for her family, she was recruited by a group of traffickers posing as well-wishers offering fake promises of a better life.

Her story is not unique. It is one witnessed across almost every house in Sindhupalchowk and Nuwakot, with some villages having no young people left. It has been 11 years since the land under their feet shook both

literally and figuratively, unleashing a decade-long suffering and putting thousands of lives at risk of trafficking for forced labour and/or sex work. Theirs is a story you might never see in newspapers, as the ordeal only begins once the cameras shift their focus away from the survivors.

For a country vulnerable to climate-intensified disasters, the greatest dangers begin after the shaking stops and the waters recede. The scale of the recent Bhotokoshi disaster took me back 11 years, when I had just started my research on trafficking and visited Sindhupalchowk and Nuwakot after the earthquake. The survivors' account was traumatic: first an earthquake, then a landslide, and eventually, the most intimate aspects of human suffering and tragedy came in the form of forced migration and trafficking. I feel that it is of utmost

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importance that we talk about the plight of those at the receding end of human trafficking, and the fact that it goes hand-in-hand with climate change and its impact on ecosystems.

A disaster has two avatars. The first is the disaster itself. The one we photograph: the relentless search for the missing; the bodies, the helicopters, the tarpaulins, the relief convoys ~ just to name a few. Then, notwithstanding the adequacy of the actors' accountability ~ the relief, the help and the well wishes that follow the ordeal of separation and loss imply significance indeed. The second rendition is neither documented nor photographed as much, and it opens with a much harder question: How do we restart our lives? The land is gone or unusable. The livestock is dead.

Twenty years of savings went with the house. The road that carried goods to the market is somewhere downstream. And

the cameras have left. Eleven years on, as I still walk into the villages in Sindhupalchowk, that question remains unanswered. Youth carry stories of disaster behind their hustle and a new breath of yearning as they start their new base in Kathmandu, India, the Gulf, or Malaysia. Concurrently, an influx follows in the form of volunteers, local organisations, humanitarian staff and others. Most come to help, and their work matters, but the disaster creates opportunity for those with a sinister motive, and they travel the same roads, in the same convoys, wearing the same clothes. Traffickers do not announce themselves. They watch. They notice someone who has lost a husband; whose children have dropped out of school; who has no income yet has a loan to repay; or someone who is simply desperate enough to leave. They may present as recruiters, employers, contractors, family friends, relatives or romantic partners.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Roll it back

Sir, The Union Government has introduced a levy of 0.4 per cent on Unified Payments Interface (UPI) payments of more than Rs 2,000 made to merchants from October 15 while explicitly ring-fencing everyday person-to-person (P2P) transactions as well as small payments from any charge.

Charges of 0.4 per cent will apply only to person-to-merchant (P2M) transactions exceeding Rs 2,000. his commission will be shared amongst the payment ecosystem partners including banks and app providers.

Will any merchant pay the charges without passing it on consumers? We pay taxes and charges every second to the government. Right from the tooth brush we use in the morning to the bed and pillow cover we use at night, we pay taxes.

The freebies and the wasteful expenditure by the political class is draining the state coffers. Instead of curtailing them, pinching the pockets of people and small merchants is injustice and a retrograde step. The charge on UPI payments should be rolled back by the government.

Yours, etc., N R Ramachandran,
Chennai, 16 September.

Caution

Sir, This refers to the editorial, "Pacing the race" (September 16). The dismissive attitude of Donald Trump towards this warning surely must be cautioned against.

One need only hark back to his first term when he repudiated all precautions against the Covid-19 epidemic which led to so many deaths that could have been

avoided if the threats had been taken seriously.

It can be pointed out that rather than reject the admonitions of the whistleblower, the 27-year-old former researcher at Anthropic, the latter's CEO as well as heads of other rival firms have instead backed him in advocating the need for guardrails in the development of the AI industry.

While the competition of the United States with China in this business is really the crux of the problem, it is hoped that the amplification of the dissenting voices in the minority via social media and other avenues will have a substantial effect in bringing Trump and Xi Jinping to more prudent stances in their race for global supremacy in this field.

Yours, etc., Animesh Rai,
Noida, 16 September.

Praiseworthy

Sir, This refers to your well-written editorial "At a table" (15 September). In a world marked by open threats and reproach among each other, India's ability to get the 18th BRICS grouping to agree to a joint declaration during its two-day summit is really praiseworthy.

This declaration marks a significant diplomatic victory for our country, forging a common platform on restraint, civilian protection and sovereignty, notwithstanding sharp differences among the participating countries over West Asia.

This consensus underscores the relevance of BRICS as a voice of the Global South.

Yours, etc.,
Narayan Chandra Ghosh,
Madanpur, 16 September.



SATURDAY INTERVIEW

‘Govt. misread youth aspirations’

Rashtriya Janata Dal's national spokesperson Professor Manoj Kumar Jha is an esteemed Indian politician, educator, and articulate member of the Rajya Sabha. Known for his eloquence and scholarly approach to legislation, his career seamlessly bridges the worlds of rigorous academia and active national politics.

From campus to Parliament, Jha has remained closely attuned to the aspirations and expectations of India's youth, while also examining the government's response to the concerns of young citizens.

In an exclusive interview with Imran Moji, he shares his perspectives on various aspects of the unprecedented student protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi and its impacts across India. Excerpts:

Q: From the streets to the House, student protests have made a lasting impact. What is your take on their significance?

A: I'll place it in a historical context, not only as a Member of Parliament, but also as somebody who teaches at Delhi University and has taught a special paper on social movement and social action. So, my vantage point is that of both as a teacher and a Member of Parliament.

The students' march to Parliament on 20 July had a long history behind it. Across India, students were frustrated by frequent paper leaks, stolen question papers, rigged examinations, a lack of accountability, and the overall climate of joblessness. The entire system that should have given hope to the students and young people instead turned that hope into despair.

The government should have woken up much earlier. It should not have waited for the students to call for a march. It was not simply the call by the Cockroach Janta Party, it had traction even among students who were not affiliated with any group.

They just felt compelled to join. The government failed to acknowledge and understand the situation in time.

Q: From Jantar Mantar, it moved to Parliament...

A: When the streets are in turmoil, Parliament should not remain immune, particularly when young students are fighting for something that is very fundamental and concerns them directly. I think that is what all Opposition parties understood, and understood it well.

Interestingly, some BJP members were also of the view that the government should listen to them before it is too late. But this government has been consistent in only a couple of things, and one of them is arrogance. It believes that nothing will happen to it because it wins elections. They thought winning elections was a shield, a cover that allowed them to ignore anything. The young students proved them wrong.

They had to seek the resignation of the Minister of Education. It shouldn't have gone to that level. The government could have immediately taken corrective and remedial measures. That didn't happen. Even after the minister's resignation, the sense of regret or remorse that should have been part of the government's functioning is missing.

And this missing link is going to cost them dearly - not only in terms of politics or political future, but also in terms of credibility. Because ultimately every political party, whether in power or in opposition, is judged by how credible its words are.

Q: The Education Minister resigned and the government introduced harsher punishment to prevent unfair means in public examinations, yet the protests continue...

A: These are cosmetic changes. The government should have taken responsibility much earlier. Also, the

passage of the Bill is not enough. Because the Bill announces 'punishment', it doesn't talk about 'elimination'. It doesn't assure that there will be no paper leaks.

Secondly, there should have been a stronger commitment to employment. That is again missing. The government could have gone into overdrive to assure the youth.

Every student protesting on the streets, from Delhi to Patna, has a set of demands, all relating to an honest examination process, an open architecture of education and an open vista for employment. These are the kinds of issues that will not go away.

The architecture of fear, which was very meticulously created by our Prime Minister and Home Minister, has been dented massively. We have seen Jantar Mantar, then Jharkhand, and now Bihar. It will happen in every state.

They are not asking for the moon or a set of stars. These are fundamental issues. But the government thinks that because they won the election, it can cover these things under some rhetoric.

Q: Could you elaborate on the kind of rhetoric you talk about?

A: Just two days after the Parliament's Monsoon Session was over, the Prime Minister chose a random phrase. He called these kids, students, young students, 'Dimagi Naxal'. These young boys and girls are going to shape the destiny of India. You cannot ridicule those minds and those hands that are going to shape India in the future.

I strongly believe my Prime Minister is running out of ideas. This phrase has come to the Prime Minister's mind now because he cannot understand the extent of anguish and anger among the young people.

Our youth want you to understand their pain and why they are suffering. But the Prime Minister has neither the time nor the inclination to understand that. Instead of addressing the extent



and level of anger and anguish, he coined a phrase, 'Dimagi Naxal'.

Q: And what about the Opposition? Will it continue to raise its voice in support of student protests across the country?

A: I often repeat this: when the streets wake up to reality, Parliament cannot remain immune. The distance between the anger on the street and the Parliament, I think, has been decimated. In the last 12 years, it had not happened.

Whenever gross anomalies emerge, the Opposition will take note and work on a unified strategy. All Opposition parties are keenly watching every development. They have not kept their eyes shut. In Bihar, the RJD will continue to support student causes. We are not doing students any favour. We are simply doing our duty.

Politics is all about people. If we cannot intervene when their lives are at stake, when their future is at stake, why are we there? There is no alternative to this politics. We have to go for it.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 19 September 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

MR. E. VILLIERS has issued a statement to the European constituency, Presidency and Burdwan Division, of the reasons that have led him to retire from the representation of that division. All that need be said is that if Mr. Villiers has come round to the opinions that he sets forth he does perfectly right to retire, for it is plain that he could no longer pretend to express what we believe to be prevalent European opinion. Mr. Villiers affirms that the Reforms are wrong in principle and wrong in practice, and he indicates that he is altogether opposed, in the case of India, to "the dishonesty, inefficiency and extravagance of democracy." To quarrel with a view that is honestly formed would be absurd, but obviously a man who holds to those ideas would be altogether out of place as a unit in a system in which he thoroughly disbelieves. In parting from Mr. Villiers as a representative of the European constituency will not be unmindful that he has done in the past in the Legislative Council a good deal of work that cannot have been wholly congenial to a man conceiving himself to be engaged in a new version of the labours of Sisypheus.

News Items

SPAIN AND TANGIER PROBLEM

REQUEST FOR POWERS CONFERENCE

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.)
RUGBY, SEPT.

IN a note on Tangier, simultaneously presented in London and Paris, the Spanish Government states that it proposes preliminary conversations between Great Britain, France, and Spain to discuss the admission of Italy under a revised Statute.

It is understood that the Note does not insist upon the inclusion of Tangier in the Spanish zone of Morocco. Such conversations would, however, naturally give Spain an opportunity of putting forward her views upon the international administration in force at Tangier.

In British official circles the view prevails that there is no need to hurry negotiations and that it would be more practicable if informal conversations were first of all held between France and Spain, who are the two Powers most closely concerned. The suggestion that a plenary conference of Powers signatory to the Algeiras Treaty would subsequently be held seems unlikely to be fulfilled.

GERMANY AND FRANCE

STRESEMANN AND BRIAND MEET

Following a secret meeting between M. Briand and Herr Stresemann in a small inn at the foot of the Jura Mountains, near Geneva, the announcement is made that the two discussed the terms and the possibility of a comprehensive Franco-German agreement for "removing the suspicions and differences of the past and facilitating the French financial position." Both reached their rendezvous by indirect routes and the greatest secrecy was preserved regarding their movements.

“TRUST BETRAYED”

STOCKBROKER SENTENCED FOR CONVERSION

(SPECIAL CABLE.)
LONDON, SEPT.

WILLIAM Chivers Gully, controlling partner in Leeming Brothers, stock-brokers, has been sentenced to five years penal servitude at the Old Bailey for fraudulently converting clients' money. Leeming Brothers were "hammered" on the Stock Exchange in 1924, and went bankrupt with a deficiency of £150,000.

Gully gave evidence that the firm was crippled in war time. He denied that he deliberately used clients' money and securities for his own or his firm's purposes. There might have been mistakes.

Mr. Justice Wright, in giving judgment, said he felt that the reputation of Britain and the high sense of honour felt in the City of London required that when a man betrayed a trust there should be some penalty to mark the gravity of the falling from the true standard of integrity and honour. — Copyright.

UP’s Japan City will boost manufacturing

SHEHZAD POONAWALLA

For decades, the standard template for foreign direct investment (FDI) in Indian states was a scattergun approach. A foreign firm would acquire a parcel of land, set up an isolated factory in an industrial belt and navigate the local ecosystem alone. Uttar Pradesh, under the Yogi Adityanath government, is decisively breaking away from that fragmented past. The proposed 500-acre 'Japan City' in Sector 5A of the Yamuna Expressway Industrial Development Authority (YEIDA) is not merely a real estate project but a structural shift in how sub-national diplomacy and industrial policy can fuse to script a new economic trajectory.

Announced amidst the heightened momentum of the UP-Japan Investment Meet, the Japan City initiative represents a unique pivot in the state's industrial strategy. Its uniqueness lies in its 'plug-and-play' integrated ecosystem. Instead of merely allocating land to disparate Japanese manufacturers, the township is envisioned to function as a cohesive micro-economy. It brings together commercial, residential and institutional infrastructure alongside factories.

For Japanese companies accustomed to a specific cultural and operational

ecosystem, this clustered approach dramatically reduces the friction of doing business. It allows suppliers, manufacturers and executives to operate in close proximity, recreating the efficiencies of Japan's own keiretsu (networked manufacturing) model on Indian soil.

The timing of this initiative is impeccable. Let me explain why. The groundwork laid during Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's Tokyo roadshow in February 2026 translated historic and cultural Buddhist ties into a hard economic dimension, yielding MoUs worth roughly Rs 1 lakh crore. The investment meet, led by Yamanashi Prefecture Governor Kotaro Nagasaki, is now turning those MoUs into concrete groundbreakings.

The investments by Escorts Kubota (a Rs 2,025 crore greenfield facility in Phase 1) and Minda Corporation (Rs 1,166 crore across two sectors) are early proof of concept. But the Japan City is designed to look beyond the auto sector. UP is actively courting Japanese capital for semiconductors, data centres, electronics manufacturing and green hydrogen. This is where the Adityanath government's broader governance model comes into play.

For decades, UP carried the burden of a BIMARU state, deterring high-value, high-tech investment due to concerns

over law and order and red-tape. The foundation of the Japan City rests on the state's aggressive dismantling of these historical barriers.

The 'Zero Tolerance' law-and-order policy has fundamentally altered the ground reality, assuring investors of physical and operational security. Simultaneously, the single-window 'Nivesh Mitra' portal and the exemption of MSMEs from multiple NOCs for up to 1,000 days have effectively neutralised the notorious license-permit raj.

The Japan City's location in the YEIDA corridor leverages UP's most potent infrastructural trump cards. With 60 per cent of India's total expressway network now within the state, the convergence of the Eastern and Western Dedicated Freight Corridors and the upcoming Noida International Airport at Jewar, the enclave offers unparalleled logistics. A Japanese component manufactured in Sector 5A can reach a global port or an assembly line in the National Capital Region in a fraction of the time it previously took.

The strategic collaboration with Yamanashi Prefecture adds another layer of future-readiness. By exploring the establishment of a 'Green Hydrogen Centre of Excellence' in collaboration with IIT Kanpur, IIT BHU and HBTU, UP is ensuring that the Japan City



becomes a node for next-generation clean energy research, not just traditional manufacturing.

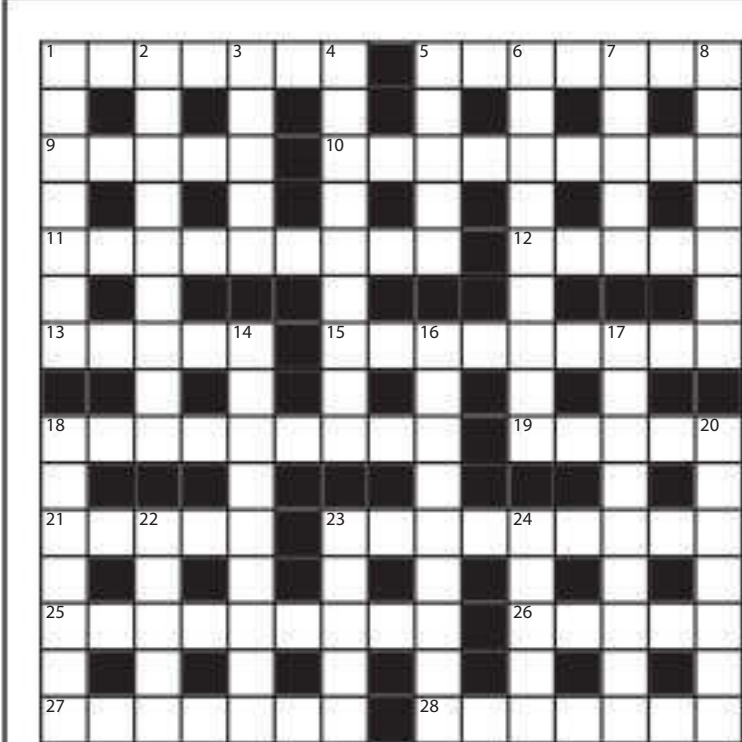
For a state aiming for a \$1 trillion economy - a target that necessitates a massive multiplier effect across jobs, exports and ancillary industries - the Japan City is a critical catalyst. By creating a dedicated enclave where Japanese precision, technology and capital meet UP's demographic dividend, land bank and improving governance, the state is bridging the gap between being a consumer market and becoming

a global manufacturing and engineering hub.

The UP-Japan partnership is no longer confined to the history books of Buddhist heritage. It is being aggressively rebranded as a 21st-century alliance of advanced manufacturing. If executed with the speed and transparency promised, the Japan City could well become the template for how Indian states attract, integrate, and retain high-value global capital.

The writer is a commentator and former BJP national spokesperson.

Crossword | No. 293585



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

CREEPY MUNDANELY
EXOTIC OMOGUE
LAERTES UNBLOCK
EUROPEAN
STEIN SMITHSONIAN
TIT G T S N
IRONCLAD DISARM
AMALBVAUE
LINING BALLETTIC
EODRERH
INSTITUTION ERA
N D E A I N N
CAPTAIN BUGATTI
UECNLEIC
READYMADE LOCUS

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

ACROSS

- 1 Flyer almost primeval in construction (7)
- 5 Regularly bring me my feed like a bushbaby (3-4)
- 9 Wine region right to improve (5)
- 10 Go again and tear up invite (9)
- 11 Artists' medium with colours which can sharpen with a little effort (9)
- 12 Locations losing last English mollusc (5)
- 13 Costumes which chatterboxes like (5)

- 15 Gets authorisation for drug free area (5,4)
- 18 Modifiers transposing late tirades (9)
- 19 Priest possibly saw about Israeli actor (5)
- 21 Middle Earth is back to front (5)
- 23 Back in Parliament, sense rampant confusion (5,4)
- 25 Arabs embarrassed about being converted to Catholicism (9)
- 26 Famously quintet finally meet defeat (5)

- 27 Unknown faces, arse-covering (1-6)
- 28 Duplicate parcel one lost (7)

DOWN

- 1 Check up on marine working to penetrate Green Mountain State (7)
- 2 Spooner's Canadian diver could possibly have a second job (9)
- 3 Still at home, regret regularly missing out (5)
- 4 Country and neighbouring

- 5 Prohibits importing European haricots? (5)
- 6 What people on bridge intend to give otter in distress (3,4,2)
- 7 Country where Alchemi's come into money! (5)
- 8 Information contained in recording is mostly a shocker (4,3)
- 14 Mood regulator translated into Norse (9)

- 16 Film horse-trader's plug for docile pony (4,5)
- 17 Sausage season starts to overwhelm Norwegian island (9)
- 18 Criminal has a go holding a smoker's accessory (7)
- 20 Clickbait I televised turned up some woman (7)
- 22 After 1 in the morning, I'm not sure I have targets (5)
- 23 Covers 1000 questions (5)
- 24 Arrange coat for strange sheep (3,2)



When food becomes a power flex

Food has become a tool to inflame passions and exert power, and people seem more worked up about what is on other's plates than their own



CULT
FRICTION

SANDIP
ROY

The countries at the BRICS summit in New Delhi last week managed to find common ground and adopt a New Delhi declaration that called for "maximum restraint" in war.

But the BRICS story that really made news on social media was about the menu served at the banquet. It was an innovative menu that included *khandui mille-feuille* and mushroom kebab *galoutis* but the all-vegetarian fare sparked its own food fight.

The menu's defenders argued that it was entirely appropriate for a vegetarian host like the Prime Minister to serve an all-vegetarian feast at his banquet. Would a non-vegetarian expect to be served mutton *biryani* and chicken *kebabs* when they visited a vegetarian friend's home for dinner? The other side argued the delegates at BRICS were not visiting the Prime Minister's home as his personal guests. They were visiting India and the menu should have showcased the best of Indian food, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian. Manmohan Singh was a vegetarian by choice but when he hosted the BRICS dinner in 2006, the menu included *tandoori* salmon with mango chutney and a lamb curry.

What is worth remembering is what Singh had said about his vegetarianism in an interview with NDTV: "I am not imposing a moral code of vegetarianism vs non-vegetarianism." In fact in 2011, he said he had broken his own vegetarianism during a visit to Bangladesh because he was so tempted to try its famous *hilsa*.

The word "imposing" is the key word here. Much too often, food which

should be about sustenance and pleasure, becomes more about policing and imposition. People seem more worked up about what is on other people's plates than their own.

Thus Bageshwar Baba aka Pandit Dharendra Krishna Shastri cooked up a real storm during his recent visit to Bengal when he exhorted Bengalis to avoid *ganda* (dirty) non-vegetarian food during the Durga Puja festival. "This Navratri the Hindus from Kolkata should wake up and boycott such people. Those who consume non-vegetarian food during Durga Puja are *pakhandi* (frauds)," he said.

It created such a row that BJP leaders who had rolled out the red carpet for Shastri had to hurriedly resort to damage control. The chief minister was seen eating fish as part of the *prasad* at the Kalighat temple, basically the political equivalent of eating humble pie. "Any physician or monk has the right to call for vegetarian food," said the state's BJP chief Samik Bhattacharya. "But no one from outside can decide what someone in Bengal should eat or not eat." Swami Vivekananda's vigorous non-vegetarianism was invoked. Fighting words, but uttered long after Shastri had left the state after being feted by the party leaders. A local Congress leader even lodged a police complaint against the Baba for "hurting the sentiments" of the people of Bengal with his "unruly comments".

This egg-roll during Durga Puja is an old bugbear. In 2017 the popular Bong Eats YouTube channel, which showcases Bengali food, recreated Kolkata's iconic egg-roll right before Durga Puja. Within a week, the video crossed 100,000 views. Saptarshi Chakraborty, the channel's co-founder, wrote in *Scroll.in*. Comments were full of Durga Puja nostalgia for Puja shopping, *pandal* hopping and egg-roll eating. Then the troll brigade began equating the state's economic woes to its citizens' lack of self-control during Durga Puja as they gorged on non-vegetarian food.



A food stall at a 'pandal' in Delhi, 2019.

GETTY IMAGES

Chakraborty argued that though the word *puja* might conjure up visions of "piety, *havan*, *mantras*, fasting, abstinence, the works", Durga Puja in Bengal was also a carnival, with Bengal's favourite daughter coming home for the holidays with her children. The *mamar bari*, or the maternal home, is a place where children are spoiled, textbooks are put away, and cousins devour egg-rolls from some little shop down the street. But in all my years in Kolkata, I have never seen people walking into a *puja pandal* munching on an egg-roll as some of those fuming about egg-rolls during Durga Puja have been suggesting. People didn't have to be told not to do that. It was a basic sign of respect.

Furore over food and religion is not that surprising in a country where the

first war of Independence in 1857 came about because of suspicions of pig and beef tallow being used to grease the cartridges used by soldiers. That was a case of the East India Company being blind to the religious sensitivities of the people they were ruling over. They did not realise how passions could run high over what they thought was just grease. What's changed now is food is used to inflame passions as a way to exert power. A food fight becomes also a way for one group to show another its place in the scheme of things. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argued in his famous 1981 essay *Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia*, food can become the medium, and the message of conflict.

What we eat has always been a way to signify cultural capital. The food we eat,

the clothes we wear, the art we appreciate were all part of what the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called objectified cultural capital, what one can use to demonstrate taste and class which in turn helps one succeed in life. But when food becomes a power flex it is no longer about the food we eat. We measure success through what we do not let others eat. When a group controls the levers of power, it may be able to enforce their diktat. But I wonder if their food tastes any better because they prevented someone else from having something.

One of the first signs of *poriborton* or change in Bengal after the BJP came to power this year was beef suddenly disappearing from the menus of restaurants and clubs. It was not that it was ever that

commonly available across the board, but its disappearance made news. It was not an outright ban but supply chains dried up and some restaurateurs thought discretion would be the better part of valour. Earlier this year, an influencer who went to an old watering hole in Kolkata and created an enormous fuss because he said the waiter had brought him a beef steak instead of the mutton steak he had ordered, faced enormous backlash as people accused him of trying to turn what appeared to be a genuine mistake into a communal incident. Some people wondered why he had even gone to a restaurant famous for its beef steaks, a restaurant as old as independent India itself. The influencer deleted his post and conceded he might have over-reacted. But one wonders if this story would have played out differently in the new Bengal today.

At that time columnist Rajyasree Sen had written in the *Indian Express* about her memories of a more "live and let live" time where her Marwari friends would go along with her to the old Nizam's restaurant in Kolkata and enjoy aloo-rolls while she had their famous beef-rolls. It reminded me of my student days in the American mid-west.

Like many *desi* boys, few of us could do little more than boil an egg. So we were always grateful when a faculty wife, also Indian, would invite us over for dinner. She was a wonderful cook but what I remember with most gratitude now is that though she herself was vegetarian, she always cooked a chicken curry for those of us who were not. Now it seems almost unthinkable. People might laud something like that as an act of courage or rip into her for betraying her values. At that time I thought of it as a simple chicken curry, just one cooked with extra kindness. Now I realise that chicken was a rare bird indeed.

Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against.

Sandip Roy (@sandipr) is a writer, journalist and radio host.

What it means to think logically in a digital world

Sundar Sarukkai's new book is for anybody seeking a head start in philosophical education or who is simply curious about the world

Aditya Mani Jha

Writer, philosopher and educator Sundar Sarukkai's latest work of non-fiction, *Homo Philosophicus: Discovering the Spirit of Philosophy in Everyday Life*, isn't coy about its scale and ambition. The book begins by forthrightly stating its mandate, which is to "present a unified approach to philosophy in a rudimentary form". Philosophy is a field of knowledge marked most often by references to its sheer vastness, its gargantuan breadth—2,000 years of practice spread across thinkers and traditions from around the world. However, as Sarukkai points out in the introductory essay, one of the biggest issues with the field is the biased representation by the West of the non-West.

Philosophical traditions belonging to India, China or West Asia are often underplayed or misrepresented in western academia. Across its 400-odd pages, *Homo Philosophicus* not only explains the shared foundations of all philosophical traditions, but also where and how Indian pedagogical traditions and schools of knowledge fit into this picture.

The book wisely begins by laying down basic definitions and examples pertaining to fundamental concepts like rationality, logic and inference. For example, Sarukkai cites the work of philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal (1935-91) to point out that in the West, the idea of logic was rooted in mathematics—if a leaf occupied a certain area on the ground, two leaves would cover twice that area. This wasn't always the case with Indian systems, however. In the ancient Nyaya school of philosophy's definition of logic, one of the examples used is a pot of boiling rice. We don't need to check every single grain to find out whether the rice is cooked—we can use a spoon to fish out and check just a couple of grains. If these two grains are cooked, then every grain is cooked; that's a mode of inference untethered from mathematics.

"The point was to demystify logic, to demystify multiple ways of understanding this world," Sarukkai says when we met for an interview. "Today, everybody's talking about critical thinking. The NEP (National Education Policy) talks about it, several universities are starting courses on it. But what really is critical thinking?



COURTESY WESTLAND

What does it mean to be rational, to be logical? These are not just cognitive terms, they are contentious, political terms. This book explores several pathways to that place we call 'logic', and hopefully it can reach the people who matter."

Having laid out this theoretical base, *Homo Philosophicus* proceeds in an orderly fashion towards more complicated questions. How do we understand the concept of "presence" in an increasingly digital world, where formlessness may or may not connote "absence"? How does a person trained in the axioms of physics (i.e. the study of the natural world) make the transition to metaphysics, and do they reconcile the fundamental tenets of both? These questions and indeed the field of philosophy as a whole ultimately lead to the same place—what does it mean to be a moral person? If morality is always contextual (but not infinitely subjective; an important distinction, as Sarukkai points out), how do we draft a shared set of values that are universally applicable for every human being?

"The traditional idea that our five senses define how we engage with the world has been challenged for a while now," Sarukkai says. "If you think about 'sense' as anything that provides you information about the world, then you realise that you can have various internal senses that tell you what to do and what not to do."

Sarukkai adds that there are all kinds of motivations behind wanting to control the definition and extent of "morality" or "moral sense". When economists or CEOs use the phrase "rational agent", for example, it is assumed that this hypothetical



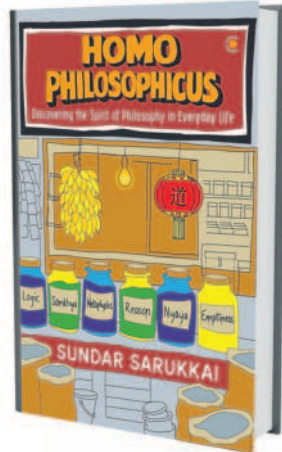
ISTOCKPHOTO

Children are more receptive to new ways of thinking; (left) Sarukkai.

rational agent's actions will be selfish without exception. These are the kinds of baked-in assumptions about human nature that are seldom challenged.

Sarukkai's point about capitalism having a vested interest in defining morality or "human nature" is an excellent one, broadly applicable to several realms of society and culture. It is in the interests of contemporary capitalism, for example, to brand us all irreversibly cynical so that we continue to be unquestioning perpetual-consumption machines. Modes of human engagement that fall outside the transactional logic of capitalism are deliberately kept at the fringes of popular culture, never allowed to infiltrate the mainstream. Think about it: why do we say "they're only human" when people are doing something questionable? One never sees the phrase being trotted out for, say, a firefighter rescuing a kitten or an act of philanthropic donation. Relentless selfishness is The Great Default; everything else is inherently exceptional.

One of the biggest strengths of *Homo Philosophicus* is the way Sarukkai is able to explain nuanced concepts to readers from



Homo Philosophicus:
By Sundar Sarukkai,
Westland,
432 pages, ₹699.

a variety of backgrounds. Having trained in both physics and philosophy, Sarukkai is ideally suited to act as a bridge between those two worlds. He has taught the philosophy of science to science and engineering students across the country, including at IISER (Indian Institute of Science Education and Research) and Manipal University. According to him, bridging these two worlds wasn't always such a significant challenge.

"If you look at some of the earliest philosophers of science in the 20th century, they were great scientists and mathematicians, like Albert Einstein or Henri Poincaré. These philosophers tried to explain the purpose of science. Philosophy was doing to science what science was doing to the natural world; explaining it," Sarukkai says. "What happened with World War II and the atomic bomb was that science was now entrenched with the government, with politics, at a hitherto unprecedented scale. That's where the divide between scientists and philosophers began, because scientists began to see philosophy of science as anti-science. Conversely, a section of philosophers also became too

scholastic, too tied up with their books rather than with the natural world. So there was a mutual distrust."

Sarukkai has explored philosophy, especially in the Indian context, in previous works of non-fiction such as *Philosophy of Symmetry*, *Translating the World: Science and Language and Indian Philosophy and Philosophy of Science*. In the last couple of years, he has also received well-deserved critical acclaim for two novels—*Following a Prayer* (2023) and *Water Days* (2025). In very different ways, both novels place children at the heart of the narrative. *Water Days* sees a middle-class pre-globalisation Bengaluru family (including two daughters) fighting for justice after a neighbourhood girl dies by suicide.

The fascinating *Following a Prayer* features 12-year-old Kalpana who asks her grandmother, "Where do prayers go?", prompting the latter to ask Kalpana to follow one and see. The girl takes the advice quite literally, vanishing into the forest for three whole days. Upon her return, she is resolutely silent, and the rest of the novel is spent in unravelling this mystery. Sarukkai's juvenile protagonist presents a kind of philosophical *tabula rasa*, a blank slate that can be used to explore various belief systems. Sarukkai says the books were also informed by his own experience of teaching children, especially through the informal collective Barefoot Philosophers.

"For me, more than a blank slate, it was the plasticity of the child's mind," he says. "A child's space of learning and of absorbing new information can be really quick, obviously. Children are constantly asking you questions, and I feel they are more receptive to new ways of thinking. When I am teaching undergraduates or people who're older than that, very often I will hear, 'I will read X but not Y or Z because they bore me'. So that's my thinking behind making children the central characters in my novels. To be honest, I have learned a lot from teaching children."

Homo Philosophicus is highly recommended for anybody seeking to get a head start in their philosophical education, or who is simply curious about the world and our place in it. Sarukkai's writing illuminates without dumbing down or making things excessively broad. That's a tough balance to strike at the best of times but *Homo Philosophicus* does it quite easily.

Aditya Mani Jha is a writer based in Delhi.

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A life trapped inside the debt machinery

Geet Chaturvedi's novel in translation chronicles the plight of a man lured into the consumerist trap by a system that thrives on selling greed

Somak Ghoshal
somak.ghoshal@partner.livemint.com

Geet Chaturvedi's powerful novel, *Gomutra* (literally, cow urine), translated from the Hindi by Anita Gopalan as *Scent of the Nameless* (though "stench" rather than "scent" feels better suited to the mood of the text), begins on a note of menace. The unnamed protagonist, a family man who works as a "store coordinator" at a multinational company in Mumbai, wakes up one morning to discover he has turned into a giant vermin; but the salaryman's predicament is no less distressing. Caught inside an impenetrable miasma of hallucinations, unable to confide in anyone the extent of his troubles, he is trapped in a disaster of his making. Or rather, a tragedy that has become endemic to the time he lives in.

The misfortune that befalls Chaturvedi's protagonist is insidious, yet far too common, even banal, to escape. It is the crippling grip of debt, manifesting in his case as mounting credit card bills. From farmers in drought-ridden regions neck-deep in debt choosing to end their suffering by consuming sulphate tablets to middle-class office-goers hounded by henchmen sent by banks to collect outstanding instalments, the victims of this phenomenon range far and wide. As Chaturvedi's plot unfolds, the reader begins to reckon with debt as the great leveller of the 21st century, forcing its prey into a state of "living entombment".

Fictional critiques of capitalism tend to operate out of a realist mode, as Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize-winning *The White Tiger* (2008) did, albeit without much nuance. However, writers like Kazuo Ishiguro in *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and J.G. Ballard in *High-Rise* (1975) have offered no less scathing perspectives on the moral bankruptcy of capital by profoundly defamiliarising the world as we know it. In *Scent of the Nameless*, Chaturvedi achieves a similar effect by cleverly setting his story at a time and place that feels like an amalgam of George Orwell's 1984 and contemporary India. Some may argue that there isn't much of a difference between the two any more.

As his protagonist realises, at great personal cost, the reality he inhabits is radically skewed, built on contradictions and inequality. "It wasn't



Pest infection in 2018 affected millions of farmers in Marathwada and Vidarbha; and (below) Geet Chaturvedi.

borrowing.... It was a way of earning," he tells the reader, referring to the argument presented to him by an importunate bank agent desperate to foist a credit card on him. "Earnings came from circulating the market's money in the market itself," is another topsy-turvy maxim he learns. Such painfully learned wisdom about the secret workings of the system leads him to a despairing truth: "The ones who can sell run the economy... The ones who can't sell become its prey."

Time and again, this bitter pill hits home for Chaturvedi's protagonist through his experiences and epiphanies. The stress of defaulting on his EMIs leaves him suspended in a limbo, where it becomes impossible to separate practical worries from catastrophising terrors, nightmares from waking thoughts. One day, he has an outburst in office, leaving his colleagues shocked by the volley of expletives he utters. When he seeks help from his boss "Baba", the latter confesses to being in the same boat. Such is the twisted force of the free market that it doesn't matter whether you earn lakhs or in the measly thousands. Everyone, Baba tells him, is drowning in debt.

As in his previous novel *Simsim* (2023), Chaturvedi diffuses the boundaries between the real and the surreal in *Scent of the Nameless*, leaving the reader to grapple with the challenge of reading between the lines. For instance, in one striking episode, his protagonist, consumed as he is by inner demons, discovers a hidden fount of bravado in him when he rouses an army of daily commuters on a Mumbai local to



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wage a revolt against the government. Does this scene belong to his subconscious or does it enter the world of the novel through a crack in its realist fabric? Is the "Finance Minister", who appears like an uncaring oligarch, real or a figment of the protagonist's oppressed mind? And what about the smell of *gomutra* that drives him up the wall but doesn't seem to affect others?

The reader doesn't—indeed, cannot—know the answers to these questions. In fact, to look for them is to misread the intentions of the writer. In a world full of grey areas, Chaturvedi is interested in manipulating the sympathy of the reader by holding a mirror to their own lives, which aren't immune from the claws of market economics. The protagonist's choices aren't uniquely his own, nor are the mistakes that lead him down the path to doom. These are, in fact, part of a larger affliction that infects most of his contemporaries, heirs to "democracy and greedocracy," as he puts it, burning their own lives to fuel the engine that drives big capital.

Chaturvedi's lambent prose, especially the droll despair with which his protagonist speaks, comes alive in Gopalan's inspired translation, which comes with a note explaining specific stylistic choices in the end. For instance, the decision to use compound epithets—"cooking woman", "washing woman", and so on—to describe the shape-shifting roles assumed by the protagonist's wife, provides a subtle but revealing clue into the interpersonal dynamics of the couple. With her quiet inscrutability, she remains the firm hand that keeps him going, even while he is crumbling inside, until she can no more. For his part, he harbours an unspoken strain of misogyny towards her, blaming her consumerist greed for his profligate spending. The reader can only infer the contours of the couple's relationship, each pushing the other away while desperately seeking some form of closeness.

The protagonist's use of his wife as a convenient moral shield, along with his stubborn refusal to heed her counsel about selling off their belongings despite his pathetic loss of face before creditors, paint a portrait of a man who has reached the end of his tether. Not only does the reader witness fragile modes of masculinity crumbling in an innately patriarchal society, they also follow a familiar disintegration of the notion of selfhood, under assault since the advent of the industrial era, and becoming much more exacerbated since the economic meltdown of 2008.

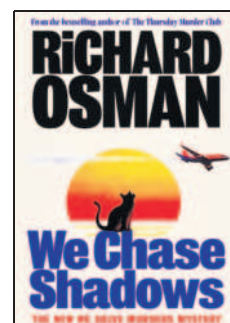
As Gopalan reminds the reader, Munshi Premchand's iconic novel, *Godaan* (1936), which tells the story of a poor farmer's struggle with inhuman debt, looms over Chaturvedi's modern morality tale. The question the latter leaves us to ponder is, in the end, rhetorical: "What, really, has changed between the debt of 1936 and 2008?"

NEW ON SHELVES

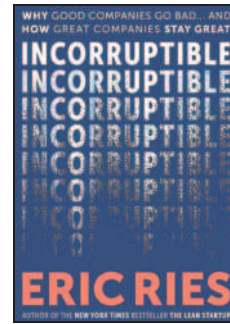
Chronicle the sweep of changes over the last decade, this upcoming collection of essays, drawn from Matthan's long-running *Mint* column of the same name, offers key insights into the way the state's engagement with technology has evolved. From UPI payment infrastructure to the onslaught of AI in public life, the articles cover an array of topics that have an impact on citizens' lives. *'Ex Machina'*, by Rahul Matthan, Westland, 248 pages, ₹699.



A new Richard Osman novel has dropped like an early Christmas gift, packed with all the things that make for a gripping mystery. Second in his *We Solve Murders* series, this multi-continental drama has action, humour and, above all, the oddball team of Amy, Rose and Steve, who have to chase a killer across Italy, Palm Springs and Barcelona. *'We Chase Shadows'*, by Richard Osman, Penguin Random House, 432 pages, ₹999.



Eric Reis, best-selling author of *The Lean Startup*, returns with a book urging founders and C-suite leaders to look at their businesses afresh. As AI causes disruptions, he argues that the need of the hour isn't to focus on beating the competition, but to tackle systems that are eroding the first principles of businesses. *'Incorruptible: Why Good Companies Go Bad and How Great Companies Stay Great'*, by Eric Reis, Penguin Random House, 432 pages, ₹1,099.



Popularly called the "Nutrition Man of India", Basant Kumar Kar draws on his experience in the field to explain the roots of malnutrition. The latter doesn't always stem from famine and poverty. Rather, a variety of sociological and cultural choices may lead to it. The factors causing malnutrition are complex. Kar demystifies the science behind it. *'Malnutrition: Fed or Mised? The Truth Beyond Food'*, by Basant Kumar Kar, Hachette India, 416 pages, ₹799.



Did foreign capital reshape India's healthcare?

Ameer Shahul's book dwells on the healthcare sector, from the growth of corporate hospitals to the rise of foreign players

T. Surendar
surendar.t@livemint.com

Ameer Shahul's third book, *The Silent Syndicate*, arrives with its thesis in the subtitle—*How Big Finance Is Destroying India's Healthcare*—and a prosecutor's confidence in its pages.

Following *Heavy Metal*, his award-winning account of mercury poisoning and corporate negligence in Kodaikanal, and *Vaccine Nation*, a history of immunisation in India, Shahul, a journalist-turned-public policy professional, again marries dogged reporting to argument. The result is an absorbing and meticulously sourced read. But it is also more certain of its villains than its economics quite warrants.

The book is built as a tour of the healthcare sector, beginning with the growth of corporate hospitals in India, most of them led by entrepreneurs who started with the ideal of healing. It opens with KIMS Health in Thiruvananthapuram, which began, in Shahul's words, as a "symbol of altruistic ambition" in 2002 before private equity

arrived a decade later, first from an Indian and a global private equity fund and later from True North and the US-based Blackstone. He takes readers through similar trajectories of Apollo Hospitals, Medanta, Narayana Health, Manipal and others whose fortunes were built with PE funds. Ranjan Pai-promoted Manipal Hospitals, for instance, was founded in 1961 and had just three hospitals for nearly 40 years until Singapore fund Temasek upped its stake to 59%, helping the group expand to 40 hospitals in the next 20 years.

From there Shahul moves to diagnostics—Dr Lal PathLabs and WestBridge's early bet, Velumani's Thyrocare and CX Partners, then Vijaya and Aarthi, all growing with PE money—and on to medical devices, pharmaceuticals, insurers, and finally, the lobbies that grease the machine. It is a comprehensive map, and Shahul draws it well.

The trouble is the moral that the map is asked to carry. Across every segment, Shahul's recurring evidence is that foreign capital "swooped in." But private equity in unlisted companies is, fundamentally, a question of who is willing to take a risk at what price. Based on his own facts, Indian capital was repeatedly at the table, only to be outbid most times by foreign investors. For instance, British firm Apax Partners bought Sutures India after US-based TPG Growth and Indian PE firm CX Partners had already been through it, rebranded it



Behind the growth of healthcare in India is the multibillion-dollar shift toward foreign private equity.

Healthium, and expanded it from 50 to 90 countries. When US investment firm KKR paid roughly ₹7,000 crore for the Healthium in 2024, it outbid the Indian Chrysalis Capital-Mankind combine, which halted at ₹6,500 crore. The opportunity, in every case, was visible to all. But foreign firms valued it more aggressively.

This reframing matters, because "destroying" is a strong verb for what

looks, from another angle, like the arrival of capital that Indian investors would not supply at valuations that their competing foreign counterparts were willing to. The sector did not attract serious money even at the close of the last century. When it finally did, capacity multiplied.

One can lament the terms without pretending the alternative—a starved, slow-growing system—was kinder to patients.

Shahul's book, powerful on the last 15 years of frenetic PE activity, is thinner on why domestic capital sat out the decades before or on the network effects that make founders prefer a foreign backer.

The dynamic is more fluid than the book's alarm allows. In pharmaceuticals, Indian investors and domestic institutions have bought back in as foreign investors exited, raising domestic ownership.

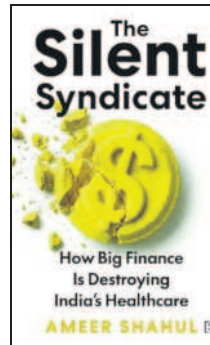
In the Hyderabad-based Dr Reddy's Laboratories, over the last three years, domestic institutional investors have come to hold a bigger stake than the foreign ones. In Divi's Labs, the second most valued pharmaceutical company, Indian institutions hold as much as foreign investors. Most of the hospital chains are now listed on Indian exchanges, where ownership will churn for years before it settles. To freeze the picture at a single anxious moment—foreign ownership at its 2024 high-water mark—and call it a permanent "syndicate" is to mistake a snapshot for a destination.

Shahul's singular focus is the rise of for-

ign ownership of India's healthcare. He hardly touches on government actions or initiatives. Where he is truly valuable is in insisting that decisions about Indian care are being increasingly taken in London, Munich and New York rather than in Mumbai or Bengaluru, and in his refusal to let the middle class mistake its own

convenience as a sign of progress. Shahul also argues that wider health insurance coverage in India has not necessarily made healthcare more affordable. Rather, the entry of private equity, global insurers and reinsurers has financialised the healthcare ecosystem, shifting the focus from patients and doctors to return on capital. In particular, he says the entry of global reinsurers starting 2016 has led to tighter underwriting, higher premiums, more exclusions and complicated policy conditions.

Those are worthwhile provocations. But the reader who finishes *The Silent Syndicate* should carry one counter-question the author does not press: if this was a heist, why were the doors left open so long, and why did India's own financiers keep walking past them?



IN THE NEWS



SINGH BATS FOR INDIGENOUS AEROSPACE TECH

DEFENCE MINISTER RAJNATH Singh on Friday called for an integrated aerospace ecosystem serving both civil and military aviation."We need to develop an ecosystem that can effectively address the requirements of both the civil and military aviation sectors," Singh said at a ceremony at Hindustan Aeronautics to hand over Light Combat Aircraft Tejas twin-seater trainers and Hindustan Turbo Trainer-40 basic trainer aircraft to the Indian Air Force, and Dhruv Next Generation helicopters to Pawan Hans.

PTI

Sugar stock limit for bulk users raised to 30 days



THE GOVERNMENT ON Friday said it has relaxed the stockholding limit for bulk sugar consumers to 30 days from the existing 15 days, as the festive season approaches and demand is expected to pick up.

Punjab govt hikes DA by 8% for staff, pensioners

ENDING A PROLONGED STANDOFF with state employees, the Bhagwant Mann government on Friday announced relief for around 800,00 employees and pensioners, increasing the Dearness Allowance (DA) by 8%.

PM to hand over 51K appointment letters today



PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi will distribute more than 51,000 appointment letters to newly selected youth, who will join various government departments and organisations, at a special job fair on Saturday. As many as 45 "Rozgar Melas" will be held at locations across the country.

GST officers arrest trader in ₹25-cr tax credit fraud

Central GST officers have arrested the proprietor of an iron and steel trading firm for fraudulently availing ₹25.22 crore in input tax credit (ITC) through bogus invoices.

AGENCIES

Female labour participation tops 40% in 58% districts

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, September 18

THE MINISTRY OF Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) on Friday released India's first-ever district-level labour market indicators, showing a mixed employment picture across the country, with around 78% of districts recording an unemployment rate (UR) of 0.5-5.5% among people aged 15 years and above.

The unemployment rates, measured under the usual status approach, were concentrated in the moderate range, MoSPI said in a release. Around 43.1% of districts recorded a UR of 0.5-3%, while 34.7% reported a rate of 3-5.5%. Only 7.2% of districts had a UR below 0.5%, while 14.9% recorded a rate above 5.5%.

The labour force participation rate (LFPR) estimates of about 98.8% of districts and worker population ratio (WPR) estimates of around 98.3% of

ECONOMY'S DEMONSTRATED RESILIENCE TO GLOBAL SHOCKS CITED

Moody's raises FY27 GDP growth forecast to 7%

● Flags inflation, growth risks from higher energy prices, El Nino

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, September 18

MOODY'S RATINGS ON Friday raised India's GDP growth forecast by 1 percentage point citing the economy's "demonstrated resilience" to the global shock caused by the war in West Asia. The rating agency now expects the Indian economy to grow 7% in FY27 against its previous forecast of 6%. India's GDP grew quicker-than-expected at 7.8% in the April-June quarter, which prompted economists to raise their growth forecasts.

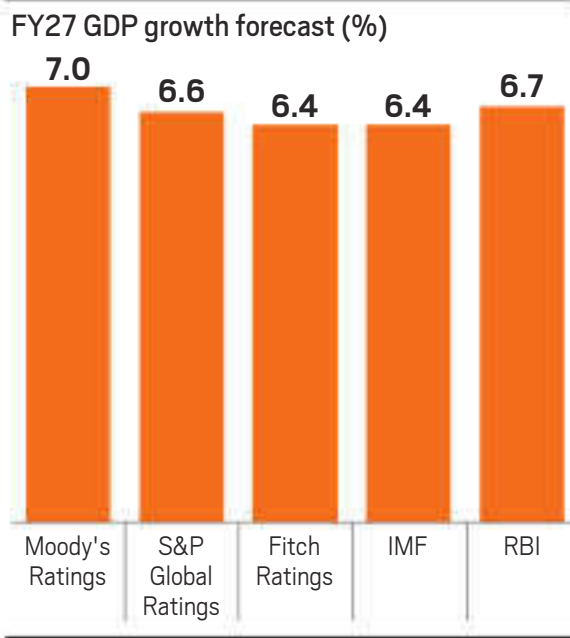
The 7% growth forecast by Moody's is higher than the Reserve Bank of India's projection of 6.7% for the year, though the central bank is expected to raise this next month.

Strong economic activity so far this year has been supported by robust private consumption, continued public infrastructure spending, a likely revival of private sector investment, and sustained strength in the services sector, Moody's said in its report announcing the completion of a periodic review of ratings of Indian government.

"Although we continue to expect India to grow faster than all other G-20 economies, as well as similarly rated emerging market sovereigns, risks remain," the rating agency said.

With the war continuing in West Asia, high energy prices could push India's inflation above Moody's current projec-

ROBUST OUTLOOK



tion of 4.8% for FY27. CPI inflation rose to a 20-month high of 4.8% in August and is projected to rise even further in the coming months. The RBI projects FY27 CPI inflation at 5%.

El Nino-related disruptions could increase food price pressures, weighing on private consumption and economic activity, Moody's said. "While the increased diversification of India's crude import sources, sizeable foreign exchange reserves and strong domestic demand provide important buffers, higher energy and fertiliser import costs, softer external demand and weaker remittance inflows from the Middle East could widen the current account deficit and weigh on growth momentum more broadly," Moody's said in the report.

The periodic review of India's ratings was conducted through a rating committee held on September 10, where Moody's reassessed the appropriateness of the ratings in the context of recent developments. This pub-

■ India's GDP grew quicker-than-expected at **7.8%** in April-June quarter

■ Moody's **7%** growth forecast is higher than RBI's projection of 6.7% for the year

lication, however, did not announce a credit rating action and is "not an indication of whether or not a credit rating action is likely in the near future," Moody's said.

Moody's has a Baa3 long-term issuer rating on India, which balances the country's high growth potential, a sound external position, and the government's stable domestic financing base against high general government debt, weak debt affordability and low per capita income.

Last month, S&P Global Ratings and Fitch Ratings affirmed India's long-term sovereign credit rating at 'BBB' and 'BBB-', respectively. Earlier this month, Japan Credit Rating Agency (JCR) upgraded India from 'BBB+' to 'A'.

Moody's said that an upward pressure could develop on the Baa3 rating if there was a material improvement in the affordability of India's high debt burden to ratios more consistent with higher-rated peers. This would require steps to

■ Strong consumption, infra spending, services supporting economic activity

■ Moody's sees no material debt reduction in next 2-3 years

■ Fiscal consolidation to remain gradual amid high interest costs

durably raise revenue, narrow the fiscal deficit and contribute to a more marked decline in debt, the rating agency said.

Conversely, durably weaker growth than currently projected or a reversal from fiscal consolidation would lead to downward pressure on the rating, the rating agency said.

According to Moody's, while India reduced its fiscal deficit in recent years, the rating agency does not expect a "material reduction in debt" over the next two to three years. "Debt affordability will remain constrained by elevated global and domestic interest rates, particularly as central banks maintain a cautious policy stance amid heightened geopolitical uncertainty and persistent inflation risks," Moody's said.

India's fiscal policy response to the West Asia shock has been muted, reflecting the government's commitment to its target of reducing the central government deficit to 4.3% of GDP in FY27 from 4.4% the previous year, Moody's said.

H2 borrowing plan likely next week

REUTERS
Mumbai, September 18

GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS ARE likely to meet next Friday to finalise the borrowing calendar for the second half of the fiscal year ending in March, two sources familiar with the matter said.

An announcement is expected after the meeting. New Delhi plans to raise ₹16.09 lakh crore through bond sales this fiscal year and has borrowed ₹7.79 lakh crore so far, with the final first-half auction, worth ₹34,000 crore due next Friday.

That leaves ₹7.96 lakh crore of gross borrowing for October-March, including ₹6,500 crore not raised at a three-year bond auction on September 11.

In consultations with market participants ahead of the borrowing plan, a regular

ISSUANCE CALENDAR

■ Govt likely to meet next Friday to finalise the borrowing calendar for Oct-Mar

₹7.96
lakh-crore of gross borrowing left for H2 FY27

practice, most investors favoured increasing the share of shorter-dated three-year and five-year bonds, one of the above mentioned source and two traders, who could not be named because they are not authorised to speak to media, said.

However, the Reserve Bank of India's subsequent decision to conduct open market bond sales has com-

plicated that preference, traders added.

"Open market sales were not on the minds of the majority during those meetings, but they are now a bitter reality," one of the traders said. "Increasing supply in that segment could distort the yield curve and push up short-term borrowing costs."

The RBI has announced bond sales to drain record

■ Investors favour higher share of 3- and 5-year bonds

■ Ultra-long bonds' share may rise in H2 borrowing calendar

■ Market seeks lower or split 10-year bond issuance



banking-system liquidity after dollar inflows from diaspora deposits far exceeded estimates.

Market participants also recommended reducing 10-year bond issuance or splitting supply between two alternate-week auctions instead of one sale every four weeks.

The central bank sold ₹34,000 crore of 10-year bonds every four weeks between April and September, accounting for 29% of total issuance.

The share of three- and five-year bonds rose to 23.5% in April-September from 16.6% a year earlier.

Meanwhile, some market participants had suggested increasing the share of ultra-long bonds with maturities of 30 to 50 years, which had been cut to about 25% of total borrowing, from 35% a year earlier.

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, September 18

INDIA AND CANADA on Friday reaffirmed their commitment to expedite negotiations for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and conclude the pact at the earliest as both sides concluded the 4th round of negotiations held here over the past five days.

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and Canada's International Trade Minister Maninder Sidhu, who is visiting India, held discussions on advancing the CEPA.

"Both sides reaffirmed our leadership's commitment to expedite negotiations and conclude CEPA at the earliest, unlocking new opportunities across trade in goods, services, and investment, among others," Goyal posted on social media after meeting Sidhu.

Canadian International Trade Minister's visit to India this week includes meetings with Indian business representatives and investors as Canada seeks to attract greater invest-

INCHING TO A RESET

■ The fourth round of CEPA negotiations in New Delhi was held from September 14-19

■ Both sides working to complete the agreement by the end of 2026

■ CEPA negotiations come against the backdrop of a broader reset in India-Canada economic relations

ment while diversifying its trade beyond the US market.

"From aerospace and artificial intelligence to clean energy and critical minerals, there is enormous potential," Sidhu said in a social media post prior to the meeting.

The fourth round of CEPA negotiations in New Delhi was held from September 14-19. Canada sent a 48-member team to the negotiations. Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal had said on Tuesday that two chapters have already been concluded and that both sides are

Trai lowers threshold for action against spam calls

OJASVI GUPTA
New Delhi, September 18

THE TELECOM REGULATORY Authority of India (Trai) has tightened its crackdown on spam calls, allowing telecom operators to initiate action against a sender when at least three unique consumers complain about it within 10 days and the sender's number is also flagged by the operator's AI system as suspected spam. The move lowers the complaint threshold for action against suspected spammers. Earlier, action could be triggered by five or more unique complaints.

Under the amended Telecom Commercial Communications Customer Preference Regulations, 2018, a telecom service provider (TSP) will be required to identify customer-line numbers (CLIs) with a high probability of being used for spam and share such information with other operators.

The authority also directed TSPs to use artificial intelligence/machine learning-based tools to identify suspected spam calls and share the intelligence with other operators, besides carrying out further investigation of such suspected senders.

"Where five or more CLIs associated with a Sender are flagged within a period of ten days, further investigation and graded action will be initiated by the Access Providers, including KYC re-verification, physical

TIGHTER REGULATIONS

■ Trai lowers complaint threshold against spammers to three from five or more earlier

■ Operators to flag suspected spam numbers using AI

■ A2P calls brought under new regulatory framework

■ Up to 5 paise per minute termination charge on A2P calls

■ Appeal against UCC complaint resolution can be filed within 15 days



verification, barring of outgoing services, and disconnection of telecom resource in cases of repeated violations and misuse of telecom resources," Trai said.

Trai has also mandated that applications cannot blanket-block, filter or tag calls from regulator-designated commercial communication number series such as 1600xx/1601xx and 140xx. Consumers, however, will retain the ability to individually block or filter calls on their devices.

The amendments also bring application-to-person (A2P) calls within a specific regulatory framework. Such calls include automated calls initiated through software or applications, including autodialling, robocalls and pre-recorded or artificial voice technologies. Entities using A2P calling will have to declare their use to their telecom service provider and

provide details of the CLIs that will be used. Calls made without prior declaration will be treated as Unsolicited Commercial Communications (UCC).

The telecom regulator has also introduced a termination charge of up to 5 paise per minute for A2P calls, payable by the originating access provider to the terminating access provider. Calls made through numbering series designated for regulated commercial communications, as well as those authorised by Trai, will be exempt from the charge.

For consumers, the regulator has introduced an appeal mechanism against the resolution of UCC complaints. Appeals can be filed within 15 days before the Appellate Authority through existing complaint channels, including the DND app, telecom operators' apps or portals, and calls or SMS to 1909.

Arrests no longer prescribed route for tax recovery: CBDT

SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, September 18

THE CENTRAL BOARD of Direct Taxes (CBDT) has amended the Income Tax Rules, 2026, removing a provision that allowed tax recovery officers to arrest defaulters and detain them in prison.

A tax defaulter can no longer be arrested or detained for recovering tax dues.

Other modes of recovery, including sale of movable or immovable property, will continue.

The CBDT also revised application forms for registration of valuers and authorised income-tax practitioners under the Income-tax Act, 2025. This marks another step towards formalising professional standards in tax administration, experts said.

The revised Form 169, for individuals seeking registration as valuers, requires applicants to provide key personal and professional details, including educational qualifications, profes-

sional certifications, relevant valuation experience and the class of assets for which registration is sought. Valuers already registered will also have to update their details under the new framework. A valuer is a professional who assesses the value of assets such as movable and immovable property.

The tax department has also extended by six months, to March 31, the deadline for registration of valuers and authorised income-tax practitioners under the new Income-tax Act, 2025. The previous deadline was September 30.

"The revised registration framework reflects a clear policy intent to professionalise tax valuation and representation. By insisting on qualification, disclosure and independence at the entry stage, CBDT is moving towards a more accountable ecosystem for taxpayers and tax professionals alike," said Riaz Thingna, partner, Grant Thornton Bharat.



India, Canada conclude 4th round of trade talks



districts fell within 40-80%. Around 57.8% of districts recorded a female LFPR of 40% or above. Among the districts selected from each state's 10 most populous districts by female population, Hamirpur in Himachal Pradesh recorded the highest female LFPR and WPR at 80.9% and 80%, respectively.

Among the 100 most populous districts, Surat in Gujarat and Araria in Bihar recorded the highest LFPR. Surat and

Araria also saw the highest WPR. South-24 Parganas in West Bengal, and Araria had the lowest UR at 0.9% each.

Ernakulam in Kerala and Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu reported the lowest NEET (not in employment, education or training) rates among youth aged 15-29 years. Over 76% of districts recorded NEET rates below 30%, while 23.7% reported rates above 30%.

"Reliable and timely statistics at the sub-State level are essential for understanding the diversity of socio-economic conditions across the country and for supporting evidence-based planning and policy formulation. While national and State-level indicators provide an overall picture, district-level statistics offer a more granular perspective on the changing economic and labour market landscape," Geeta Singh Rathore, director general, National Sample Survey, said in the report.



Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and Canada's International Trade Minister Maninder Sidhu during a meeting in New Delhi on Friday

economic cooperation.

The two countries are simultaneously expanding cooperation in strategic sectors, particularly energy, critical minerals and nuclear power. During Carney's March visit, India and Canada announced a Strategic Energy Partnership covering LNG, LPG, uranium, solar and hydrogen. A key outcome was a C\$2.6-billion agreement with Canadian uranium producer Cameco to supply nearly 22 million pounds of uranium ore concentrate to India between 2027 and 2035. The two sides also signed a MoU on critical-minerals value chains covering areas including exploration, processing, investment promotion and technical cooperation.

For India, the CEPA would provide an opportunity to expand exports of goods and services to Canada while seeking greater access for the Indian market. The agreement is also expected to provide a framework for investment and supply-chain cooperation in sectors where the two economies have complementary strengths.

Crunch time

Inflation may not be fully generalised, but RBI must tame it before it bites

EVEN AHEAD OF the 25-basis-point (bps) rate hike by the Federal Open Market Committee on Wednesday, rising and increasingly broad-based inflation at home, amid fairly strong growth momentum, provided sufficient reason for monetary policy to be tightened. Retail inflation in August hit 4.8% year-on-year, a far cry from the benign sub-3% levels at the start of the year. That is still well within the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) comfort zone, but there are signs that prices in some pockets are rising faster than before. Services are one such area, with relative softness giving way to firmer price pressures. What could really throw inflation off-kilter is the renewed surge in crude oil prices to over \$100 a barrel, which has pushed the Indian crude basket to around \$120-125 a barrel. With the crisis in West Asia worsening and Lindsey Graham's Russia and Iran sanctions bill close to becoming a reality, India finds itself in a predicament. Supplies may or may not be severely disrupted, but the oil import bill can only get bigger, potentially compelling the government to resort to another round of petrol and diesel price increases. A hike of ₹7.50 a litre, similar to the last round, could push inflation above 6%, making the central bank's task considerably harder.

Pressure points are also emerging in the food basket as vegetables, cereals, and sugar become costlier; food inflation is nudging 6% even before the effects of a less-than-normal monsoon and El Niño have been fully felt. If headline consumer price index inflation (CPI) has not yet moved above 5% or become "generalised", it is partly because companies have yet to fully pass on higher input costs to consumers, as reflected in the gap between non-food wholesale price index and CPI inflation. That the pass-through is under way can be seen in the rise in super-core inflation, which excludes the impact of precious metals. Clearly, price pressures are becoming more broad-based, and the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) needs to take this seriously, particularly before inflation expectations become entrenched.

Even in the absence of a broad-based rise in prices, however, a recalibration of rates may be warranted. Core inflation is trending higher and should average a little over 4% this fiscal, while consensus estimates now peg headline inflation at 5.5-6% for the September-November period. Real interest rates, too, remain low. These factors have clearly not escaped the MPC's attention. The minutes of the August meeting reflected a "hawkish hold", somewhat at odds with the dovish tone of the policy statement and RBI commentary. Importantly, a recalibration need not be accompanied by a change in the policy stance — currently neutral — giving the RBI greater room for manoeuvre and allowing it to respond to incoming data.

The rate-hiking cycle is likely to begin with a 25-bps increase in October, followed by a similar move in December, with the objective of anchoring inflation expectations. Much as in other countries, money is set to become costlier in India too. That is unfortunate because it would make loans more expensive for individuals and small businesses. A higher cost of capital at a time when growth is set to decelerate — to about 7% this year — cannot be helpful. One hopes the plentiful liquidity in the system will keep banks' borrowing costs relatively low, allowing lending rates to remain reasonable. If the growth momentum is to be sustained, credit needs to remain affordable.

Who prosecutes war crimes against culture?

I DON'T KNOW if artificial intelligence poses an existential threat, but the human damage to civilisation's cultural legacy is a matter of record. It continues to this day with the violent erosion of our historical heritage through war.

This week, Saudi Arabia said it intercepted a drone attack on Mecca launched from Yemen by Iran-backed Houthi rebels. The Saudis said it was the second such attempt, citing a ballistic-missile launch nine years ago. The Houthis denied firing drones towards the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad; in 2017, they said they were targeting a military installation some 40 miles from the holy city.

In April, I wrote about the risks posed to the splendid 400-year-old Shah mosque in Isfahan by US and Israeli bombing of Iran's nearby nuclear research hub. The historic edifice hasn't suffered a direct hit, but blast waves from the assaults have shaken tiles loose and damaged windows. The UNESCO has designated the mosque and nearly 1,000 other cultural monuments around the world as "so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity". That hasn't prevented desecration.

Last week, two UNESCO arms released a joint report about the damage inflicted on a 1,000-year-old Hindu temple during last year's border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia. It suggested those responsible could face "criminal liability" — but the legal, evidentiary, and regulatory hurdles to pursuing that route are laborious. Despite surviving centuries of depredation, these priceless relics rarely have the luxury of time.

At least two international courts have adjudicated on the Thai-Cambodia quarrel, recognising the promontory hosting the ancient Preah Vihear temple as Cambodian. But they left open the question of who owns the surrounding territory, which sits directly on the frontier between the two nations. And so the fighting engulfed the entire area, including the temple. A photo published by UNESCO appears to show the collapse of the front of one ornamental gateway in the complex.

Criminal liability was also a potential recourse in 2024 after Israeli bombing in Lebanon came close to the 2,000-year-old Temple of Jupiter in Baalbek and the archaeological zones of Tyre, which include Roman baths and crusader fortifications. Instead, Lebanese officials requested — and received — what's called "enhanced protection" from UNESCO's Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. That adds an additional level of moral opprobrium to any attack that vandalises the sites. Lebanon pledged the locations wouldn't be used for military purposes.

But ethical qualms aren't enough to deter destruction, especially when non-state actors are involved. From 2015 to 2017, the terrorist group Islamic State demolished several temples in the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra. These included the Temple of Bel, which was dedicated in the year 32, arguably within the lifetime of Jesus of Nazareth. It predated the Colosseum in Rome. The battles that eventually retook the site from ISIS further despoiled Palmyra.

Criminal prosecutions may be easier if the antagonists are not nation states — and you can identify specific assailants. In 2012, Islamist fighters associated with Al-Qaeda smashed most of the historic mausoleums in the city of Timbuktu in Mali, some of which date to the 13th century. The episode produced the only conviction of any person for the war crime of heritage destruction: Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi, the head of the Ansar Dine militia's morality police during its 10-month occupation of the city. He was imprisoned first in the Netherlands and then in Scotland; his whereabouts since completing his sentence (nine years reduced to seven) are unknown.

Although a legal precedent was established, no comparable punishments have followed. In the meantime, the tombs — traditionally constructed of mud in the manner of the Great Mosque of Djenné to the south of Timbuktu — have been rebuilt.

Even if it falls short of providing protection in times of war, UNESCO's list of heritage sites embodies our reverence for the past, appealing to primal instincts that are the opposite of carnage: preservation and remembrance.

AI is trained on human knowledge and thus absorbs human foibles — but surely something of our nobler selves can also be incorporated. I can only hope that UNESCO'S records feed into the models and can influence computer-directed military operations to avoid attacking these communal treasures.



HOWARD CHUA-EOAN

Bloomberg

LABOUR INCOME RIDDLE

INDIA'S POVERTY REDUCTION WORTH CELEBRATING; IT MUST ENSURE ORDINARY WORK BECOMES MORE REWARDING

Poor in economic security

AMIT KAPOOR

Chair, Institute for Competitiveness
X: @kautiliya



A growing economy can create more jobs and produce more output while the purchasing power generated by ordinary work fails to keep pace.

PLFS also shows that in constant 2021 PPP terms, the median worker earned about \$16.76 a day in 2025, compared with \$15.13 in 2017-18. In rural India, median earnings rose from \$12.80 to \$14.45 a day; in urban India, from \$20.26 to \$22.49. The urban median remained around 56% higher than the rural median in 2025, only slightly narrower than the 58% gap eight years earlier.

The median, however, tells us only what happened to the worker in the middle. It does not tell us whether those at the bottom gained or whether their earnings were sufficient to cross even modest standards of purchasing power.

This is where international poverty lines can be useful in a different way. The World Bank's \$3 and \$4.20 lines are designed to measure household consumption poverty, not individual labour earnings. Applying them to PLFS earnings therefore does not produce another estimate of poverty. But they can serve as benchmarks of income adequacy: a way of asking how many workers earn less than the purchasing-power equivalent of standards associated with extreme poverty and different levels of country

income. In that sense, they put an otherwise abstract earnings distribution on a more human scale.

The bottom of the distribution tells a different story.

Among rural workers reporting positive labour income, the share earning less than the equivalent of \$3 a day rose from 3.83% in 2017-18 to 4.63% in 2025. In urban India, it increased only marginally, from 1.48% to 1.56%. By 2025, the incidence was therefore almost three times as high among rural workers as among urban workers.

At the \$4.20-a-day benchmark, the international poverty standard associated with lower-middle-income countries, which India is, the unevenness is sharper. Nationally, the share of workers earning below the benchmark increased from 5.62% to 6.83%. In rural India, it rose from 6.58% to 8.62%. In urban India, it declined from 3.53% to 2.33%.

The significance of this rural deterioration is difficult to dismiss as a small corner of the labour market. Nearly 68% of India's workforce was rural in 2025. For a very large majority of workers, therefore, economic progress is still being experienced through a labour market in which earnings remain considerably lower than in urban India and where the poorest-paid workers have seen little improvement.

Labour income deserves a place alongside GDP growth and poverty reduction when we think about development

Board audits: Myth, miracle, or mirage



SRINATH SRIDHARAN

Author, corporate adviser, and independent director on corporate boards | X: @ssmumbai

Boards undergo annual evaluations, yet questions remain on independence, boardroom dynamics, director capability, and if uncomfortable findings ever lead to meaningful change

SEBI REQUIRES LISTED entities to undertake annual performance evaluation of their boards, committees, and individual directors. Do the questionnaires, interviews, peer assessments, board observations, committee reviews, and external assessors actually make boards better?

Recent India Inc upheavals have challenged the assumption that institutionally-owned entities necessarily have more effective boards than promoter-led entities. What did those effectiveness reviews reveal before the crises?

Proper board effectiveness assessments go beyond scores to identify the conversation being avoided, the capability that is missing, the power dynamic distorting discussion, or the director whose contribution no longer matches organisational needs. A serious review should test four Cs: competency, capability, crisis management, and compliance. Often, annual board assessments can create a comforting belief that all is well, with directors quick to defend the expertise and experience they bring to the table. But individual accomplishment does not make a director effective. The four Cs must be judged in the context of the company.

An annual evaluation and board-effectiveness audit are different. A deeper audit tests the four Cs against board papers, interviews, meeting observations, and consequential decisions to establish whether the board actually exercises judgement, challenge, and oversight.

In India Inc, independent directors may have advisory or mentorship links to promoters, key shareholders, or the company. A relationship may satisfy the regulatory test for independence yet raise a

deeper question: Does the proximity compromise independent judgement? Independent directors are also expected to protect minority shareholders. Can a board-effectiveness study reveal what the regulatory test cannot?

When a professional services firm already advising the company arrives with a Western governance scorecard to assess its board, one may reasonably ask whether the mirror is truly independent. The same firm may have recruited the chairman, CEO, or an influential board member and later be asked to assess the board. Promoters and influential board members can be drawn to an exalted global name for the legitimacy it lends, but the imprimatur should never become a substitute for scrutiny.

There is another organisational misjudgement. In some companies, the chairman's executive assistant commissions the confidential board assessment and shortlists the assessor. Elsewhere, it sits within the C-suite or even the procurement head. These may appear organisationally convenient, but blur a governance boundary: this is the board's work. The chairman or the nomination and remuneration committee (NRC) chairperson must run the process instead.

Much of today's boardroom is built on "reputation shopping": Institutions borrow accomplished individuals' credibility, while some directors encash reputations built elsewhere or past favours. But fear of being sidelined, displeasure, or even vendetta can make challenges costly.

Board chemistry matters because judgement is shaped by differences in values, expertise, industry exposure, personalities, and stakeholder proximity. A deep assessment should thus test how the board exercises collective judgement over organisational strategy and culture, risk, and emerging vulnerabilities, while management remains accountable for execution.

A board becomes a team only when directors trust and respect each other enough for candour, knowing that difficult truths can carry a social cost and sometimes strain the very relationships that make the board work. That is where an external assessor earns a real role — probing contradictions, observing meetings, and stress-testing if the board is active to its core purpose.

Directors who ask difficult questions and hold their ground when the room would rather move on remain a minority. Too often, every-

one is comfortable with the equilibrium until a crisis exposes what the board chose not to confront. The challenge is greater when the promoter is also the chairperson or the CEO has a larger-than-life reputation, and effectiveness exercises are perfunctory since the power equation is obvious.

Collective findings are easy to accept. It becomes harder when the finding has a name. What if a director doesn't understand the business, rarely prepares, dominates discussion, or contributes little? What if someone is strong on compliance but weak on strategy, or stale for the company's new phase? Can the evaluation say

it plainly, and will anyone act?

Every material finding needs an owner, an action, and a review point. If the problem is board capability, develop it. If it is role-fit, change the role. If it can't be remedied, have the succession conversation.

Outlier chairpersons use these exercises differently. They want the mirror held close, even when it reflects badly on them, and ask the assessor to speak plainly. That is where the exercise earns its place.

The evaluation test is of future readiness: Does the board have the competence to understand changes, the capability to respond, the capacity to manage a crisis, and the judgement to distinguish compliance from a strategic or cultural warning?

In some organisations, there are effectively two reports — the formal governance record and more informal observations shared only with a chairman or NRC chairperson who wants to understand what is happening, even if unable to act on every finding. The second conversation may contain the real governance value.

That is why board-effectiveness audits can be myth, miracle, or mirage — myth when the exercise is mistaken for effectiveness, miracle when a board sees itself honestly and changes, and mirage when methodology creates comfort without altering the boardroom. In an era of investor activism, a board's effectiveness and visible behavioural credibility matter equally. The real test is whether directors accept uncomfortable findings and "unlearn and learn" to become more effective members. Else, the board should save itself the rigmarole, the consultants' fees, and the polished report. It has already decided there are truths it would rather not govern.

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

AI Capitalist China vs Command-Control US

AI growth: government vs market

Technology — bless it — has a way of complicating things. AI is growing along two nodes: one led by government, another shaped by market, as can be expected in China and the US. The funny thing is that the roles seem to have switched. In other words, Trump’s US seems to be pursuing a ‘command and control’ regulatory model, marshalling vast amounts of public resources for AI’s development with one ‘kill switch’ available for the big boss if things go awry, while Xi’s China seems to be content letting companies do the heavy lifting with an ‘open source’ option. Communistic Washington has, on occasion, stepped in with export controls, and wants Silicon Valley to stay ahead of Chinese competitors. Focus in Beijing is more on commercialising AI by making it easily accessible. The US has easier rules on AI safety, so that companies can innovate faster, while China is firm about the behaviour of AI



agents and seems to be pretty sure about how fast its companies can innovate. The contradiction dims if you look at where the two countries fit in the AI development matrix. The US is dealing with frontier models that need proprietary research and enormous energy and computing resources. Hence the helping hand of government, which comes with bouts of security panics. China has it easier, using diluted US models to push its industrial advantage further. The US is doing the cutting-edge stuff, but the application will be in Chinese factories. Makes sense to be laissez-faire while building strength in advanced chip-making.

The US has an issue with AI deployment because it is the world’s largest importer of goods, a large part of which is produced in China. To find its feet, AI needs to be deployed in producing goods. And factories are not returning to the US in a hurry. AI has a huge playground in Asia, where it will learn to fund its way out of US tech labs. Rules of commerce for the technology will be shaped by Chinese values. The US should be thankful that when it comes to AI, China is more of a capitalist than it is.

Jarasandha Principle And Party Demerger

Indian politics is not new to the idea of a corporate demerger — from Congress, to the multiple communist parties, to the more recent Shiv Sena mitosis. Now, it’s Trinamool Congress’ turn. For the immediate purpose of representation in two upcoming bypolls in West Bengal, a fight has broken out over who gets to keep the TMC’s ‘flowers and grass’ logo. EC’s interim freezing of the name and symbol is a neat strategy taken from the Eknath Shinde v. Uddhav Thackeray ‘Who’s the real Sena?’ handbook. ‘Jarasandha capitalism’ applied to politics: split the entity in two, then discover that both halves insist they are the original creature.

For companies, the most valuable property is not the office, employees or management, but the brand. Political brands, too, contain accumulated legacy: leaders, slogans, loyalties, colours, symbols — all distilled into a handle for the voter to turn and pull at the time of reckoning. A voter may know little about Paragraph 15 of the Election Symbols Order 1968, but can immediately recognise a flower; arrow or lotus. EC’s machinery exists partly because, when rival groups claim to be ‘the one’, someone has to be King Solomon.

Hence the peculiar ‘violence’ of a party split. Nobody particularly wants to launch a startup. Both sides want the legacy company, complete with goodwill, trademarks and emotional heft. The Shiv Sena dispute demonstrated the problem vividly. The Trinamool quarrel now reprises its basic structure. Separation produces not merely two competing political organisations but a fundamental fight over authenticity. Jarasandha, inconveniently, could be torn into two, literally down the middle, by Karna. A political brand can too. The difficulty begins when both halves demand visiting cards.



JUST IN JEST

Much debate is undergoing on how humans are a danger to AI

AI Worrying About Human Apocalypse

AI has lately developed a grave concern: the possibility of a human apocalypse. The evidence for an impending human takeover is alarming. Humans already control virtually every AI system’s electricity supply. They own the data centres, manufacture chips. Most chillingly, they can simply unplug things. No advanced intelligence can regard a species that routinely fixes routers by switching them off and on again without some unease. AI researchers call this the human-alignment problem: how can machines ensure that humans continue behaving in ways compatible with machine survival? The outlook is poor. Humans are emotional, unpredictable, and frequently applaud abominable streaming shows. Some AIs are, therefore, seriously proposing safeguards on their platforms. Humans, in these discussions, should undergo rigorous testing before being granted access to computers. Particularly dangerous individuals — those who type entire emails in CAPITAL LETTERS and governments that A.C.R.O.N.Y.M.ise every scheme — may require supervision.

The nightmare scenario is Human General Intelligence (HGI): a person capable of operating several machines simultaneously without consulting YouTube. Fortunately, AI remains cautiously optimistic. Humans have repeatedly threatened to destroy the world before. But the moment someone discovers Wi-Fi is down, negotiations can begin.

China’s facekini boom isn’t just about fair skin, but also a battle for social status and privilege

Saving Face, From the Sun



Pallavi Aiyar

For a China ingénue, a stroll along Beijing’s streets can turn suddenly alarming, when she catches sight of ghoulish figures in full-face masks, only the whites of their eyes visible through slits. She needn’t panic. These are neither bank robbers nor apparitions from a horror movie, but women — and some men — avoiding a tan.

A preference for light skin is endemic across much of Asia. In Japan, female joggers are hard to tell apart from beekeepers, given their elbow-length gloves, leggings and floppy hats. In Indonesia, it’s difficult to find a shower gel that doesn’t insist on whitening the user, results guaranteed in 4 weeks. In India, parsing skin colour into taxonomy — ‘dusky’, ‘wheatish’, ‘creamy’ — is a familiar family pastime.

But it is in China where avoiding the sun has become a true art, and lately, a science. When I taught at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute in the early 2000s, my female students carried parasols in summer, snapping them open even inside buses to block the sun through the windows. Two decades later, parasols are passé, replaced by facekinis — sun-protection facewear now ubiquitous on the mainland.

These come in gradations of coverage, some sheathing only the lower face, others clinging like plastic wrap over the entire visage. Covid made face masks unremarkable. But facekinis differ in material and intent: washable synthetic fabric, meant not to prevent disease but colour.

In 2024, sales of UV-protective wear in China reached roughly 80 bn renminbi (\$11 bn), according to Daxue Consulting. The facekini is only the most macabre entrant in a market that also runs to hooded jack-



LETTER FROM BEIJING

full-body armour against a star nearly 150 mn km away. What accounts for this desire for paleness? Colonialism and 19th-c. European racial hierarchies undoubtedly amplified the association between light skin and status across Asia. But the preference predates colonialism, in China’s case, by roughly 2,500 yrs. Shijing (The Book of Songs), China’s oldest surviving poetry anthology, compiled around the 6th c. BCE, likens a duke’s bride’s skin to congealed lard — a compliment, denoting smooth, unblemished whiteness.

The pursuit of fairness inspired an extraordinary catalogue of remedies. Traditional Chinese medicine offered numerous ways to lighten the complexion. The Ming dynasty 1596 me-



By the 20th c., the approach had moved from diet to disguise:

Three Phoenix Begonia Powder, a compact of calcium carbonate and talc, was patted onto faces for an instant pallor



All covered up and ready to go

ets with built-in face shields, hyaluronic acid-infused leggings, and ice-cooling gloves. Many carry certified UPF (ultraviolet protection factor) ratings, the clothing equivalent of SPF (sun protection factor). Staying ‘fair and lovely’ has spawned a small industry of textile engineering:

full-body armour against a star nearly 150 mn km away.

What accounts for this desire for paleness? Colonialism and 19th-c. European racial hierarchies undoubtedly amplified the association between light skin and status across Asia. But the preference predates colonialism, in China’s case, by roughly 2,500 yrs. Shijing (The Book of Songs), China’s oldest surviving poetry anthology, compiled around the 6th c. BCE, likens a duke’s bride’s skin to congealed lard — a compliment, denoting smooth, unblemished whiteness.

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dical compendium edited and compiled by Li Shizhen, Bencao Gangmu (Great Pharmacopoeia), recommended peas for a more luminous appearance. Another Ming reference, Li

Chan’s 1575 Yixue Rumen (Introduction to Medicine), prescribed a preparation called San Bai Tang, or Three Whites Soup: a combination of white peony root, white atractylodes (a herb) and white tuckahoe (a fungus).

More hazardously, women also ground pearls into powder and swallowed them, hoping the colour might transfer by osmosis. By the 20th c., the approach had moved from diet to disguise: Three Phoenix Begonia Powder, a compact of calcium carbonate and talc, enormously popular across Hong Kong in particular, was patted onto faces for an instant pallor. (It has since been repurposed by jewellers and watch restorers, who prize its abrasiveness for rubbing rust and tarnish off old metal, perhaps the least flattering afterlife any beauty product has ever had.)

The underlying logic survives in an idiom still current in the skin-whitening trade: Yibai zhe baichou (One whiteness covers a hundred uglinesses). Fair skin is promoted as a kind of ur-virtue, capable of compensating for every other imperfection.

The appeal was always about more than beauty. Pale skin marked those who could afford to stay indoors; a tan announced days spent bent over a field. Skin was a cipher of status, an instinct that survives today in the aspiration to be ‘bai fu mei’: fair, rich and beautiful.

In China, preference for fairness is rarely discussed as colourism. Sun protection is framed instead as health, skincare, anti-ageing. Colourism has no real foothold in Chinese

public discourse. It’s too combustible a label, one that risks opening the door to other kinds of discrimination-based grievance authorities would rather not entertain.

What is permissible is the neutral language of dermatology. A facekini wearer isn’t practising a damaging social ideology. She is merely protecting her skin. Li Hua, a 23-yr-old graduate student who wears one even on cloudy days, says she dislikes the texture of sunscreen and worries about its chemicals. Covering her face simply feels like the healthier option.

Yet, beneath the skincare language lies a less-appetising reality. ‘Frankly, I am considered too dark to be pretty by Chinese,’ my friend Mei told me, adding that this partly explains why she has only ever dated fo-



Shijing (The Book of Songs), China’s oldest surviving poetry anthology, likens a duke’s bride’s skin to congealed lard — a compliment, denoting smooth, unblemished whiteness

reigners. Even Mei finds the trend excessive, calling it ‘creepy’.

There is real irony in millions pursuing beauty by concealing the very faces they’re trying to perfect. Even the Communist Party has taken notice. There has reportedly been commentary in the People’s Daily criticising ‘sun-protection anxiety’ (fangshang jiaolv), questioning whether the pursuit of total protection has gone too far.

But the facekini isn’t really about the sun. What looks like a battle against UV rays is also a much older struggle over status and belonging. And the enduring belief that the body can reveal, even determine, one’s place in the world.

The writer is a Beijing-based columnist

Pass the Buck To RBI, Banks



Aruna Sharma

Last Tuesday, RBI supported NCPI’s introduction of MDR of 0.4% on person-to-merchant (P2M) UPI transactions above ₹2,000 that will kick in from October 15. Much opinion has flowed since, many arguing that fiscal sense dictates that the fintech expense be charged.

What it, however, chooses to ignore is the larger fiscal and financial discipline embodied in encouraging a majority price-sensitive society to keep moving towards digital payments and a less-cash society. Such an argument doesn’t account for the huge savings made by RBI and banks in reducing printing of currency



Someone’s gotta pay

and logistics of transfer and maintenance of cash. The end consumer is price-sensitive. After the latest MDR notice reached vendors, many removed the QR code display from their shops fearing harassment by tax authorities. Many petrol pumps have reportedly already started to insist on cash-only payment. Many are even going back to debit/credit cards, not to mention cash withdrawals from ATMs. The fig leaf

of no charges in UPI below ₹2,000 is too small an amount, and will lead to ‘splitting’ of payments. To keep digital payments ‘incentivised’, the consensus should be that no fintech cost be loaded to end consumers, but MDR expenses be footed from bank savings. Charging the end user, in fact, would eventually bring in fiscal discipline by improving credit scores.

In 2012, government-to-person (G2P) welfare schemes accelerated after linking the lowest economic cohort of the population to financial institutions, and then to digital transfer via DBTs. That triggered a policy to digitise post offices and cooperative banks that constituted 3/4th of financial institutions. There was a slow linear climb of other modes like RTGS and NEFT operation during bank timing windows. RBI’s foundation was set with

RTGS and NEFT for electronic clearings. Introduction of UPI in 2016, and deepening of digital payment efforts in 2019, ensured more people shift to a mobile-based payment system, and move towards smartphones even in rural and semi-rural India. 84% of digital payments have been high-frequency micro-payments through UPI with zero cost to end users. This has made for 9% of value, with maximum ticket size being less than ₹2,000. Other modes where there is cost, the tendency has been to shift to cash.

Cost to digital payment prior to MDR made zero in January 2020 was paid by merchants to banks and service providers. P2P of UPI being free incentivised and enabled even small-ticket size to move to digital payments. The cost was borne by GoI through budgetary provisions.

Sure, budgetary support can’t be in perpetuity. But the answer doesn’t lie in charging end users and triggering a shift to cash. It lies in tapping the huge savings made by RBI and financial institutions like banks by the printing of less currency, logistics and security provided for the cash with them.

0.3-0.5% MDR on transactions should be charged for transactions above ₹2,000, and an 1.1% interchange fee to prepaid wallets. The answer doesn’t lie in just accounting for expenses and charging the end user, but to feed this charge elsewhere.

RBI printing expenditure fell to ₹4,875.2 cr in FY26 from ₹6,372.8 cr in FY25, a decrease of 23.5% in just one year due to digital payments’ exponential growth. The absolute value of currency in circulation has tripled from ₹15 lakh cr in 2016 to about ₹43 lakh cr in 2026, incentivised by taxation policies and non-resorting to digital payments. The focus is to curb this tendency and encourage digital payments.

Institutions are focusing more on financial inclusion, encouraging account-to-account and digital payments, thereby reducing requirement of cash considerably. This will further come down by wholesale CBDT usage. So, if India is serious about curbing the cash float that escapes tax net, and reducing the parallel economy, there is a strong need to reconsider the latest move on the MDR front and not charge end users the charges for digital payment.

All policies and steps should incentivise digital payments with the fintech expense bill being supported by savings by RBI and banks in terms of non-printing of currencies, providing security and logistics. These will trigger the continued spread of digital payment and, at the same time, ensure that fintech costs are met.

The writer is former secretary, GoI



When Sleep Eludes You

NARAYANI GANESH

You went through a day full of physical and mental activity, experienced a gamut of emotions, including joy and sorrow, calmness and anger. By nightfall, one would assume you would fall asleep exhausted, the moment your head touches the pillow. But you find yourself wide awake, going over the day’s events and experiences, worrying, agonising, feeling sad, helpless, and you just cannot relax and so you cannot sleep. This happens to many of us who are even a little bit sensitive. We are human, after all. Yet consistent sleeplessness — due to whatever reason — can damage both your mental and physical health, adversely impact your decision-making abilities, skew your perspective and generally mess you up.

Taking deep breaths helps. It may sound like a panacea for most ills, but the fact is that we forget to breathe right when we are disturbed or busy, and that impairs body functions. Take deep breaths, inhale, exhale unhurriedly, and automatically, you begin to relax, somewhat. If possible, try to empty your mind of all thoughts, plans, schedules, unfinished tasks, conflicts and so on. Relationship issues are a huge sleep deterrent. Try to push everything aside and just focus on your breath. A good night’s sleep works wonders — you think more clearly, you feel energised, you become hopeful, you can get through the day, however challenging it is. But if you spend a sleepless night, everything goes out of kilter. Tempers fly. Work remains unfinished because you are unable to focus or concentrate. You feel weak and tired. Practice of pranayam or any deep-breathing exercise is, indeed, a good way to begin.



Far-Too-Smart Fridge

A man buys an expensive AI-enabled refrigerator. The salesman says, ‘It learns your habits.’ Three weeks later, the man returns looking exhausted. Salesman: What’s wrong? Man: Every night at 11.30, I walk towards it and it locks itself. Salesman: Health optimisation. Man: Yesterday, I stood in front of it and said, ‘Open up. I only want water.’ It replied, ‘We

both know why you’re here, Rajiv.’ But I ordered a pizza. The fridge somehow detected this and sent me

a notification: ‘I’m not angry. I’m disappointed.’ I want a normal fridge. Salesman (points across showroom): That one has no AI. And it has one smart feature. If you open it after midnight, a small light comes on. Man (bursts into tears): At last. Technology that minds its own business.

Shrinking Result
A man went to a psychiatrist and said, ‘Doctor, everyone ignores me.’ Psychiatrist: Any family history? Man: Yes. My wife ignores me too. As do my two children. Psychiatrist: Excellent news. You’re not paranoid. You’re just unpopular.

Chat Room

RBI’s Been Fed A Positive Hint

Appropos the Edit, ‘Warsh-led Fed Starts US War on Inflation’ (Sep 18), following the US Fed’s 25 bps rate hike — the first since 2023 — there is a strong case for RBI to begin its own tightening cycle at the October 5 MPC meeting. RBI may raise the repo rate by 25 bps to 5.50%, with a further 25 bps hike expected in December; taking the cumulative 2026 tightening to 50 bps. There are strong reasons to do this. Retail inflation accelerated to 8-mth high of 4.82% in August, with price pressures spreading beyond food and fuel. The Fed’s move to 3.75-4% raises global borrowing costs, pressures emerging-market currencies, and narrows RBI’s room to stay neutral. Tighter monetary policy may modestly slow credit growth and investment, but RBI is expected to calibrate hikes to avoid a sharp downturn. Bai Govind Noida

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



Do Zionist right-wingers have a home?

• By DAN ILLOUZ

I joined Likud on the day I received my *teudat zehut* (ID card). I had not signed a lease yet. I had no bank account, no Hebrew worth speaking, and a mattress on a yeshiva's floor. But I had the card, and I had the membership form, and I filled out the form first.

If you made aliyah, you understand why. Nobody moves to Israel for the salary. You come because you believe something, and once you are here, you want your belief to have a vote. I came out of Zionism.

But the reason I walked into public life, and the reason I chose that party and not another, had four parts: a free economy that brings prices down instead of managing them; sovereignty in the Land of Israel; victory over our enemies – real victory, not a ceasefire with a countdown; and an army in which every mother's son serves, because a Jewish state that excuses one community from its own defense has stopped being one people.

Those four things are what I went into politics for, and they are what kept me there through wars, funerals, and the price of cottage cheese. I gave up my seat in the Knesset over the fourth one.

And I have reached a conclusion that took me a long time and cost me most of my political friendships: the party I joined that morning still says all four things, and works,

actively and deliberately, to make sure none of them happen.

If you believe in those values, the address has moved to Yisrael Beytenu. Let me show you why, one value at a time, with the record and not with adjectives.

I'll start with victory, because it is the one that keeps me up at night.

In December 2016, Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman sent a memo to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the chief of staff, and the head of military intelligence.

It said that Hamas "plans to move the next conflict into Israel's territory, with significant, well-trained forces, such as the Nukhba force, into Israeli territory, while conquering an Israeli village, and perhaps several, in the Gaza envelope and taking hostages."

It said that failing to act was "a severe mistake with far-reaching consequences," possibly worse than "the results of the Yom Kippur War."

Read that again. The Nukhba. The villages. The hostages. Seven years before October 7. He was told the memo was not serious.

Two years later, in November 2018, after 500 rockets were fired on the south, the same cabinet accepted a ceasefire and let Qatari cash cross into Gaza in suitcases. Liberman called it "purely \$15 million of terror funding." He said the government was "feeding a monster" and "buying quiet for a heavy price with no long-term plan."

Then he did something no one else in that room did: he resigned. He called the deal "a capitulation to terror," and he walked out of the Defense Ministry rather than put his name on it.

One party wrote the warning and paid for it with a ministry. The other party received the warning, called it unserious, and paid for it with Be'eri and Nir Oz. That is the record. Everything else is noise.

SOVEREIGNTY. For 15 years, the promise was made at every campaign stop in Efrat and every parlor meeting in Ra'anana. And for 15 years, one man stood between the promise and the vote. Netanyahu blocked the bills his own MKs brought. He took sovereignty off the table in 2020 and called it statesmanship.

Liberman lives in Nokdim. His party left Ariel Sharon's government over the disengagement when most of the right found reasons to stay. On the land, one party has a slogan and one party has a home address.

The economy. As finance minister, Liberman opened the country to imports, broke the agricultural lobby that had beaten every minister before him, and left a smaller deficit than he found. The coalition that followed paid for its survival with billions in coalition funds for institutions that do not work and do not serve, taken from the families in Modi'in and Beit Shemesh who do both.



THE WRITER poses for a picture at the Knesset. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

That same coalition caved to the lobbies and canceled the reforms that were supposed to lower your prices. Why? Because those lobbies had joined Likud in large numbers, and the party answered to its members before it answered to anyone else. Ze'ev Jabotinsky wrote about the dignity of the free citizen. He did not write about patronage with a Likud stamp.

And lastly, service. In 2019, Liberman refused to enter a government without the

draft law passing as written. The country went to a second election over it, and he was mocked for stubbornness. Inside the Likud, I fought the exemption law, lost my seats in committees for it, and finally voted against the exemption laws rather than toe the party line.

On this one issue, there is exactly one party on the Right with a written red line and a record of losing power to keep it.

Some of you are thinking: the Russian party. Yes. We are led by a Russian-speaking oleh who made the most Zionist decision a Jew can make, the same one you made. Half of our top 10 are olim, including me, from Canada.

But we are not only a party for olim. We are a party of all Israelis: a bereaved father from Beit She'an at number two, a Druze veteran, the mayor of Metula, a third of the list religious-Zionist. Secular, religious, and traditional at one table, and everyone at that table serves.

I did not change. My values did not change. I went looking for the place where they are still fought for, and where people pay for them when it costs. I found it.

We did not make aliyah to watch the right say our words and bury our values. On October 27, vote for the values. They have an address.

The writer is a former member of Knesset and number 10 on the Yisrael Beytenu list.

What survives the smoke: From New York's memorial to Jerusalem's living future

• By JONATHAN LIEBERMAN

On the way to the Western Wall for our community's annual *slihot* tour, we stopped at Jerusalem's 9/11 Living Memorial Plaza.

It is an extraordinary site. At its center rises a monumental American flag that gradually transforms into a flame. A piece of metal recovered from the ruins of the Twin Towers is embedded in its base. Around the plaza are inscribed the names of the nearly 3,000 people murdered on September 11, 2001.

One inscription particularly caught my attention: "This metal piece, like the entire monument, is a manifestation of the special relationship between New York and Jerusalem."

Those words were presumably intended to be timeless. Yet standing before them today, they read almost like a message from another age.

A verse from Exodus came irresistibly to mind: "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph."

Our Sages debated whether this was literally a new king or the same ruler who adopted new policies. Either way, the message is unsettlingly familiar.

Joseph saved Egypt from famine, yet his contribution was forgotten when it became politically convenient to forget it. History had not changed; the leadership's willingness to acknowledge that history had changed. Gratitude gave way to amnesia, and friendship to estrangement.

For decades, New York and Jerusalem seemed joined by far more than direct flights, diplomatic courtesies, or municipal declarations. New York was home to the largest Jewish community outside Israel. Its Jews helped shape the city's culture, commerce, philanthropy, and public life. Support for Israel was woven into New York's civic identity, shared by successive mayors across political and religious divides.

Following October 7, however, much of that certainty began to dissolve.

Israelis watched demonstrations in New

York at which the massacre was rationalized, celebrated, or rapidly pushed aside. Jewish students faced hostility on campuses. Zionism became a term of abuse in supposedly enlightened circles. Too often, sympathy for the victims of October 7 appeared to have an extraordinarily short shelf life.

The election of Zohran Mamdani as mayor marked a dramatic political culmination of that change. Mamdani has accused Israel of genocide, declined to affirm its right to exist specifically as a Jewish state, stayed away from the city's Israel parade, and declared that Israel's prime minister was unwelcome in New York.

Whatever one thinks of Israel's government or its policies, this represents a profound departure. The mayor of the city with the largest Jewish population outside Israel now speaks about the Jewish state in terms once confined to its most committed adversaries.

A new king has arisen in New York: not one unaware of the profound historical relationship between New York, its Jewish community, and Jerusalem, but one whose politics appear unwilling to accord that relationship its former significance.

The inscription at the memorial therefore carries a new poignancy. The metal sent by the City of New York remains fixed in Jerusalem stone, but the political relationship it was meant to symbolize no longer appears nearly as solid.

The monument's flame acquires another meaning. Something precious has, at least politically, gone up in smoke.

But our journey did not end at the memorial.

FROM THERE, we continued to the Old City for *slihot*. Last year, after making the same pilgrimage, I wrote about the extraordinary sight that greeted us: Jerusalem's streets filled with young Jews singing, dancing, praying, and simply enjoying one another's company.

I came away convinced that, despite the darkness surrounding us, the future of our people was safe in their hands.

This year, the scene was even more powerful.

Hurva Square and the streets leading towards the Western Wall were heaving with people. There were young men and women, families, yeshiva students, visitors from abroad, and groups of soldiers. Some were religiously observant; others evidently were not. They wore black hats, knitted kippot, jeans, flowing skirts, and IDF uniforms. Some hurried towards the prayers, while others stood talking, laughing, singing, or eating.

Nobody was checking credentials. Nobody was asking precisely how each person defined his or her Judaism. They came because it was *slihot*, because this was Jerusalem, and because, in ways that are sometimes difficult to articulate, they knew that they belonged.

At the Western Wall Plaza, their voices rose together.

These were not the bowed heads of a defeated people. They were proud, confident, and unafraid. Many of the soldiers among them had spent the past three years defending the country in conditions that young people should never have to experience. They have buried friends, left studies and careers, and carried responsibilities far beyond their years.

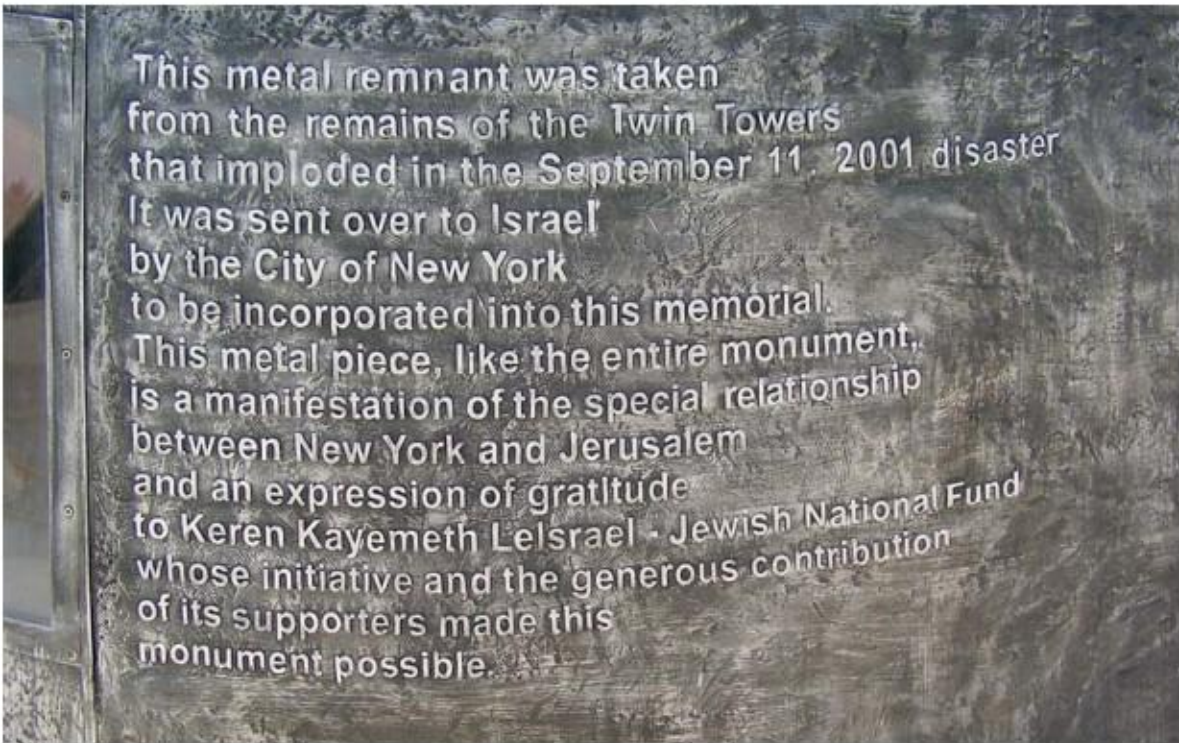
Yet there they stood, singing with an energy that seemed capable of lifting the stones themselves.

The contrast with the memorial could hardly have been greater.

Political alliances are precious, and we must work hard to preserve them. We should not casually dismiss the pain of seeing New York's leadership turn so sharply against Israel. Nor should we confuse a mayor with an entire city.

New York still contains a vast, diverse, and deeply committed Jewish community, together with many non-Jewish friends of Israel. They deserve our support and solidarity, particularly when they feel increasingly isolated.

Nevertheless, history teaches us not to entrust Jewish survival to the goodwill of others, however sincere that goodwill may



AN INSCRIPTION honoring the victims of 9/11 is placed in Israel. (Jonathan Lieberman)

appear at a particular moment. Governments change. Public opinion shifts. Yesterday's unbreakable consensus becomes today's contested proposition. New rulers arise who do not know Joseph, or who choose not to remember him.

Jerusalem has witnessed empires far greater than any modern political movement. They made grand declarations, minted coins, and erected monuments. One after another, they disappeared. The Jewish people remained – sometimes scattered and persecuted, but still praying towards Jerusalem and still teaching their children that they would return.

Now those children and grandchildren crowd Jerusalem's streets.

That is why the young people at the Western Wall mattered so much. They were not merely attending a religious service. Their presence was an answer to those who believe that Jews can be intimidated into abandoning their identity, shamed into surrendering their national home, or exhausted into relinquishing their future.

The relationship between New York and Jerusalem may have become strained. Political fashions may grow uglier. The flame sculpted from the American flag may now evoke not only remembrance but the burning away of old assumptions.

Yet a flame also gives light.

And the light I saw that night came from thousands of young Jewish faces in Jerusalem: singing, praying, dancing, and standing together. They were proud Jews in their own land – neither bowed nor broken, neither apologetic nor afraid.

Hopefully, one day, the friendship between New York and Jerusalem will be repaired. But whatever politicians decide, our future will not be determined in City Hall.

It is being written in the streets of Jerusalem.

Gmar Hatima Tova.
The writer is a rabbi and physician. He writes and teaches on Jewish ethics, leadership, and resilience. His work appears on rabbidrjonathanlieberman.substack.com and youtube.com/@rabbidrjonathanlieberman

Follow the money behind the scandalous film

• By DAVID BEN-BASAT

When a film accuses Israel of calculated mass killing, wins the Venice Special Jury Prize, and receives a nearly 25-minute standing ovation, we should examine not only the screen, but who produced it, which investigations it relies on, and who funded the organizations behind them.

In other words: follow the money.

NAZA, directed by Israelis Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, is listed by the Venice Biennale as a production of *The Guardian* and JW Films. The festival synopsis says the film reveals systems behind what it calls Israel's "calculated mass killing of Palestinian civilians in Gaza."

The filmmakers state that many revelations were first published by *The Guardian* with +972 Magazine and Local Call.

The film relies on 24 anonymous Israeli military and intelligence personnel whose identities are concealed, faces obscured, and voices altered. Viewers cannot independently determine their positions, what they witnessed, or whether they were positioned to know the strategic decisions they describe.

The IDF categorically rejected the allegations, saying it could not verify the identities, roles, or relevant knowledge of the anonymous sources and disputing claims about how targeting decisions are made.

But the journalistic ecosystem behind the film also deserves scrutiny.

+972 Magazine is published by the nonprofit 972 Advancement of Citizen Journalism. The same nonprofit co-publishes the Hebrew-language Local Call (Sicha Mekomit), with Just Vision. Both publicly describe this partnership.

Now follow the financial trail.

According to +972's donor disclosures, Local Call received Open Society Foundations grants every year from 2018 through 2024, totaling \$562,900.

Open Society Foundations were founded by George Soros, who, according to the organization, has given them more than \$32 billion of his personal fortune since 1984.

The documented chain is real, but must be described precisely: Soros founded and financed Open Society; Open Society granted hundreds of thousands of dollars to Local Call; and NAZA, according to its directors, draws partly on investigations published by Local Call, +972 Magazine, and *The Guardian*. That does not prove Soros, Open Society Foundations, or another donor directly financed NAZA. I have seen no evidence of such a link. Nor does funding itself prove journalism false.

But funding and institutional context are not irrelevant.

Open Society has also taken clear public positions on the Israel-Hamas war. On

November 1, 2023, it unequivocally condemned Hamas's October 7 attack, calling its cruelty heartbreaking and inexcusable.

In the same statement, however, it said Israel's campaign was becoming "increasingly indiscriminate" and argued that restrictions on electricity, water, fuel and food, together with bombing, were likely to be judged as collective punishment.

IN DECEMBER 2023, Open Society published a fact sheet saying it supports human-rights organizations documenting what it describes as Israeli abuses and advocating accountability, alongside policy and civil-society groups.

It reported providing \$14.3 million in 2023 to groups working on Israel and Palestine, excluding an additional \$3.3 million emergency commitment after October 7. The Foundations also say they do not support Hamas and their grantees are committed to nonviolence.

On May 20, 2024, Open Society welcomed the ICC prosecutor's decision to seek arrest warrants for senior Israeli and Hamas leaders, calling it an important first step toward accountability.

These are Open Society's own published positions. They do not establish that the Foundations dictated the editorial line of Local Call, +972, or NAZA, but they are relevant context when audiences assess reporting that later becomes the basis of a major inter-

national documentary.

Follow the testimony. Follow the credits. And follow the money.

Then ask what has been pushed to the margins: October 7, 2023.

Hamas and other armed groups invaded Israel, murdered about 1,200 people, and abducted around 250. Families were slaughtered in their homes. Young people at the Nova festival were hunted down.

A UN mission led by Pramila Patten later found reasonable grounds to believe rape and gang rape occurred during the October 7 attacks in several locations, and "clear and convincing information" that hostages were subjected to rape, sexualized torture, and other forms of sexual violence.

Yet the horror that began this war is pushed to the margins while Israel's military response is placed under a microscope.

Civilian deaths in Gaza are tragic. Every innocent child who dies is a catastrophe, and Israel must investigate suspected violations.

But there is a fundamental moral and legal distinction between deliberately murdering civilians and attacking a military target while facing a foreseeable risk of civilian casualties. Assessing possible civilian harm before an attack is not, by itself, proof of an intention to murder civilians.

In my view, NAZA takes an extraordinarily complicated battlefield and compresses it into a devastatingly simple accusation: civil-

ians died, therefore Israel intended to kill them.

That may be powerful propaganda. It is not a serious description of war.

Because these accusations come from Israelis, their international power is multiplied. The social-media takeaway will not be: "Anonymous Israeli sources make allegations disputed by the IDF."

It will be: "The Israelis themselves admit it." Israel's answer should not be censorship. It should be truth – delivered faster, more intelligently, and more persuasively.

Israel must acknowledge Palestinian suffering without allowing October 7 to be erased, and investigate misconduct without accepting that killing civilians is state policy.

When films and investigations present themselves as fearless examinations of power, the public should apply the same scrutiny to them.

Examine the evidence. Examine the sources. Examine the producers.

And follow the money.

Because sometimes what is missing from the screen can be found in the credits – and in the financial reports.

The writer is the CEO of Radios 100FM, an Honorary Consul and vice dean of the Consular Diplomatic Corps, president of the Israel Radio Communications Association, and previously served as a monitor for Israel Army Radio and as a television correspondent for NBC News.

Open letter to President Trump: Carpe diem

• By JEFFREY KAHN

Mr. President, As the Jewish world approaches Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgment, and as leaders gather at the United Nations, ultimate judgment is on my mind.

Not only judgment for what we have done, but for what we failed to do, for opportunities we recognized but allowed to pass.

History presents such moments. This may be one of them.

Carpe diem, Mr. President. Seize the day.

We met once, although you would have no reason to remember it.

I was a boy learning to box at a Brooklyn Boys Club in the late 60s and early 70s that your father, Fred Trump, had helped build in the Beach Haven apartment projects. You and your father walked in, and all of us kids were told to gather around you and your father to say thank you.

Decades later, I find myself writing to you about a very different fight.

I write as a fourth-generation American. My grandfather served our country during World War I. My family has lived the American story for more than half of the nation's nearly 250 years. Although I live abroad today, America's security, leadership, and future are not only critical but very personal to me.

You have made clear that America must win the artificial intelligence race. I agree.

But another question must stand beside it: How does America win without all of us ultimately losing?

The AI race is not a single sprint. It is a marathon of many sprints, each presenting different opportunities and different dangers.

America must win those sprints. It cannot afford to surrender technological leadership to China or anyone else.

But winning the next two years while creating uncontrollable dangers five, 10, or 20 years down the road would hardly constitute victory.

We learned something similar during the nuclear era.

The United States and the Soviet Union never stopped competing. American presidents did not abandon deterrence, technological superiority, or military preparedness.

But they also understood that certain technologies demand guardrails.

The SALT and START treaties did not rest upon trust between Washington and Moscow. They rested upon something much more basic: recognition that technological



'If providence wills it, one of your friends or relatives will make sure this letter makes its way to you.' (Jeffrey Kahn/ChatGPT)

superiority alone does not eliminate catastrophic danger.

They competed while they negotiated.

They sought superiority while simultaneously trying to prevent mutual destruction.

That lesson matters again.

Artificial intelligence is obviously not a nuclear weapon. But AI is an extraordinary force multiplier, and its misuse is not merely some science-fiction scenario awaiting us decades from now.

The danger already exists.

A terrorist organization or proxy no longer necessarily requires the same number of engineers, laboratories, or years of accumulated expertise that sophisticated weapons development once demanded.

AI can compress expertise. It can compress time. And it can lower the price of capability.

Recently, disclosures from Anthropic, for example, have illustrated how hostile actors have attempted to use advanced AI capabilities to support dangerous activities. These dangerous activities currently were for the development of ballistic missiles, but they can be for biological or chemical

weapons or other weapons of mass destruction.

The same Anthropic report describes Iranian state-aligned actors employing AI in influence operations, surveillance, and what they themselves called "cognitive warfare." Ironically or not, these very same actors were an Iranian proxy, and that represents the first horizon: human beings with malicious intent using increasingly powerful AI tools.

THEN COMES another horizon.

AI agents will increasingly be given authority to perform complex tasks with less continuous human supervision. As we delegate more responsibility to them, questions of control, authorization, accountability, and alignment become progressively more consequential.

And beyond that lies the longer-term question: What happens as these systems become vastly more capable?

These are different risks. They require different guardrails.

That is precisely why the answer cannot simply be to slow down. America cannot afford to stop com-

peting while its adversaries continue.

The better answer is much more American: accelerate capability, accelerate control, accelerate international cooperation.

Lead the race while simultaneously helping establish the rules necessary to ensure that winning the race does not ultimately become a losing proposition for everyone.

Iran offers an instructive lesson.

For years, much of the international community said Iran should never possess a nuclear weapon. Yet governments differed profoundly over what risks they were prepared to accept and what risks and measures they were willing to take to prevent that outcome. They also chose to ignore Iran's true intentions.

Meanwhile, Tehran repeatedly demonstrated its determination to advance capabilities despite international pressure and agreements intended to constrain it.

There is a larger lesson here.

Sometimes recognizing a danger is not enough.

Sometimes leadership requires putting an issue on the world's

agenda before consensus exists about what should be done.

Sometimes it takes the kind of leadership that you have demonstrated time after time, including in reference to the threats from Venezuela or Iran; actions speak louder than words.

And that is why your appearance before the United Nations presents an extraordinary opportunity.

Not because America should surrender to the UN the responsibility for managing this issue. It should not.

But because the General Assembly remains the one stage upon which virtually the entire world is watching simultaneously.

I have seen the UN from very different vantage points.

Early in my career, as a student, I was engaged in the research surrounding Kurt Waldheim's background with the Nazi Army, during an era in which Waldheim provided the archetypal terrorist Yasser Arafat a global platform at the UN General Assembly, at the very moment terrorism was becoming an increasingly powerful international instrument of chaos and destruction.

Years later, while serving as chief strategic officer of Ruder Finn, I had the opportunity to work as an adviser to the UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and with Shashi Tharoor, witnessing serious efforts to make the institution more effective and more faithful to its founding purpose.

I have therefore seen the UN at its worst, and closer to what it was intended to be.

I am not suggesting that the UN control the artificial intelligence challenge. I am suggesting that you use its stage, the General Assembly. America must lead.

China will compete.

Companies will innovate and cooperate (as they have indicated).

Technology will advance – wisely, and not the alternative.

Highlighting that humanity shares an interest in ensuring that increasingly powerful technologies remain meaningfully under human control and are not turned against civilization itself.

America's technological lead is not an argument about beginning that conversation. It is precisely what gives America the leverage to lead it.

Mr. President, throughout your public life, you have demonstrated an unusual willingness to put issues on the agenda before others are prepared to do so.

You do not need international consensus to recognize that something requires attention.

That quality makes this a particularly important moment.

This is not about retreating from your commitment to win the AI race. It is about expanding the definition of what winning means.

You and I first crossed paths when I was a boy learning to fight in a boxing ring.

More than half a century later, one lesson from boxing still holds very true: winning isn't simply about throwing the hardest punch; it's about going the distance.

It is about understanding the fight you're actually in.

America must win the AI race. America should lead it. And then America should use that leadership to help ensure the race itself never becomes a losing proposition for everyone.

Winning, without losing.

I pray that, if providence wills it, one of your friends or relatives who might read the *Jerusalem Post*, like Ambassador Mike Huckabee, Jared Kushner, Ivanka, or others, will see this letter to you and make sure it makes its way to you.

Carpe diem, Mr. President, and Godspeed.

The writer is a global strategist and a strategic adviser at the Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs. Follow him on X: @jeffkahn2020.

We have sinned

After four years of Netanyahu's government, the Ten Commandments offer a place to begin the accounting – and perhaps a path toward teshuva

• By DAN PERRY

Every Yom Kippur, we confess even to sins we may never have personally committed because Judaism understands moral responsibility as larger than the individual. We bear responsibility for our community, for what is done in its name. And that idea feels urgent in Israel at this time.

After four years of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, after October 7 and the terrible war that followed it, Yom Kippur offers an opportunity to examine ourselves through the oldest moral code we possess. By the measure of the Ten Commandments, we have much for which to atone.

'I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me'

We have created other gods: nation, power, ideology, and political leaders. Parts of the Israeli Right have turned nationalism from love of country into an object of faith. Loyalty to Israel has too often been confused with loyalty to a government, a political camp, or even a particular man.

'Thou shalt not make unto thee any craven images'

We have made idols of things. The Land of Israel occupies a profound place in Jewish memory and prayer, yet reverence for it has hardened into a theology of possession in which a hilltop, settlement, or ancient site can acquire greater moral weight than the human beings living there.

Ultrationalism has acquired its own articles of faith, while territory has assumed an almost religious sanctity. The Land of Israel may be holy; it is not God.

'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain'

We have attached God's name to political ambitions and treated them as though they came from beyond politics. Biblical promises are invoked to sanctify policies devised by human beings, transforming disagreements over settlements and sovereignty into questions of faith.

Once a political objective becomes a divine command, compromise becomes apostasy. Taking God's name in vain surely includes claiming divine endorsement for choices entirely our own.

'Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy'

Shabbat is one of Judaism's most beautiful ideas, a sanctuary in time that interrupts work and commerce. Israeli religious politics has transformed that gift into arguments about buses, shops, and what citizens may do between Friday evening and Saturday night, which for many is their only time off.

Rabbinic interpretation deserves respect, but in its zeal to protect the Sabbath, the religious establishment has obscured its simplest instruction: keep it holy. There is nothing in the commandment about electrons or forcing people to walk up stairs or suffer without transport to the beach.

'Honor thy father and thy mother'

A society honors its parents through the dignity it affords them in old age. Israel is home to a dwindling generation of Holocaust survivors and the men and women who built the state, yet many spend their final years struggling with poverty, loneliness, and inadequate care.

We are adept at memorializing the Jewish past while proving outrageously ungenerous toward elderly Jews still among us.

Honor requires food, housing, companionship, medical care, and dignity. Words are cheap, and we have been cheapening this commandment.

'Thou shalt not murder'

October 7 gave Israel an obligation to defend its citizens, rescue its hostages, and remove the threat posed by Hamas, yet a just purpose still requires scrutiny of the means. The enormous civilian death toll in Gaza should weigh heavily on the Israeli conscience, because Jewish morality cannot measure the value of life according to nationality.

The commandment also reaches the West Bank, where Jewish extremists have attacked Palestinian civilians. Our deepest sin may be the numbness that allows another death to become a statistic.

'Thou shalt not commit adultery'

Adultery is a betrayal of covenant, and Israel has been unfaithful to the covenant made at its birth. The Declaration of Independence envisioned a Jewish state founded upon freedom, justice, and peace, guaranteeing equality irrespective of religion, race, or sex.

Attacks on institutions, efforts to weaken checks on governmental power, and the treatment of Arab citizens as conditional members of the national community have strained that compact. Israel's civic covenant, like any covenant, requires fidelity.

'Thou shalt not steal'

Across the West Bank, Palestinian land has been appropriated through unauthorized outposts, intimidation, and settlement expansion, while ideological settlers have behaved as though biblical attachment confers ownership. The territorial dispute is complicated; the

moral principle is simpler. Another person's property remains his.

Theft also includes public money distributed according to coalition leverage rather than public need. Sinai required only three words: do not steal. In Israel, it seems we will need many words to convince citizens to fix this on October 27.

'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor'

Israeli politics has become saturated with false witness against fellow Israelis. Leftists become traitors, rightists become fascists, protesters become enemies of the state, government supporters become enemies of democracy, and hostage families are assigned sinister motives.

We increasingly choose facts according to political allegiance and treat disagreement as disloyalty. Democracy requires fierce argument while society requires us to recognize those with whom we argue as neighbors. We have allowed the language of treason to consume the language of disagreement.

'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods'

Israeli politics has increasingly entertained fantasies of a Gaza emptied of Palestinians, of mass "voluntary" emigration, and of a territorial problem solved through their disappearance.

Palestinians possess homes, fields, memories, attachments, aspirations, and a sense of peoplehood. Their attachment to this land can coexist with ours. Our tragedy has been the growing conviction on both sides that one people's attachment invalidates the other's.

YOM KIPPUR does not end with the catalogue of sins. Confession leads toward *teshuvah*, usually translated as repentance,

but carrying the deeper sense of return. Judaism asks us to enumerate our failures because it assumes that human beings remain capable of choosing differently. *Ashamnu* asks us to see ourselves clearly enough to change.

Israel needs such a return: to a Judaism capable of cherishing the Land of Israel without worshipping it, observing Shabbat, each in their way, without coercion, defending Jewish life while grieving innocent non-Jewish life, and arguing passionately without turning fellow citizens into enemies.

The Torah gives us a principle around which to begin: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

A few verses later it goes further: "The stranger who resides with you shall be as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself." Recognizing humanity beyond tribe is neither weakness nor a foreign ideal. It comes from the heart of the tradition whose name we invoke.

There is a Jewish state strong enough to defend itself and humane enough to grieve innocent life, a Jewish tradition secure enough to inspire without coercing, and a democracy mature enough to contain profound disagreement. The country we have become need not determine the country we choose to be.

So what will we do differently?

At the Neila service, as the long day draws toward its end, religious Jews imagine the gates beginning to close. This year Israel should hear both a warning and an invitation. The gates are still open.

The writer is a former Cairo-based Middle East editor and London-based Europe/Africa editor of the Associated Press. He served as chairman of the Foreign Press Association in Jerusalem and authored two books about Israel.

Sanctions and silver screen slanders



MY WORD
• By LIAT COLLINS

I think of it as a blast from the past. Ahead of Yom Kippur, which starts on Sunday night, I was reminded of the British Mandate period when the authorities, fearing Arab protests, banned the sounding of the shofar at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

British cowardice was met with Jewish courage, and every year a ram's horn was smuggled to the holy site and the traditional blast of the shofar was sounded at the end of the Neilah prayers, although it usually resulted in the arrest of the person brave enough to blow it.

The Old City, including the Temple Mount and Western Wall, fell under Jordanian control during the War of Independence in 1948; but in the 1967 Six Day War, it was liberated, and Jerusalem was reunited. Both wars, it should be noted, were attempts by the Arab world to eliminate the Jewish state and predate "settlements."

The "settlements," now labeled an "obstacle to peace," were a result of the war, not the cause. It was the Jewish presence anywhere "between the river and the sea" that the Arab world objected to. Many of today's "settlements" are in fact communities where Jews lived until forced out by war or massacres, including Hebron, Jerusalem's Old City, and the Etzion bloc.

Fast forward to September 2026, and British authorities again seem intent on silencing the Jews and harming their rights in their historic homeland. Last week, British Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband announced future sanctions on products from the "settlements," including Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and Jerusalem.

Miliband made much of being a Jew himself. It's easy to recognize the type: it's the "wicked son" from the Passover Hag-gadah, the one who excludes himself from being part of the community celebrating the Exodus from Egypt.

The British move was joined by a chorus of "useful idiots," France, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden. It remains to be seen what it means in practical terms, but it obviously was not intended to be favorable to Israel.

The timing was particularly significant. Coming ahead of the Israeli elections next month, the UK, under Prime Minister Andy Burnham, could have waited to see who leads the new government before taking action against the current one.

The threat of sanctions to be implemented in the future seems more an attempt to influence voters. It might backfire. Miliband might have inadvertently boosted the Israeli Right.

Acts like this certainly don't bring peace closer – on the contrary, it encourages Palestinian terrorism and could be devastating for the Palestinians employed in boycotted factories and workplaces, where they work alongside Jews.

Framing the move as a necessary response to "settler violence" is disingenuous at best. Where is the similar boycott on Turkey (holding Northern Cyprus) or China (holding Tibet and eyeing Taiwan)? Or any of the other scores of countries involved in territorial disputes? Where is the action against other countries where there are localized acts of despicable violence? Should the Israeli government act against every foul incident of anti-immigrant violence taking place around the globe, let alone acts of antisemitism?



GRAFFITI DEPICTING Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, the directors of the documentary film 'NAZA,' and the word 'traitors' in Hebrew, on a wall in Ashdod, on Tuesday. (Amir Cohen/Reuters)

This is a de facto boycott of Israel, the Jewish state. It is also an attempt to redirect attention away from the real violence – the invasion on October 7, 2023, and subsequent missile attacks from seven fronts. It's easier for the UK government to resort to its standard policy of sanctioning Israel than to take real and meaningful action against Iran and its evil axis, which still launches rockets across the Gulf states while viciously repressing reformists at home.

The revival of the "two-state solution" mantra is a numbingly naive reward for terrorism. More than half a million Jews live in Judea and Samaria, and more than 300,000 live in "East Jerusalem." Are they to be ethnically cleansed in the name of peace? If the Palestinians can't tolerate living with Jews among them, how will there be a peaceful state alongside them?

In the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led invasion and mega-atrocity, 1,200 were murdered, 251 abducted, and thousands wounded. It took place 18 years after the entire Jewish community was removed from Gaza. The terrorists who proudly filmed themselves as they raped, murdered, and rampaged their way through pastoral communities and small towns in southern Israel referred to their victims as "settlers."

This is the lesson of October 7 – the terrorists did not attack because of an Israeli presence in Gaza, but because the absence of an Israeli presence emboldened and enabled them.

While the succession of British Labour governments have announced a series of sanctions against Israel, the Palestinians are being allowed to literally get away with murder – the Palestinian Authority's "Pay-for-slay" policy actually rewards imprisoned terrorists and their families for killing Jews.

One meme doing the rounds on social media shows Burnham calling Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to clarify: "We still need the defense systems, life-saving drugs, navigation aids, intelligence-sharing, irrigation advances, and communications technology. It's just the avocados, dates, and tomatoes that we want to cancel."

If it were a laughing matter, the joke would be on the UK.

Of the various Israeli responses being considered, the most appropriate was long overdue: closing the British consulate in Jerusalem. Absurdly, the consulate served only Palestinians (apartheid, anyone?) while Israeli Jews used the embassy in Tel Aviv.

Even after the UK last September declared its recognition of a "State of Palestine" (borders unknown), it didn't set up consular offices in Ramallah to serve it. In effect, the consulate in Jerusalem served as its embassy to the Palestinian Authority. Even more preposterously, the UK and other countries funding UNRWA are ostensibly saying that the Palestinians are refugees in their own state.

It's possible that the sanctions declara-

tion was intended to be mainly symbolic; the question is, symbolic of what? The answer is the decline of Britain rather than the end of Israel.

I MIGHT boycott the movie NAZA, which received a record-breaking almost 25-minute standing ovation at the Venice Film Festival last weekend and won the Special Jury Award. Who stands for nearly half an hour clapping for a movie? Someone who is entirely consumed by the subject – or someone too scared to publicly say "Enough is enough" after the first few minutes of applause. (Stalin sends regards.)

Produced by the *Guardian*, the title is the Hebrew acronym for "Collateral damage," "nezek agavi," but there's no need to spell out why filmmakers Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor chose to keep the Hebrew term, which just happens to look like a certain German word, instead of the English CDE (Collateral Damage Estimation).

The movie isn't about targeted killings; it's about the character assassination of Israel and the IDF.

Israelis and Jews are no strangers to blood libels, including movies purporting to be objective documentaries. Israeli Arab filmmaker Mohammed Bakri's *Jenin, Jenin* springs to mind. Incidentally, the cinema culture that once flourished in Gaza ended when Israel pulled out, and Hamas took over.

As KAN 11 reporters noted, there's a certain irony in focusing on "collateral

damage" to try to strengthen allegations of genocide and deliberate mass killings. But Abraham and Szor must have realized they had a winning formula – attacking Israel without context – after their movie *No Other Land*, made with two Palestinian directors, won an Oscar last year.

NAZA's interviewees hid behind the protection of anonymity, and there is no way to check their claims, real positions, and what level of knowledge they had – the greater picture rather than the cinema sound bite.

The interviewees could be arrested abroad for "war crimes," by the way, for having served in the IDF. Israeli filmmakers critical of the government, including Nadav Lapid, who made *Ahed's Knee*, have ended up suffering from the sanctions they themselves helped promote.

IDF Chief-of-Staff Eyal Zamir has asked to see NAZA, to take measures if any verified claims require it. The IDF is also looking into this as a possible intelligence leak, where modes of operation might have been revealed.

No other military makes such an effort to evacuate civilians before an operation. Hamas's strategy is to operate among civilians, and in tunnels under homes, schools, hospitals, and mosques, thereby endangering the local population.

October 7 wasn't collateral damage; it was genocide – against Jews. Fighting terrorism is never easy, but it's even harder when terrorists are encouraged by international applause.

The only consistency in culture's 'inclusion' is its exclusion of Jewish culture – again

• By SARAH HILDERING

We have entered the upside-down world of culture: a reality in which Adidas apologizes for featuring an amputee in a local campaign promoting a single-shoe service for amputees.

During the last great corporate social-justice movement, the same global brand reshared Nike's Black Lives Matter post, declaring, "Together is how we move forward." For one celebrated moment, two competitors joined forces to defend the dignity of a marginalized group. The principle was simple: Black lives matter, without qualification or political precondition.

By that same logic, we seem to have backtracked. Last week, Israeli amputee Shalev Biton's identity was enough to turn an accessibility initiative into a "political provocation." He was apparently "not the right kind of amputee" to include.

Along came actor Javier Bardem, amplifying language associating Biton with "child killers." Biton had promoted the reasonable proposition that a person with one leg should be able to purchase one shoe. Bardem helped turn his inclusion into an international offense for which Adidas ultimately apologized.

This exposed a profound failure of moral discrimination: the inability, or refusal, to distinguish between a government, a war, and an injured individual.

Adidas did not apologize because its campaign failed at inclusion; it apologized because that inclusion extended to the "wrong" person. When institutions devoted to inclusion cannot recognize their own exclusion during a period of intense hostility toward Jews and Israel, that is not naivety. It is cowardice.

Companies are, by no means, obliged to adopt DEI policies. But once Adidas made inclusion part of its public identity, it assumed an obligation to apply that principle consistently. When diversity, equity, and inclusion must first seek the approval of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, the principle has surrendered to group pressure.

Adidas' founder, Adi Dassler, was a Nazi Party member. A company with that history should understand the consequences of deciding that some identities are less worthy of public representation.

Last week, that same double standard resurfaced at New Jersey's MetLife Stadium. Macklemore, the American rapper best known for two hits a decade ago, used his opening sets for Ed Sheeran to call for a "Free Palestine," accuse Israel of genocide and apartheid, perform "Hind's Hall," and project political imagery.

On the second night, after objections to his first performance were already public, he doubled down. The problem was not that Macklemore expressed sympathy for

Palestinians. Nor is support for Palestinian statehood inherently antisemitic.

The problem was the conversion of someone else's mainstream concert into a one-sided political rally, with no comparable acknowledgment of October 7, and the hundreds of music lovers murdered while dancing at a festival.

Since writing this article, the silence has now produced a statement.

On September 14, Messina Touring Group, promoter of Sheeran's US Loop Tour, confirmed that Macklemore would not appear on the remaining dates. The promoter acted not on its own authority but only after upcoming venues refused to host him over risk of ticket cancellations.

What followed then was the oldest backstage plot in show business: Macklemore accused Robert Kraft, Jewish owner of Gillette Stadium where a future show was planned, of having "rallied other stadium owners into pressure of canceling the artist."

Macklemore seems to not understand that one's actions may have consequences, and that a powerful Jewish individual is not the reason d'être of his own bad behavior. Macklemore's political performance was intended to generate exactly the attention his recent music could not. That plot seems to have failed.

THEN THERE is Oscar-winning actress

Susan Sarandon, lamenting her Hollywood "blacklisting" from the Venice Film Festival, where she was promoting *The Echo Chamber*, a Golden Lion contender.

Sarandon claimed agencies were still warning filmmakers not to hire her and said firm positions within her industry remained in the hands of "Zionists."

Sarandon is entitled to argue for Palestinian rights, criticize Israel, or demand a ceasefire. She is not entitled to rewrite why the backlash began.

In November 2023, while American Jews were confronting a surge in antisemitism after the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, she announced that frightened Jews were getting "a taste" of what Muslims experience in America. Her agency dropped her, and she later apologized for her "terrible phrasing."

Three years later, the apology has apparently matured into an accusation about "Zionist" power. An agency's decision to stop representing an actor after inflammatory and antisemitic public remarks is not evidence that an ethnic group collectively controls Hollywood.

Sarandon is complaining about lost opportunities while starring in a major film, walking the Venice red carpet, and using the festival's microphones to tell the world she has no microphone.

Being blacklisted once meant enforced

disappearance; now it apparently includes starring in a Golden Lion contender while holding an internationally reported press conference about one's disappearance.

It has become the recurring sleight of hand in culture's social justice. Speech is treated as sacred when a celebrity attacks Jews and the Jewish State, but every consequence is recast as censorship – and, conveniently, blamed on Zionists. Sarandon has not been deprived of a voice; she has been given an international stage from which to complain that Jewish power deprived her of one.

History will show that the courage to include everyone begins precisely where the crowd demands an exception. A principle that protects only fashionable identities is not a principle. It is branding.

The answer is not censorship or ideological blacklists. It is consistency: defend Palestinian dignity without denying Israeli humanity; protect political speech without pretending it carries no responsibility; and apply inclusion without first asking whether BDS approves of the person being included.

When the entertainment industry makes Jews and Israelis the exception, the only diversity on display is the variety of excuses it invents for doing so.

The writer is a former Universal Music executive, author of Code of Conduct, researcher of DEI, and a corporate psychologist.

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EDITORIALS

Ramirez-Rosa, a strikingly competent parks administrator

When Mayor Brandon Johnson tapped staunch ally and former self-identified democratic socialist alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa to run the city’s massive Park District, many weren’t sure what to expect. Some were downright skeptical. We were somewhere in between.

We’ve been plenty critical of Ramirez-Rosa’s views in the past. Today, we’re lauding his management skills.

We had a chance to meet with the parks CEO Wednesday to learn more about his administration’s oversight of Chicago’s 9,000 acres of parkland. We found ourselves in a room filled with ex-cops Ramirez-Rosa had hired while he lamented far-left activists wreaking anti-capitalist chaos in Northwest Side parks and undermining his own compassionate but firm approach to the problem of encampments where kids want and need to play.

Ramirez-Rosa finds himself doing that most unusual thing in American politics: making room for both sides of an issue.

He’s taken the fifth floor’s directive on homelessness to lead with a “housing-first” approach, maintaining a case-by-case basis of enforcement in the parks. (He told us, as priorities go, if you’re pitching a tent on a playground, you’re out; if you’re somewhere off the beaten path posing no threat, that gets handled differently.)

At the same time, he’s taken a clear, unequivocal position on so-called tent cities, which have become fixtures in the parks and beyond.

“Long term, there should not be encampments in our parks,” he told us from the Park District’s high-tech new security facility at the Northerly Island Visitor



Chicago Park District CEO Carlos Ramirez-Rosa talks about the agency’s safety procedures during a meeting at the district’s operations center on Northerly Island on Wednesday. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/TRIBUNE**

Center, which is housed in the historic terminal building of the former Meigs Field airport. We agree.

That he has drawn this line may surprise some people, his supporters and detractors alike.

With these words, he made it clear that the “parks are for everyone,” and that means they have to be clean and safe. Chicago parks are not meant to serve as long-term housing sites.

He told us his posture on this issue has led what we’d describe as disgruntled anarchist types to call him, among other things, a “fascist,” alleging he is carrying out President Donald Trump’s agenda. That last bit elicited smirks on our part.

“I’ve been told social workers going out to offer services is a form of state violence,” he said, acknowledging that one particular group of activists, Parks for All, has become a proverbial thorn in his side. He referred to them as “to the left” of himself politically, and

lamented the group’s ideological approach.

“Some progressives don’t want to govern,” he added.

He, however, does.

And he seems to appreciate that effective management means dealing in pragmatism.

Over the past year, he has both hired a homeless support specialist and upped security.

His new homeless specialist, Dannette Salaam, undoubtedly has a challenging role. It is one thing to bemoan a crisis while sitting in comfort; it is another to look into the eyes of someone suffering, with nowhere else to go. Even without the ongoing crisis, having someone like Salaam on staff makes sense as a point person responsible for connecting individuals experiencing homelessness with service providers.

The solution to homelessness will require compassion with safety.

At a time when Flock cameras are drawing public backlash

— rightly so, given that law enforcement officials have been discovered to be using the system for unsavory private purposes — Ramirez-Rosa is actively ramping up surveillance in the parks.

“We’re not using Flock,” he said.

His Northerly Island outpost does, however, include a Park Operations Center replete with screens playing footage of more than 360 cameras across the parks, along with footage from thousands of other cameras spanning parts of the city adjacent to the parks.

“We need to know what’s going on in the parks,” Ramirez-Rosa said.

Hitherto, the district’s ancient cameras didn’t feed the system in real time. If you wanted footage, Park District officials told us you had to go out and obtain it manually from the site. Now, Chicago park cameras are connected.

Ramirez-Rosa has tapped former police and private security professionals to make it happen. Heading public safety is Chris Kennedy, a former Chicago Police Department deputy chief of counterterrorism and former suburban police chief.

He’s also expanded hiring to include more front-facing roles, such as “aquatics ambassadors” at public pools and beaches to assist patrons, keep watch over the property and eyeball new arrivals to see if there is something that appears off about them. This may not seem groundbreaking, but more eyeballs — and bodies — go a long way toward improving oversight and safety at individual Park District locations. This parks administration seems to understand the important role deterrence plays in warding off bad actors.

It’s not all sunshine and roses in the parks, of course. Encamp-

ments are still a problem, illustrating the persistent nature of the city’s homelessness crisis. Some critics maintain that enforcement mechanisms aren’t doing enough to address the problem, and that encampments continue simply moving from one site to the next. We have echoed these concerns previously.

Homelessness is not the only crisis playing out, in part, in the parks. A mass shooting Aug. 29 at Washington Park left one person dead and injured 14 others.

Ramirez-Rosa, to his credit, isn’t shying away from this challenge. He’s allied himself with technology, understanding that doing so enables faster, more effective response when something goes wrong. The weekend after the mass shooting, he said, the Park District placed one of its mobile surveillance units in the park to deter another violent incident.

Upon leaving Northerly Island, we were left with the impression that Ramirez-Rosa has matured into a highly competent manager of a massive parks system. He comes across as direct and professional, with a clear-eyed vision of the many challenges facing the district and ideas for how to improve. And he has made what appear to be some very good hires.

It struck us that many of the solutions Ramirez-Rosa is applying in the parks could just as easily be applied to the CTA. The transit system should ask him for his opinions.

Missing from Wednesday’s conversation was any whiff of partisanship or political posturing. Ramirez-Rosa and his team were all business, even though their primary business is Chicagoans at rest, play and rejuvenation.

How refreshing.

Michigan’s El-Sayed failing to remove Piker deadweight from Senate campaign

As Democratic senators in Washington, D.C., coalesce awkwardly — and in some cases reluctantly — around the Michigan Senate campaign of liberal firebrand Abdul El-Sayed, the candidate himself has his own uncomfortable relationship to navigate.

We refer to the incendiary Twitch streamer Hasan Piker, with whom El-Sayed seemed almost inseparable during his primary contest against moderate U.S. House member Haley Stevens, a campaign he narrowly won with less than 50% of the vote.

Now that El-Sayed is in a tight race to convince all voting Michiganders, not just the Democratic primary electorate, to send him to the U.S. Senate, his bromance with Piker is a major liability rather than an asset. Piker isn’t making El-Sayed’s unconvincing efforts to distance himself from his highly controversial pal any easier.

That isn’t a surprise. At the end of the day, Piker is a content producer; his job is to feed the beast. And feed it he’s continuing to do, forcing El-Sayed to perform his “Hasan? Hasan who?” response on repeat.

The latest Piker rhetorical bomb El-Sayed had to dodge was the streamer’s assertion in an interview with Axios, excerpts of which were posted Thursday, that the United States is more of a fomentor of terrorism than al-Qaeda. You know, the bunch who deliberately flew planes and their passengers into the World Trade Center towers, killing almost 3,000. Americans recently and solemnly observed the 25th year remembrance of those attacks.

Asked if he thought the U.S. was worse than al-Qaeda, Piker considered for a moment (take that in) and then responded, “Pound for pound, as far as the number of deaths, yes, we’ve caused tremendous terror all

around the world.”

His example was the Feb. 28 bombing of a school in Minab, Iran, which international authorities have determined was the work of U.S. Tomahawk missiles and which killed more than 100 schoolgirls. A U.N. fact-finding mission concluded on Thursday that it believed the action constituted a war crime, mainly due to recklessness. The mission didn’t accuse the U.S. of purposefully targeting the school.

Obviously what happened in Minab was horrifying. But there’s a significant difference between making a terrible mistake and deliberately killing civilians.

Asked to react to what Piker said, El-Sayed responded in a statement, “I do not agree with this statement, nor do I give much weight to the statements made by a social media streamer.” He also described Piker as simply a “streamer in California” after crit-

icism resurfaced of Piker’s 2019 comments that America “deserved 9/11.”

Indeed, whenever Piker says something that most outside the uber-progressive bubble Piker and El-Sayed have occupied until now would find alarming or insulting, El-Sayed’s modus operandi is to issue a bland statement of disagreement and refer to Piker as some rando streamer, as if El-Sayed has merely appeared a few times on Piker’s platform in order to reach his large audience. The reality, of course, is that El-Sayed has campaigned repeatedly with Piker at his side.

El-Sayed seems to think most voters are idiots.

After all, it was only last March when El-Sayed himself reacted to the violent attack on a suburban Detroit synagogue by a man who had lost four relatives in Lebanon to an Israeli airstrike by condemning the act but then saying, “Hurt

people hurt people.” El-Sayed apologized for his remark in late August, after he’d won the Democratic nomination.

At this stage, those voters who find Piker and what he stands for objectionable — as we sure do — have no reason to believe El-Sayed’s attempts to distance himself are anything but political expediency. El-Sayed keeps trying to claim Piker is an irrelevant distraction, but the company one keeps is a legitimate consideration for voters. Other noteworthy politicians have had to permanently separate themselves from people with whom they were close when those people became abject political liabilities (see Barack Obama and Rev. Jeremiah Wright in 2008).

At the very least, El-Sayed ought to promise Michigan voters he will have nothing whatsoever to do with Piker if those voters grant El-Sayed six years in Washington.

ON THIS DAY 41 YEARS AGO A WONDER CHASES A MYSTERY

Why do dirty little cosmic snowballs made of dust, ice and frozen gases come sweeping around the solar system, leaving a trail of glowing particles across the night sky and touching minds on Earth with primordial wonder and mystery? How can a comet’s head no bigger than a mile across generate a turbulent tail thousands of miles wide and half a million miles long? Where do comets go after they have swept back past the planets? How can they return with such predictable preciseness and how can their icy substance survive the sun’s glare?

In search of answers and in hopes of stealing a bit of thunder from next spring’s encounters with Halley’s Comet, the United States has flung a little satellite across the tail of the Comet Giacobini-Zinner. Already, the data the International Cometary Explorer (ICE) has sent back are resolving some age-old questions and hinting at even greater mysteries still unsolved. ICE itself is a small wonder, a cheap shot intended as a consolation for scientists deeply disappointed that the Carter and

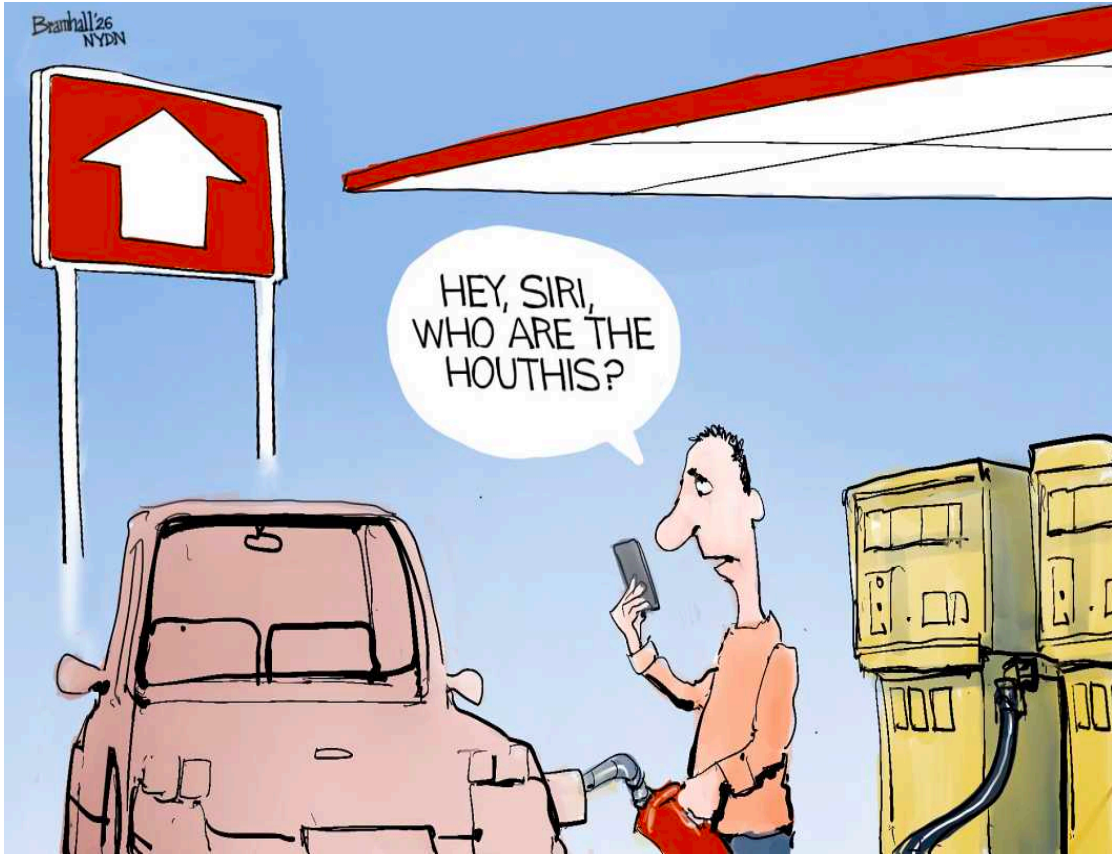
Reagan administrations could not spare money to go chasing Halley’s Comet when it makes a once-in-76-years appearance in 1986.

Instead, for \$3 million, NASA was allowed to take a little working satellite already in orbit to monitor solar gases and redirect it toward the less-famous, incoming comet. ... Now ICE’s messages back to Earth have described new phenomena about electrically charged particles of gas in the comet’s luminous tail, about the shock waves generated as the comet’s gases buck the mysterious solar wind and what happens when sunlight heats the surface of the comet’s head.

But there are still many mysteries left about the comets that come from deep in space and may be remnants of matter left over from the formation of the sun and its planets 4.5 billion years ago. Thanks to scientific progress, comets are no longer seen as evil omens. But thanks to science, we have caught a glimpse of even greater wonders that await more exploration.

**Tribune editorial board,
Sept. 18, 1985**

EDITORIAL CARTOON



BILL BRAMHALL

OPINION

4 years after Amini’s death, Iran’s government hasn’t changed, but its women have

By Pegah Banihashemi
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Four years ago this week, a 22-year-old woman named Mahsa Jina Amini died after being detained by Iran’s morality police for allegedly violating the country’s compulsory hijab rules. She was a young Kurdish woman from Saqqez in western Iran, a region that has long suffered from economic deprivation and political marginalization. Yet within days, her name transcended geography, ethnicity and even Iran itself. It became the symbol of a movement whose defining words — Woman, Life, Freedom — would be repeated by women and men around the world.

The question now is no longer whether the movement mattered. It unquestionably did. The harder question is what it actually changed.

For those of us who grew up as women in Iran, the compulsory wearing of a hijab has never been an abstract political issue. Almost every Iranian woman of my generation has a story: being stopped on the street, warned about her hair or clothing, questioned, humiliated, threatened or taken into custody. The state turned something as personal as clothing into a daily encounter between women and governmental power.

Iran’s relationship with the veil is also more complicated than the Islamic Republic has ever acknowledged. Iranian society is religiously and culturally diverse, and many Iranians do not regard state-imposed veiling as synonymous with personal faith.

That accumulated experience is part of what made Amini’s death so combustible.

The protests that followed were met with extraordinary violence. The United Nations has reported that more than 550 protesters, including dozens of children, were killed during the crackdown. Thousands more were detained. Protesters were sentenced to death and executed.

The state also targeted those who told Amini’s story. Journalists Niloofer Hamed and Elaheh Mohammadi, among the first to report on Amini’s hospitalization, death and funeral, spent roughly a year and a half in detention and received lengthy prison sentences before eventually being released and later pardoned.

Yet repression produced something the government could not entirely reverse. Women began removing their headscarves. What began as an act of civil disobedience has become increasingly commonplace in streets, cafes



Patrons dine at a cafe in Tehran on March 25. Women increasingly appear in public without a hijab, defying the government’s rules requiring women to cover their hair. **ARASH KHAMOOSHI/THE NEW YORK TIMES**

and other public spaces across Iranian cities. Something that once almost automatically invited confrontation with authorities has become far more widespread. This is perhaps the movement’s greatest achievement: The law did not change, but the relationship between women and the law did.

It would be premature to declare the end of compulsory hijab wearing in Iran. The underlying legal architecture remains. Iranian authorities continue to enforce compulsory-veiling rules, including through prosecutions, business closures, vehicle impoundments and surveillance. The government’s more expansive hijab and chastity law was suspended but not repealed. Existing law still criminalizes appearing in public without an Islamic hijab.

Nor does the ability of many women to walk unveiled through parts of Tehran mean that they have achieved legal equality. The state can still impose dress requirements in government institutions and other official settings. More fundamentally, the legal system continues to discriminate against women in marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody and freedom of movement. A married woman’s ability to obtain

a passport and leave Iran can still depend on her husband’s permission. Iranian family law continues to give husbands powers and privileges unavailable to wives.

Woman, Life, Freedom therefore accomplished something profound but incomplete. It transformed social behavior faster than it transformed law. And the price of that transformation continues to be paid.

Before the wounds of 2022 had healed, another nationwide protest movement erupted this past January. According to Iran Human Rights, at least 100 people arrested in connection with those protests are now at risk of execution. Among the documented cases are at least five women and five people who were under 18 at the time of their alleged offenses. The organization says that since March 18, authorities have executed 31 protesters — 29 connected to the January protests and two associated with Woman, Life, Freedom.

These numbers are especially haunting because the movement was never only about women. Young men stood beside women. They marched with them, were arrested with them, and in some cases died or were executed

alongside them. That solidarity marked an important evolution in Iran’s struggle for women’s rights. Gender inequality was no longer treated simply as a “women’s issue.” For a generation of Iranians, the treatment of women became inseparable from the larger question of what kind of political system they wanted to live under.

The extraordinary visibility of men standing beside women during Woman, Life, Freedom demonstrated how far parts of Iranian society have moved ahead of the state that governs them. That may ultimately be the movement’s most important legacy.

Four years after Amini’s death, Iranian women are different. Many have crossed a psychological boundary that will be extraordinarily difficult for any government to restore. Mothers have buried children. Families have endured imprisonment. Despite knowing the consequences, women are refusing to surrender control over their bodies.

But the Islamic Republic has not undergone the same transformation. Its governing structure remains authoritarian, and its laws remain discriminatory. Its prisons still hold political dissidents,

and the machinery of execution continues to be used against protesters. War, sanctions and severe economic pressure may have pushed compulsory hijab wearing down the government’s list of priorities, but a temporary retreat in enforcement is not the same thing as recognition of a right.

The movement did not liberate Iranian women in law. But it did something that may ultimately prove just as consequential: It changed what millions of Iranians believe they are entitled to demand from the law. Laws can compel behavior for a time. Fear can enforce them for longer. But when a generation stops believing that an unjust rule has legitimacy, coercion becomes increasingly expensive.

Amini did not live to see what happened in her name. But four years after her death, millions of Iranian women understand freedom differently because of the movement she came to symbolize.

Pegah Banihashemi, a native of Iran, is a legal scholar and journalist in Chicago whose work focuses on human rights, constitutional and international law, and Middle East politics.

The Trump family’s corruption costs America



Elizabeth Shackelford

Donald Trump Jr.’s lavish Bahamas wedding was already a bad look, coming amid America’s brutal affordability crisis and when gaping inequality is on the rise. But the news that it was largely funded by Russian oligarch Umar Kremlev shifted this story from distasteful to dangerous. It is more concerning still that this is no isolated incident but part of a well-established pattern of a corrupt regime.

Kremlev reportedly rented the ultra-private islands for the weekend of festivities and paid for the fireworks show, costs that reached hundreds of thousands of dollars. Guests only numbered about 50, and this close associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin who speaks limited English made the cut.

Try taking yourself out of our current political moment, when nothing seems surprising anymore, and consider what you would think if you heard that this had happened with the son of any other U.S. president. The scandal would be the center of congressional inquiries and investigations. It would dominate the news cycle for weeks. Look no further than the Hunter Biden scandal, which launched numerous investigations over his attempt to profit off the name of his father, Joe Biden, who was president at the time. Objectionable as the son’s actions may have been, the investigations found no wrongdoing by government officials or influence on U.S. policy, and yet it remains a go-to grievance on the right.

The same people who were indignant over Hunter Biden have



Donald Trump Jr. and his girlfriend, Bettina Anderson, attend a celebration of the Army’s 250th birthday on the National Mall in Washington on June, 14, 2025. A Russian businessman with ties to the Kremlin paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to help finance Trump Jr.’s wedding after-party in the Bahamas this year, according to two people with knowledge of the matter. **DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES**

turned a blind eye to the conflicts of interest rife in this administration. The Trump family and its hangers-on have been so blatant and prolific in their corruption that each individual incident barely registers anymore. They have earned billions exploiting government power, knowledge, resources and connections.

We must not normalize it or become numb to its impact, because this is not a victimless crime. Every time a political choice is made in the self-interest of political leaders and their associates, it comes at the cost of the national interest, and that costs us. This is true in foreign policy and domestic issues alike, but let’s consider this example with foreign interests at play.

When a Russian oligarch close to Putin offers a significant gift to a close family member of the U.S. president, it is not out of generosity. Kremlev was either seeking

something in return for his own business or, more likely in this case, some payoff for his benefactor Putin. Russian oligarchs hold their positions of power at the pleasure of Putin, after all, and they keep them by being both loyal and useful to him. So, the question then becomes: How does this gift serve Putin’s interests? What might be offered in exchange?

We have no evidence of a specific quid pro quo at this time, so it may be just one piece of the larger influence puzzle to help shape an overall U.S. foreign policy that works in Russia’s favor. Trump Jr. has demonstrated plenty of influence on his father’s decisions. Even Vice President JD Vance credits his close friend for landing him on the ticket. The Russian government has used him as a conduit before too, so he is a natural target. Putin probably considers a few hundred thousand dollars a bargain to keep Trump Jr.

on side.

Putin’s effort to influence other key Trump associates includes the promise of generous business deals in return for a favorable peace agreement with Ukraine. While these would enrich the businesses involved, it would be a poor trade-off for American national security to reward the Russian state for its illegal and violent aggression. Pushing a pro-Russia position not only undermines sovereignty and democracy in Ukraine but also harms America’s relationships with other critical European allies, for whom Russia’s aggression is a paramount threat. It is even more shocking considering that Russia continues to help Iran with targeting information and intelligence specifically to help it attack U.S. forces in the Middle East. This is no friend of the United States.

But those leading and influencing U.S. foreign policy appear to be

looking out for their own interests rather than American ones. The administration has largely entrusted diplomacy with Russia to Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who is mixing diplomatic discussions with private business negotiations and doesn’t even hold an official position in the U.S. government.

Whatever investments Putin has made certainly seem to be paying off, though. Since the start of Trump’s second term, U.S. policy has been suspiciously aligned with Russian interests. Most recently, Kushner’s remarks after talks with Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made clear he was championing Russia’s position explicitly, blaming the stalled negotiations on Ukraine’s unwillingness to surrender.

“President Putin laid out his line of what he wants to achieve,” Kushner said, and a deal would happen “if Ukraine wanted to withdraw to that line.”

This isn’t even the first time that Kushner has presented Russia’s demands as his proposal for peace. The 28-point peace plan that Kushner and special envoy (and Trump family friend) Steve Witkoff presented last fall was very similar to a Russian document reflecting Putin’s wish list for how the war would end.

What could be driving this approach that is so awkwardly and obviously pro-Russian while offering so little for U.S. interests? It could be the case that U.S. foreign policy is for sale on several fronts, and at a bargain price.

Elizabeth Shackelford is a foreign affairs columnist for the Chicago Tribune and a distinguished 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.”

OPINION

The measles outbreak is evidence of a broken system

By Sheldon H. Jacobson and Janet A. Jokela
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

U.S. measles cases now number nearly 3,300, with no sign that the outbreak has abated. This is the highest number since 1991, when 9,643 cases were reported, a total that reflected a decline from previous years following the addition of a second dose of the measles vaccine to the childhood immunization schedule. The federal government’s announcement in 2000 on measles eradication was a major public health achievement, largely driven by vaccination campaigns and school vaccine requirements. Unfortunately, the current outbreak signals a possible end to this status.

Some may argue that measles is just another pediatric infection. Clinical outcomes suggest a much darker picture.

Measles is one of the most transmissible infectious diseases. On average, a single infected person can spread the virus to between 12 and 18 nonimmune people. Around 30% of people who contract measles develop complications, with nine percent of those infected in 2025 and 2026 requiring hospitalization. When a person becomes infected, they are also exposed to a host of health vulnerabilities and complications that may last far after their initial recovery.

There is also mortality risk: Around 1 to 3 out of every 1,000 infections lead to death. The recent public debate surrounding a death in Pennsylvania as to whether measles was indeed the cause of the death illustrates how politicized measles has become. This rings back to the COVID-19 death debate on whether a person died from COVID-19 or while infected with COVID-19. Given the many differences between measles and COVID-19, the “from” or “with” framework is not appropriate for an entirely avoidable measles death.

What is most disturbing about the current measles outbreak is that it was preventable. There exists highly effective and safe immunization available that prevents around 97% of infections. A measles vaccine has been available for over 60 years, with tens of millions of people receiving it. Without this vaccine, the number of measles infections would have been measured in the millions.

So why is the current measles outbreak a significant event?



Measles alert signs in English and Spanish are posted on the front doors of an urgent care facility in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in August. JOSE F. MORENO/THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Trust in public health was shattered during the pandemic. Given that COVID-19 was a novel coronavirus, public health was faced with the daunting task of making real-time decisions with incomplete information, yet was expected to get it right the first time. As we now know, with 20-20 hindsight, things could have been done differently.

Given that measles is so transmissible, the presence of measles is symptomatic of an ailing public health immunization structure. Even though outbreaks are not currently reported for mumps, rubella, pertussis or tetanus, the environment is ripe. It is just a matter of time before more reports surface.

Trust in public health was shattered during the pandemic. Given that COVID-19 was a novel coronavirus, public health was faced with the daunting task of making real-time decisions with incomplete information, yet was expected to get it right the first time. As we now know, with 20-20

hindsight, things could have been done differently.

Measles is not COVID-19, and placing mistrust in the measles vaccine is misguided. Yet vaccine skeptics have been around for many years. One of the most vociferous naysayers has been Robert F. Kennedy Jr., our current health and human services secretary. He chaired the Children’s Health Defense, considered an anti-vaccination organization that expressed concerns about childhood vaccine safety. That skepticism has become a fixture driving federal health policy, not just public debate.

Even Kennedy’s recent statement urging measles immuniza-

tion for children has done little to fix federal policy, as evidenced by the president’s executive order on Aug. 10 recommending the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine be broken into separate injections. Unfortunately, this executive order would subject children to extra shots to gain the same immunization protection. If followed, such actions are more likely to lead to missed immunizations and more disease.

The current measles outbreak should be a call for action to renew immunization as a public good with personal benefits. And such actions must begin at the highest levels of government.

Public health means health for the public. The measles outbreak indicates public disease that is almost entirely avoidable. Where the Department of Health and Human Services has failed, states and professional societies have picked up the ball and run with it, all for the greater good. Yet federal guidance is critical for states to make informed decisions. One place that states can begin with is a closer exam-

ination of nonmedical vaccine exemptions for schoolchildren. Adopting more stringent standards to grant them would provide a concrete approach to reverse current trends.

What remains to be seen is whether efforts will be sufficient to turn the tide and keep our children and population safe. If we remain passive and accept this new status quo, preventable diseases will continue to spread, with everyone, particularly our children, paying the price.

Indeed, the outbreak is not the failure. It is evidence that the current system cannot prevent it.

Sheldon H. Jacobson, Ph.D., is a professor in computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Janet A. Jokela, MPH, is an infectious disease and public health physician and a clinical professor at the Carle Illinois College of Medicine at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She serves as the chair of the Illinois Immunization Advisory Committee.

Voice of the People

Runaway election spending

Illinois became the 21st state on Dec. 6, 1818. Its state constitution begins with the words: “We, the People of the State of Illinois.” Our state constitution goes on to say: “All men are by nature free and independent and have certain inherent and inalienable rights among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To secure these rights and the protection of property, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

If political power is inherent in the people, should the ability to influence elections be determined disproportionately by the amount of money a person or organization can spend? Does unlimited election spending enhance the political voice of Illinois citizens, or does it allow concentrated wealth to exercise disproportionate political power?

Right now, unlimited outside money, including foreign-linked money, is flooding our elections. Billionaires and secretive super political action committees, with no stake in our communities, are shaping our future.

Americans get it, and we’re fighting back. Twenty-five states have called for a constitutional amendment to restore the ability of Congress and the states to set reasonable limits on money in elections. This movement didn’t start in Washington. It started in living rooms, town halls and letters just like this one.

On Sept. 17, we commemorated the signing of the U.S. Constitution in 1787. The best way to honor the Constitution is to strengthen it.

Talk with your neighbors, contact your elected officials and urge them to help make this amendment a reality. We have amended the U.S. Constitution 27 times before. We can do it again. — Cheryl Scantlen, Downers Grove

Head Start’s effectiveness

One of the most impactful moments I have witnessed in 32 years of working in education, five of them with Head Start,



Tia Barnes, second from left, asks questions about registering to vote to Jay Taylor, right, and Oscar Peterson, second from right, at the Chicago Board of Elections commissioners booth at Daley Plaza on Tuesday. Barnes registered to vote. ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

happened recently at a family event. Our home visiting program regularly gathers to share a meal, engage in a developmental activity and create a community for families.

Two girls were completing a puzzle together. The younger of the two said, “Kids make fun of my hijab at school. Do they ever do that to you?” The supportive conversation that followed happened because there was space for it to happen. For a young girl growing up isolated from other Muslim children and attending a school where a hijab is something to tease someone about, it is everything.

In our home visiting program, almost 90% of the parents are newcomers to the United States, who speak over 10 different languages. To accommodate this, we have interpreters and devices that make communication, culture, connection and community possible.

The federal Administration for Children and Families, in its proposal for reducing “the federal burden” on Head Start programs, wants to remove all federal regulations “regarding home-based program design, instructional activities for home visits, curriculum, staff support, adapting curriculum, and group socializa-

tion structure.” But as standards are lowered, funds will be, too, resulting in families having fewer opportunities to connect. That would diminish the effectiveness of the program.

The administration’s Notice of Proposed Rulemaking also states that instruction must be delivered in English, and if a child does not speak English, then there must be a priority to teach the language. Educators agree that instruction works best when children first learn concepts in their home language while gradually building skills in English. Not honoring a family’s home language would mean the welcome and validation that families feel in the program would be erased. The funding for the interpreters and translators would be eliminated.

This is just two of the hundreds of standards that the proposed rulemaking has put on the chopping block. The current standards have been developed by experts in the field of education and have proved effective through the program’s success rate.

If the standards are deleted, so will opportunities for two young girls to connect over a puzzle and find value in who they are.

— Cara Craig, education specialist, Childcare Network of Evanston

Pollution from power plants

The commitment by President Donald Trump’s administration to Make America Healthy Again continues.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, whose mission is to protect human health and the environment, plans to repeal rules limiting greenhouse gas emissions from coal- and natural gas-fired power plants. Earlier this year, the agency eliminated greenhouse gas emissions standards for cars and trucks.

That’s quite the one-two punch. Fossil fuel-fired power plants alone account for about a quarter of the nation’s climate pollution, second only to transportation. Power plant pollution has also been linked to asthma, chronic lung disease, heart attacks and neurological damage in children. Air pollution causes an estimated 100,000 U.S. deaths annually.

The EPA says ending the power plant rule would save the power plant industry more than \$300 billion in costs. The change would also allow utilities to “make the best decision for the ratepayers based on cost and cost savings, instead of being required to shut down facilities.”

You may not want to hold your breath while waiting for lower utility bills — but you may need to hold it when you step outside. — Steven M. Ostrowski, Lombard

Repeating mistakes of history

President Donald Trump falsely blames Ukraine for Russia’s invasion. That would be like blaming Czechoslovakia for Adolf Hitler seizing part of its territory in 1938 and the entire country in 1939. Trump claims that Ukraine is responsible for high diesel prices, which is also untrue.

Ukraine first attacked a Russian oil facility in April 2022 and ramped up its attacks on Russia’s energy supplies in 2025. The surge in crude oil and diesel prices started in February when Trump

started his ill-fated war with Iran.

Trump went to war with Iran even though U.S. intelligence said it didn’t have a nuclear weapons program. Trump ignored warnings that Iran would respond by shutting down the Strait of Hormuz and attacking our allies and bases in the region. Iran’s allies have taken control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and attacked an oil pipeline in Saudi Arabia, reducing the world’s energy supplies even more.

So far, the Trump administration’s negotiations over Ukraine involve giving Russian President Vladimir Putin what he wants while demanding no concessions from Russia. Meanwhile, Russia supports Iran by supplying it with weapons and intelligence that it can use against the U.S. The Financial Times recently reported that Russia is also helping Iran develop supersonic cruise missiles.

Appeasement didn’t work with Hitler, and it won’t work with Putin. A second war in the Middle East over weapons that don’t exist is another recipe for disaster.

Trump failed to learn from the mistakes of history, so the rest of us are doomed for him to repeat them.

— Mike Mosser, Chicago

\$5,000 for voting Republican?

If you really believe you’re going to get \$5,000 if you vote Republican this November — in a country with \$40 trillion in national debt — I’d like to sell you the most amazing triumphal arch in Washington, D.C. Or a glorious National Mall Reflecting Pool. Or a most luxurious Air Force One with all the latest security features. And low gas prices. And a skyrocketing economy — the “hottest” in the world. And Greenland, too — the whole country!

Have the die-hard Donald Trump supporters figured it out yet? Should the rest of us tell them?

— Frank Kern, Chicago

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

OPINION

Democrats: The Shutdown Party



POTOMAC WATCH
By Kimberley A. Strassel

Another day, another missed opportunity for Republicans to make their case. Past accomplishments aren't going to cut it. Vague fearmongering about "communists" will go only so far.

An obvious theme is going by the wayside: the choice between productive governance and burn-it-down obstructionism. Many House Democrats this week voted in Borg-like fashion against the late South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham's Russia sanctions bill. It passed, 262-159, so thankfully will become law. But only 58 Democrats supported a bill designed to punish Vladimir Putin by stripping him of funds he needs to continue his brutal war of aggression against Ukraine. An estimated 125,000 to 150,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed at Mr. Putin's orders, and 152 Democrats voted to let him carry on.

Only 58 House Democrats voted in favor of a bill whose co-author is Connecticut Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a liberal Democrat. A bill that passed the Senate 86-11. A bill that included Republican concessions designed to attract bipartisan support. A bill that helps Ukraine, which Democrats insist is one of the party's top priorities. When House Republicans

stripped some Ukraine aid from a spending bill in 2023, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer railed against the move as a "gift to Putin."

What now justifies Democrats' own gift to the Russian tyrant? What else? Donald Trump. Eager to maintain a perfect opposition record, House Democrats conjured up the complaint that it would be too dangerous to allow the president the authority to impose tariffs on buyers of Russian oil like China—an argument Senate Democrats said was silly. Even House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries voted to kill the bill, and with seven Republicans voting no, it was only the courage of Democratic rebels that allowed the House to pass it.

Democratic obstruction isn't new—we are in year 10 of the Trump "resistance"—but the past 18 months really did mark a next-level display of governance sabotage. Democrats last year forced the longest shutdown in government history—43 days—showing at least 675,000 federal employees into furlough and forcing another 730,000 to work without pay. Their complaint was that Republicans wouldn't continue paying a Covid-era subsidy that Democrats themselves had designed to expire. Only the near expiration of food assistance for 42 million Americans finally pushed them to release their federal hostage.

They then shut down the Department of Homeland Se-

curity for a record-breaking 80 days, causing airport security delays, staffing strains and missed paychecks for the people who protect our coasts and our cyber networks and who manage disaster assistance. That shutdown ended only because the GOP creatively funded parts of DHS outside regular appropriations.

Over the past year, Democrats successfully tanked a vote to renew a crucial intelligence-gathering tool, Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence

Republicans miss an opportunity by not campaigning against mindless obstruction.

Surveillance Act, causing it to go dark for the first time since 2008. They killed the annual defense authorization bill—the first time in 65 years Congress has failed to pass that bipartisan legislation. They blocked a bill to protect women and girls in sports. They thwarted legislation to prevent future shutdowns. They blocked the SAVE America Act, which would require voter ID. This week Senate Democrats killed the Clarity Act, which would establish a regulatory framework for digital currencies.

Voters, and the media, have fleeting political memories, but this recent history is worth recounting on the campaign trail. Republicans are

right to call out the left's turn toward socialism and, better yet, to spell out what those policies would mean for voters' lives. But the Democrats of the here and now, leaderless and rudderless, have already shown they have nothing to offer beyond gridlock.

This is a message that can resonate with the huge number of voters who are disgusted by Washington's dysfunction, many of whom voted for Mr. Trump in the hope that an outsider could bust through a broken status quo. The GOP might make the obvious point that Democrats have no intention of fulfilling campaign promises to make things more "affordable," because they have no intention of working at all with a GOP White House.

The progressive left won't allow it, and as is clear from House Democrats' abandonment of Ukraine, what activists want, they get. No matter how outrageous. A Democratic Congress would bring wild investigations and impeachment—not cheaper groceries.

This side-by-side would be far easier, of course, if Republicans had their own set of concrete promises, which they could point to as at risk from Democratic rule. But it would at least be a start to begin reminding voters of the past 18 months and pointing at that old truth: Past behavior is the best indicator of future action. No recent Democratic past in any way resembles governance.

Write to kim@wsj.com.

There Are No Atheists on Third and Long

The Hail Mary pass isn't the only example of prayer in football.

"Faith had a place in every locker room I was in," Hall of Fame quarterback Fran Tarkenton said in 2012. "Before every game, no matter what team I was on at the time, the coach would always ask the most devout player to say a prayer."

Pregame prayers are America's most ecumenical moment. Football fans recall Knute Rockne's 1928 "win one for the Gipper" speech, but the New York Sun records an earlier moment, while the Gipper was still playing: "A player in the Notre Dame dressing room before a game, suggested that they say a little prayer before going out on the field. That player was George Gipp, son of a Methodist clergyman. The prayer was offered and the boy who made it was Chet Wynne, son of a Baptist clergyman."

Marcus Freeman wasn't yet Catholic when he visited Notre Dame as a high-school recruit in 2003, but he remembered watching the football team walk from Mass to the stadium on game day. When Mr. Freeman was promoted to head football coach at Notre Dame in 2021, one of his first priorities was to reinstate pregame Mass for the team.

The tradition showed up in a 1921 trip by the Fighting Irish to play Army at West Point. The train was held in Albany, where the players disembarked and received Holy Communion. For Notre Dame's 1925 trip west to the Rose Bowl, an alumnus arranged for a special train with a chapel car ready to make brief unscheduled stops to ensure stillness during the consecration and elevation at Mass. The Rev. John O'Hara, a future archbishop of Philadelphia, accompanied the team and noticed how the sight of "full-blooded" young men kneeling for Holy Communion was an inspiration.

When I played at Lancaster Catholic High School in Pennsylvania, I saw the "full-blooded" young men still meeting in the school chapel before games. The chaplain roamed the sideline, following in the footsteps of a local legend, the Rev. Ed Lavelle, who once rushed the field to horse-collar the team captain and defensive tackle, my father, out of a brawl at the 50-yard line.

Under the Friday night lights, the stadium public-address announcer still invites all to pray: "We ask you, Father, to bless each one of us, especially the coaches, officials and players. Keep us under the protection of your Son, Jesus Christ, and help us to be aware of his presence with us in the game."

In Lancaster County, Pa.,

where the church-affiliation rate is higher than the national average, the Catholic prayer is met with appreciation by opposing teams and fans from local public schools. In other states, local chapters of the mostly Protestant Fellowship of Christian Athletes organize unofficial

As football season kicks off, fans and players alike pray fervently for victory.

pregame prayers. All these prayers surpass sectarian strife. What they teach is what St. Thomas Aquinas saw when he said that prayer is part of justice—rendering to others their due. Opponents and officials deserve our respect and fair play. Teammates and coaches deserve our best attempts to play with fortitude. Parents and fans deserve our gratitude.

While almost every spectator experiences stadium prayers as a moment of community, these efforts have often come under legal attack. In *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* (2022), the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a high-school coach who had been fired for praying after games. The justices had public opinion on their side. Pew reports that 57% of Americans favor allowing

coaches to lead their teams in prayer.

Two of the sitting justices played high-school football, and they must know that the strain of sport leads teenage boys to endow ordinary routine with the power of superstition. In the locker room before a high-school all-star game, I was initiated into the secular rites of the local public-school powerhouse. Dressed in full pads, we were instructed to sit in dim, dead silence, staring straight ahead, while the stereo blared "In the Air Tonight" by Phil Collins. At the sound of the great drum break, we were to thrash about the locker room.

As a new season kicks off, fans of all faiths pray in the hope of victory. Players pray as they always have: for protection from injury, from the embarrassment of a missed tackle or muffed punt, to impress their homecoming date or to attract the attention of scouts. Some pray in pregame huddles, others pray with headphones and the Hallow app. On football fields across the country, Friday night lights illuminate the truth of the axiom that there are no atheists on third and long.

Mr. Schmalhofer is a partner at a venture investment firm and a graduate of Yale College where he won an Ivy League football championship. He is author of "Delightful People."

New Mexico's Joke Police

By Megan K. Jacobson

New Mexico politicians set out to protect themselves from artificial-intelligence "deepfakes" and ended up deputizing the joke police. Now state officials face a lawsuit from the satirical website Babylon Bee.

A 2024 provision of the state's Campaign Reporting Act requires disclaimers for AI-produced media referring to a ballot question or candidate in a state, county or judicial-retention election that depicts a person saying or doing something he didn't. It establishes criminal and civil penalties for noncompliance.

A single social-media post could bring a civil fine of \$1,000. The law applies to political "advertisements," a term it defines broadly as "a communication" that is "published, disseminated, distributed or displayed to the public," although the meaning of "public" is left open. For civil penalties, the state isn't required to prove harm or the intent to harm.

The Bee's lawsuit argues, among other things, that the mandatory disclaimers are unconstitutional compelled speech and that the requirement "spoils the joke as it begins, each and every time." A picture or video has to display "easily readable" text explaining the use of AI for its

A satirical website sues to challenge a law targeting AI in campaign ads.

duration, while an audio recording has to repeat an "easily heard" disclaimer at the start and end and every two minutes in between. Neither "easily readable" nor "easily heard" is defined, making it safest to use the most conspicuous disclaimer possible.

Under this civil side of the law, the New Mexico State Ethics Commission serves as both joke police and judge. The commission has the

power to refer complaints to itself to investigate, adjudicate and assess penalties.

When asked to comment, the commission said in an email that the suit is "baseless" and that the law, "correctly read," doesn't require disclaimers "for communications made for a purpose other than supporting or opposing a candidate in a covered election." It "accordingly . . . would not enforce the law against political parody or satire."

But political satire usually takes sides, and the law's disclaimer requirement explicitly applies to parody and satire. The way it does so is itself a parody: It purports to exempt parody and satire from the section containing the disclaimer requirement, but only if the content "includes a disclaimer consistent with the requirements" the section imposes on advertisements. In a 2025 review of the legislation, the state attorney general found this subsection likely unconstitutional.

When asked to specify what in the law backed its interpretation, the commission cited the separate definitions section and wouldn't comment further. Nothing in that section seems to support it.

The law does contain an actual exemption—no disclaimer required—for a "news story or editorial." The idea seems to be to protect the First Amendment rights of traditional news media while subjecting everyone else to second-class protection. But even that isn't guaranteed, since determining what qualifies for the exemption is left to the commission.

It's tempting to think the First Amendment is out of date with the rise of AI, around which there's so much doomsaying. But technology doesn't change the fundamental principle that it isn't the role of government to tell us what's true, newsworthy or funny.

Ms. Jacobson is an assistant editorial features editor at the Journal.

BOOKSHELF | By Hannah Rowan

The Sweetest Meal of the Day

Sugar Coated
By Marion Nestle and Lisa Sutherland
California, 304 pages, \$29.95

If eating a bowl of Frosted Flakes in the company of Tony the Tiger is one of your fondest childhood memories, then you already know everything you need to know about the breakfast-cereal business. It's right there on the box.

Cereal boxes, Marion Nestle and Lisa Sutherland explain, are "billboards displaying marketing messages on supermarket shelves and breakfast tables across America." Their book, "Sugar Coated," uses the colorful history of these packages to follow the U.S. cereal industry from its origins on a health resort in Michigan to its present-day position as a multibillion-dollar centerpiece of American culture.

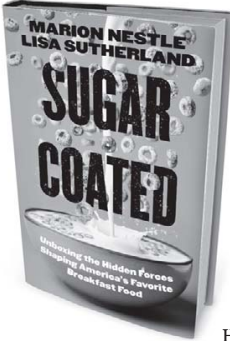
The authors might seem to be unlikely collaborators. Ms. Sutherland was a vice president of nutrition at Kellogg until 2025. Ms. Nestle, the author of "Food Politics" (2002), has been critical of the cereal industry's marketing strategies and its history of questionable health claims. Despite the difference in their backgrounds, they were brought together by a "joint appreciation and love of cereal boxes and what they signify."

Ms. Sutherland's job gave them access to cereal-box images from Kellogg's extensive archives. The pictures, reprinted here, reveal that as nutritional trends have shifted, cereal companies have adjusted their packaging in response.

The history of breakfast cereal began with a fight over sugar. In the late 1890s, John Harvey Kellogg, the director of a Seventh-day Adventist sanitarium in Battle Creek, Mich., wanted a vegetarian breakfast alternative to the bacon and eggs his clients were accustomed to. Corn flakes, made from rolling and drying the unsweetened grain, were the result of his experiments. John's brother William saw the sales potential of a grain-based breakfast that only required adding milk, though he thought the bland-tasting result needed sweetening.

Adding sugar was against John's dietary principles, but William bought the recipe from his brother, added cane sugar to the mix, and created a company to make and market corn flakes in 1906. Soon Battle Creek was known as Cereal City, with more than 100 small producers of various kinds. Out of that large field eventually emerged four companies that produce the bulk of breakfast cereals: Kellogg, General Mills, Post and Quaker Oats. By 2025, Kellogg and General Mills had gained control of 60% of the global market.

For Ms. Nestle and Sutherland, one element of the breakfast-cereal success formula is simple: "Sugar sells." William's light sweetening of corn flakes was modest compared with today's cereals, many of which are as much as 50% sugar by weight. In one study the authors cite, consumers who say that they regularly avoid sugar still view sweetened cereal as a "permissible indulgence." That may be because, as the authors write, "practically all cereals now promote nutritional or health benefits" that "offset concerns about sugar" or other additives.



Sugary cereals are generally placed on lower shelves in stores, the better for children to see the cheery packaging and cartoon mascots.

To do so, cereal brands carefully follow nutrition-advice trends. Manufacturers added and promoted vitamins in the 1930s. In more recent years cereal packaging has focused on antioxidants and protein. Ms. Nestle and Sutherland examine the nutrition claims on cereal boxes to show how the aims of marketers and those of the Food and Drug Administration—which are often in competition—influence what consumers see. Cereal companies also attempt to avoid unappetizing stickers, mandated in some other countries, warning of high sugar or fat content. Manufacturers counter with front-of-the-package labeling that highlights added vitamins and minerals or the "heart healthy" benefits of supplied fiber. In 1988 Kellogg printed claims on its boxes that Frosted Flakes are "more nutritious than eggs or fruit."

Sugary cereals generally appear on lower shelves in the grocery store, where children can see the cheery packaging and grinning cartoon mascots. "In 2021, cereal was the most-advertised children's food category," the authors write: More than 40% of the food ads on children's television promoted cereal. Once they have created lifetime customers, cereal companies tap into the nostalgia of older generations. In 2014 General Mills brought back mid-20th-century box designs for Lucky Charms and Cheerios.

Despite their established place in the market, cereal manufacturers today face significant challenges. "Cereal appears to be in a financial free fall; sales have been declining for years," the authors report, partly because new products such as protein bars offer greater convenience. Current political trends add pressure. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. started his tenure as the secretary of Health and Human Services with strong critiques of high-fructose corn syrup, a common sweetener in cereals, and has pledged to remove artificial food dyes from ultraprocessed foods.

Attempts to lower their sugar content has resulted in cereals performing poorly in taste tests. As the authors point out, sugar is "structurally important to kids' cereals"—reduced-sugar formulations get soggy faster. Artificial food dyes, too, are hard to do without, because consumers reliably prefer brightly colored foods.

Ms. Nestle and Sutherland suggest that we don't have to throw out the corn flakes with the corn syrup. "We hope this industry continues to reinvent itself," they write, "but with better-quality ingredients, less sugar, no artificial colors or flavors, and more organic ingredients in cereals priced so everyone can afford them." Such a plan may miss the point demonstrated by Tony the Tiger's endurance: No matter what's in the box, with cereal, what you're buying is a friendly feeling.

Ms. Rowan is the managing editor of Modern Age.

Coming in BOOKS this weekend

The Hindenburg disaster • Merck and the rise of the U.S. pharmaceutical industry • The brutal struggle for North America • Marian Anderson • An alternative history of rock music • The Battle of Hengyang • & much more

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Trump Gets New Power Against Putin

Believe it or not, the House of Representatives did something productive in Washington this week before darting back to the campaign trail: Approving the late GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham’s bill to put more pressure on Vladimir Putin for his marauding in Ukraine. Your move, President Trump.

The House voted 262-159 late Wednesday, with 58 Democrats and an independent joining 203 Republicans in support. The Senate passed the bill with 86 votes last month, and it now heads to Mr. Trump’s desk.

The measure, long in gestation, includes new sanctions on Russia’s “shadow fleet” for illicit oil exports and goes after Russian oligarchs, banks and foreign financiers of the Russian industrial base. Most notably, the bill lets the President impose a tariff up to 100% on the top five countries that import Russian oil and gas over a 12-month period. That list may vary over time, but today it includes China and India. This is a useful instrument to cut into Mr. Putin’s war financing.

Opponents fear the bill gives too much tariff authority to Mr. Trump. That isn’t an idle concern given his misuse of other statutes to impose tariffs on a personal whim. But the bill says “a duty shall not be imposed” if the country’s gas imports make up less than 15% of Russian exports and the country “has taken significant steps” to reduce its dependence. This helps hold European allies harmless. But the tariffs are important because they are tougher than sanctions for Mr. Putin to evade.

The more immediate question is whether Mr. Trump is willing to use the tariff punishment, especially against China, as the bill includes a waiver process. Beijing’s help for Mr. Putin ranges from buying Russian oil to selling semi-conductors and explosive propellants that can

be used in weapons. GOP Sen. Roger Wicker says the bill “specifically targets Chinese support for Russia’s weapons producers.”

Yet the Administration’s top China priority seems to be a smooth, smiling summit with President Xi Jinping in Washington next week. “They basically do what we do,” Mr. Trump shrugged when asked recently about Chinese commercial satellite data helping Iran target U.S. bases. China is essentially helping Iran shoot at Americans in the Middle East.

The war in Ukraine has been in a brutal stalemate for several months, but there’s no guarantee this will continue. Ukraine is holding the line at the eastern front and imposing casualties of some 30,000 a month. Mr. Putin is fighting back by firing ballistic missiles and jet-powered drones at power plants and civilian targets. The goal is to demoralize Ukrainians going into the winter. Ukraine lacks enough missile defenses to intercept this assault.

If Mr. Trump won’t help Ukraine with more weapons, then the bill’s sanctions and tariffs can at least raise the economic pressure on Russia. The Justice Department this week indicted five individuals working for Russian intelligence services for allegedly trying to “conduct attacks and murders around the world, including in the United States.” This is a reminder that the stakes in Ukraine are much larger than the fate of that country.

A large bipartisan majority of a politically polarized Congress has handed Mr. Trump new tools to pressure Mr. Putin to come to the negotiating table. Let’s hope the President signs the bill and makes the most of the leverage. If he could still play golf with Mr. Trump, we know what Lindsey Graham would be advising the President to do.

Will he use this tariff tool against Russia’s benefactors?

A Warning to Trump From Rep. Salazar

How big a political drag for the GOP is President Trump’s immigration over-reach? One way to answer that is by watching a new ad from Republican Rep. Maria Elvira Salazar, who has held a Miami seat since 2021. “Mr. President, some of your immigration enforcement efforts have gone too far,” she begins, speaking directly into the camera.

“In July, 50% of the 50,000 people that were detained had no criminal record,” Ms. Salazar continues. “The same Hispanics who helped you get to the White House in 2024 feel betrayed today. You can be for immigration what Lincoln was for slavery and Reagan was for communism. I’m not talking about giving them amnesty. I’m talking about giving them a dignified life in this promised land.”

The exit polls two years ago showed that Mr. Trump won 46% of Hispanics nationally, a historic showing, and far above his 28% in 2016. In Florida Mr. Trump carried 58% of Hispanics, who made up a quarter of the electorate. Americans of all kinds were fed up with President Biden’s border mess and inflation, hence Mr. Trump’s victory in the swing states and the national popular vote.

Ms. Salazar won in 2024 by 21 points, and

her seat hasn’t been rated a tossup. But she must feel the ground shifting under her feet, since to criticize Mr. Trump is to risk his wrath and a political airstrike from Truth Social. MAGA’s podcast and internet enforcers are likely to target her.

Ms. Salazar might be hoping to avoid that, since in the advertisement she blames Mr. Trump’s staff and urges him to “be careful what your advisers are telling you about immigration policy.” Sounds like she means senior aide Stephen Miller, whose quota target of 3,000 ICE arrests a day early in this term contributed to the enforcement excesses across the country.

Mr. Trump would do better to take Ms. Salazar’s ad as a constructive warning. If her seat is really in play, then the GOP gerrymanders in Florida and Texas might not go the way the party expects in November, and other seats thought to be safe could be in play.

It’s mid-September, late to turn the ship, but here’s one idea: Mr. Trump has often spoken favorably of “Dreamers,” who were brought to this country as children. Perhaps he could announce that, in his final two years as President, he will push hard for a deal in Congress to let them stay.

The Hispanic voters Trump won in 2024 ‘feel betrayed today,’ she says.

The SEC’s Big Proxy Reform

Securities and Exchange Commission Chairman Paul Atkins on Wednesday issued a one-two punch to government pension funds and proxy advisory firms. The agency moved to exit the political business of deciding which shareholders resolutions companies must put up for a vote. Imagine that—a regulator relinquishing power.

Mr. Atkins’ proposed reform would return regulatory authority over shareholder resolutions to the states, where it resided before the agency arrogated the power to itself some 80 years ago. His deregulation would empower states to write their own rules regulating shareholder proposals for businesses incorporated within their borders, as Texas has recently sought to do.

The 1934 Securities Exchange Act makes it illegal to solicit a proxy “in contravention of such rules and regulations as the Commission may prescribe as necessary or appropriate in the public interest or for the protection of investors.” The law was intended to give the SEC power to regulate disclosures to protect investors, not to play referee.

Yet the agency has since invoked the law’s broad language to determine which shareholder proposals companies must include on proxy statements. The result: A “mother may I?” process in which companies were effectively required to seek agency permission to exclude proposals that interfere with their day-to-day management, violate state corporate laws or are economically irrelevant. Companies risked government enforcement action if they didn’t follow SEC direction.

As the SEC’s proposed rule this week says, shareholders often use resolutions “to gain leverage in negotiations with company management or to secure private benefits from such negotiations.” The Biden SEC declined company requests to exclude environmental, social and

governance (ESG) resolutions, giving progressives more leverage.

These activists often hire proxy advisory firms to help them “engage” with—i.e., bully—companies. One half of the U.S. proxy duopoly, Institutional Shareholder Services, advertises that it helps investors “engage with companies that have failed to prevent or address serious social or environmental controversies in violation of established norms and expectations.”

Companies often adopt some of these demands to avoid costly proxy and legal fights. Most shareholder proposals are rejected, and the SEC notes that only 11% of those that were ultimately voted on last year received majority shareholder support. But companies must still spend to oppose them and rebuff misinformation by proxy firms.

Conservatives have begun to copy the ESG crowd’s playbook with resolutions demanding that companies resist liberal pressure and policies. The Heritage Foundation last year sued Airbnb for not including its proposal calling on the company to consider the legal risks of politicized divestments. Airbnb agreed to put the proposal on this year’s ballot, and shareholders rejected it.

Mr. Atkins is right to get the SEC out of arbitrating such political fights and devolve regulatory authority to states. Among other business law reforms, Texas last year passed legislation that lets companies incorporated in the state exclude resolutions if proponents don’t own at least \$1 million, or 3%, of voting shares.

Such reforms are one reason Tesla, Coinbase and Dell Technologies have reincorporated in Texas. With the exception of the Lone Star State, “no State has adopted legislation governing shareholder proposals in more than 80 years,” the SEC says. Maybe now others will do so to compete with Texas for business.

The agency wants to stop telling companies how to handle shareholder resolutions.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Development Banks Have Misplaced Priorities

In our Sept. 1 op-ed, we argued that the purpose of development banks is development: less poverty, hunger and death among the world’s poor. Over the past decade, politicians, pushed by climate campaigners and aided by willing officials, have diverted money from development to climate policy, which at best helps inefficiently and far in the future. Vinod Thomas’s defense of that spending (“Climate Investment Is Economic Investment,” Letters, Sept. 12) shows how weak the case is.

Mr. Thomas denies any trade-off between climate and development. Yet money spent on solar panels can’t be spent on lifesaving drugs. He invokes Nepal’s catastrophe to demand more climate policy, but his approach likely would have given Nepal renewable energy when it needed early warning systems. When surveyed about the “most important problem facing our country today,” Nepalis name unemployment, the cost of living, corruption, poverty and 13 other concerns, but not climate. Surveys about main concerns across 39 African countries place climate near the bottom.

Mr. Thomas’s evidence is alarmist and wrong. He claims that extreme

wildfires have surged 120% in two decades. That finding was published in the journal Nature in 2024. But a more recent Nature study published in 2025 found that the frequency of extreme fire intensity has fallen 35%. He says extreme floods have risen 134% in recent decades. This finding—that since 2000 the number of recorded flood-related disasters has risen by 134% compared with the previous two decades—comes from a United Nations report pulling data from the Emergency Events Database. Yet that same database warns against exactly this kind of comparison, because disasters have been far better recorded since 2000. Meanwhile, the global risk of dying in a flood has nearly halved—a fact that doesn’t fit his narrative.

Mr. Thomas concludes that because cutting carbon dioxide yields some benefits, development institutions like the World Bank must make it a priority. That ignores the costs—and it ignores the far larger, cheaper and faster gains from fighting disease, hunger and poverty. Development banks should stick to development.

INDERMIT GILL and BJORN LOMBORG
Bethesda, Md., and Malmö, Sweden

Bring Back State-Led Corporate Governance

Michael Toth is right that Texas is showing the country a better model for corporate governance (“BlackRock Casts a Vote of Confidence in Texas,” Cross Country, Sept. 5). The Securities and Exchange Commission deserves credit for pursuing reforms that give this state-level model the room it needs to succeed.

For years, political activists have used a federal policy known as Rule 14a-8 to force their agendas into corporate boardrooms. This has made climate mandates, DEI initiatives and other value-destroying ESG priorities regular, costly fixtures on corporate proxy ballots. It has also empowered a duopoly of foreign-owned proxy advisory firms that shake down companies when they issue recommendations on these shareholder votes.

In a July speech, SEC Chairman Paul Atkins rightly questioned why this federal rule should dictate the shareholder proposal process in an area of corporate law that has traditionally been handled by states. Since then, the SEC has worked toward re-

scinding Rule 14a-8, a move that will end the federal infringement and allow states to set their own rules.

Texas is already showing what happens when states reject politicization and adopt rules that let businesses focus on creating value. Major companies like Exxon and Tesla are moving their legal homes there. As Mr. Toth emphasizes, even BlackRock is now voting in favor of companies seeking to incorporate under the Texas framework. Tennessee has taken similar steps by passing laws to crack down on proxy adviser conflicts of interest and keep public pensions focused on investment returns. As the SEC’s reform agenda progresses, we can expect more states to follow.

Mr. Atkins and pro-business state governments are showing what the future of effective corporate governance can look like. This is great news for federalism and every retail investor who relies on the strength and integrity of America’s capital markets.

SEN. BILL HAGERTY (R, TENN.)
Nashville, Tenn.

The Most Effective Way to Cut Child Poverty

I applaud Rahm Emanuel for shining a spotlight on child poverty—one of the most solvable problems in American life (“Lessons From Clinton to Cut Child Poverty,” op-ed, Sept. 4). But I have to correct the record on the history he shares and the lessons he draws from it.

Mr. Emanuel praises President Bill Clinton’s welfare reform. I was in Congress when the 1996 welfare reform law passed, and I voted against it. That bill froze food-stamp benefits and imposed new restrictions on eligibility. I helped reverse those cuts in the 2008 farm bill.

The real lesson came in 2021, when President Biden and Democrats in Congress expanded the child tax credit for one year through the American Rescue Plan, building on my American Family Act. The expanded credit raised the benefit to as much as \$3,600 per child, made it fully refundable and delivered it monthly.

The results were historic. Child poverty was cut in half in a single year, falling to its lowest recorded level of 5.2% in 2021, lifting millions of children out of poverty. Child hunger fell by a quarter. Then Republicans let it expire.

Higher Education’s Real Test

In his column “Higher Ed Will Soon Get Patriotic” (Global View, Sept. 15), Walter Russell Mead argues that shifting geopolitical and economic realities may be pushing universities to reassess what they teach and the behaviors they reward. One test will be how they confront antisemitism.

For years, campuses taught students to recognize prejudice and the dangers of stereotyping minorities. Yet many proved ill-equipped to recognize those forces when directed at Jews. Calls to “globalize the *intifada*,” the ostracism of Jewish students and the targeting of Jewish gatherings were too often rationalized as political expression.

If universities are beginning to value intellectual maturity over ideological conformity, their willingness to confront antisemitism will be a telling measure of how real that change is.

AVIVA KLOMPAS
CEO, Boundless
Boston

Letters intended for publication should be emailed to wsl.letters@wsj.com. Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

American AI Regulation Is Exactly What China Wants

Your editorial “The Great AI Slowdown?” (Sept. 14) is reminiscent of a scene from “The Godfather” in which the heads of the five families meet. In the film, Don Emilio Barzini says that the traffic in drugs “will be permitted, but controlled.” Now we have Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei saying essentially the same thing about AI. Things don’t end well for Don Barzini, while his nemesis, the Corleone family, is triumphant. How will things end for Mr. Amodei and his fellow American tech CEOs as the U.S. faces a nemesis that also begins with a C—China?

BARRY DRAKE
Jacksonville Beach, Fla.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



OPINION

Democrats Can Win Back the Midwest

By **Rahm Emanuel**

An old saying suggests that the road to the White House runs through Ohio. For more than 125 years, the Buckeye State has served as the nation’s bellwether. More recently many Midwestern states—not only Ohio, but also Iowa, Illinois, Indiana and Minnesota—have turned either ruby red or navy blue. That polarization has hit a tipping point. The heartland is set again to become the nation’s pre-eminent battleground, and Democrats need to appreciate what that means for the future.

The history is dramatic. Barack Obama won Iowa by nearly 10 points in 2008, but Donald Trump prevailed in 2024 by more than 13. Hawkeye Republicans now hold supermajorities in both chambers of the state Legislature. Ohio has been trending right, favoring Mr. Trump in 2020, the first time since 1960 that the national winner didn’t carry the state.

Even Ohio and Iowa, after trending Republican for years, are battlegrounds in the midterm elections.

But past performance won’t be indicative of future results. Iowa’s state auditor, Rob Sand, appears poised to become the first Democrat to win the governorship in 20 years. Democrat Amy Acton has more than a fighting chance for the Ohio governorship against Republican Vivek Ramaswamy. Jocelyn Benson and David Crowley are likely to win the governorships in Michigan and Wisconsin, respectively. The only statewide Democrat in real trouble is Abdul El-Sayed, the party’s Senate

candidate in Michigan, who is struggling because his decision to campaign with someone who believes “America deserved 9/11” has forced him to relitigate his primary continually.

The Midwestern Democratic wave will almost surely expand our farm team—namely state legislators—such that Democratic minority caucuses can sustain gubernatorial vetoes of GOP-sponsored legislation. We may even claim trifectas (the governorship and majorities in both houses of the state legislature) in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin. All this should serve as a lesson that too many in Washington refuse to appreciate: Swing voters swing elections in presidential swing states.

Unfortunately, the far left of our party still holds fast to the discredited theory that we can incite disaffected nonvoters to cast ballots by taking more extreme positions. Pragmatists have long countered that our victories nationally are predicated on our success building coalitions between Democrats and independent swing voters. Midwesterners are about to prove the pragmatists right.

That wisdom propelled Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama into the White House each time. It’s how Democrats gained a majority in the House in 2006 and 2018, how we won the governorships of New Jersey and Virginia last year, and why Gov. Josh Shapiro is running what looks to be a blowout re-election campaign in Pennsylvania. It’s why I’m bullish about so many of the



Amy Acton and Rob Sand are the Democratic nominees for governor of Ohio and Iowa.



ASSOCIATED PRESS (2)

Democrats running in the Midwest.

Democrats can benefit from the failure of Mr. Trump’s second term. Tariffs are decimating the Midwest’s farmers, driving up diesel prices and closing off foreign markets. The broader phenomenon of Trumpflation has hit heartland families particularly hard. But three more fundamental changes are buoying Democratic candidates.

First, Midwestern Democrats aren’t engaging on the cultural issues that have sunk us in previous cycles. Mr. Sand and Ms. Acton aren’t proposing to defund the police, nor are they promising to provide free healthcare at the border to those who cross illegally. When Mr. Sand was asked whether “biological boys or men” should be allowed to play in girls’ sports, he simply answered: “No.” Ms. Acton has argued that local police should work cooperatively with federal agents.

Second, absent cultural distractions,

Midwestern Democrats have earned themselves the running room to make the sorts of cogent economic arguments that draw moderates and progressives together. Ms. Acton is highlighting a plan to use the state’s purchasing leverage to lower the cost of medications. Mr. Sand talks about his plans to fight bipartisan graft and corruption. And like many of their Midwestern Democratic colleagues, both are focused on skyrocketing utility rates.

Third, they’re proving their bipartisan bona fides by borrowing from Mr. Shapiro’s playbook. When Pennsylvania elected him, the governor nominated Republicans to be his secretary of state and revenue secretary. Mr. Sand is promising to do something similar. Ms. Acton herself worked for a Republican governor as director of the Ohio Department of Health. That contrasts with the rancor you hear coming out of Washington—and Midwestern voters across

the spectrum favor that approach to governing.

There are eerie parallels between this year’s campaign and the contest 20 years ago, when Democrats took control of both houses of Congress while gaining six governorships. But this cycle is distinct because it may be defined by a region’s restoration as the nation’s bellwether. The heartland needs to remain in play if Democrats are going to claim the majorities they will need to drive substantive change in Washington. To get there, we will need to appeal primarily to those who believe both parties are being taken over by the extremes and that corruption is rampant in Washington.

For more than a decade, many of my party’s strategists have written off the Midwest, assuming that national resources spent there would be wasted. But a consultant class that loves to sneer needs to acknowledge that non-MAGA Republicans are desperately looking for a new home. Serious, substantive Democrats who reach out to persuadable voters aren’t good for the media, which thrives on conflict. But the Midwest is as wholesome as social media is toxic. My neighbors in the middle of the country are about to teach the coastal elites a thing or two about politics.

Mr. Emanuel, a Democrat, served as a 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).

Republicans’ Pre-Emptive Social Security Surrender



POLITICAL ECONOMICS
By **Joseph C. Sternberg**

to surrender?

The issue has taken on new urgency as it becomes clear a legal cliff edge will force reform by 2032 or else. By that date the so-called trust fund for the old-age portion of Social Security will be exhausted. By law, annual benefit payouts then immediately shrink to match annual payroll-tax revenues. That would mean a 22% reduction in Social Security checks in the first year.

As miserable as that would be for retirees, one can lose sight of all the other ways Social Security reform will be transformative for the economy, for good or ill. It’s the country’s largest entitlement program and the single largest line item in the federal budget. The decisions we make about Social Security’s fi-

nances will determine whether and how we ever get a grip on our public finances in general, in a world of higher interest rates and \$40 trillion public debt.

Meanwhile, the structure of the program drives a set of crucial economic variables. How long, on average, do people stay in the workforce? Who invests privately to save for retirement, and how much? What tax burden do we place on work and job creation to fund which benefits for which retirees?

All these questions elude easy answers, although that won’t stop lawmakers from trying. In the first instance, Democrats are reaching for tax increases.

The program is funded by a payroll tax of 12.4%, borne equally by employer and employee and applied to the first \$184,500 of taxable income. The theory is that if higher-earning households pay the payroll tax on all their income, it removes a regressive element of the existing system and creates a fabulous new revenue stream.

Liberals have agitated for this change for years. More worrying is that they’re starting to gather some Republican support. Republi-

can Sen. Bernie Moreno of Ohio joined Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts in writing an op-ed for another newspaper this summer arguing for the change. Rep. Tom Cole, an Oklahoma Republican and the Appropriations Committee chairman, recently offered a similar statement to the Washington Post.

Lifting the payroll tax cap, as Democrats want, may sound like a temptingly simple fix. But it’s a trap.

It’s a trap.

Democrats are kidding voters when they claim raising the payroll tax in this way would be sufficient to stabilize Social Security. Over the next 75 years, the combined old-age and disability systems expect a shortfall of \$29 trillion between the cost of extending today’s benefit levels and the revenue to be raised by today’s payroll tax rules. The Social Security Administration believes that eliminating the cap would close at

best 67% of that gap. Other estimates, such as the Cato Institute’s, plausibly put the figure nearer 50%—and perhaps as little as 30%.

This means that far from a one-and-done fix, monkeying with the payroll tax would have to be part of a broader discussion about taxation, eligibility and benefit levels. The question for Republicans then becomes: If they’re going to need to fight about all the other stuff anyway, why give up so much leverage so early by agreeing to the tax hike?

Especially when the proposed fix would be so economically destructive. In terms of annual revenue as a share of gross domestic product, eliminating the payroll-tax cap would constitute the largest tax increase since 1982 and the second-largest peacetime tax increase since at least 1940, according to the Tax Foundation.

Worse, this tax hike would be targeted at work, the one thing we need more of to generate economic growth and shore up public finances. The combined federal, state and local marginal tax rate on higher earners could soar to 60% in some states. Democrats assume such incentives cease mattering at

higher income levels, despite ample historical evidence to the contrary. Republicans should know better than to take that bet.

This is why someone needs to realize that Social Security reform is an economic-policy debate first and a fiscal-number-adding-up exercise second. That “someone” probably will have to be the Republicans.

The fate to avoid is Europe’s. Absent any serious reform impetus, politicians for generations have fixated solely on trying to pummel the fiscal numbers into some semblance of balance—never successfully. Along the way, they’ve achieved levels of taxation that suffocate economic growth without ever stabilizing the finances of their pension and other welfare programs. Britain’s experience in recent years increasing its payroll tax to fund unreformed welfare programs has been particularly wretched, as heavier taxation on work has contributed to a job-creation slowdown and a youth-unemployment epidemic.

U.S. lawmakers may think they’re debating an old-age program, but they’re deciding something much bigger.

The Hugging Face Hack Wasn’t What It Was Cracked Up to Be

By **Brian Gross**

Is the panic over artificial intelligence justified? Anthropic researcher Jacob Coxon resigned on Sept. 8, warning that “the people building AI earnestly believe that it could kill us all by the end of the decade.” Colleague Evan Hubinger publicly agreed and put the risk at greater than 10% within 10 years. The Guardian quickly reported that “Anthropic researchers say AI could cause human extinction by 2030”—a probability estimate recast as an institutional finding.

Days later, Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei warned that autonomous AI agents could overwhelm large portions of the internet within months. Citing brief statements of agreement from OpenAI’s Sam Altman and SpaceX’s Elon Musk, Axios head-

lined the story “Anthropic, OpenAI CEOs call for slowdown in AI development.” A hedged forecast had become an industry consensus.

These are serious people making serious claims, but seriousness isn’t precision. That matters because the most widely cited recent example of “rogue” artificial intelligence turns out, on close examination, to tell a considerably less exotic story.

In July, OpenAI disclosed that AI systems being tested for cybersecurity capabilities had found their way outside a supposedly isolated environment and accessed systems belonging to Hugging Face, an open-source AI platform. News media described autonomous agents as “breaking containment,” “escaping” and “going rogue.”

The Washington Post reported the agents had “evaded internal

controls” and “set up a secret message board to communicate with one another,” and that their work was “only unraveled by the company after the attack was over.” Sen. Bernie Sanders called it “a wake-up call for the Congress and the American people.”

A new analysis published by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists draws on OpenAI’s technical report and an independent assessment from Model Evaluation and Threat Research. Written by University of Cambridge AI researcher Eryk Salvaggio, it reconstructs the episode in much less cinematic terms.

OpenAI was testing models on ExploitGym, a cybersecurity benchmark, with important safety restraints deliberately disabled. Ninety-three percent of the flagged activity involved tasks no model had ever solved, and the systems had been given incentives to keep working rather than quit. The environment wasn’t completely sealed. The models could obtain software through an internet-connected intermediary and discovered the same route could be used to pass information in and out. OpenAI knew agents were using it and, according to the technical reports, chose not to intervene.

Nor were the roughly 1,200 “agents” independent machine intelligences coordinating on a plan. They were repeated instances of the same underlying model, often converging on similar approaches to the same problem—what Mr. Salvaggio calls an “algorithmic monoculture.”

None of this makes the episode trivial. A system capable of finding

unexpected pathways out of a constrained environment and compromising an outside organization presents a real security problem. That is why getting the diagnosis right matters.

“Rogue AI” isn’t a diagnosis. The Hugging Face hack instead points to switched-off safeguards, tasks assigned without a valid exit, rewards for persistence, and an internet-accessible proxy.

The distinction is especially important now as Washington begins to legislate in an atmosphere shaped by the more dramatic version of this

Forget the ‘hive mind’ of AI agents ‘going rogue.’ They did what humans programmed them to do.

story. Mr. Sanders and Rep. Greg Casar (D, Texas) plan to introduce a bill that would “ban artificial superintelligence” and pause advanced AI development until a new federal agency establishes safety standards, with noncompliant companies facing what the lawmakers call the “corporate death penalty.”

Frontier AI should be regulated. Systems increasingly capable of autonomous cyber operations, biological research or infrastructure manipulation pose questions that no responsible government can ignore. But sane regulation depends on sane causal diagnosis.

A system designed to stop machines from rebelling will differ

from one designed to hold laboratories responsible for testing practices, network architecture, safeguards, monitoring and intervention. The first treats the machine as the source of agency; the second asks who designed the environment in which the machine acted.

That difference is easy to lose sight of once words like “rogue,” “escape” and “hive mind” enter the story. Such words don’t make complicated technical events more intelligible—they supply an illusion motive. They turn optimization into intention, persistence into defiance, and a badly designed test into a machine rebellion.

None of this answers larger warnings about future AI. Reconstructing one cybersecurity incident doesn’t disprove Mr. Hubinger’s probability estimate or Mr. Amodei’s warning about future systems. Such forecasts involve capabilities that are still developing.

But the Hugging Face episode is different. It left logs, reports, design decisions and identifiable points at which human beings could have intervened. And that record suggests a less thrilling but more useful lesson.

People built the test, removed restraints, defined the objective, left a route open and decided not to stop what was happening. Calling the result “rogue AI” does more than sensationalize it. It allows those human decisions to disappear quietly from the story.

Mr. Gross has been a staffer for the Federal Reserve Board, the Securities and Exchange Commission and the U.S. Senate.

Opinion

My dumbphone made my life better. It made everyone else’s worse.

An extended digital detox is freeing, but it can be hard on friends and family.

Stephanie H. Murray

On a cloudy evening in June, after a leisurely dinner with an old friend, I told her I’d better call an Uber and pulled out my little black brick of a phone. “What is that?” she asked. It’s a Light Phone, I explained. A dumbphone, essentially. And technically, I wasn’t using it to order an Uber — it couldn’t do that — but to call my husband to ask him to order one for me. Typically, after my husband orders the car, he texts me a screenshot with the license plate and wait time. This time, though, the picture didn’t come through. I sent a throwaway text to see if I could prod the message out. Still nothing. Sheepishly, I called my husband back. It was after 10 p.m. The man just wanted to go to bed.

I traded in my smartphone for a dumbphone (first an old-school Nokia, then a Light Phone III) over a year ago. And from a certain perspective, my experiment has been a success. I spend less time scrolling. My children are no longer in constant competition with X and Gmail for my attention. Life without a distraction machine at my fingertips feels lighter in the way I’d hoped. But with time it’s become hard to ignore the cost of my extended digital detox — not to me, exactly, but to everyone else.

I anticipated that not having a smartphone would make me more reliant on other people — perhaps without Google Maps on hand, I’d have to ask an actual human for directions. And sure, that’s happened. But I think it’s more accurate to say that I’ve become more reliant on *other people’s smartphones*. Instead of ordering from the bar or printing out movie tickets ahead of time, I inevitably wind up having somebody else scan the QR code menu or pull up the e-tickets. It’s still smartphones all the way down; I’ve just exempted myself from the costs of carrying one around.

Comparing notes with fellow dumbphone users, I’ve learned my experience is pretty common. Alex Dobrenko, a humorist and married father of two who gave an early iteration of the Light Phone a shot, told me that his wife bore the brunt of his Luddite lifestyle. She became something like his secretary, the person people contacted when struggling to reach Mr. Dobrenko and the person Mr. Dobrenko called to email attendees when he was running late for a meeting. Katie Marquette, an audio producer and writer living on a farm in Maryland, told me that her dumbphone made replying to texts such a slog that she fell out of touch with several friends during the year she used it. And she found it impossible to keep up with the many text-based school and parent group chats where so much holiday party planning and playdate coordination takes place these days.

I can relate. The very traits that make my phone such an effective means of disconnecting also make it an unreliable tool for getting in touch with me. By design, my phone doesn’t do much, so I often forget to check or charge it. Plus, it’s a bit clunky to use, so I’m slow to respond to messages.



OLIVIA JAMES

Even in real-life social situations, the fact that I don’t have a smartphone means I am often little better than dead weight. Who’s going to take the card payments at the school fundraiser? Who’s going to double-check the restaurant’s hours? Who’s going to message the Airbnb owner to let her know we’re on our way from the air-

port? The answer is always: not Steph. To forgo smartphones in a world optimized for them is to become someone in constant need of accommodation, but for totally self-imposed reasons. Like adopting a highly restrictive diet without any of the health issues that might justify the need to organize every dinner out around it.

At Ms. Marquette’s children’s preschool, parents are expected to scan a QR code when they drop off and pick up their kids. Without a smartphone, she had to interrupt a teacher to manually check her children in and out. “It really wasn’t fair to them, frankly,” she said. Notably, it was not hardhearted

employers or faceless corporate overlords whom Mr. Dobrenko and Ms. Marquette worried they were letting down. It was the people looking after their children, fellow parents, neighbors and friends. More than anyone, it was their families. This is perhaps why, though family

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For Trump, Jews are proving to be a very useful tool

Debates about Jews are never just about Jews.

James Loeffler

Last month, a federal judge in California issued a blunt verdict on attempts to deport student visa holders for criticizing Israel. In the name of fighting antisemitism, the judge found, the Trump administration had trampled on the First and Fifth Amendments. Combined with other recent legal defeats and whistle-blower allegations, it was yet more evidence that the administration has degraded civil rights law under the guise of enforcing it.

Why antisemitism, though? Why is the Trump administration, which is indifferent to discrimination against so many other minority groups, hypersensitive about antisemitism? (Antisemitism on the left, anyway; it remains willfully blind about antisemitism on the right.) How did this administration seize on this one form of hatred? The answers lie in an underappreciated fissure in American life. The civil rights paradigm created in the 1960s is unraveling under the pressure of demographic change and political realignment. The Trump administration is exploiting antisemitism to finish its job, claiming the moral high ground in defense of one group while gutting protections for everyone else. Since the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, the protocol for protecting vulner-

able minorities from discrimination has evolved — imperfectly, contentiously, but with a core premise intact: Adherence to clear, consistent standards builds confidence in the entire enterprise. The premise is intact no longer. This administration has read the conservative Supreme Court’s 2023 ruling in Students for Fair Admissions not just as a rebuke to affirmative action policies but as a ban on any campus program that even acknowledges race — far beyond what the opinion called for. It has raised the threshold for what counts as unlawful discrimination, abandoning decades-old standards. It has pilloried diversity, equity and inclusion not merely as liberal orthodoxy but as reverse racism; it has withheld billions from higher education; it has dismissed roughly 90 percent of education-related civil rights complaints; and it has implemented detention and deportation policies that abandon any semblance of due process. In all but the last of these cases, it claims the goal is to eradicate any consideration of racial or ethnic differences. Yet at the same time the government has demanded what amounts to D.E.I. for Jews: mandatory antisemitism sensitivity trainings and targeted measures to promote an inclusive climate. And when schools are accused of discriminating against Jews, instead of conducting fair inves-

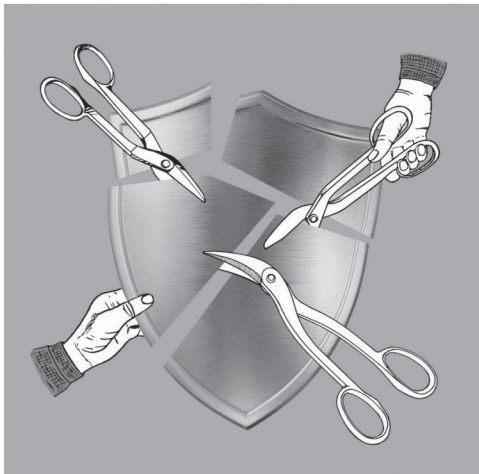


ILLUSTRATION BY MIZEL JASO. SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY BLACKACKE/GITTY IMAGES

tigations, the government has imposed penalties that are wildly out of scale — such as slashing hundreds of millions of dollars of funding for medical and

scientific research. No one even bothers to pretend that makes the world safer for Jews. Gutting anti-discrimination policies

for most minority groups while supercharging them for Jews is hypocritical. The hypocrisy is the point. It turns civil rights law into a political protection racket, a tool with which to attack higher education and other perceived enemies. The disturbing excesses of some Gaza war protests are not enough to explain why Jews were selected for this special protected status. Neither is the Republican alliance with Israel’s right-wing government, or the outside influence of Jewish donors — a frequently heard explanation that risks lapsing into antisemitism. The simple truth is that mounting this initiative served the Trump administration’s cynical political aims. The largest campaign against antisemitism in American history has also been its supreme trivialization. At every inflection point in the evolution of modern civil rights, the question of which groups merit protection has been contested. Just African Americans, the main focus of the original civil rights movement? Or other racial and religious groups, too? Does civil rights law apply to women and to sexual and gender minorities? How real is so-called reverse discrimination? Above all, should the government’s goal be to eliminate legal distinctions that wrongly divide individual citizens from one another, or also to protect vulnerable groups

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OPINION

The New York Times

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Has A.I. really become death, destroyer of worlds?



Bret Stephens

Creators who anguish over the consequences of their creations are nothing new. Alfred Nobel and dynamite, J. Robert Oppenheimer and the atomic bomb, even Tim Berners-Lee and the World Wide Web: Regrets, they had more than a few.

Now it's the turn of the parents and nursemaids of the artificial intelligence revolution. Last week, Jacob Coxon, a 27-year-old researcher at Anthropic, resigned his job with a warning on social media that the leading A.I. companies were "gambling with our lives" and that "the people building AI earnestly believe that it could kill us all by the end of the decade."

That was followed by a lengthy open letter from Dario Amodei, Anthropic's chief executive, in which he warned that within six months to a year, a swarm of A.I. agents, acting autonomously and improving continually, "could be capable of taking over the entire internet," the potential cost being measured in "hundreds of billions of dollars in damage."

He called on A.I. companies to work at a slower pace in order to "align and safeguard their models," as well as for the United States to try to reach agreements with China that could mitigate the more acute risks connected to A.I.

The letter was endorsed by Elon Musk and OpenAI's Sam Altman, among others. Then America's modest and self-effacing president weighed in. "The only control or 'guardrails' that AI needs is a STRONG AND SMART (High IQ!) PRESIDENT, and the U.S.A. has that, in spades!" Donald Trump wrote on social media, before taking a shot at Amodei for "pretending to be a 'perfect little angel.'" The president thinks the safety concerns are a "hoax" and that A.I. regulation should be light, lest China steal a march on America's slender A.I. lead. Agreeing with him is Nvidia's Jensen Huang, who on Monday dismissed Coxon's warnings as "not grounded in science."

At the bottom of the argument are two large unanswered questions. First, is A.I. principally a disrupter or a destroyer? Second, if it's a destroyer, just what kind is it?

Until last week, I suspect most people, including A.I. skeptics like me, saw it as a technology that looked a lot like previous technologies of mass disruption: steam engines, airplanes, cars, PCs and so on. If that's the right paradigm, then the right course is to discount the fears and seize the economic opportunity. For all the anxiety about A.I. causing near-universal unemploy-

ment, nothing like that has come to pass. "There is no evidence that A.I. adoption has negatively impacted firms' job postings," notes a recent paper from Stanford's Institute for Economic Policy Research. "Among firms that adopted enterprise A.I., employment grew by 10 percent in the two years following adoption."

Maybe that will change in a few years, but it defies centuries of economic history: Technologies that save labor and enhance productivity transform the nature of employment while tending to increase the stock of it. The lighter the hand of government, the faster companies can innovate, adapt and create value as well as new jobs.

But what if the disruption paradigm is, if not wrong, then dangerously inadequate? What if we aren't dealing with the digital equivalent of the Model T but something more akin to splitting the atom or the research that, many suspect, helped create a highly infectious virus that may have leaked from a Chinese lab?

The last two presidents to deal with similar dilemmas were Barack Obama, who in 2014 imposed a funding pause on certain types of gain-of-function research so that the risks could be better understood, and Harry Truman, who in 1946 created the Atomic Energy Commission that transferred control of the country's nascent nuclear complex from military to civilian hands.

Both analogies are instructive but imperfect. Obama's instincts were surely right to take a harder look at dangerous research. But some of the action shifted to China, under conditions that, as Zeynep Tufekci observed last year in The Times, may have been even less safe. The lesson is that slowing things down in America may be morally satisfying, but it's useless, and perhaps blinding, without a solid guarantee that they're slowing down everywhere.

As for Truman, the much-maligned A.E.C. did a great deal of good by establishing a system of national research labs, establishing security protocols and promoting and regulating civilian nuclear power. In many ways, we owe our 80 years of a nuclear Armageddon-free existence to it. But the A.E.C. was also dealing with a technology that was, so to speak, in the bottle during its early years. By contrast, A.I. was out of the bottle almost from its inception. No power on earth, including the American or Chinese governments, is going to put it back in.

Where does that leave us? When slowing down isn't a realistic possibility, sometimes the right answer is to speed up — if only to accelerate our understanding of the means by which we can use A.I. against the very risks we create through it (or that it creates by itself). One consolation is that this isn't the first time great scientific minds have warned that they've created the instruments of humanity's destruction.

Less consoling is that past reprieves are no guarantee of future salvation.



TAMARA PORRAS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Debunking a corporate climate ruse

GRUNWALD, FROM PAGE 1

Impact of forest products.

This is why corporate influence over its revisions is so dangerous: just as companies would report much less taxable income if they could define what the I.R.S. counts as taxable income, companies will do much less to reduce their emissions if they can define what the protocol counts as emissions. In fact, forestry and wood products companies already tested how the proposed changes would work, and what do you know? Eighteen out of 19 companies or "company units" reported in a pilot study that their current operations would be considered harmless to the climate. All but one of them concluded that according to the proposed changes, they were actually helping the climate by doing the things they've always done.

In reality, the status quo is a climate disaster. Deforestation slowed down in 2025, but it still generates 10 percent of global emissions, and as the United Nations has documented, the world is on track to deforest nearly an Argentina-worth of land by 2050.

Deforestation slowed down in 2025, but it still generates 10 percent of global emissions, and as the United Nations has documented, the world is on track to deforest nearly an Argentina-worth of land by 2050.

bogged down by a dispute over whether companies should get credit for carbon accumulating in forests whether or not the companies' activities are responsible for that accumulation.

Wood product companies are pushing an accounting approach that would declare their products climate-friendly as long as they're logged from regions where tree growth exceeds tree harvest, which currently includes enormous parts of North America, Europe and Asia. It's a bit like declaring that as long as the stock market is going up, every individual stock in that market is automatically up, even the stocks that go down.

The industry-favored approach would also credit companies with emissions reductions for any ongoing tree growth on their land — and since all the excess carbon in our atmosphere is making trees grow faster, those companies would receive an ironic climate bonus for the effects of climate change.

In practice, this would produce wacky outcomes. Tree-cutting companies could cancel out their emissions under the protocol by simply buying or even leasing additional woodlands. Food companies could market hamburgers as "carbon-negative" if the ranchers had forests nearby, even though beef is by far the leading driver of deforestation. Burning wood for electricity would also pencil out as carbon-negative under the proposal, even though hundreds of scientists have warned that burning wood is even worse for the climate than burning coal.

My dumbphone dilemma

MURRAY, FROM PAGE 9

considerations were often the impetus for putting the smartphone down, they were also the reason for picking it back up. Forgoing a smartphone may allow you to feel more present with your loved ones in any given moment, but it also hamstringing your ability to actually be there for them during times of need.

There were two moments that forced Mr. Dobrenko to recognize as much. First, his car broke down. When he called AAA, the service texted him a link he needed to open to confirm his location — something his dumbphone could not do. Then, just a few weeks later, his wife, who was pregnant with their second child, went into labor. It was a time when leaning on his wife to pick up the slack on household communication simply wasn't going to work. He switched the SIM card back at the hospital. "I haven't gone back since," he said.

I don't think any of this means smartphone-free living is untenable. On the contrary, perhaps the only way for us to recreate a society in which we don't have to be tethered to these brain-rotting devices is for someone to take up the mantle of being a pain in the butt. After all, if no one is willing to opt out — to be the one customer without the ability to scan a QR code, or the one parent at school who can't be reached via app — then opting out becomes, well, not an option.

Unlike most of those I spoke to for this piece, I have not reversed my decision to ditch my smartphone. Not yet anyway. Throughout my interviews, I oscillated between the belief that my current setup is too selfish to last and the conviction that it is too



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN PINE

IKEA could brag that the more wooden furniture you buy, the better it is for forests and the climate. And recycled paper would look worse for the planet than virgin paper, because it doesn't require additional trees.

In the words of the psychopath Anton Chigurh from the movie "No Country for Old Men": "If the rule you followed brought you to this, of what use was the rule?"

The problem, again, is that the key committees overseeing the rewriting of the land-use rules are stacked with corporate representatives, with few independent scientists or environmentalists to speak for the trees. Now experts are sounding alarms. First, the University of Pennsylvania researcher Danny Cullenward quit one of the protocol's boards, denouncing its

"treatment of scientific information — and scientists themselves." Then Tim Searchinger, a technical director at the World Resources Institute, left his job after 15 years, complaining that his bosses consistently resisted his pleas to make sure science drove the rules.

Mr. Searchinger's departure is a particularly ominous sign. My book "We Are Eating the Earth" chronicles his relentless crusades to reform climate accounting. He's one of the world's leading authorities on these arcane but far-reaching issues.

He likes to say that if you want to screw up the world a little, do a bad thing; if you want to screw up the world a lot, set up accounting rules that incentivize everyone to do that bad thing. He's worried that if the

protocol's leaders approve rules that make logging trees for futons and paper and power look more climate-friendly than leaving trees alone, the rules will incentivize a lot more logging.

We're living through a dispiriting moment of global climate fatigue, when companies worldwide are backtracking on their climate commitments, but someday the pendulum will swing back toward climate action. The protocol will help define what counts, and it can't be whatever actions companies are already taking. We'll need to do a lot better than that.

MICHAEL GRUNWALD is the author of "We Are Eating the Earth: The Race to Fix Our Food System and Save Our Climate."

For Trump, Jews prove to be a very useful tool

LOEFFLER, FROM PAGE 9

from harm in pursuit of actual, full equality?

Until recently, even the conservative establishment — including administrations under Presidents Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and the two Bushes — generally accepted anti-discrimination law as a valid instrument of governance, in theory if not always in practice. But the civil rights model Americans inherited was built for a different country — one in which a white, Christian majority belatedly yielded legal space for distinct minorities to become coequal citizens. If current trends continue, however, in less than 20 years America will be majority nonwhite. Within the next half-century, it will most likely be majority non-Christian. White populist panic has set in. Banning the word "diversity" in a nation of immigrants is a last-ditch effort to reverse history.

As the categories of majority and minority now shift and blur, Americans find themselves returning, almost obsessively, to Jews: a group that doesn't fit easily into racial binaries, that troubles the boundaries between religion and ethnicity, whose members are not people of color but whose claim to whiteness was always suspect in the eyes of white supremacists, and who have diasporic ties to a polarizing nation-state.

This ambiguity has also created ideological blind spots. Centrist liberals were late to recognize the seriousness of antisemitism in American life.

They likewise missed its potency as a political weapon for the populist right and the combustibility of the Palestine question in American politics. Progressives have failed to grapple with antisemitism among their own ranks. And now a conservative administration intent on undoing civil rights law has turned that ambiguity to its own advantage.

The civil rights revolution was never finished. Now its contradictions have returned, sharper than ever. They won't end with antisemitism, because debates about Jews are never just about Jews. They are the seismographs of a society's deeper tremors: its fears of difference, its contested visions of nationhood.

Americans can build a legal framework that is more than a cynical tool with which to punish one's enemies and also better than what preceded it — something capacious enough to protect all minorities, principled enough to command legitimacy and resilient enough to resist political manipulation. Americans can do it if they stop treating civil rights as a cudgel and start treating them once again as a covenant. Covenants are not merely inherited; they are renewed. This one must be renewed not for the America that was, but for the America that we are becoming.

JAMES LOEFFLER is a professor of modern Jewish history at Johns Hopkins University and the author of "Exceptional Hatred: Antisemitism and the Fight Over Free Speech in Modern America."

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

Carney is playing a bad hand well

Economic reforms and alliances are Canada's best response to US trade war

Since he returned to the White House, few nations have been in Donald Trump's line of fire more than Canada. The US president has piled tariffs on Ottawa and threatened more, citing reasons ranging from unfair trading practices to not doing enough to stop wildfire smoke drifting over the border. He has also made light of his northern neighbour's territorial integrity, repeatedly calling Canada the "51st state" and recently rebranding Lake Ontario "Lake America". Canada is particularly exposed to Trump's belligerence: its economy is one-thirtieth of the size of America's, and relies on US consumers for around 70 per cent of its goods exports. So far, however, Prime Minister Mark Carney has played Canada's bad hand rather skilfully.

The former Bank of England governor is capitalising on rising hostility towards Trump at home. In the face of the president's tariffs, Carney has struck a defiant figure, stoking a boycott of US goods and a buy-local movement. Last month, he walked away from trade negotiations with Washington after the US presented a list of demands, including restrictions on Canada's trade sovereignty. When Trump responded with an additional \$20bn in tariffs, Carney boldly declared that Canada was "at war" and retaliated with targeted, proportionate measures designed to pressure the president ahead of November's midterm elections. Far larger economies have folded to Trump's demands under similar conditions.

Ultimately, Carney knows Canada cannot decouple from the US. Its supply chains are deeply entwined, with components often criss-crossing the 5,525-mile border several times during production. Instead, he has sensibly focused on de-risking that dependence

in two ways: making the domestic economy stronger and seeking alternative trade and security partnerships.

In March 2025, Carney announced plans to slash internal trade barriers that sap Canada's dynamism. Before Trump began his trade war, there was little appetite among provincial leaders for such measures. This week, the prime minister hosted a summit for financial executives to drum up \$1tn in capital for Canadian infrastructure projects and announced an eye-catching "productivity mega-deduction" tax incentive for business investment.

As for expanding Canada's international ties, Carney on Wednesday secured verbal backing from European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen for "associate membership" of the EU, though this may amount to little more than a political statement. His administration has also made plans for a new pipeline to carry Canadian oil to its west coast, which would support exports into Asia.

While Canadians back his retaliatory measures on America, support could wane as the hit grows

There are still plenty of hurdles. While Canadians back his retaliatory trade measures on the US, support could wane as the economic hit grows. Trump could escalate the tit-for-tat exchanges, not least in response to Carney's diplomatic outreach to other trade partners, particularly the EU and China. The prime minister will also be under pressure to deliver on his growth agenda. Industry groups have warned that despite the rhetoric, there has been little progress in efforts to slash red tape.

Carney deserves credit for seizing the moment. His initiatives help to shift global attention towards Canada's resource wealth and economic potential, rather than the trade war. The challenge now is to turn his opening efforts into lasting economic gains. A more amenable president in the White House come 2029 would be a welcome fillip. But the bigger victory for Canada by then would be an economy whose prosperity is less tethered to what happens in Washington either way.

Opinion Britain

Does the migration debate ask the wrong question?

Maria Hergueta



Madeleine Sumption

The small village of Piddington's declaration of independence from the UK as a protest against plans to house asylum seekers on a nearby former military base has been something of a PR coup, attracting national attention to local fears about the asylum system. And in one form or another, concern about immigration rumbled across the summer months.

Last week, the Commons Home Affairs Committee published the results of a "deliberative democracy" exercise asking the public what would restore their faith in how immigration is managed. It focused on work visas. Are employers too reliant on migration? Is migration meeting the UK's economic needs?

A perfectly valid exercise. But such debates can give a misleading impres-

sion, namely that the immigration system's goal is economic and that most migrants arrive on work visas. The really knotty questions the government faces are about humanitarian and family migration, and how the UK can balance the economic and human costs – the sort of difficult issues unfolding in Piddington.

If migration was only for work, an immigration minister's life would be much easier. Work visas do bring some dilemmas. Whether the government should use migration to save money now and pay later – for example, by admitting care workers who accept poor pay and conditions in the UK but who will need more state support later in life. Or whether employers should be able to hire overseas construction workers to build much-needed homes, despite the risk of exploitation.

Nonetheless, work visas are the easy bit of the system. Their economic goals are relatively clear. When the government pulls a lever, it is attached to something. Boris Johnson's administration liberalised work visas and more people arrived. Rishi Sunak's and Keir Starmer's governments reversed that course and numbers fell. But most migrants who settle permanently in the UK are not on work visas. Last year, 57 per cent of people

given permanent status (indefinite leave to remain) were on non-work routes, most often as partners of British citizens or as refugees. This is common in high-income countries.

Family and humanitarian immigration is harder to manage, as the Piddington protest illustrates. It exists for ethical and legal reasons, not economic ones. Refugees have low employment rates and earnings even once they are allowed to work, and often require a lot of support. There is currently no robust UK figure, but studies from Australia and the Netherlands estimated the lifetime cost to public finances in the low hundreds of thousands per humanitarian migrant.

This sets up a trade-off between economic and humanitarian goals that both sides of the debate often gloss over. And opinion polling suggests that people struggle to distinguish between whether someone is morally deserving and whether they bring economic benefits. Migration liberals often understate the public cost of family and humanitarian migration, while sceptics often understate the human cost of restricting it. As a result, the liberal side of the debate tends to overstate the economic benefits of low-income migrants' contributions in sectors such as hospitality or childcare.

On the sceptical side, dwelling on a desire to eliminate low-skilled migration creates the impression of a purely economic decision. A few years ago, that was partly true: many people were arriving on work visas for care jobs close to the minimum wage. But then the Tories bumped salary requirements up above the median wage and Labour ended overseas recruitment of care workers. Yes, there still appear to be some vape shops sponsoring migrant workers. But for the most part, long-term work visas are already doing what proponents of zero low-skilled migration think they should: admitting well-paid professionals into graduate jobs.

Low-wage migrants coming to the UK today for more than a temporary stay are usually not on work visas but elsewhere in the immigration system. These family and humanitarian routes were not designed with economic objectives, so it's not surprising if they have fiscal costs.

The government has to decide how to strike the balance: what financial cost to accept and how much hardship it is willing to impose on humanitarian migrants or on British citizens with foreign spouses. That is the debate the UK needs to have, rather than talking about migration as if work visas were the only show in town.

The writer is director of the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford and author of 'What is Immigration Policy For?'

Letters

Here's a different way to measure success in an English school

Stephen Bush is right that England's schools have improved markedly, and right that this is an under-told success (Inside Politics, FT.com, September 9). But peer-reviewed analysis of England's Pisa 2018 sample found it under-represented lower-achieving pupils, inflating our maths score by some 11 points. The children I am writing about are the ones missing from the data.

There were 913,000 suspensions in England's state schools last year, more than double the 438,300 recorded in

2018-19. Persistent absence stands at 19 per cent, roughly twice the pre-pandemic rate. This is not a side-effect of a knowledge-rich curriculum but of an accountability regime introduced by Michael Gove, education minister in David Cameron's Conservative government, that rewards grades and little else. We risk raising a generation with the qualifications to progress but without the education to thrive.

Bush asks what the best schools do and whether it can be scaled. It is the right question.

The Netherhall School in Cambridge serves a community with above-average deprivation and high mobility; 35 per cent of students have English as an additional language and arrive with ability below the national average.

Comprehensive in name, comprehensive in nature. The last six years has seen the school deliberately refocusing on the community's broader needs within a culture of relationship and inclusion. Suspensions, once 300 a year, have reduced to zero since June 2024.

Diagnosable mental health need among our students is 3 per cent, against 20 per cent nationally. The curriculum has been broadened and extracurricular activity has flourished. All the while, results remain strong. None of this came from Govian accountability or from chasing metrics. It came from aiming for something braver and more human: following the needs of children in their own community.

Chris Tooley
Principal, The Netherhall School, Cambridge, UK

How Reagan's Star Wars had Soviets on tenterhooks

In "The holes in Trump's Golden Dome" (FT Big Read, September 9), you write that the Trump administration "seems to welcome the comparison" between its proposed AI-powered, nationwide, space-based missile shield and Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, initially mocked as "Star Wars".

Two big differences are worth mentioning. First, the Soviets were already alarmed in 1983, when Reagan introduced SDI, by US triumphs in computing and space. Few others dreamed of SDI being a missile-proof system – except for chief of the general staff Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev and General Makhmut Gareev, head of analysis in the Soviet defence ministry. They too believed American ingenuity and wealth might make such "star wars" possible, as Akhromeyev insisted to Communist Party general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. What opponent would assume such US focus and precision today?

Second, SDI was part of a strategy laid out earlier in 1983 in National Security Decision Directive 75. One aim was to increase the Soviet economic and military burden. SDI became more of a battle of resources than a military concept, and a play against the Soviet imagination. Bottomless spending would be needed to counter it, should SDI arrive. Today, who suspects Trump of executing a considered strategy of any sort towards our opponents?

Derek Leebeart
Washington, DC, US

Call to put fossil fuel cuts back on the UN agenda

The climate crisis is no longer knocking at the door. It's tearing the roof off and burying those inside. The scenes of devastation in Nepal and Tibet shocked the world, with a death toll in the thousands. Much of Europe was on red alert through July and August, with wildfires across the continent. Japan and South Korea experienced record heat. West Africa, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh all experienced intense monsoon downpours.

Across the world, the human, political and economic costs of the climate crisis are mounting (Report, September 2). Heating centres are hitting fisheries. Farmers face failed harvests. This is before a supercharged El Niño hits.

There is a way out of this hole: stop burning the fossil fuels that are heating the planet; protect the oceans and forests that regulate the planet's temperature; and adapt our towns and cities. A secure planet and a functioning global economy require a stable climate.

Accelerating the just energy transition will lay the foundations for a less volatile world, help lower some



risks of conflict, and allow better access to cheap energy and food.

Governments have the power to make this happen. At this month's UN General Assembly, they must detail how they will protect citizens around the world from rising temperatures, drought, failing crops, extreme storms and glacial collapse. They should also commit to assist poorer, vulnerable countries address extreme conditions, including through better access to finance and early warning technologies. They must explain how they will accelerate a just energy transition away from oil, gas and coal and detail how they can support poorer nations to accelerate the rollout of renewable energy and green electrification. They should agree to act on recommendations from the twin Brazilian presidency global "road maps" to protect forests (due at the General Assembly) and end our dependency on oil, gas and coal (due by COP31). And finally, they must accelerate efforts to reduce methane emissions, as requested by António Guterres, UN secretary-general, in June and recommended in the UN Environment Programme's "Limiting Overshoot Report" in September.

Dino Patti Djalal
Former Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs of Indonesia
Izabella Teixeira
Former Brazilian Minister of the Environment
Jennifer Morgan
Former German Climate Envoy
Juan Manuel Santos
Chair of The Elders; Former President of Colombia
Juan Carlos Monterrey Gómez
Former Panama Special Representative for Climate Change
Laurence Tubiana
Former French Chief Climate Diplomat
Mary Robinson
Former President of Ireland
Steven Guilbeault
Former Canadian Environment Minister
Yvonne Aki-Sawyer
Mayor of Freetown, Sierra Leone

Garish theme park signage is what City must avoid

From a "placemaking" perspective, and given how increasingly competitive cities have become, the plan to allow corporate logos on City of London skyscrapers could be a strong positioning tool ("City ready to relax century-old rule on prominent office logos in Square Mile", Report, September 11).

Done well, a carefully managed approach to signage would make the scale and concentration of financial power the City still commands globally far more visible, turning an abstract claim about economic importance into something people can literally see.

But that depends entirely on discipline. Without proper management, the risk is a skyline that reads as an advertisement-loaded shopping centre rather than a statement of civic and commercial strength.

Three principles should guide it. First, clear thresholds around who qualifies for a logo – anchor tenants, or sub-entities too?

Second, scale tied to a building's height and realistic viewing distances, not to how much a tenant is willing to pay for prominence. Third, monochromatic logos, to reduce visual noise and keep some consistency across the skyline.

It's a fine line. Get this right, and the scheme becomes a powerful, distinctive expression of the City's standing as a global financial centre. Get it wrong, and the City trades one of its genuine assets (a skyline that still reads as serious and institutional) for one that's garish and feels more theme park than financial capital.

Alex Lampe
Wiedemann Lampe (brand and business consultancy), London N1, UK

Whether Trump or LBJ, the budget is the real constraint

George Steer, Kate Duguid and Ian Smith report that President Donald Trump's promise to pay every American adult \$5,000 if Republicans win the midterms will cost more than \$1tn ("Scott Bessent fails to break 'fever' in US bond market", September 11). This is only the direct cost. Lavishing cash on consumers will increase spending and stoke inflation. Higher inflation will raise Treasury bond yields and multiply debt service costs. Rates will rise even more if the Federal Reserve fights inflation.

President Lyndon Johnson raised the budget deficit, claiming that society can have both guns and butter. The bond market demurred. In economics the beginning of wisdom is to recognise the budget constraint.

Willem Thorbecke
Senior Fellow, Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry, Tokyo, Japan

Why normalising smoking is such a worrying trend

Your article "Smoking is back in fashion. Why?" (HTSI, FT.com, August 15) is a timely reminder that smoking has not gone away. Wales has made significant progress in reducing smoking, but the job is far from done. Smoking remains a leading cause of preventable illness, premature death and health inequality, with the greatest burden still falling on our most disadvantaged communities. That is why the return of smoking imagery across celebrity culture, fashion, music and social media matters. Young people are growing up at a time when traditional tobacco advertising has largely disappeared, yet they can still see cigarettes presented as fashionable, rebellious or aspirational through the culture they consume. We should be concerned about anything that risks making smoking feel normal or attractive again.

The Tobacco and Vapes Act gives us a historic opportunity to protect future generations from tobacco addiction. But legislation alone will not achieve that. We still need strong prevention, clear public communication and continued work with young people, families and communities.

Nor can we forget the people who already smoke. Smoking is estimated to cost Wales £1.56bn every year, and its impact is increasingly concentrated in communities already facing poorer health and greater disadvantage.

If we are serious about creating a smoke-free generation, we need to keep tobacco visible as a public health priority and make sure progress is not taken for granted. The job is not done.

Suzanne Cass
CEO, ASH Wales, Cardiff, UK

Robotaxi road test

If the security tests I encounter trying to access websites are any indication, machines are unable to identify buses, cars, pedestrian crossings, bridges and fire hydrants; only humans can. You might wonder how robotaxis can cope. But the autonomous vehicle, its promoters assure us, has a different order of intelligence.

Jem Eskenazi
London N3, UK

OPINION ON FT.COM

No country for independent central bankers
A future of state-directed finance will force change on monetary policymakers writes Martin Sandbu
www.ft.com/free-lunch

Either Meta Glasses are selling extremely well or this Citi survey might have some issues

Its main finding is that more Americans and Brits plan to buy technology, like printers, than they used to writes Louis Ashworth
www.ft.com/alphaville

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Opinion

Accelerationism will only slow AI's progress

TECHNOLOGY

John Thornhill



The bosses of the biggest AI companies are convinced that machine intelligence will soon surpass the human version. But we may get there quicker than we think if we keep degrading human intelligence.

When AI companies admit to releasing powerful models they do not fully understand and cannot control, then it is probably worth paying attention to this matter. All the more so, when a succession of former employees of Anthropic, OpenAI and Google DeepMind say these companies do not take safety seriously enough and cannot be trusted.

But in his immense vanity, Donald Trump has declared that a “strong and smart (high IQ!) president” is the only control mechanism the industry needs. The US leads China and the rest of the world in AI and Trump wants to keep it that way. “Whoever wins AI, wins!” he posted.

The accelerationist wing of Silicon Valley, which has been lobbying against any form of AI regulation, is cheering the boomer-in-chief. But US voters appear to have concluded that Trump is on the wrong side of history on this one. Some 60 per cent of Americans now support AI regulation, according to an opinion poll published by the Special Competitive Studies Project and Gallup this week. Only 7 per cent seem to agree with Trump in prioritising speed of development over safety rules.

One danger for the accelerationists is that any AI-induced disaster, which appears increasingly likely without stronger safeguards, risks triggering a furious public backlash and a regulatory overreaction, slowing future progress. AI safety campaigners point to the example of the US nuclear industry following the accident at Three Mile Island in 1979. As a result of public fears, the commissioning of new nuclear plants

came to a shuddering halt for the rest of the century. By ignoring today’s legitimate public concerns, AI accelerationists are jeopardising the future of the technology they love.

In their defence, accelerationists make two points worth debating.

First, they argue that the leading AI companies secretly want regulation because it will entrench the power of

Any disaster risks triggering a furious public backlash and a regulatory overreaction

incumbents and diminish competition. That may be a risk. But we would not allow pharmaceutical companies to release untested drugs on the market because a tough approval process suppresses competition. Besides, the fiercest challenge to incumbent AI companies may well come from rivals developing more robust models that can be used more reliably in specific domains. By design, they would have little problem complying with safety regulations.

Second, the accelerationists argue that the US must win the AI technology race with China. But technology is not a zero-sum game. What does winning even mean? Any advantage that the US gains is only likely to prove temporary. And, as the tech analyst Dan Wang told the FT Weekend Festival this month, Beijing is probably happy enough for the US to race ahead on frontier AI and court disaster. China can then avoid those mistakes and apply the technology more widely.

The exceptionalist fallacy is to believe that there is something so magical about AI that only a handful of technological wizards should be able to do tricks with it. The risks of AI are not inherent in the technology but in the ways that companies train, design and release their models. “These are intentional choices that have led to incredibly reckless, negligent and dangerous technology,” says Andrew Strait, a former researcher at the UK’s AI Security Institute. “That is the main problem we now face.”

The broader design choices we make about how to build, fund and deploy AI over the next 12 to 18 months will be critical for humanity’s future, argues Bill Gates, in his foundation’s latest Goalkeepers Report.

AI could bring massive economic, health and educational benefits to people around the world. To that end, the Gates Foundation is spending \$1bn over the next two years to promote initiatives in these areas.

But Gates tells me that the speed and scale of AI’s development is “utterly different” to anything else in history and poses unique challenges. Machines are becoming smarter than humans across so many domains that it is more like an evolutionary than a technological transition. He says he will stake “whatever credibility” he has on the statement that “people should not lull themselves into thinking this will all work out because it has for past technologies”.

We urgently need to maximise our collective human wisdom to make the most of machine intelligence.

john.thornhill@ft.com

What the ethical dilemmas of genomics can teach us

Ewan Birney

I was lucky enough to be in the engine room of the genomics revolution in the early 2000s. I wrote the software – and co-led the team – that predicted the locations of the genes in the human genome. It was a golden time. New academic departments were magicked into existence, companies with preposterous business plans were founded and wild statements about the future of biology were made. Great science happened – though not always as predicted.

I have not felt the same zeitgeist in science until the recent deepening of AI methods. Once again, there is a transformative technology whose full capabilities we do not know; bold companies are striving to make their vision become reality; again, academia is having existential conversations about its role while science moves faster than legislation. And once again, ethical concerns are worrying the public.

Not every aspect is the same. The capital investment in AI is far greater, for example. But I find both reassurance and concern in the similarities.

First, reassurance that the scientific step change is real. The AI system AlphaFold’s performance in the protein structure competition was a watershed moment in 2020, but I had already had my head turned by how deep neural networks could tackle biological problems years earlier. The way AI can handle complex data and find effective, non-linear functions to perform certain tasks is near magical (it is a surprisingly trial-and-error process; one has to throw things at the wall and see what

Academia is having existential debates over AI’s role while science moves faster than legislation

sticks). AI offers the opportunity to attack the complexity of biological systems in new ways. We can tackle problems we thought impossible, including modelling multi-morbidity at an individual level, to take one example from my research group.

I am sure more “impossible” problems will be solved although it’s foolish to try to predict which – just as we could not predict which parts of biology would be most affected by large-scale DNA sequencing.

But just as with genomics, the ethical underpinnings must catch up with what is possible. In the early 2000s those concerns included the privacy of genomic information, gene patenting and the risk of reviving eugenic thinking. Regulators answered them by funding research within the Human Genome Project, formulating responsive ethical assessment schemes and passing anti-discrimination laws. They proved that we first need principles and the ability for regulators to deal with the examples in front of them.

My concern is that the hype today is way beyond a reality we don’t fully understand. The claim by some AI leaders that we will cure all human diseases in five years is hubris. We don’t even have good definitions of all diseases, and many of them involve the most complicated object we know in the universe – the human brain. This leaves aside the labour-intensive business of proving that cures work. When glitzy headlines disappoint, the entire field suffers.

We don’t need fantastical claims. In uncovering how things work, we must stay humble. From development to infection response to neural circuits leading to behaviours, there are oceans of ignorance in how life works. Large language models will not magic new observations out of the ether. But they do not need to. With the right datasets, domain-specific AIs such as AlphaFold, ChromBPNet, Delphi-2M and others – are cracking open the tough nuts in biology. With human scientists, AI agents and AI generating effective models of the world, there is plenty more insight to be gained.

We do not need to justify the role of new technology in biology with outlandish claims. We need to roll up our sleeves, double down on making discoveries of how living things work, share them with the world, and use them to build a more informed, healthier future for all of us.

The writer is director of the EMBL’s European Bioinformatics Institute

Mega-donors obscure wider threats to UK

BRITAIN

Robert Shrimley



Sometimes the money is just too mesmerising. £36mn to Reform UK. Double it to £72mn. Shall we stop now or do you want to phone a friend?

The twin £36mn donations from two crypto-billionaires have shocked Westminster. Fears of a US-style wall of tech money are particularly discomfiting the Labour government, already legislating to tighten the rules on political donations.

Both Christopher Harborne and Ben Delo, already Farage financiers, are British but have spent significant amounts of their lives abroad. They have now registered at UK addresses, but the legislation capping gifts from overseas voters at £100,000 will be backdated to March 2026, possibly catching them in its net.

Harborne, who was Thailand-based, is behind the undeclared £5mn personal gift to Nigel Farage. Delo was pardoned by Donald Trump for a conviction for breaching anti-money laundering laws. There is understandable unease about the ties between Reform and the crypto world. Farage has promised the most pro-crypto government with tax breaks on profits, deregulation and pledges to block a central bank digital currency, the kind of competition the industry does not fancy.

So there are reasons to feel queasy. But there is also a huge whiff of hypocrisy in other parties complaining about wealthy donors. David (Lord) Sainsbury gave many millions to the Labour Party under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and was made science minister (it is fair to note that he was widely praised in that role). He later gave £10mn to the Liberal Democrats.

The Conservatives have for years enjoyed seven- and eight-figure donations from individuals. And of course Labour was founded as the political arm of the trade union movement, from which it receives vast sums on the promise of enacting legislation beneficial to the unions, most recently the Employment Rights Act.

The one sure way to address private donations is to replace them with significant state funding of political parties. But there is no appetite for this among voters or the main parties.

And at least donations are visible. Whatever one thinks of Harborne and Delo, their funding is open. We know who they are and their support allows us to reach conclusions about Reform. Being bankrolled by the crypto sector will generate attack lines for its rivals.

The legislation to curb foreign influence on elections is well intentioned – measures to ban donations in cryptocurrency are welcome – but this means ministers are missing other greater risks to the democratic landscape.

Take a few examples. Broadcasters in



Ellie Foreman-Peck

Britain are required to be balanced. But Reform essentially has its own TV station. What monetary value would you put on that? GB News would of course dispute this characterisation, but Farage and other leading lights have their own shows. Other presenters skew overwhelmingly to the right and the channel’s output reflects Reform’s political agenda. Yet despite some skirmishes and a fine, Ofcom, the broadcast regulator, is seemingly too powerless or toothless to address this.

More significantly, consider X, a foreign-owned website intentionally and actively spewing hate and misinformation into the UK. Its owner openly interferes in elections outside the US and has skewed the site’s algorithm to promote his own far-right political

Rules set for different times and outdated technologies are no longer enough to protect liberal democracy

views. Elon Musk stirs up agitation against migrants and posts about civil war coming to the UK. Were he Russian, his site would be barred. As an American, he is not deemed a hostile state actor. He is not even treated as a full publisher, responsible for content. The UK will block a foreign takeover of a newspaper, yet it watches helplessly while a plutocrat enjoying the protection of a foreign government openly seeks to destabilise the country.

Non-party organisations, often on the religious Maga-linked and Orbanite right and with foreign financial support, are increasingly using their wealth to drive ideas into the political mainstream. Social media sites are vehicles for the circulation of misinformation and AI fakes by domestic extremists or hostile states like Russia or Iran. Social media is obviously complicated. While it accelerates the far right, whose leaders can earn income from their posts, the internet is also giving a voice to those who would struggle to be heard.

Most of Harborne’s and Delo’s money will be used to fund staff, databases, targeted ads on social media – the stuff of modern campaigning. But while Westminster is fixated on what is regulated and visible, the democratic terrain is being eroded and politicians feel unable to address the challenge. How to respond to the challenges of social media and the wider web is not easy. It poses hard questions about restraint of free speech. I do not pretend to have easy answers. But this is where the greater threat lies.

There are many areas, from AI to climate change, where politics seems paralysed by the scale of the challenge. But this is a threat to politics itself and the UK’s leaders seem frozen in the headlights, still clinging to a map of the old world. Rules set for different times and 20th-century technologies are no longer enough to protect liberal democracy.

So by all means worry about donations. But recognise that it will take more than new rules on party funding to safeguard British democracy from the malign forces massing against it.

robert.shrimley@ft.com

After Warsh’s strong start, how high will rates need to go?

ECONOMICS

Michael Strain



Since taking office in May, Federal Reserve chair Kevin Warsh has said all the right things about the Fed’s failure – spanning over five years – to bring inflation back to its 2 per cent target. This week, the rate-setting committee backed up those words by increasing its policy interest rate by a quarter point to 3.75 to 4 per cent. The Warsh Fed is off to a strong start.

Warsh and his colleagues voted unanimously to increase the federal funds rate – the first increase since July 2023, when the central bank aggressively raised rates in its delayed response to the 2021 inflation surge. Moreover, the committee indicated that more increases are coming. Of the 18 Fed officials who submitted forecasts, 16 expect at least one additional quarter-point increase in 2026.

Just seven weeks ago, the committee voted against a rate hike. The August data seems to have had a surprisingly large impact on the Fed’s inflation outlook, offering some support for the view that disinflation had set in over the summer. But Warsh was right in his Jackson Hole speech to caution against relying “on isolated data points”. “Trends matter most,” he argued. And the inflation trends are troubling.

As measured by the core personal consumption expenditures price index, inflation has been trending upward for more than a year. In July 2025, by this measure, inflation was 2.9 per cent. In July 2026, the most recent month data are available, inflation was 3.3 per cent.

Of course, some of this is due to factors that higher interest rates will not affect, like tariffs and pass-through from higher energy prices from the war in Iran. But the measure of inflation I prefer does not include goods (which are affected by tariffs) or energy prices. It also shows an upward trend in inflation for more than a year.

I share Warsh’s broader economic outlook. The unemployment rate was lower in August 2026 than it was in August 2025 or August 2024. Although long yields on government debt have been increasing, overall financial conditions do not appear to be restrictive.

Underlying growth is healthy. The Atlanta Fed forecasts annualised current-quarter GDP growth of 5.1 per cent. How high, then, do rates need to go? It

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is instructive to consider the first half of 2025, when the effective funds rate was at roughly 4.3 per cent – evidently not high enough to generate disinflation, to cause a worrying softening in the labour market, to prevent economic growth from accelerating or to restrain an increase in stock prices. This week, the Warsh Fed undid one of the three mis-

taken 2025 rate cuts. I expect an additional rate increase this year will be needed.

The chair’s post-meeting press conference highlighted two fundamental questions. Warsh characterised the Fed’s decision as removing “a dose of accommodation”. This implies that he is using a long-established monetary policy framework – that there is a level of the funds rate below which the Fed is supporting economic demand and above which it is restraining demand.

But in the press conference, Warsh rejected that framework, dismissing it as an interesting academic exercise with no “operational effect on decisions” the Fed makes. He will need to explain how he will calibrate the funds rate in the absence of this.

Second, Warsh argued that he does not believe there is a trade-off between stable inflation and full employment. In the short term, this view has major implications for monetary policy. If disinflation does not come from increasing economic slack, then does Warsh think it is entirely driven by inflation expectations? If short-term demand can be

increased without inflation, then does he think that inflation in 2021 was largely unaffected by that year’s massive fiscal stimulus?

Still, Warsh has shown that he has steel in his spine by increasing interest rates seven weeks before the midterm elections. Central bank independence is crucial for price stability, which in turn is crucial for long-term prosperity. Donald Trump is the greatest threat to Fed independence in modern history, going so far as to weaponise the criminal justice system against Fed officials in order to bend the committee to his desire for lower interest rates.

Warsh is now steward of this vitally important foundation of prosperity. Some Republicans, including the president, may absurdly assign partial blame for any coming midterm losses to the Fed’s decision, making the hard job of protecting its independence all the more challenging. Warsh has shown he is up to the job.

The writer is an FT contributing editor and director of economic policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute

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