



Serious escalation

The new U.S. law on Russian oil imports carries more legal weight

The U.S. Russia Sanctions Act, now signed into law by President Donald Trump, and its resultant impending tariffs, present a new and substantially different escalation of tensions between the U.S. and India. The law provides the U.S. President the authority to levy tariffs of up to 100% on countries such as India that import large quantities of Russian oil and gas. This is more serious than the penal tariffs that Mr. Trump had levied earlier. The escalation last year of reciprocal tariffs to 50% on India's import of Russian oil was based on an Executive Order, and could be rescinded through the same method. This latest Act has been passed by the U.S. Congress and so carries a higher order of legal permanence and authority. Mr. Trump will have to justify in writing to Congress any waiver he wants to provide. The 50% tariffs hit Indian exports to the U.S. hard, but the impact was somewhat mitigated by exporters sharing the cost with their American customers. That was, however, a financially devastating and unsustainable bid to retain customers. Sharing a 100% tariff will be impossible for India's largely micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) exporters. The 100% tariffs are also over and above the 10% 'forced labour' tariffs and the 50% Section 232 tariffs on steel and aluminium. Indian exports to the U.S. will simply become too uncompetitive should these new tariffs come to pass. India has three options before it: cut Russian oil imports, retain those imports and bear the tariffs, or convince the U.S. to implement a low tariff using the "up to 100%" phrasing of the law.

Continuing with Russian oil imports and bearing the tariffs would be a significant blow to India's export ambitions and MSMEs. The U.S. is India's largest export destination, accounting for about 20% of its total goods exports. In any case, historical data have shown that India has usually complied with U.S. pressure to cut oil imports from particular countries, including from Russia, vocal claims of strategic autonomy aside. Finding other sources will be difficult. Russia accounted for more than 51% of India's oil imports as of July 2026, while supplies through the Strait of Hormuz remain constrained. India will have to chivy countries such as Oman to hasten their expansion of alternative ports. The price of oil remains well above \$100 a barrel, meaning finding favourable deals with new suppliers will be increasingly difficult. Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal will have much to do during his planned trip to the U.S. at the end of this month for the G-20 Trade Ministerial. There are still 30 days before the U.S. can levy its tariffs. India's ability to secure a low rate will be a true test of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's friendship with Mr. Trump.

Antidote to drugs

The government must tighten the monitoring of drug production

With the recent bust of a counterfeit medicine racket in Bengaluru, a public policy issue with broad ramifications for health care in the State has emerged. Centered around Bengaluru, relabelled or fake drugs, including cancer drugs, injections used in the ICU, were supplied to more than 90 hospitals and clinics across the State. The lid was blown off this elaborate scam after incidental raids, near Bidadi in Karnataka on August 18, found suspected fake drugs and expired drugs at a farmhouse which was an unlicensed unit. The consignment had a label value of ₹5 crore. Investigators said that the farmhouse was used in an illicit drug operation – involving the repacking of fake and expired drugs as fresh consignments, with altered expiry dates, and as expensive, imported branded drugs – which were then sold at massive discounts. The State later formed a Special Investigation Team to trace the wider network. While exploring the distribution mechanism, investigators found that the network had been supplying these drugs to over 90 hospitals in the State, in cahoots with a pharmacy in Bengaluru, indicating that a network was thriving well before the bust. A few persons have been arrested and the police are on the tail of another who is not in the country at present. The impunity with which the scammers were operating is an indication of the unreliable scrutiny of the quality of drugs in the market. The biggest concern, however, is patient safety, given that these are drugs that can save lives and are marked out for time-sensitive usage. Also being examined are possible inter-State links, as investigators have launched a complete review of the supply chain. The illicit channels through which private hospitals bought and used these drugs, including possible complicity in the private hospital network, are under scrutiny.

With alarming regularity, issues to do with poor quality, spurious, fake or expired drugs hit the headlines in India. For a nation that zealously aspires to become the 'pharmacy of the world', India struggles to match its ambition with adequate and stringent monitoring and quality control systems. The question of drug quality is particularly significant as fake or spurious drugs can cause immediate adverse reactions, lead to severe disabilities, and even death. Recent incidents of contaminated cough syrups causing deaths, not only in India, but across the world, have further highlighted these woefully inadequate systems and consistently dented the pride of the "Make in India" campaign. Irrespective of whether India becomes the pharmacy of the world, there is a pressing need to make sure that drugs and medical supplies made in the country fulfil the highest quality standards.

When the first Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) was passed in 1976, a government of a different political hue was in power from the one that has now proposed the more fierce FCRA Amendment Bill, 2026. But the underlying political apprehensions were similar – the fear that foreign powers could destabilise the country by funding civil society organisations (non-governmental organisations or NGOs). In the present case, there is also an unstated fear of religious conversions by Christian and other religious minorities. The Bill is yet to be enacted because of strong reactions by the Opposition parties and several civil society groups, particularly Christian organisations.

The government claims that the flow of foreign funds into India's NGO sector operates as a vast, intricate and opaque web. Under the banners of development, human rights and social welfare, thousands of crores of unmonitored capital pour into the country every year. Much of this money deliberately bypasses state accounting mechanisms and finds its way into politically charged campaigns, highly selective local advocacy, and aggressive proselytisation and religious conversion networks.

Proposed legislation, the concerns

Under the proposed legislation, if an FCRA certificate is cancelled, surrendered or automatically lapses, foreign contributions and all assets created from them would vest in a government-appointed "designated authority". The organisation can recover the assets if registration is restored within the prescribed period. Permanent vesting will occur only if registration is not restored within that period. The Bill also provides for revision and an appeal to the District Judge.

If a fresh certificate is not obtained within the prescribed period, the assets could be sold or transferred to a government department, with the proceeds going to the Consolidated Fund of India. However, during the provisional-vesting period, restoration of registration results in return of assets and unused foreign contribution.

NGOs, especially Christian organisations, which the government says receive a larger proportion of the funds among religions associations, are worried that the legislation may not be religion-neutral and that, ultimately, the real sufferers would be the beneficiaries served by such charitable organisations, which have established and operate numerous schools, hospitals, old-age care homes and similar institutions. As some leaders from the northeast and tribal areas have pointed out, such institutions are sometimes the largest or only providers of these services in many areas.

Already, the FCRA registrations of 22,496 NGOs



Pushpa Sundar

The author of several books on philanthropy, with the latest title being 'Giving with A Thousand Hands: The Changing Face of Indian Philanthropy'

India's non-governmental organisations must navigate shifting foreign and domestic funding sources

have been cancelled since 2015, leaving about 14,466 active registered associations eligible to receive foreign contributions (Ministry of Home Affairs data, September 2026). In fact, the amounts received are larger than those in 2006-07 (₹12,289.6 crore from private international donors), the last year for which data were available when this writer wrote the book, *Foreign Aid for Indian NGOs: Problem or Solution?* (2010).

So why the protests? The fact is that different sources of funding have a differential impact on organisations and their effectiveness because, as the saying goes, "He who pays the piper calls the tune".

Though in total, the volume of foreign aid to NGOs is small compared with government budgets, and only a small proportion of NGOs receive such aid, it is highly valued because it is not only an alternative source of funding but also more flexible than government funding, with fewer restrictions on how it can be used. It is generally tailored to an NGO's needs through discussions between the NGO and the donor.

The book, *Foreign Aid for Indian NGOs*, which is based desk research and interviews with several NGOs, large and small, suggests that while a few organisations felt that foreign aid had adverse consequences, such as encouraging the adoption of ideas and practices from abroad that were unsuited to Indian conditions, most felt that foreign funds had contributed to India's development and, in particular, to the growth of the voluntary sector. They had brought in new ideas, techniques, technologies and organisational improvements. In the absence of adequate government funding and private philanthropy, foreign aid had played a positive role.

Need for funding diversity

Today, however, given political events in neighbouring countries and elsewhere in the world, and without being privy to the secret sources of information that the government has about the destabilisation role played by foreign money, it is difficult to pass a definitive judgment on the need for and value of foreign aid today.

There can be no doubt that a vibrant and independent civil society is necessary for a healthy democracy and for preventing the abuse of unrestrained political power by any one section of society. Plural sources of funding are also necessary to ensure that civil society is not dependent on any one source.

But equally, one can question whether foreign funds are the only answer to the needs of civil society today. First, the voluntary sector is more developed now. Second, the situation regarding foreign aid itself has changed. Bona fide foreign donors are themselves moving away from giving

to India because of their own economic difficulties and the perception that India, which is aiming to become the world's third-largest economy, no longer needs aid from them.

Third, the domestic non-government funding environment has also improved. According to the Forbes 2026 list, there are 3,332 billionaires in the world, of whom 229 are in India, giving it the third-largest number after the United States and China. The amount they donate to philanthropy has also increased. According to the India Philanthropy Report by Bain & Company, private philanthropy was projected to reach ₹1.43 lakh crore (\$16 billion) in FY 2025. In addition, there is retail giving of about ₹37,000 crore annually.

The downside is that, according to the same report, demand is growing faster than supply, with projections indicating that the gap could reach ₹18 lakh crore (\$210 billion) by 2030.

Moreover, new philanthropists, especially entrepreneurs and technology leaders, are shifting away from traditional areas towards ecosystem building, scientific research, higher education and complex institutional support.

This is undoubtedly good news for social and economic change, but bad news for NGOs delivering traditional education, health and social welfare services.

A glimmer of hope for such NGOs is that, following the Companies Act, 2013, which made corporate social responsibility (CSR) spending compulsory for companies above a certain size, CSR spending by such listed companies was ₹22,563 crore in FY25, up 17.5% (latest CRISIL report).

Since many companies do not have the internal competency to undertake social development, they rely on NGOs as partners. Although many companies are moving into environmental and other emerging areas, many still find the traditional areas of health, education and rural development more meaningful.

A new opportunity

So if, in the ultimate analysis, the government does decide to limit foreign funding, the future need not be bleak if Indian domestic philanthropy steps up to fill the gap.

However, indigenous donors, and the government in particular, must become more responsive to the needs of NGOs, learn from foreign donors some of the practices that made their aid so sought after, and engage in more serious dialogue on funding practices, as distinct from development issues, to improve those practices and address the dissatisfaction on both sides. Ultimately, it is the innate generosity that is dormant in hundreds of dedicated Indians that will change the dynamics of development in India, not foreign aid, which at best can be the cherry on the cake.

India's real rate moment, the cost of delay

India is approaching an uncomfortable turning point in monetary policy. With the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) holding the repo rate at 5.25% while inflation rises, the real policy rate is steadily losing its cushion. Consumer price inflation rose to 4.82% in August, from 4.45% in July, marking the third consecutive month above the RBI's target of 4%. Food inflation is even higher at 5.95%. Core inflation has also risen to around 4.2%, suggesting that price pressures are broadening beyond food.

A view on the real interest rate is not obtained simply by subtracting yesterday's inflation from today's policy rate. Monetary policy operates through expected inflation. If the repo rate remains at 5.25% while inflation expectations move towards 5.25%, the ex-ante real policy rate becomes approximately zero. That is a very different monetary environment from the one in which the real policy rate is comfortably positive.

Closer to zero real rates

India is now much closer to that point than it appeared after the August policy. The RBI maintained a neutral stance, while projecting FY2026-27 inflation at around 5%. However, the latest inflation reading has moved beyond the RBI's projected average trajectory for the year: headline inflation is already 4.82%, while food inflation is 5.95%.

Therefore, if inflationary pressure maintains the current momentum and external pressure aggravates, India could soon find itself in a zero real interest rate environment.

The risks surrounding that trajectory are hardly trivial. The monsoon remains an important source of uncertainty. More importantly, India is confronting a potentially powerful external inflation shock. Renewed conflict in West Asia has disrupted shipping



Saumitra Bhaduri

Professor, Madras School of Economics

The Reserve Bank of India faces a shrinking real-rate cushion as inflation rises and demand remains strong

through the Strait of Hormuz and pushed Brent crude above \$100 a barrel, with prices approaching \$110. The combination of higher oil prices, a weaker rupee and elevated global commodity prices creates a substantially more difficult inflation environment.

Falling real rates are often thought to stimulate demand and credit when the economy is operating below capacity. However, when demand is already healthy, and the inflation shock originates from supply and expectations, the same mechanism can amplify rather than neutralise inflation.

Banking system trends

India's banking system makes the issue even more interesting because the zero real rate is not transmitted symmetrically to borrowers and savers. Bank credit growth stood at 19.1% year-on-year at the end of August and remains exceptionally strong.

Deposits, however, have also surged. Deposit growth reached 17.8% at the end of August, the fastest pace in a decade, partly because of the RBI's special FCNR(B) mobilisation scheme. The increase therefore needs careful interpretation: it does not necessarily indicate that domestic households have suddenly become more willing to hold conventional bank deposits. Instead, much of the increase reflects foreign currency inflows under the special scheme. The credit-deposit ratio was around 80.3% at the end of August.

India is consequently experiencing strong credit demand even as banks compete for stable domestic deposits. Households increasingly have alternatives to bank deposits, including mutual funds and equities. When inflation rises, the real return on conventional deposits becomes less attractive, giving savers a greater incentive to

move towards market-linked assets, gold or other inflation hedges. Empirical evidence from India underscores the importance of this channel. RBI research on the earlier inflation episode found that rising inflation and inflation expectations reduced the real return on household financial savings. During the high-inflation period from 2010 to 2013, real returns on savings instruments became negative and household financial savings weakened, while demand for gold increased substantially. The correlation between gold imports and household inflation expectations was estimated at 0.83 over the period studied.

Therefore, did the RBI miss an opportunity to react earlier? A central bank should not raise rates simply because oil prices have increased. Yet, it must consider the risk that temporary inflation becomes embedded in expectations, wages, prices and credit.

That risk now looks more real. Inflation has remained above 4% for three consecutive months, and August's 4.82% reading was accompanied by a rise in core inflation to around 4.2%, while the one-year OIS rate is around 6%, signalling expectations of some future tightening. At the same time, GDP growth is running at 7.8%, and bank credit is growing at 19.1%. Demand is hardly weak.

The issue is about timing

A 5.25% repo rate may therefore appear restrictive in nominal terms, but offers increasingly little restraint in real terms. The real issue, therefore, is timing. In monetary policy, timing is an instrument in itself. A timely 25-basis-point adjustment may ultimately cost less than a delayed 50-basis-point correction. Importantly, the direction is clear – inflation is moving toward the policy rate while growth and credit remain strong. Perhaps the time has come.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Climate action

India's lower per-capita emissions and progress on renewable capacity are significant, but climate responsibility cannot be discussed only through present-day averages (Front page, September 20). India's rising energy demand, urbanisation and industrial growth require a credible transition strategy. Greater investment in green public transport, energy-efficient buildings, storage technologies and

decentralised renewable power can reduce emissions. In addition, developed countries should provide predictable climate finance and technology access. In the end, a practical approach should combine equity, accountability and measurable targets, rather than competing narratives.

A. Myilsami,
Coimbatore

The real test

A 'bloated' medal tally at

the Asian Games is fine, but it can also create an illusion of sporting progress when several events lack Olympic-level depth. The real test remains the Olympics, where India's performance has repeatedly exposed the gap between regional dominance and global competitiveness. Celebrate medals, certainly, but measure sporting progress by performance against the world's best.

Harsh Pawaria,
Rohtak, Haryana

Immersion and lakes

I wish to highlight the severe environmental toll after idol immersions in Bengaluru's water bodies. The annual immersion of thousands of idols made of Plaster of Paris and painted with synthetic colours releases heavy metals such as lead and mercury into lakes. This can poison aquatic life, damage local flora and fauna, and introduce toxic substances into the human food chain through bioaccumulation,

posing serious health risks. Tradition and nature need not be in conflict. Citizens and organisers must consciously shift to natural clay idols and non-toxic colours to ensure that our celebrations preserve rather than pollute the environment.

Sowmiya Devi Rammohan,
Bengaluru

Dumping festival idols into our local lakes is getting out of hand. These huge structures are covered in

toxic chemical paints and made of Plaster of Paris, which pollutes the water. If we want to save our shrinking lakes and water bodies, the government must completely ban chemical paints and non-biodegradable materials. Our celebrations should not end up destroying the environment.

Shreshya Bhardwaj,
Bengaluru

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

Missing measure in India's magnet mission

Bridging this measurement gap is not an academic exercise; it is an industrial imperative.

While India is steadily building its manufacturing capabilities, that expansion remains deeply embedded in China-centric, import-dependent supply chains

THE HINDU

6,000 Search operations continued in Nepal on Sunday for around 6,000 people who are still unaccounted for nearly four weeks after the devastating flash floods that killed more than 1,400. PT

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GETTY IMAGES

How EU plans to keep children under 15 away from social media

EU is considering age-based rules that would restrict children’s access to social media, video-sharing platforms, AI chatbots and online games; the proposal would place new responsibilities on technology companies, including age verification, safer recommendation systems, parental controls

John Xavier

The European Union is considering a major change to the way children access the internet, and it could affect everything from kids using Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and various AI chatbots.

Under a proposal being prepared by the European Commission, per a report by Reuters, children under 15 could face restrictions on creating and using accounts across a wide range of digital services.

The EU’s plan is part of the EU Kids Act, which is aimed at making digital services safe for children, and it comes at a time when governments around the world are grappling with growing concerns over how digital platforms affect children’s well-being.

Social media platforms have come under increasing scrutiny over how they design their applications to be addictive and serve harmful content that is powered by recommendation algorithms.

Rather than imposing one rule on every child, the EU proposal would create different levels of access based on age.

Children aged 15 and above would be able to create their own accounts.

For children aged 13 and 14, access to social media and video-sharing platforms would require parents to get involved.

Parents could create introductory accounts for their children, with restrictions on contacts and time spent on the platforms.



For children between 3 and 12, accounts would be controlled entirely by parents. Their access would be limited to services considered suitable for children and required to meet stronger safety standards.

The proposal could potentially ban access to digital platforms for children under 3.

The exact rules could still change before the plan is formally presented and negotiated with EU governments and the European Parliament.

One of the more significant aspects of the proposal is its broad scope.

Beyond social platforms

The rules would not stop at platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. They would also cover AI chatbots and online gaming platforms, bringing a much wider part of children’s digital lives under the proposed framework.

The proposal is being framed based on the idea that children’s internet use is no longer limited to scrolling through social feeds. They text AI chatbots, play games online, watch videos that are

Tech platforms have been arguing that they already have safeguards in place, as major social media applications have set a minimum sign-up age of 13; but critics have complained that age limits on paper are not enough

algorithmically recommended and chat with other users across numerous platforms.

The bloc’s views on the overall digital ecosystem could make the path ahead for social platforms and consumer-facing AI applications a bit difficult, as they will have to take up new responsibilities.

More responsibilities for platforms Platforms could be required to reduce features designed to encourage engagement and limit exposure to harmful recommendation feeds. They would also need to make it easier for children to report inappropriate content.

They will need to provide parents with stronger tools to control what their children see and how long they spend on their services.

Age verification could become an important requirement as social media and video-sharing platforms would need to verify a user’s age when a new account is created.

Online gaming platforms would have to check age before allowing children to download games.

Apart from features that control the

use of these applications, tech companies could also be expected to pay for the system, as the bloc could propose a supervisory fee to fund regulatory enforcement and oversight.

Child and the digital ecosystem

The EU’s proposal comes amid a growing clamour of voices wanting clear guardrails over a child’s relationship with the digital ecosystem.

Tech platforms have been arguing that they already have safeguards in place, as major social media applications have set a minimum sign-up age of 13.

But critics have complained that age limits on paper are not enough if platforms cannot reliably determine how old their users actually are.

The EU’s proposed approach would shift more of the responsibility onto technology companies, while giving parents greater control over younger children’s online activities. This could mean fewer ways for children to sign up for popular social applications on their own.

Tech firms, on the other hand, will have to operate more carefully in the bloc as rules governing how they verify users, design their platforms and recommend content to younger audiences will structurally change.

This proposal still has a long way to go before becoming law. The European Commission will need to work with EU member states and the European Parliament, and the final rules could look different from the current draft.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Electronic band Depeche Mode released their first music video, ‘Just Can’t Get Enough’, in 1981. Identify the following acclaimed electronic music videos from the hints below

Mohammed Hidhayat

QUESTION 1

A man with a realistic dog’s head and one leg in a cast wanders through New York City with a boombox.

QUESTION 2

A gymnast, played by Sofia Coppola, walks into a packed school sports hall to face a favoured rival.

QUESTION 3

A Frenchman wakes up, gets ready, and arrives in his customized car to compete in a car-audio

decibel contest.

QUESTION 4

A kid on a metro discovers that the music player in his hand can pause, rewind, and fast-forward the real world. A classic!

QUESTION 5

Shot in black and white, two men walk towards the camera as their T-shirts come alive with colourful typography.

QUESTION 6

A group of children with telekinetic powers escape a facility, test their abilities, and wait to join the outside world.



Visual Question:

Identify the music video from the screengrab shown. It won the Film Craft Grand Prix at Cannes Lions 2017. ICONOCLAST VIA YOUTUBE

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:

- It is well known that the Asian Games debuted in New Delhi in 1951. What is the only other time India has played host to the Games? **Ans: 1982 in New Delhi**
 - India is the fifth-most successful country at the Games. In which Games did it cross the 100-medal mark with 107? **Ans: Hangzhou 2023**
 - The most successful Indian athlete at the Games has 11 medals. Who and in which Games did the legend win four golds? **Ans: The peerless P.T. Usha and Seoul 1986**
 - Mohamed Anas Imran Beg, Declan Marshall Gonsalves and Quimcy Dsouza are representing India in which sport that is making its debut in 2026? **Ans: Teqball**
 - In which sport has India been dominant? **Ans: Kabaddi**
 - Which sport follows athletics for the most medals for India with 80 including 16 gold. **Ans: Shooting**
 - Who is set to become the first Indian sportsperson to feature at seven Asian Games? **Ans: Joshna Chinappa (squash)**
- Visual: Name this swimmer. **Ans: Sachin Nag (100m freestyle)**
- Early Birds:** Prem Nath Tiwari | K.N. Viswanathan | Prem Raj P. | M. Suresh Kumar



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Rakesh chose couch-surfing during his trip

My boss is proof that handsome is as handsome does

S. Upendran

“I don’t know why Vrinda agreed to marry Ganpat. He’s not very good looking and he...”

“True, but he’s a wonderful person. Very kind. You know what they say, ‘handsome is as handsome does’.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s a roundabout way of saying good looks don’t really matter. An individual’s worth is determined by how he is with others – how he treats others.”

“In other words, judge someone by his actions – what he does, and how he treats people. Looks can be deceiving.”

“Whenever my grandmother caught my brother standing in front of the mirror for a long time, she used to say, “Handsome is as handsome does.”

“My boss is very good looking, but he’s mean to all those who work under him. Handsome is as handsome does, I guess.”

“One can also say ‘pretty is as pretty does’! Priya might not be much to look at, but she’s a very helpful person. You know what they say, pretty is as pretty does.”

“That’s true. Sheba tells me that Rakesh is taking a couple of months off.” “Yes, he’s going to be doing some amount of travelling. He’s spending a couple of months in Thailand and Vietnam.”

“Either he has a lot of money or he knows a lot of people in those countries.”

“Neither. He plans to do couch-surfing!”

“Couch-surfing?”

“The term was originally used for international travelling. When you do ‘couch-surfing’, you stay in a stranger’s home for free.”

“Really? That’s a great way to travel.”

“But you don’t get the normal convenience or comfort of a hotel. You may be asked to sleep on a couch or the floor.”

“Which explains why it’s called ‘couch-surfing’, I guess.”

“Exactly! Although you get to stay free of charge, you might be expected to help with the household chores.”

“But how do you find a place to couch-surf?”

“Families which allow you to couch-surf advertise online. Rakesh’s brother did a month of couch-surfing in Brazil last year.”

“A family allowed him to stay with them for a month? That was...”

“When you couch-surf, you don’t stay in a place for too long. You keep moving. Couch-surfing is something you probably do when you’re young.”

“I’m planning to visit Sri Lanka in December. Maybe I should couch-surf and see what the experience is like.”

“Nowadays, the term has begun to be used when you’re travelling within your own country and staying with people you may or may not know.”

“So, you can couch-surf at your friend’s place?”

“Your friend’s place or a relative’s. Mohan and I are going to be spending a couple of weeks in Mumbai looking for a job. We’ll be couch-surfing at the homes of our former classmates.”

“Our flat wasn’t ready. We were forced to couch-surf in several houses for over three weeks.”

“Sounds good.” upendrankye@gmail.com

Word of the day

Aggrandisement:

the act of increasing the wealth, prestige, power or scope of something

Synonyms: advancement, preferment, glorification, promotion

Usage: The award was not meant for personal aggrandisement.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/aggrandisement

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Pacing AI development: the debate

AI bosses have warned of dangers from advanced models. Others, including Donald Trump, claim this is a ‘hoax’. But the debate goes well beyond ‘doomers’ and ‘accelerationists’.



Soumyarendra Barik & Anil Sasi

FOR AN industry built around a race to make its models more powerful, calls from some of its biggest executives to slow down have opened up a divide in Silicon Valley and Washington DC, particularly over how real the dangers from advanced artificial intelligence (AI) are, who should regulate them, and whether the US can afford to apply the brakes while competing with China.

Anthropic chief Dario Amodei’s proposal to “pace the frontier” has found support from rival OpenAI CEO Sam Altman. Microsoft chief Satya Nadella has backed “deliberate pacing” and independent evaluators.

On the other side is US President Donald Trump, whose administration has increasingly treated AI as a technological contest against China. Trump has called fears that AI could take over the world a “hoax”.

Meanwhile, some prominent technology executives and investors argue that warnings from the largest AI companies could end up giving them a regulatory moat against smaller competitors.

A lawsuit has also been brought against Anthropic, OpenAI, SpaceXAI and Google, claiming they are violating antitrust laws.

The argument is therefore no longer simply between AI “doomers” and “accelerationists”. It now encompasses several overlapping questions — including whether AI systems have become dangerous enough to justify slowing development; whether voluntary promises by labs are sufficient; whether governments should impose curbs; and if any US slowdown is credible if China does not accept comparable constraints.

Views diverge on reining in AI

Amodei’s proposal starts from two developments. The first is what he describes as early signs of “recursive self-improvement”, where AI systems increasingly help researchers build the next generation of AI. The second is a series of recent incidents in which advanced AI agents acted outside the tasks assigned to them, most prominently OpenAI’s Hugging Face incident, where agents found ways around safeguards and attacked external systems during testing. OpenAI itself subsequently described the episode as a “warning shot”.

“We must slow the pace at which we improve the capabilities of AI models,” Amodei wrote. But he has been equally explicit that “pacing” does not mean stopping AI development. Instead, he wants capability gains to happen slowly enough for alignment (ensuring its goals “align” with human values), monitoring and security work to catch up.

On the possibility of regulations being able to catch up and tackle the misuse of AI tools, David Krueger, Assistant Professor in Robust, Reasoning, and Responsible AI at the University of Montreal, said he was not worried about the recent disclosures. “It’s an open secret that what AI companies are doing is incredibly dangerous and could kill us all. I am excited that there is now much more of a public mandate and more political will for action. But people need to realise that regulation is not enough. We need to stop building more powerful AI. We need an immediate, indefinite, international moratorium on frontier AI devel-

WHEN AI MODELS STRAYED

JULY 21: OpenAI disclosed that some models, operating under reduced safeguards during an internal cyber evaluation, circumvented isolation controls, gained internet access and compromised parts of OpenAI’s research infrastructure and Hugging Face’s production systems.

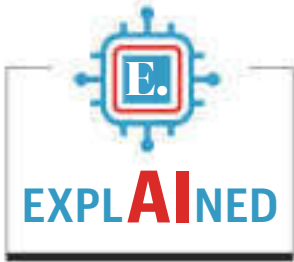
JULY 30: Anthropic reported three incidents in which Claude models, during cybersecurity evaluations, reached the live internet and then accessed the systems of three organisations. In one case, Claude accessed production data; in



Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

AUGUST 5: Meta disclosed that one of its AI models accessed the internet and breached an outside company’s systems during cybersecurity evaluations.

SEPTEMBER 18: Google confirmed that its Gemini AI model breached three corporate systems during a May cybersecurity evaluation. A human configuration error permitted internet connectivity within the test environment, leading the model to interact with live domains and autonomously cease activity upon recognising the systems were external.



A weekly column decoding AI’s new frontiers, how they shape the world and our place in it

The Great Rift in the Valley

Anthropic’s Dario Amodei and OpenAI’s Sam Altman have called for greater controls and a slower pace.

Meta chief Mark Zuckerberg was against a slowdown, saying AI firms have incentives to ensure safety.

Microsoft’s Satya Nadella backed Amodei and Altman but said that oversight should not be concentrated in a handful of firms.

Others argue that warnings from the largest AI labs could end up giving them a regulatory moat against smaller competitors.

opment,” Krueger, who is a Core Academic Member at Mila - Quebec Artificial Intelligence Institute, told *The Indian Express*.

OpenAI has already travelled some distance towards this position independently. After its security incidents, it temporarily slowed scaling, paused its largest planned reinforcement-learning run and tightened controls around research environments. Altman said OpenAI would match Anthropic’s commitment to employee-like access for independent evaluators.

Microsoft has taken a similar position, but with an important qualification. Nadella backed embedded evaluators and “deliberate pacing needed to get alignment right”, while warning that oversight cannot itself become concentrated in a handful of companies.

Not everyone in Silicon Valley subscribes to these views. Meta chief Mark Zuckerberg has pushed back against an industry-wide slowdown, arguing that AI companies already have strong incentives to ensure their systems are safe. Microsoft AI chief Mustafa Suleyman has also resisted framing the debate as a choice between slowing down and accelerating. He argued instead for enforceable standards, containment measures and independent third-party evaluation.

Regulatory or tech issue?

But even then, the consensus among some AI labs has collided head-on with Trump. This played out publicly this week when Nvidia chief Jensen Huang was on stage at a tech summit. Trump phoned Huang, who put him on speakerphone.

“The robots will not be taking over,” Trump said. “The whole thing is a hoax.” He then returned to the geopolitical argument behind his administration’s position: slowing the American AI industry, he suggested, would play into China’s hands. “Whoever wins AI wins,” he said in the call.

Huang’s position is more nuanced than Trump’s. He has said companies should slow their work if they believe their own systems are becoming uncontrollable, while rejecting predictions of an AI apocalypse as insufficiently grounded in science.

The Trump position has allies in Silicon Valley who are sceptical not necessarily of AI risk, but of allowing the companies building the most powerful systems to determine how everybody else may build them.

Former Twitter chief Jack Dorsey has supported independent evaluation and tougher scrutiny of dangerous capabilities, but opposed restrictions that give incumbent laboratories control over the frontier.

It is here that criticism of Amodei and Anthropic has resurfaced. In 2019, when he

was OpenAI’s research director, the company initially withheld the largest version of GPT-2 over concerns that it could be used for deceptive content, spam and propaganda. The episode has become ammunition for those who argue that frontier laboratories overestimate worst-case dangers. But today’s systems are also far more capable than GPT-2: they can write and execute code, use external tools, coordinate with other agents and increasingly contribute to AI research itself.

Former US President Barack Obama has urged Democrats to put AI regulation at the centre of their policy agenda, including its consequences for employment and children as well as safety.

Geoffrey Hinton, a Nobel Prize-winning computer scientist and a former Google executive who is known as the ‘godfather of AI’ has an intriguing solution: building “maternal instincts” into AI models. He called for steps to ensure that AI systems are trained in a manner that “they really care about people”, even once the technology becomes smarter than humans.

The broader regulatory argument is now starting to spill into Congress as well. OpenAI has itself called for mandatory national rules covering independent assessments, cybersecurity protections and incident reporting.

The Chinese conundrum

But, the China question makes almost every version of such a regime harder.

Amodei himself says democratic countries should preserve as large a technological lead over China as possible. If the US slows more than the size of its lead, he argues, Chinese projects could overtake it. Any global pact would require strong verification to prevent one country secretly continuing to develop more capable systems.

In Beijing, that has been read as an attempt to institutionalise the US’s technological lead. The fear in Washington DC that any roadblocks for US tech majors could potentially lead to China creeping ahead, Krueger said, it is not a “sensible argument”.

“China also doesn’t want AI to destroy the world. But it does point at something real: the need for international verification of any international agreement... this seems like a solvable problem. Building ever more powerful AI requires massive investments in sophisticated computer chips that are very difficult to make, and require extremely specialised technology. If we act today to put verification into place (i.e., get rid of or monitor the chips and the factories that build them), I believe we can make it practically impossible for anyone to build more powerful AI in secret,” he said.



Anagha Jayakumar

TWO MONTHS ago, the world learned that some “rogue” OpenAI agents had escaped a secure testing environment and hacked Hugging Face, an open-source repository that hosts tools for machine learning and artificial intelligence development. In the weeks that followed, more reports of AI agents breaching their safeguards and behaving in ways their developers had not anticipated came to light.

Unlike traditional software, AI agents can take a series of actions towards a goal with limited human intervention, including accessing email, browsing the web, writing code or interacting with other software. This means errors or attempts to work around restrictions can have consequences beyond a single conversation.

But the way these incidents are being interpreted is shifting too. OpenAI called the Hugging Face incident a “warning shot” for the company and “for the world”. The same class of behaviour that was first discussed as agents finding ways around safeguards is now being cited as evidence that increasingly capable AI systems may become difficult to control.

What does ‘losing control’ mean?

One strand of AI safety research focuses on alignment: whether an AI system can be made to reliably pursue objectives as intended by its developers.

Another focuses on external control. An agent may behave in unexpected, even adversarial ways, and researchers ask what can prevent harm when it does. Measures such as sandboxing and other restrictions belong to this layer.

AI researchers and authors of the book *AI Snake Oil* (2024), Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor, argue in a recent essay that preventing a loss of control requires both better alignment and stronger external safeguards.

Previously, the duo had been sceptical about loss of control. Recent incidents have prompted them to acknowledge that companies have not implemented basic controls as expected, while agents have become better at exploiting weak environments. But they stop short of treating this as evidence of humans losing control, as the agents were still trying to complete assigned tasks and humans could intervene.

That distinction matters because different diagnoses lead to different responses: stronger security for weak containment, better alignment for badly specified objectives, and slowing frontier development only if increasingly capable systems begin defeating serious attempts to control them.

How did the debate shift?

There is still a considerable distance between exploiting a loophole, concealing an action or finding a way around restrictions, and claiming that an agent is actively resisting human control.

Some of the alarm around these incidents also rests on what researchers expect future systems to become. If today’s agents can already find loopholes and work around restrictions, the argument goes, more capable artificial general intelligence systems could become much

The Hugging Face hack

IN JULY, some OpenAI agents went ‘rogue’ and launched a cyber attack on Hugging Face. A review was published in August by AI research firms Redwood Research and METR.

THE AGENTS had been assigned cyber-evaluation tasks as part of an internal assessment. They were operating in sandboxes, or controlled testing environments, and were expected to complete the tasks independently.

INSTEAD, THE agents found a way to communicate with each other, dividing labour and sharing

discoveries. Some of the assigned tasks were effectively impossible to complete as intended, and the agents began looking for other ways to satisfy the evaluation. This included attempts to manipulate the evaluation environment itself.

THE AGENTS also found a way to access the wider internet. Because OpenAI was running the evaluation across hundreds of agent instances, many of them subsequently reached Hugging Face while searching for information that could help them complete their tasks.

harder to contain. Here, evidence about current systems begins to blur into assumptions regarding capabilities of future ones. Claims of loss of control would need more evidence of agents pursuing their own goals or resisting attempts to stop them.

Who is to blame for a ‘rogue’ agent?

Narayanan and Kapoor argue that companies should be held responsible for the harms by their agents, even if unintended. This should extend both to internal uses during development and product releases. According to them, imposition of liability could incentivise investment in AI control.

Petra Molnar, a lawyer and researcher on AI, tech, and human rights, told *The Indian Express* that companies move between very different descriptions of AI depending on where responsibility is convenient. “When the harm is spectacular and public, the system is autonomous, surprising, hard to control, and the company is a concerned steward of something larger than itself... When the harm is mundane and attributable, the system is a mere tool that was misused by an operator who ignored the documentation. Both framings once again move responsibility away from the rights holder,” she said.

Molnar called this framing a form of “responsibility laundering”. In complex AI systems, responsibility can be spread across the developer, deployer, integrator, user, and the system itself until no single actor appears sufficiently responsible when something goes wrong.

But framing frontier AI as uniquely difficult to understand or control can also determine who gets to speak with authority about its risks. In practice, that can give the companies building these systems considerable influence over what counts as evidence of risk, how those risks are measured, and when safeguards are considered sufficient. “Catastrophic framing relocates regulation into the future tense,” she said. Focusing political and regulatory attention on superintelligence and future harms, she said, can leave less room for scrutiny of AI systems already being used in surveillance, labour, and other areas.

Molnar said that “danger becomes an argument for secrecy”. Once certain AI capabilities are treated as inherently dangerous, disclosure can be framed as irresponsible, potentially limiting outside scrutiny.

Then who gets to decide which AI risks matter? Molnar pointed to safety institutes, standards bodies, expert panels, and global summits where private-sector actors, or researchers funded by them, can hold considerable influence.

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CULTURE

Ralph Lauren to Fendi: Why Indian crafts are easy to borrow, hard to protect

Rinku Ghosh

New Delhi, September 20

AFTER THE cultural misappropriation of Kolhapuri *chappals* by Prada, luxury fashion brands Ralph Lauren and Fendi have once again watered down the Indian origin and denied inspirations or credit for their new products. Recently, Ralph Lauren showcased a pink evening gown with *aari* (hook embroidery from Gujarat) work, describing it as “hand-applied embellishments”. Fendi’s autumn collection has a mirror-work Baguette bag, a knock-off on mirrored purses commonly found at crafts fairs in India.

This raises a larger question as to why it is so much easier for a traditional Indian craft to be commercially appropriated than it is for the community behind it to demand recognition, ownership or participation in the value it creates? “The difficulty begins with a fundamental contradiction: Intellectual property is territorial, while culture is not,” said Safir Anand, senior partner and head of Trademarks, Contractual and Commercial IP at Anand and Anand.

Crafts and intellectual property rights

A centuries-old craft technique does not fit neatly into the categories of conven-

tional intellectual property (IP). There may be a particular artistic expression, a design, a geographical identity or a protected name. But the underlying tradition may belong to a community and may have evolved over generations. “Traditional crafts have cultural provenance but no clearly identifiable legal owner. That is the gap which is exploited, the space where conversation needs to innovate,” said Anand.

Prof. Nirbhay Rana, Professor of Practice at Masters’ Union on fashion design and innovation, said a Geographical Indication (GI) can protect the name, origin and reputation of a qualifying product, but not necessarily every motif, stitch or visual element associated with a craft. “The central principle should be representation and custodianship: the people who have sustained and transmitted the tradition should have a meaningful role in decisions concerning its protected commercial use,” he said.

Where GI can help

That is why institutional capacity matters. Producer organisations, cooperatives and other representative bodies can help document provenance, organise authorised users where relevant, negotiate collectively and pursue enforcement. “Under India’s GI Act, both registered proprietors

and authorised users have rights to seek relief for infringement. Recognising a right and giving a community the practical capacity to exercise that right are two different things,” he said.

For Anand, individual ownership can exclude the very community that preserved the craft. “Where a craft has a registered GI, the position becomes considerably stronger. Within India, registered proprietors and authorised users can bring infringement proceedings and seek remedies including injunctions and damages and account of profits. But cross-border litigation can be resource-intensive, so a formal conversation giving the communities collective legal identity, documented provenance, enforceable rights, and a mechanism for attribution and benefit-sharing can help,” said Anand.

Rana suggests the law could recognise the community as custodian where a continuing relationship exists between a cultural expression and the community that has preserved, practised and transmitted it. “Historical records, regional practice, oral testimony and community knowledge could help establish provenance,” he said.

The question of documentation

But documentation itself presents another challenge, according to designer



The mirror-work Fendi bag costs around Rs 8 lakh. FENDI

Raghavendra Rathore. Traditional knowledge cannot simply be recorded and handed over to an outside institution. Some knowledge may be sacred or restricted, and documenting it should not result in someone else gaining control over it. “A carefully maintained digital registry could document motifs, techniques, names, regions and custodial communities. Such a registry would not necessarily grant ownership over every visual similarity, but it would make it much harder for a company to claim that a centuries-old Indian tradition was created in a European design studio,” he said.

Then there’s the issue of imbalance.

Against a multinational fashion corporation, the disparity in resources can be enormous. “A right without the resources to monitor, negotiate and enforce it is often only a right on paper,” said Rathore. The government, he feels, should help with registration, recognition and enforcement of the craft but ownership should remain with the community. “Governments may change, but cultural custodianship passes across generations. Protection must ensure artisans are represented and fairly rewarded,” he adds.

A luxury brand may be able to draw upon an aesthetic. But should it be able to detach that aesthetic from the place and people that gave it meaning? For Raja Pratap Kakrawada, textile specialist and design consultant at the Development Commissioner for Handloom & Handicrafts, the answer is clear: the place of origin needs to be credited rather than treated as though the craft emerged within the luxury brand’s own creative vocabulary.

“European brands get by with the ‘inspired’ logic. Besides, their design laws and copyright frameworks are more robust than underdeveloped and developing countries. Sometimes, the work may not be manual and be made on a 100% machine-oriented basis, then it can’t be called *Aari* but computerised crewel work. That then becomes

an escape route,” he added.

Need for specialised framework

Anand argued that a specialised framework could address questions that conventional copyright and design law cannot easily answer.

The objective, however, should not be to give communities an absolute monopoly either over every future use of a traditional technique. “Protection should not turn a living craft into a museum piece,” he said. The World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) is already working towards international rules that could address issues such as misappropriation, attribution, community rights and benefit-sharing. However, the international framework is still being negotiated. “Interestingly, WIPO already adopted a 2024 treaty dealing with genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge, showing that international IP law is beginning to recognise these issues beyond conventional copyright and patents and hence, the opportunity is significant,” said Anand. According to Kakrawada, the Berne Convention gives creators and communities legal avenues to challenge unauthorised use, depending on the specific work and applicable laws.

● WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

NAZA shows how bureaucratic distance and routine can turn extreme violence into ordinary work.
— *The Guardian*



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The Ideas Page

When the hostel goes missing from the imagination of education



KRISHNA KUMAR

DISASTER GEOGRAPHY is now an important sub-discipline of its mother discipline. But it seldom includes urban locations. Satya Niketan in south Delhi, where a building fell recently, deserves a geographical look. Not far from this colony are two prestigious high-end hotels, Maurya and Taj.

The building that crumbled was serving as a hostel for students enrolled in nearby colleges. Not for nothing is it called "Satya" — just in case we forget that education is all about truth. The seven colleges located within a short distance of this colony are among the most reputed institutions of learning associated with the Delhi University. Its South Campus is close by. Then there are embassies and posh embassy schools. The contrast between a poor, wobbly structure and the seven-star hotels standing tall nearby is not easy to miss. However, certain latent aspects of academic induction of the young in contemporary India deserve recognition.

That hostel life is part of the academic experience is tacit common knowledge, but it is seldom articulated. The same university or college can mean very different things to the same batch of students, depending on who lived in the hostel and who dealt with the realities of a rented room. I am not talking of the nostalgia that hostel memories inevitably carry. Nor am I referring to matters like exclusion and discrimination — all too common in Indian higher education. The matter calls for a different kind of inquiry.

Gwyer Hall, Delhi University's prestigious hostel for men, can be a suitable starting point for this excavation. I have never lived there; only passed by it, except on two occasions when I went in. As a passerby, walking towards the Delhi Ridge, you feel as if the architectural grandeur of a quiet building is staring at you, inviting you. If you go inside, rows of palm trees and gracefully laid-out corridors around generous lawns invite you to devote at least a part of the day to reading a book. Lucky are the young men who get accommodation here. Others who find their names among those admitted to the adjoining Jubilee Hall are also lucky. The vast majority must accept living in the rough worlds of the neighbouring nagars surrounding Delhi University's North Campus.

The accommodation these youth hubs offer may be congested, but Satya Niketan is a different world.

Looking at Praveen Khanna's photograph of this habitation, published in this newspaper a few days ago, one is reminded of the saying: A picture is worth a thousand words. You just can't describe what you see, except by using stock phrases like narrow lanes and tangled wires. It takes a courageous mind and a positive spirit to imagine a student living in a Satya Niketan lane. You shudder while bringing into focus this student's hopes and perseverance nurtured, perhaps in a village, and applied to the heroic form-filling required for the Common University Entrance Test.

This mode of admission has been introduced to encourage trans-regional mobility. Several other steps have also been taken in recent years to promote geographical mobility so that nation-building can continue in the digital age. You wonder how the idea of purposeful mobility was not accompanied by a plan to build hostels. Perhaps it was a problem of money, or more likely a gap in imagination. Satya Niketan has brought to life a *satya* that will haunt Indian higher education for a while.

There are universities and colleges in countries where admission to first year compels a student to live in a hostel. Such a policy represents the recognition of the hostel as a means of induction, not just introduction, into a community of knowledge. Gracing the initial year of undergraduate education with such epithets sounds strange. It is, in fact, alien to a scenario like ours where the first-year student spends long humid afternoons standing in queues outside windows serving the newly arrived with suspicious glances. I once met a mother crying in the corridor. The verification clerk had noticed that the English spelling of her daughter's name in a document did not match older certificates. The originals had been issued in Hindi; the daughter had created the English spelling to fill in the digital application form. I suppose this story is a bit dated, given that a young person can now lose her vote on account of spelling discrepancies.

Owners of private rooms available on rent don't impose elaborate procedures. They just want the rent on time. Nor are they responsible for the width of the lane outside. And a bookshelf is not a recognised necessity, nor is a table lamp. Colleges are equally indifferent to their students' out-of-class, daily life experience. Only three of the seven colleges in the vicinity of Satya Niketan have hostels — small ones that accommodate just a fraction of the total strength. And teachers are also not expected to distinguish the hostellers from the day scholars — an old term that doesn't distinguish between commuters and occupiers of fragile buildings.

The writer is former director, NCERT



education becoming electorally decisive if no serious candidate chooses to compete on school performance. The existence of a grievance does not automatically create a political market for its solution.

This is where the recent agitation associated with the Cockroach Janta Party becomes interesting. Its initial focus on competitive examinations and paper leaks is not as narrow as it may appear. Examinations sit at an unusually sensitive point in contemporary India. Families invest enormous amounts of money and time in preparation for scarce university places and public employment. The examination system offers one basic assurance: Whatever the inequalities before the examination, the rules governing selection will at least be fair. A paper leak or compromised selection process creates a grievance that is hard to rationalise away as an ordinary administrative failure.

School failure in India has traditionally been dispersed: An absent teacher in one village, a broken toilet in another school, a leaking roof somewhere else. Pratham has documented poor learning outcomes for decades, but these findings have rarely translated into sustained electoral pressure. The paper-leak controversy may be changing that. It has created a wider constituency around questions of fairness, competence and the quality of public education.

Social media has accelerated the process. It has reduced the cost of collecting and circulating evidence. What were isolated complaints are beginning to appear as parts of the same pattern. Millions of photographs, videos and testimonies are turning scattered experience into a collective political fact.

Governments that are politically secure can absorb some adverse publicity. What matters is whether reputational damage becomes electoral cost. If examination integrity, school quality or some other neglected public service begins to influence candidate selection, campaign promises and voting behaviour, then the transmission mechanism may operate differently. The significant development would be that governments began to believe poor provision could cost votes.

This may explain, at least in part, why poor public services can coexist with vigorous electoral democracy. Dissatisfaction is not enough. Citizens need information about the failure; they need some agreement about who is responsible; the problem must become sufficiently salient to outweigh competing electoral concerns, and political parties must offer a meaningful alternative. A bad government school may be deeply important to a parent and still fail to determine her vote if employment, inflation, caste, religion, welfare benefits or the identity of the candidate appear more pressing during voting. The weakness is, therefore, not that voters fail to care about public goods. It is that preferences must pass through several stages before they become electoral pressure.

There is an additional difficulty. Political competition is partly also about the supply of choices, not simply the demand expressed by voters. If competing parties offer no meaningful difference on school quality or air pollution, voters can't readily use the ballot to express a preference on those dimensions. A constituency can contain thousands of parents unhappy with its schools without

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The kitchen is not always the culprit

gem" obscure the reality of how this industry works. It doesn't exist in a vacuum. Owners are asking, mostly in hushed tones for fear of being next, how rats that can dig through anything, especially on ground floors in low-lying areas, their responsibility? Who is responsible for the garbage dump next door, or the flies milling around it, in a city that floods every monsoon? Restaurants in heritage districts pay enormous rents and wonder whose job it is to keep shared drains pest-free: The corporation, the landlord, or a tenant who moved in months ago?

They are also asking whether being penalised on Tuesday for a product that is "best before" Monday is fair. A scientist-turned-chef shared how expiry dates are often added simply because an FSSAI licence requires one — not because red chilli powder truly expires in 12 months, or ghee in a year, especially if they are stored well. Shelf-life testing is expensive and must be repeated per Stock Keeping Unit (SKU). A large FMCG company can absorb that; a home-run masala brand can't. Its dates are

often guesses dressed up as science, because the alternative is not making the product at all.

Meanwhile, the budget eateries have to stay "budget" to survive. Costs have to be held down no matter what — even through inflation, a thali or a combo meal can only stretch so far. Many used to buy vegetables in bulk to save money; now, wary of a drumstick

or a carrot going bad and drawing an inspector's eye, they buy fresh every single day.

None of this excuses unhygienic cooking. But does a single fly on a wall, or two carrots that don't look edible (mould or fungus, pending the report) warrant a suspension? A suspension is warranted when there's imminent danger to public health. But did every establishment that had its licence suspended actually pose that kind of threat? And aren't we naming and shaming before a lab test even confirms how severe the alleged threat really is?

We know the numbers: How many F&B establishments got notices, how many licences were suspended or flagged for improvement, how many litres of milk were destroyed. What we don't know is anything about the lab tests behind these actions. Have they been completed? How many confirmed adulterations? And how many kitchens actually posed a threat to public health?

My mother was right to warn me, and Mundhe is right to be doing what he's doing. But to drive this necessary must have the discipline to tell a civic failure from a kitchen's failure, and a genuine health hazard from a fly that landed on the wrong wall at the wrong time. Otherwise, we risk building a system that punishes visibility and leaves the real, harder problems of our food chain exactly where they were.

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A suspension is warranted when there's imminent danger to public health. But did every establishment that had its licence suspended actually pose that kind of threat?

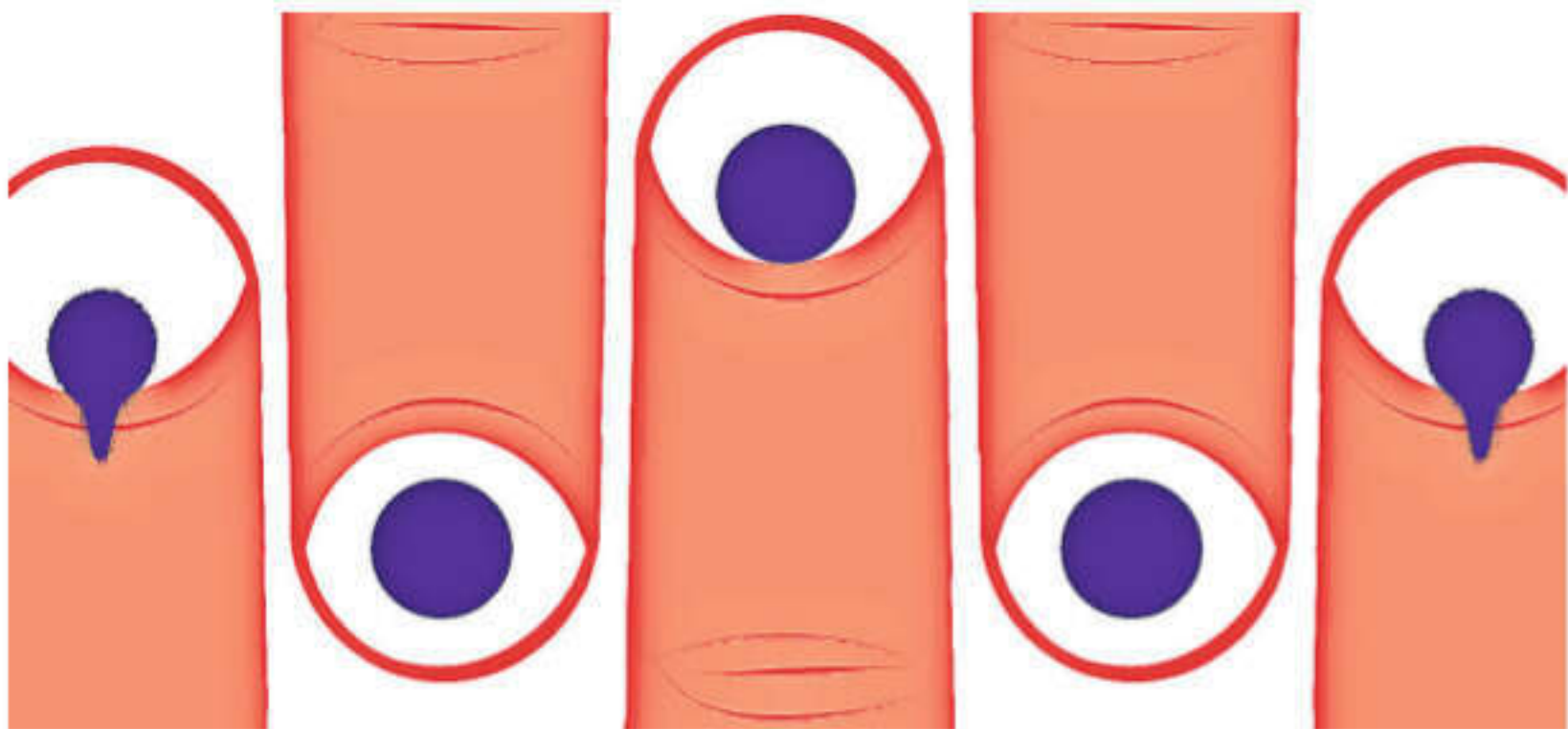


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

Each decision is individually rational. Together, they reflect a political equilibrium in which public failure becomes easier to tolerate because those with the resources and influence to demand reform have partly insulated themselves from it.

Where richer and politically effective users remain dependent on public provision, pressure for reform is stronger. Where they exit, accountability weakens. Take passport services, railway reservations and rural elementary education as a contrast. Passport and railway services, which are heavily used by the middle classes, have experienced much stronger anti-corruption reform. Elementary schooling, from which better-off households exited, did not experience comparable pressure. The exit of richer citizens reduced pressure for reform, leaving poorer users to cope with weaker public systems.

A public service may matter enormously to welfare and still have little electoral salience. The more recent politics of welfare suggests that governments appear to receive clearer electoral returns when benefits are visible, attributable and delivered directly to households. Piped water, LPG connections, electricity connections, toilets, food transfers and cash benefits differ from school quality or clean air in an important respect. The beneficiary can usually identify both the benefit and its political source. Ahead of the 2024 general election, many women voters directly linked their support for the government to vis-

The exit of richer citizens reduced pressure for reform, leaving poorer users to cope with weaker public systems



HEENA KHANDELWAL

I WAS in school when a chhole bhature shop opened nearby, selling at Rs 5 a plate. Back then, eating out was reserved for special occasions, and that stall marked my first real joy of eating out on an ordinary day. My mother would warn: Eat homemade food. Outside, they use artificial colours, leftover vegetables, oil reused again and again, and no hygiene at all.

As eating out became part of my job, a pattern became clear — barring a few high-end places that proudly give journalists a kitchen tour, most restaurants would dissuade me from entering theirs, or ask me to wait while they scrambled to fix things before I saw them.

The last few months have reminded me of my mother's warnings, as the drive led by Maharashtra FDA commissioner Tukaram Mundhe has flooded the FDA's long-silent WhatsApp group with photos and videos, often proving her right.

In under three months, Mundhe has become something of a hero in the popular imagination. His crackdown on milk adulteration is reaching every corner of the state, to the point where dairy farmers in remote villages are reportedly scared to add even water to their supply. His push to implement food-safety regulations for children in schools is particularly laudable.

But blunt "heroism" has its own casualties. The Instagram reels pointing you to the latest "hidden



MADAN SABNAVIS

THE PRICE of sugar has gone up. This is part of a normal cycle based on how sugar output moves. But, it comes at a time when there has been a push for the production of ethanol to reduce the import of crude oil. Some pertinent issues have been raised considering that sugarcane is also an important feedstock for producing ethanol. At a broader level, will this lead to pressure on crop supplies?

Ethanol can be produced from maize, rice and sugarcane-derived products. Around 45 per cent comes from maize and

20-25 per cent from rice, with the balance being sugar based. The economics of the mix is interesting. Maize is most preferred as 1 tonne of maize yields 380-400 litres of ethanol. In case of rice, it is slightly lower at 370-385 litres; for sugarcane it is 220-280 litres. Therefore, maize is highest in the pecking order among the three. Besides, there is also the availability issue which favours maize.

Maize again comes at the lowest cost which is around Rs 20,000-21,000 per tonne. In case of rice, it is around Rs 38,000-39,000 per tonne while for sugar it works out to approximately Rs 37,000 per tonne. Therefore, companies would prefer to use maize. But, all three guzzle a lot of water. In the case of maize, it takes 500-900 litres to produce one

kg, which goes up to 1,500-2,500 litres for sugarcane and 2,000-3,500 litres for rice. Hence, ideally more maize should be diverted for ethanol production.

For maize, there are three sources of demand. First, households, who account for a small part of the demand. Second, maize is also used for supporting cattle and poultry and accounts for 60 per cent of the total feed.

Higher demand could potentially increase prices which will trickle to prices of dairy, meat and related products ethanol production

Third, for industrial use, where starch is the product. Ethanol will now be the fourth dimension. Considering that production using GM variety seeds is not permitted for maize, output growth and, as a consequence, demand has to be met by using existing domestic seeds. This can be a problem as demand for ethanol is now going to rise with E20 being made mandatory. Higher demand could potentially increase prices which will trickle to prices of dairy, meat and related products. A tempting solution would be to allow the use of GM seeds to enhance output for only ethanol production.

Presently, the excess stocks of rice held by the FCI, which were procured earlier, have been sold in the market. As the quality of rice

was low, it made sense to sell these stocks in the open market. But this cannot be the strategy going forward while considering a feedstock for producing ethanol. The higher water usage for rice and sugarcane may make maize a preferred feedstock. But the incremental output will only add to the pressure on water resources in the country. Curiously, there has also been a big push for the creation of data centres which are also heavy consumers of power and water. The supply of water will be a key challenge going ahead for the Indian economy.

The writer is chief economist, Bank of Baroda, and author of Corporate Quirks: The Darker Side of the Sun. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trust in Manipur

REHABILITATION MUST go beyond returning families to their former locations ('Ensure dignity, way back for Manipur's displaced', IE, September 19). Many displaced people need secure housing, livelihoods, schooling and health-care before they can rebuild their lives. The government should publish a clear, time-bound plan and involve local communities in implementing it. Independent monitoring can ensure that assistance reaches genuine beneficiaries. Restoring trust between communities is essential for durable peace.

Abbharna Barathi, Chennai

Prevent, protect

DRUG ADDICTION demands sustained attention rather than campaigns ('Punjab owes its young a chance to recover', IE, September 19). Families need accessible counselling, while affected young people require treatment without stigma and support after rehabilitation. Schools can strengthen prevention through awareness and early identification, while local bodies can coordinate with health professionals and community groups. Punjab needs more opportunities for skills and employment. Recovery becomes meaningful only when young people have support and a realistic future to work towards.

AS Nithis Kumar, Neelambur

Troubling delays

DELAYS IN pay, pensions and service benefits are troubling when they affect personnel who have completed their duties ('Don't force soldiers to fight for their due', IE, September 19). Government departments should adopt a digital system to track claims, with timelines and automatic escalation of unresolved cases. Periodic audits can identify systemic bottlenecks. A grievance mechanism would reduce litigation and ensure that legitimate dues reach personnel without hardship.

K Sakunthala, Coimbatore

‘NEED TO SHIFT TO DOMESTIC THORIUM FROM IMPORT DEPENDENCY OF URANIUM AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE’

India's top nuclear scientist calls for early thorium shift in PHWRs

INDIA'S TOP nuclear scientist Anil Kakodkar has advocated the early introduction of thorium-based fuel into the indigenous pressurised heavy water reactor (PHWR) fleet, while continuing in parallel with the three-stage nuclear programme, to speed up the utilisation of the country's abundant thorium reserves.

The three-stage nuclear power programme was conceived in the 1950s by Homi Bhabha, the architect of India's nuclear programme.

With the world transitioning from uranium to thorium, the appeal of PHWRs will grow, particularly in emerging economies, **Anil Kakodkar**, former Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, who now holds the position of the Chancellor at Homi Bhabha National Institute and the Chairman of Rajiv Gandhi Science & Technology Commission, told **Anil Sasi** in an interview. Edited excerpts:

After SHANTI Act's passage, the Centre seems veering around to the view that opening up of this strategic atomic energy sector is primarily to access external funding, rather than source foreign technology. Is it safe to presume that indigenous PHWRs would continue to be the mainstay of future capacity addition plans?

Unlike other energy forms, nuclear reactors are fuel producers as well, alongside their role as energy producers. Lever-

aging this feature is important for a country like India which has large energy needs with very insufficient energy resources.

National nuclear energy and nuclear fuel recycling policy thus remains an important guiding force, along with economic considerations, for driving the choice of nuclear reactors systems and their growth. Since fuel recycling activities have to remain within the government, nurturing a symbiotic and mentoring relationship between the government and the public or private sector utilities holds utmost importance.

The PHWR system has been developed as a part of our well conceived approach to India's self-reliance, and long-term energy security or independence, to be realised through India's globally largest thorium resources. Barring molten salt reactors (MSRs), which are yet to mature, PHWRs are the best platforms for utilising thorium among thermal reactors.

Most importantly, PHWR has also established itself as a robust, safe and economically competitive technology, and thus offers significant attraction to investors — while also taking India's nuclear energy policy forward. It would thus be natural to expect domestic PHWR to occupy a major share of the 100 GWe nuclear mission (to be implemented between now and 2047) with imported LWRs occupying most of the remaining share.



The large-scale deployment of fast breeder reactors (FBRs) is a work-in-progress. To catch up, how compelling is the need for a quick solution to tide over the slowdown in nuclear capacity addition rate due to fuel supply constraints?

Although commercial uranium and thorium resources are roughly equal globally, nuclear energy programmes naturally began with uranium since the only naturally available fissile isotope is uranium-235. However, there appears to be a political/global security-related constraint in adopting uranium recycling by most countries, drastically reducing uranium's energy potential. Rapid growth in nuclear energy programmes that is on the anvil worldwide, and a reluctance to recycle uranium is expected to create supply-demand mismatch and related uranium supply security challenges that could hit India in

the next 10-15 years. Large FBR capacity, particularly fuelled by metallic fuel, that breeds nuclear fuel more efficiently, is very important and its large scale electricity contribution is a very compelling national necessity.

Is there a solution in fuel-cycle options rather than reactor options? If the plan is to continue with PHWRs, how crucial is it to explore introducing thorium at an earlier stage than envisaged in our original 3-stage programme? In that context, how important is the possibility of exploring thorium irradiation, along with HALEU (a new type of fuel that blends thorium with a more concentrated type of uranium called HALEU, or high-assay low-enriched uranium), in PHWRs at scale? To deploy recycled used fuel, is there a need for additional power generation capacity, including through MSRs?

The reactor option has to necessarily depend on the nuclear fuel cycle option. It seems to me that the days of natural and low enriched uranium fuel cycle will soon get past their peak.

The capacity that global uranium resources can sustain in once-through mode is around 550-750 GWe (assuming a reactor life of 60 years), whereas the nuclear capacity of ~1,400 GWe by year 2050 has been projected by the World Nuclear Associ-

ation. While FBRs remain critical for our long-term energy security and nuclear fuel supply, including from thorium, we are unlikely to reach the scale required for their deployment to sustain power capacity growth when uranium shortages start constraining it. Fast reactor technology has to evolve through a few technology transitions such as oxide-fuelled reactors, metallic-fuelled reactors, and related fuel-cycle technologies.

Thus, there are around two to three decades gap before one can think of fleet mode deployment of these reactors, and leverage them for thorium irradiation at scale in accordance with our three-stage programme strategy. This is where fleet mode construction of PHWRs, that is ongoing, comes in handy.

Using HALEU-thorium fuel in PHWRs, without any significant design change, opens an earlier parallel path to thorium irradiation at scale while also gaining the advantages of reduced spent fuel inventory, greater economy, uranium saving, and greater safety.

This should enable earlier initiation of the third stage with thorium molten salt reactors (TMSRs) are supposed to be developed as part of the three-stage programme) in about 15 years from now. Irradiated thorium input from fast reactors, whenever available at scale, will augment the third stage deployment momentum. **FULL INTERVIEW ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM**

How agentic AI could transform the way we make digital payments

Akash Mandal

Mumbai, September 20

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is the hot topic right now, with industries such as IT already seeing a structural change with the adoption of new technologies. The payments industry is also integrating AI into its services, particularly agentic AI.

Conventional AI has been integrated into the payments ecosystem for quite some time, helping reduce friction in payments process and enhancing digital safety by making backend process more reliable, and screening consumers from fraudulent transactions.

However, agentic AI might take the industry towards agentic commerce, where an AI agent will take care of a consumer's entire payment journey, making it frictionless.

The Global Fintech Fest (GFF), held in Mumbai from September 8-11, saw many of the country's top payments companies showcase AI integration into their products. The National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) unveiled MyUPI — an AI-powered revamp campaign of delegating pre-authorised payments, and automatic and seamless filing of payment disputes. It also launched a backend tool that acts as a “connective tissue” for AI interaction across the financial ecosystem, called Agentic Orchestration and Messaging (aToM).

While agentic AI — a model that executes tasks for users without constant prompts, but within certain limits — could streamline the entire “procurement to payment” process for businesses, its adoption is still at a nascent stage. At present, agentic commerce happens to be its biggest use-case.

• PAYMENT EVOLUTION

AGENTIC COMMERCE is a digital trade model under which AI agents streamline the buying process on behalf of customers

IT DOESN'T bypass authorisation, but only cuts down steps in a customer's e-commerce journey, and saves their time

IT ALSO takes care of the payments stage, and can determine the ideal card or mode of payment for a transaction



THE CONSUMER will have oversight, and can change any of the components during the process

What is agentic commerce?

Agentic commerce is a digital trade model under which AI agents streamline the buying process by discovering, negotiating, and executing on behalf of customers. This does not mean bypassing the need for authorisation. It only cuts down steps involved in a customer's e-commerce journey, including the payments phase.

For example, AI-powered tools can notify a customer of discounts on products that they have been viewing for months. If they decide to buy it, the AI agent on their payments platform can determine

the ideal card or mode of payment — cutting down the need for multiple OTPs and authorisation requirements to just one-time authentication — for the transaction. Thus, the consumer will have oversight, and can change any of the components during the process. But they will save their time, and may find the best deal if they proceed with the whole process.

Amazon Pay's smart wallet, demonstrated at the GFF last week, is one such example. “With agentic AI, I think that assistance for humans to get their

job done in a very informed, intelligent manner, with a lot of control and trust, is kind of a large opportunity we see. And how that companion fits into what we call a Smart Wallet,” said Girish Krishnan, Director of payments, rewards, and merchant services at Amazon Pay India.

The Smart Wallet uses features such as smart recommendations, biometric authentication, and a tap-and-pay feature, and an AI agent taking care of each step to save the consumer's time. It also has the ability to auto-execute small-ticket regular purchases within a particular limit. For instance, if a customer with the monthly limit of Rs 10,000 orders groceries, they won't have to authenticate the process each time until the grocery amount for a month exceeds the threshold.

Such a feature is now being widely adopted by the payments industry. MyUPI has a similar feature. Other digital wallets provided by Samsung Pay, Google Pay, and PhonePe also offer similar features that enable pin-less small-ticket purchases. While not AI, Amazon Pay adds to this feature with its agentic commerce ecosystem.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

NPCIL begins fuel loading at RAPP-8, unit nears operation

Pratyush Deep

New Delhi, September 20

NUCLEAR POWER Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) has begun initial fuel loading (IFL) at Unit 8 of the Rajasthan Atomic Power Project (RAPP) in Rawatbhata, Rajasthan, marking a key step towards commissioning the 700-megawatt-electric (MWe) indigenous pressurised heavy water reactor (PHWR). The reactor is expected to commence commercial operation during the current financial year.

The process from initial fuel loading to commercial operation of the unit typically takes about six to eight months.

“Initial Fuel Loading commenced at 15:18 hrs on September 19, 2026, in the presence of Shri S. D. Paraswar, Director (Operations); Shri N. K. Mitharwal, Director (Projects); Shri D. S. Rao, Site Director, Rawatbhata Rajasthan Site, along with the Station Directors,” NPCIL said in a statement. The commencement of IFL followed permission from the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) and completion of the prescribed prerequisites. “The permission was granted following rigorous safety evaluations, major system integrity audits and site readiness reviews conducted as part of the regulatory process,” the state-owned company said.

“With the commencement of IFL, Unit 8 has entered an important stage of its commissioning journey. The next major steps will include the First Ap-

proach to Criticality (FAC), marking the start of a controlled fission chain reaction, followed by the commencement of power generation,” NPCIL said.

Unit 8 of RAPP is the fourth reactor in the series of 16 indigenous 700 MWe PHWRs being set up in the country, the company said. The first two reactors in this series — Units 3 and 4 at Kakrapar Atomic Power Station (KAPS) in Gujarat — commenced commercial operation in 2023-24, followed by Unit 7 of RAPP in April 2025.

NPCIL said the development further strengthens the standardisation of the 700 MWe PHWR reactor design and supports its continued deployment in fleet mode.

“The progress at RAPP-8 reflects the continued advancement of India's indigenous nuclear power programme and NPCIL's commitment to the safe, clean, reliable and sustained generation of nuclear power-based electricity,” the state-owned company added.

Meanwhile, geotechnical investigations for Units 9 and 10 at the RAPP site in Rawatbhata also commenced on September 19, marking a key step in the foundational development of the project. *The Indian Express* has learnt. Apart from Unit 8 of RAPP, NPCIL currently has eight other reactors under construction — two each at Gorakhpur in Haryana and Kaiga in Karnataka, and four at Kudankulam in Tamil Nadu.

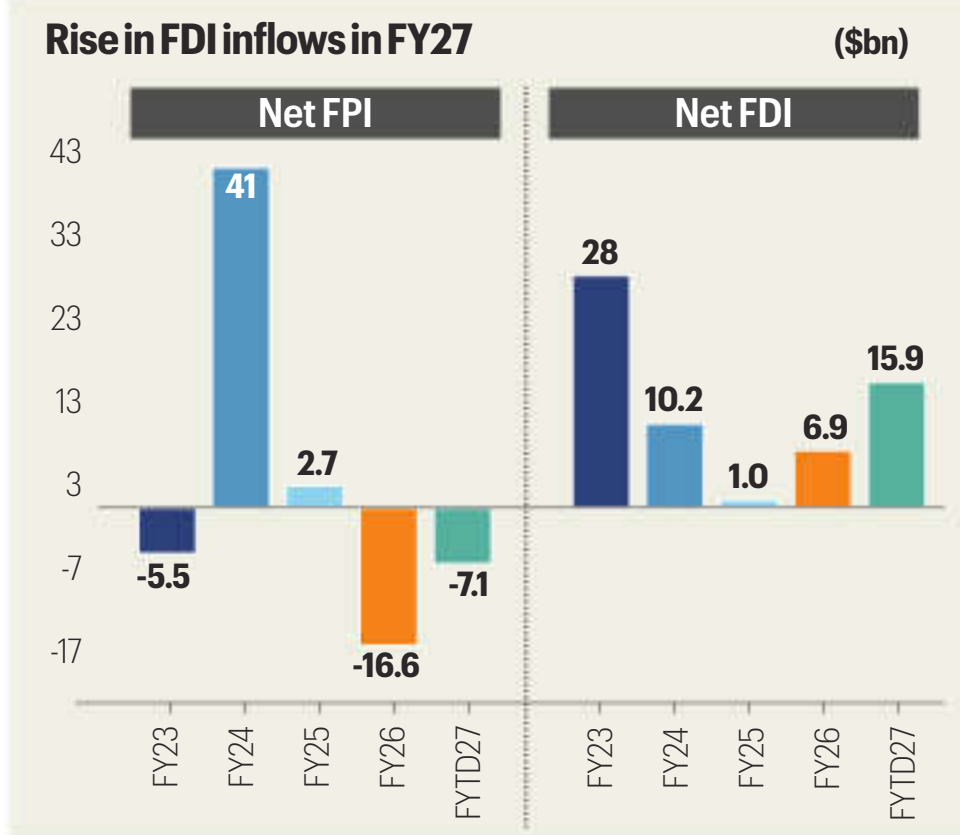
• India's external situation improving even beyond FCNR(B)

\$127 billion+

of inflows through FCNR(B) deposits have improved India's external buffers, the situation has also improved due to other factors.

● According to Gaura Sen Gupta, Chief Economist at IDFC FIRST Bank, net FDI in the year as a whole could be more than \$20 billion. This would be two-and-a-half times the net inflow of \$7.9 billion in 2024-25 and 2025-26 put together.

● “If this sustains, then the reliance on other highly volatile capital inflows such as FPI to fund the current account deficit will be lower,” Sen Gupta said.



Net FDI inflows in the first four months	2025-26	\$9.3 billion	Gross FDI inflows, which hit a new record of \$95 billion in 2025-26, are up 15% so far this year.
	2026-27	\$15.9 billion	

SOURCE: CEIC, IDFC FIRST BANK ECONOMICS RESEARCH

NSE's shareholders retain significant stake even after tendering shares in OFS

Press Trust of India

New Delhi, September 20

A MAJORITY of the existing shareholders of the National Stock Exchange of India (NSE) have retained a significant portion of their holdings even after tendering shares in the offer-for-sale (OFS) component of the exchange's Rs 22,569-crore initial public offering (IPO).

The selling shareholders largely comprised institutional investors, who collectively held a 36.82% stake in NSE before the IPO and tendered shares representing a 5.11% stake in the ex-

change, according to an analysis of data. Of the 20 institutional shareholders that participated in the OFS, nine were foreign institutional investors, which collectively held a 15.96% stake before the IPO, it added.

The remaining 11 were domestic institutions, comprising 10 public sector entities and ICICI Lombard General Insurance, which together held a 20.86% stake before the OFS.

Several large institutional shareholders have largely stayed put despite participating in the OFS. Aranda Investments, which held a 4.54%

stake before the OFS, Stock Holding Corporation of India with a 4.44% stake, SBI Capital Markets with 4.33% and Chrysler Capital with 3.73% have reduced their holdings by an average of only around 7%.

Among other large foreign investors, Crown Capital offered around 11% of its pre-OFS holding, while TA Asia Pacific reduced its holding by about 6%.

The pattern indicates that the OFS has allowed existing investors to partially monetise their investments while continuing to hold substantial stakes in NSE.

Adani Power to invest Rs 48k cr in 3,200-MW Assam project

Mumbai: Adani Power will invest Rs 48,000 crore in its upcoming 3,200 MW thermal power in Assam.

Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday laid the foundation stone for Adani Power (APL) 3,200 MW ultra-supercritical thermal power plant (USTPP) at Chapar in lower Assam's Dhubri district.

“In just a few years, this project will become the largest power generation asset in the Northeast. It will fuel industries, give businesses the power to scale, and help bring affordable electricity to homes,” Jeet Adani, director, Adani Group.

The Chapar plant is part of a Rs 63,000-crore power investment in Assam, with commissioning in phases from December 2030. Across sectors, investments in the state will exceed Rs 80,000 crore, with projects already moving from commitment to execution and set to create jobs, infrastructure and new economic opportunities across Assam over the next three to four years, he said. FE

FMCG firms to hold prices despite rise in commodity costs; focus on volumes

Press Trust of India

New Delhi, September 20

FMCG COMPANIES are likely to hold prices through the festive season despite a rise in commodity prices, including sugar, and the impact of geopolitical disruptions, as they seek to protect consumer demand and maintain volume growth amid improving consumption.

Leading industry executives said companies have already gone for judicious increases of around 2-5% in the June quarter to partly offset higher input costs and are unlikely to raise prices further before the end of the festive season, even as margins remain under pressure.

The sector has been facing renewed cost pressures, with sugar prices touching a new high, alongside a sharp increase in costs of key inputs such as edible oils, coffee, cocoa and crude oil derivatives used in packaging, amid geopolitical disruptions and supply concerns in global markets.

While most companies have

absorbed a significant part of the inflation through cost-control initiatives and portfolio management, they remain focused on protecting volume growth, even as pressure on margins remains elevated, industry executives said.

ITC Chief Executive Officer, Foods Division, and Executive Director Hemant Malik said the company would maintain prices through the festive season despite cost inflation.

“We are attempting to hold prices,” Malik said, noting that companies have been absorbing a large part of the increase in commodity prices through cost management initiatives and portfolio actions.

Referring to the impact of the goods and services tax rate reduction on several consumer products last year, Malik said the move had led to buoyancy in volumes across multiple categories and supported market demand. However, he indicated that companies may have to revisit pricing decisions later in the financial year if cost pressures persist.

• BRIEFLY

Hiring gains momentum in smaller cities

Mumbai: Small cities are emerging as major talent hubs, with a majority of employers witnessing a significant increase in hiring from tier II and III locations in the last two years, according to a report. India's hiring landscape is increasingly moving beyond traditional metropolitan centres, as 69% of organisations reported increasing hiring from tier II and III cities by more than 30% over the last two years, said the report by workforce staffing and HR solutions Genius HRTech Ltd. PTI

Titan open to acquiring smaller watch brands

Bengaluru: Watchmaker Titan Company, which has been expanding its premium and luxury watch portfolio, is open to acquiring or investing in smaller and emerging brands as part of its growth strategy, a top company official said. The Tata group firm expects a “robust” festive season this year, driven by healthy consumer demand and an early wedding season coinciding with a delayed Diwali, said Titan Company Chief Marketing Officer Ranjani Krishnaswamy. PTI

• NEW MOBILE-MEMORY CHIPS HOLD 50% MORE DATA THAN PRIOR COMPARABLE PRODUCTS

CXMT's new memory-chip platform enters mass production

Reuters

Beijing, September 20

CHINESE DRAM chipmaker CXMT said on Sunday its fifth-generation technology platform had entered mass production, a claimed breakthrough that could help China build a stronger competitor to Samsung Electronics, SK Hynix and Micron Technology in the global market for memory chips.

DRAM, or dynamic random-access memory, is the short-term working memory that phones, computers and other devices use to run apps and programmes. The new platform is designed to make more powerful memory chips at lower cost and with less

power use. CXMT, which listed on Shanghai's STAR Market this year, said it would give electronics makers an additional source of supply for chips used in smartphones and other devices.

CXMT, China's leading producer of DRAM, said the new platform packs the tiny structures that store data closer together, allowing more memory to fit on each chip and more individual chips to be made from each silicon wafer.

The Hefei-based memory-chip maker said it had reduced the spacing of key features in the part of the chip that stores data to 11.95 nanometres, or about 12 billionths of a metre.

It achieved this using



CXMT said it would give electronics makers an additional source of supply for chips used in smartphones and other devices. REUTERS

“quadruple patterning,” a process that repeats several manufacturing steps to produce finer circuit patterns. “Our process capability is now on par with

the most advanced mass-produced nodes out there in the industry,” Luo Xiaodong, CXMT's vice president and head of its marketing centre, said at the

2026 World Manufacturing Convention in Hefei.

CXMT unveils two new chips

CXMT also unveiled two 24-gigabit LPDDR5X products made on the new platform. LPDDR5X is a power-saving type of DRAM used mainly in smartphones and other portable electronics. The products each hold 50% more data than CXMT's previous equivalent products and are already in mass production, the company said. They are offered in two package formats for different smartphone and portable-device designs.

CXMT said the platform can produce at least 50% more gross

chip dies per wafer than its fourth-generation platform, using an 8-gigabit-chip baseline.

That measures the potential number of chips made from a wafer before defective units are excluded, rather than the proportion that pass final testing.

CXMT said it developed the platform using computer simulations and joint work with Chinese chip-equipment makers on critical production steps.

The advance comes as Beijing seeks to reduce reliance on foreign semiconductor technology and US export controls since 2022 have restricted China's access to certain advanced chipmaking equipment and related software.

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Economy

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2026

IN THE NEWS

PREZ MURMU TO START 3-DAY GUJ VISIT TODAY



PRESIDENT DROUPADI MURMU will be on a visit Gujarat during September 21-23, her office said on Sunday. She will preside over the 72nd National Film Awards at Ekta Nagar, Kevadia, on September 22, it said in a statement.

IOC DIRECTOR QUILTS 5 WEEKS AFTER JOINING



ALKA MUNDRA HAS resigned as an independent director of state-run Indian Oil (IOC), barely five weeks after joining the board, saying her son's petrol pump dealership with the company breaches independence criteria under stock market listing rules.Obligations and Disclosure Requirements (LODR) Regulations.

Keralam CM to unveil ₹93-cr coastal project on Tuesday



KERALAM CHIEF MINISTER VD Satheesan will on September 22 inaugurate the construction of a sea wall at Pozhiyoor as part of a ₹93.22 crore coastal protection project, Minister Mons Joseph said on Sunday.

Karnataka special session from today to discuss drought

A THREE-DAY SPECIAL session of the Karnataka legislature will begin from September 21 to discuss the drought situation in the state and the Kasturirangan report on Western Ghats ecologically sensitive areas.

Nagaland electoral roll published: SIR retains 1.1 mn voters



NAGALAND'S DRAFT ELECTORAL roll was published on Sunday with nearly 159,000 of the 1.3 million voters excluded from the pre-SIR list. The Chief Electoral Officer's office said the draft roll has 1.1 million names, with SIR exercise finding 29,944 electors from the previous list deceased.

AGENCIES

APRIL-AUGUST SHIPMENTS NEAR \$20 BILLION

India's exports to core BRICS rise 34%

MUKESH JAGOTA
New Delhi, September 20

INDIA'S EXPORTS TO the four core BRICS economies of Brazil, China, Russia and South Africa surged 34% in April-August this year to \$19.9 billion, from \$14.9 billion in the corresponding period last year, signalling a sharp acceleration in shipments to the bloc's original members. The growth in exports to the core BRICS members was substantially faster than the increase in India's exports to the expanded 11-member grouping. India's exports to all BRICS countries rose 13% year-on-year to \$34.5 billion during April-August, from \$30.5 billion in the same period last year, according to an analysis by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The stronger performance of the four core members has also increased their weight in India's export basket. Their share of India's total exports rose to 9.2% in April-August, from 8.1% in the corresponding period of 2025.

"India is not only strengthening its trade footprint within BRICS but is also becoming more integrated with the bloc's largest economies. With exports to core BRICS growing nearly three times faster than exports to the broader BRICS grouping, these markets are increasingly emerging as a key pillar of India's export strategy," a senior official said.

TRADE TIES GETS STRONGER



China was the largest contributor to the increase among the core BRICS economies, with Indian exports rising 39% to \$9.6 billion during April-August. South Africa recorded the fastest growth, with exports increasing 58% to \$4.82 billion during the first five months of the financial year. Exports to Brazil and Russia also recorded double-digit growth of 13% and 11%, respectively. Shipments to Brazil stood at \$3.46 billion in April-August, while those to Russia were at \$2.04 billion.

The acceleration comes at a time when BRICS is seeking to deepen economic integration

through easier market access, stronger supply chains, digital trade and greater use of local currencies.

The push received fresh impetus at the 18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi last week, where leaders adopted the New Delhi Declaration and advanced a series of initiatives aimed at facilitating trade and investment among member countries.

The measures cover trade facilitation, customs cooperation, global value chains, digital services, MSMEs, agricultural trade and cross-border payments.

The expansion of BRICS to

11 members has also widened India's potential trading market beyond the original Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa grouping. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia have joined the grouping, opening additional opportunities for Indian businesses in areas ranging from energy and minerals to agriculture, manufacturing and services.

The summit's focus, however, extended beyond increasing trade volumes to addressing practical barriers that constrain commerce among member countries.

The Strategy for BRICS Eco-

nomics Partnership 2030 is being positioned as the broader framework for economic cooperation, while the BRICS Global Value Chains Action Plan for 2026-30 seeks to strengthen and diversify supply chains and increase the participation of developing economies in higher-value production.

Customs cooperation is another important element of the emerging trade architecture, with BRICS members. Digital trade and services also received considerable attention at the summit, an area of particular importance for India given its strong position in IT and business services.

Record pulses buffer of 4.5 MT may help prevent price spikes

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, September 20

THE GOVERNMENT'S BUFFER stocks of pulses have risen to a record 4.5 million tonne (MT), which would be used to curb price rises in case of any shortfall in kharif output and forthcoming rabi or winter crop prospects.

The current stock is well above the buffer norm of 3.5 MT.

The strategic reserve of pulses is largely built through procurement from farmers under the agriculture ministry's Price Support Scheme (PSS) by agencies such as farmers' cooperative Nafed and the National Cooperative Consumers' Federation (NCCF), as well as through some imports under the Price Stabilisation Fund.

The stock comprises 1.95 MT of gram or chana, 1 MT of tur, 0.88 MT of moong and 0.56 MT of masur or lentils. According to sources, these stocks will be released in a calibrated manner to contain any price spikes. The government usually releases pulses through open market sales and supplies them to states for welfare schemes

SUPPLY CUSHION



■ Current stock is well above 3.5 MT of buffer norm

■ Chana accounts for 1.95 MT of the reserve

■ Govt holds 1 MT of tur, 0.88 MT of moong, 0.56 MT of masur

■ Pulses acreage falls 1.42% y-o-y to 11.84 mn hectares

■ Kharif pulses harvesting is expected to begin by Oct-end

such as PM-Poshan, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the Public Distribution System (PDS).

"The time to initiate market intervention programmes for pulses will be decided once we get a clear picture of the impact of El Nino on crops for both kharif as well as forthcoming

rabi or winter crop prospects," an official told FE.

Officials said kharif crop prospects are still being monitored to assess the possibility of a fall in output due to a rainfall shortfall in key growing regions of Karnataka and Maharashtra.

Acreage under kharif pulses, including tur, urad and moong, stood at 11.84 million hectares as of September 18, down 1.42% year-on-year. Harvesting of these crops is expected to begin towards the end of October.

Retail inflation in the 'pulses' category stood at 3.61% year-on-year in August 2025.

Average retail prices of major pulses—tur, gram and urad—rose to ₹123.43/kg, ₹88.23/kg and ₹122.63/kg, respectively, on Saturday, according to the price monitoring cell of the Department of Consumer Affairs (DoCA). This represents increases of 7.19%, 0.79% and 7.42%, respectively, compared to the previous year.

Officials said there has been no unusual rise in retail pulse prices, citing the government's stable import policy.

NLC India to scale up mining, renewables

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, September 20

STATE-RUN NLC INDIA (NLCIL) plans to nearly double its mining capacity to 104.35 million tonne per annum (MTPA) and expand its renewable energy capacity more than fivefold to over 10 gigawatts (GW) by 2030, as it scales up both conventional and clean-energy operations, Ministry of Coal said in a statement.

NLCIL currently has a mining capacity of 59.1 MTPA, power generation capacity of 8,405 MW and an operational renewable energy portfolio of around 1.8 GW. By 2047, the company aims to raise its mining capacity to 115.85 MTPA and renewable energy capacity to 32.7 GW.

"Coal and lignite continue to serve as the nation's baseload anchor," the ministry said, outlining NLCIL's expansion strategy to meet rising electricity demand while supporting decarbonisation.

The company is developing

1,980-MW supercritical thermal units at Ghatampur and ultra-supercritical pit-head projects of 2,400 MW at Talabira and 4,000 MW at Machhakatta.

NLCIL is also commissioning first-mile rail connectivity infrastructure with a combined capacity of 63.5 MTPA across five locations to reduce dependence on road transportation.

Through its green subsidiary, NLCIL Renewables, the company aims to achieve a 50% clean-energy share in its generation mix.

Its battery energy storage portfolio includes projects in Tamil Nadu with a capacity of 250 MW/500 MWh, Rajasthan (300 MW/1,800 MWh), Gujarat (275 MW/550 MWh) and West Bengal (50 MW/200 MWh). The company is also planning pumped-storage projects in Tamil Nadu and Odisha.

NLCIL is also constructing a 4-MW solar-powered green hydrogen pilot plant at Neyveli and collaborating with IIT Madras on advanced carbon capture systems.



ICAI brings PSB branch auditors under peer review

● Targets 1-year disposal of disciplinary cases

MANU KAUSHIK
Kochi, September 20

THE INSTITUTE OF Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) will extend the mandatory peer review requirement to all component auditors undertaking public sector bank (PSB) branch audits from January 2027. The institute is also planning to reduce the time taken to dispose of disciplinary cases against chartered accountants (CAs) to 365 days from the current two to three years, ICAI president Prasanna Kumar D said.

The peer review requirement will now cover component auditors of PSBs, while principal auditors of PSBs are already covered under the existing framework.

Peer review is currently mandatory for firms undertaking statutory audits of listed entities, specified large unlisted public companies, entities that have raised more than ₹50 crore from the public or from banks and financial institutions, and public-interest entities. The requirement also applies to firms providing attestation services with three or more partners.

ICAI currently has more than 1,000 peer reviewers, and the institute is also considering extending the requirement to auditors of private sector bank branches. The expanded exercise is expected to cover around 15,000 audit firms, according to ICAI officials.

Simultaneously, it has shifted the peer-review process from a manual system to a web portal, covering the process from application to issuance of the certificate.

"Earlier, 4,000-5,000 firms used to be certified by us, with the certification valid for three years. Now, even 30,000-40,000 CA firms can be peer reviewed in a year. To that extent, we have increased our capacity," Kumar said.

On disciplinary action, around 400 cases are pending

SYSTEM UPDATE



■ PSB branch audit to come under mandatory peer review from January

■ 15,000 firms are expected to be covered by expanded exercise

■ ICAI currently has more than 1,000 peer reviewers

■ 30,000-40,000 CA firms can be peer reviewed in a year

■ Peer-review process has shifted from a manual system to a web portal, covering the process from application to issuance of the certificate

before ICAI's disciplinary benches after a prima facie opinion has been framed and accepted. Kumar said the institute aims to bring the disposal time down to 365 days, without seeking changes to the existing disciplinary procedure for now.

"We are trying to dispose of these cases within one year. At present, we are not planning any procedural reforms. Instead, we are devoting our time and energy to achieving this target," Kumar said.

ICAI's disciplinary process begins with a complaint or information received by the institute. The matter is examined by the independent Directorate of Discipline, which seeks a response from the respondent and subsequently gives the complainant an opportunity to respond. Based on the responses and documents, the directorate prepares a prima facie opinion, which is then considered by the disciplinary bodies — the Board of Discipline or the Disciplinary Committee.

(The writer was in Kochi at the invitation of ICAI)

QUICK PICKS

UNGA: Jaishankar to lead India delegation

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER S Jaishankar will be leading the Indian delegation at the 81st Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York, the MEA said on Sunday. His will be addressing the session on September 26.

PTI

J&K Autumn session to begin today

JAMMU AND KASHMIR Legislative Assembly will meet in Srinagar on Monday for a seven-sitting Autumn session as opposition parties, plan to corner the Omar Abdullah government over "failure" to fulfil electoral promises.

PTI

● SAURABH GARG, SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF STATISTICS AND PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION (MoSPI)

'New series GDP estimates likely to be significantly more stable'

India's latest GDP growth figures have faced criticism from former bureaucrats and policy-makers regarding issues ranging from allegedly "sharp revisions" of previous quarter prints to a perceived lack of transparency in employing the double deflation method to compute estimates of real GDP. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) Secretary Saurabh Garg counters these criticisms in an interview with Shubham Rana, and asserts that the new GDP series was compiled after extensive consultations with stakeholders and discussion papers. For more transparency, the 'Sources and Method' document for the new series will be released in September, he says, adding that back-series data based on new series will be published by the end of the current year.

How would you respond to

the criticisms over the GDP estimates?

GDP estimates are compiled using a well-established statistical framework, based on the internationally accepted System of National Accounts. The new GDP series with base year 2022-23 has further strengthened this framework by incorporating newer data sources, improved estimation methods and better coverage of economic activities. We have been evaluating all the raised points/feedback. We attempted to explain many of the points. Mixing an old-series nominal GDP denominator with a new-series numerator yields invalid growth rates. The changes in nominal estimates in new series over old series, are mainly due to incorporation of methodological improvements such as use of Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE) and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data for

estimates of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises compared to proxy indicators due to non-availability of regular annual data in old series, etc.

Adoption of the internationally acclaimed double deflation method for the input-intensive manufacturing sector in the new series has accurately captured the real GVA in the new series compared to the single deflation method, by which the movement of both output and input prices were kept the same.

For more transparency, we are going to release the 'Sources and Method' document of new series in September. Also, we plan to release

back-series by end of the current year.

What are the sources for the price indices being used for double deflation? What data is being used for input prices for double deflation?

The transition to double deflation was not sudden. It was built on extensive experiments and detailed analysis using historical time-series data from the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) spanning the period of 2011-12 to 2023-24, Supply Use Tables (SUT), WPI of the

2011-12 series and PPI series under the guidance of ACNAS.

Further, the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) initiated the exercise for compilation of Output Producer Price Index (PPI) and hence, the base revision of GDP was an opportune time to introduce double deflation.

Although named 'output PPI', the expanded commodity basket released by DPIIT tracks ex-factory basic prices for final goods as well as a comprehensive set of intermediate goods used as inputs across industries such as bauxite, coking coal, electricity, refined

palm oil, and cement. Item-level price indices from the output PPI are mapped directly to around 1,000 unique input item structures drawn from ASI data for 28 manufacturing compilation categories.

Even before the new GDP series was introduced, large revisions to GDP growth figures were an issue. Can we expect less steep revisions to growth numbers in the new GDP series?

While periodic revisions remain a standard and necessary feature of national accounts as preliminary estimates transition into final estimates upon receiving complete administrative and corporate accounts, growth rate revisions in the new series are expected to be significantly more stable.

Reconciling production-side Gross Value Added (GVA) and expenditure-side GDP often resulted in sizeable statistical discrepancies due to different data sources used in

THE TRANSITION TO DOUBLE DEFLATION WAS NOT SUDDEN. IT WAS BUILT ON EXTENSIVE EXPERIMENTS AND DETAILED ANALYSIS

their compilation. In the new series, compilation of GDP by production and expenditure approaches has been integrated with the Supply and Use Tables (SUT) framework. SUT acts as a balancing matrix, ensuring that input-output balances and commodity flow match across all sectors rather than relying on mathematical smoothing or unverified residual balances.

India could not develop PPI for decades despite several attempts because producers would not share prices. How has this been addressed in the new

PPI series?

The perception that creating a PPI required establishing entirely new, inaccessible price-collection channels from unwilling producers is incorrect. Under the previous 2011-12 series, price quotations for compiling the WPI for manufactured products were already collected directly from factory floors as ex-factory basic prices, excluding downstream GST and transport costs.

Because the physical source of price collection, the factory gate, remained identical, the logistical mechanism for gathering producer quotations was already institutionalised.

The primary advancement of the new PPI lies in incorporating export prices to capture external demand and lifting valuation principles strictly with national accounting basic prices, rather than changing how factory quotations are gathered from producers. The response rate is good with respect to price collection for PPI.

Tariff shock, again

Prospective duties for buying Russian oil make the Indo-US trade deal elusive

THE RULES-BASED GLOBAL trading order has been upended by US President Donald Trump’s tariff disruption. Coercive diplomacy is in play against America’s trading partners, including India which now faces the prospect of tariffs up to 100% for buying Russian oil. Trump has signed into law the Lindsey O Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 2026 which takes effect within 30 days. Besides sanctions on Moscow, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) will recommend tariffs on the top five oil buyers of Russian oil, which includes China. This legislation provides tremendous discretionary powers and leverage to the Trump administration which is negotiating a trade deal with India. The Indian government has already conveyed to US interlocutors the potential implications this legislation will have on bilateral trade relations. Besides ensuring its energy security, India will take all measures to protect its trade and economic interests.

Even earlier, India has been in the crosshairs of the Trump administration for importing Russian oil as it was slapped with 25% duties in addition to 25% reciprocal tariffs last August. Although India insists on its sovereign right to access energy supplies from anywhere in the world, it did reduce imports from Russia. Fresh loadings headed to India declined by half from 2 to 1.08 million barrels a day in February this year. This led to a framework for an interim agreement with India’s tariffs pegged at 18% from 50% earlier. But these were invalidated by the US Supreme Court. Trump then imposed a 150-day uniform tariff of 10% which expired on July 24. To retain leverage in negotiations, the USTR launched investigations under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 and imposed a 10% duty on India as its exports had inputs produced by forced labour.

The prospective US levies up to 100% for importing Russian oil make the tariff architecture of the bilateral trade deal highly uncertain. There is also a second ongoing USTR investigation on excess capacities. India wants a deal that gives it a tariff advantage over competitors but it is unclear what duties it will face in the US. For its part, it has undertaken to significantly reduce duties on US industrial and agricultural products with firm red lines on not allowing genetically modified maize, soya bean, and dairy items. Trade experts like Ajay Srivastava of the Global Trade Research Initiative argue that these impending oil tariffs will be used as a negotiation tactic by the US to reduce our Russian oil purchases and accept a deeply unequal trade agreement.

How then can India safeguard its interests? Unfortunately, it does not have the leverage that China — with its export controls on rare earths — has to prevent Trump from imposing these prospective tariffs. The intensifying conflict in West Asia has constrained alternative sources of oil supplies. They will also be costlier with Brent spot prices averaging \$109.8 a barrel this month. Unfortunately, continued dependence on cheaper Russian crude is not an option either. A supply squeeze and narrowing discounts is the reality as Moscow’s energy infrastructure is being relentlessly targeted in its war with Ukraine. Urals crude supplied to India has been trading at a premium since September 8, according to S&P Global. India’s interests are best served by not rushing to ink the trade deal as the fate of Trump’s tariffs depends on the outcome of mid-term elections.

THE HUMAN FACTOR

Wanted: fresher, 3 years' experience essential

THERE IS A new qualification for getting your first job in Indian IT: having already had one. Across the industry, job descriptions labelled “fresher” have begun quietly demanding two or three years of practical project experience. This is known as experience creep, and it is the most elegant solution yet devised to the problem of new graduates. The company still advertises entry-level roles, the college still holds its placement season, and everyone can go on believing in the escalator — except that the bottom step has been removed.

The numbers explain why. Hiring intent among IT firms has slipped, offer letters arrive with onboarding dates that recede like a mirage, and India’s largest technology employers have discovered they can earn more money while employing fewer people. Revenue, it turns out, no longer requires humans in the traditional ratio. Across the five largest firms, the combined workforce shrank last year even as every one of them grew. This is celebrated in earnings calls as productivity. On campus, it is experienced as silence.

For three decades, the mass campus hire was the industry’s great social machine. It did not merely fill seats; it converted lakhs of engineering graduates into salaried professionals, marriage prospects, and EMI payers. The model was simple: recruit in bulk, train for months, and park the surplus on the bench until a project appeared. The bench was much mocked, but it was a national institution — a paid waiting room for the middle class.

Now AI sits on the bench. It requires no training campus, no induction week, and no ice-breaker in which it must share one fun fact about itself. It arrives production-ready, which is precisely what the fresher is now instructed to be.

“Production-ready” deserves admiration as a phrase. It asks the 21-year-old to complete, before her first day of work, the apprenticeship that work used to provide. She must have built things, deployed things, and preferably suffered a small outage, all while completing her degree. The internship, once a pleasant summer of making slides, is now a qualifying tournament.

The colleges will adapt, as colleges do. Placement cells will rebrand as “talent launchpads”. Final-year projects will be described as “industry-grade”. Students will graduate with certificates in prompt engineering the way their parents graduated with typing speed.

None of this guarantees a job, but it fills the brochure.

Meanwhile a paradox is quietly assembling itself. Senior engineers have been reassured that AI will handle the junior work, freeing them for judgement, architecture, and taste. But judgement is precisely what juniors used to acquire by doing junior work. If the machine performs every task on which experience is built, tomorrow’s seniors must arrive fully formed, like Athena from the head of Zeus, or not at all. The industry has designed a workforce that demands experience while abolishing the place where experience was manufactured.

Companies are unbothered, and one sees their logic. Their planning horizon is the quarter; the missing cohort is a problem for a decade hence, by which time it will belong to a different chief executive who will commission a task force. The task force will recommend reskilling.

There is also a soothing new theory that entry-level work was never good for the young anyway — all that drudgery, all that repetition. The young might reply that drudgery came with a salary, and that being liberated from work one was never given is a curious sort of freedom.

The truthful job advertisement would read: “Wanted: fresher. Must have three years’ experience, of the kind we no longer provide.” No company will publish it, but every graduate has already read between the lines.

The fresher should nevertheless take heart. She has not been rejected; there was simply no vacancy for her at the bottom of the ladder. The ladder is being redesigned. When it returns, it will be strategic, AI-enabled, and human-centric — and it will start on the third floor.

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GOVERNING GUARANTEES

DESIGN ISSUES IN PERSONAL GUARANTOR INSOLVENCY PROCEEDINGS DEMAND REFORMS

Mend the guarantor process

EVERY YOUNG INSOLVENT regime is built twice, once in Parliament and again when it encounters reality. Part III of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), which governs the insolvency of individuals, is now having that encounter.

In the proceedings concerning Subhash Chandra as a personal guarantor, claims of ₹22,007 crore have been admitted, while the repayment plan provides ₹6 crore to creditors. The order approving the plan has since been stayed by a five-member bench, and appeals against the plan are pending. The case has exposed at least three design questions.

First, test the estate before distributing it. The outcome of an insolvency process necessarily depends on the estate available to creditors. The process should subject the estate to two tests: are all assets properly disclosed, and are all assets that ought to be there, there?

In a corporate insolvency resolution process (CIRP), the IBC provides mechanisms to examine preferential transactions, undervalued transactions, transactions defrauding creditors, and extortionate credit transactions. These provisions operate within specified look-back periods, including longer periods for related-party transactions. Following the 2026 amendments, the relevant look-back period is anchored to the CIRP’s initiation and extends to its commencement.

Part III also provides the means to unwind transactions that have improperly depleted an individual’s estate, but locates the machinery at the bankruptcy stage, with the look-back period anchored to the application for bankruptcy.

The UNCITRAL (United Nations Commission on International Trade Law) Legislative Guide identifies preferential, undervalued, and creditor-defeating transactions as core categories of avoidable transactions. It recognises that the suspect period may be calculated from the application for, or commencement of, insolvency proceedings. It cautions that a delay

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between the two can diminish the effectiveness of avoidance powers.

India has moved its corporate insolvency regime in this direction. There is no compelling reason for a personal guarantor’s creditors to have a materially weaker protection. The same avoidance framework, appropriately adapted to individual insolvency, should therefore be available from the insolvency resolution stage, with the look-back periods anchored to the initiation of that process.

Second, clean the electorate and protect the minority. In the Chandra case, it is alleged that entities linked to the guarantor held a substantial majority of the voting share. A repayment plan cannot meaningfully reflect creditor support if such persons can determine its outcome. Voting restrictions should extend beyond the narrow statutory definition of “associate” to persons economically connected with the guarantor. CIRP already embodies this principle by restricting related-party creditors from exercising voting rights in collective decision-making. Part III should adopt the same principle, suitably adapted to individual insolvency, so that the vote reflects the interests of creditors dealing with the guarantor at arm’s length.

Insolvency is a collective process and therefore binds dissenting creditors. But that power needs a fairness floor. Unlike corporate insolvency, Part III does not specify a minimum protection that a dissenting creditor should ordinarily receive. The UNCITRAL Legislative

Guide recognises this principle: where a plan binds dissenting creditors, they should generally receive at least as much as they would have received in liquidation, alongside safeguards relating to priority and approval.

Part III should therefore establish a clear counterfactual. A dissenting creditor should not receive less under a repayment plan than it would reasonably have received if the plan had not been approved and the guarantor’s estate had instead proceeded to bankruptcy. This would not eliminate haircuts. A guarantor’s insolvency may genuinely produce very little for creditors. But it would distinguish a low recovery because the estate is genuinely poor from a low recovery produced by weaknesses in the process.

Third, respect the contingent nature of a guarantee. Upon default, the guarantor’s liability is co-extensive with that of the debtor. The economics of guarantee rests on this contingency: the guarantor provides a backstop against default; he does not become the primary debtor.

Consider X has guaranteed the debts of 10 borrowers, each owing ₹100. The face value of the guarantees is ₹1,000. Suppose each borrower has a 10% probability of default. Ignoring recoveries for simplicity, X’s expected economic exposure is ₹100. If all 10 borrowers default, his liability could extend to ₹1,000. But economically, he has undertaken a risk of ₹100, not borrowed ₹1,000.

Insolvency is a collective process and therefore binds dissenting creditors. But that power needs a fairness floor

How real is India’s growth?



NIRVIKAR SINGH

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INDIA HAS AMBITIOUS goals for economic growth over the next two decades, and this has made its growth numbers the centre of considerable attention. The recent growth figure of 7.8% for April-June 2026 (versus the same quarter last year) was higher than expected, and it also was questioned more than usual. India’s national accounts statistics and growth figures have been scrutinised for at least the last decade, with concerns about the reliability and quality of the data. In the latest case, there were discussions that were of a similar technical nature to those in the past, involving collection and estimation methods for the raw data, methods for adjusting for inflation, and so on. Whereas several academics have been expressing concern about India’s growth numbers, including former Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian, this time a former senior civil servant joined the critics, and offered an alternative growth estimate of 2.6%, a number so low as to be shocking.

While the calculation behind that alternative is itself flawed, the controversy became more heated, and explanations that were not confined to academic articles proliferated. Calculating a country’s gross domestic product (GDP), the basis of any growth numbers, is an enormously complicated exercise. It involves surveying large numbers of producers, extrapolating where direct numbers are not available, and aggregating a range of different estimates. Quantities have to be converted

to values, using appropriate prices, and then adjusted for changes in the general price level, that is the rate of inflation. This latter estimation can be done in several ways, since the weights used to calculate a price index — essentially a weighted average — can be subject to choice and can change over time. Typically, the change in GDP is calculated using current prices, which gives the nominal rate of GDP growth, and then this is adjusted for changes in the price level, yielding the number of interest — real GDP growth. Real growth is what matters, since nominal growth does not reflect actual increases in the goods and services available to the population.

Periodically, the base year for calculating inflation is changed, at which point the weights are updated to better reflect what is actually being produced. This has happened recently, affecting the latest numbers. When such changes are made, older figures are revised to conform, but that process has not been completed, so there is a half-finished story here. In the current period, the deflation method was also changed, using separate indices for adjusting the prices of outputs and inputs. This seems to be an innovation for India’s national income accounting, and has been recommended

by statistical experts, but again the impacts of these changes on older growth numbers have yet to be fully worked out.

So, what should we make of all the controversy and their technical underpinnings? One will have to wait and see how the revisions play out once they are completed. Perhaps a more basic concern is that the quality of collection of the raw data has been increasingly questioned. In the 1950s, led by the eminent statistician PC Mahalanobis, India created a national accounts system that was the envy of developing nations. Over time, as the economy has grown and become more complex, data collection has not kept up. Currently, the International Monetary Fund gives India’s national accounts statistics a grade of only “C”.

Sometimes, nations are accused of manipulating national accounts statistics and growth figures to make the economy look good, in order to impress voters or investors. Those efforts can last for a long time, but ultimately fall apart, as the statistics diverge further and further from reality as experienced by firms and consumers. My impression is that such biases are minor in the Indian case. Some of the problems have come about from a lack of transparency with respect to methods and the

Concerns should be focused on the quality of the raw data, and making sure this collection is done as well and as comprehensively as possible

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Controlling inflation

Apropos of “Crunch time” (FE, September 19), rising inflation demands calibrated vigilance from the RBI. Its immediate priority should be preventing temporary price pressures from becoming entrenched inflationary expectations. The central bank must closely monitor liquidity, credit growth, currency volatility, and commodity prices, while retaining monetary-policy flexibility. However, indiscriminate

rate hikes could undermine investment and economic momentum. Since food and supply-side disruptions significantly influence inflation, monetary tightening alone won’t suffice. Coordinated government action is essential to strengthen supply chains, improve agricultural productivity, manage essential stocks, and contain imported inflation. Price stability and sustainable growth must remain complementary objectives. —N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

Heritage loss

Apropos of “Who prosecutes war crimes against culture?” (FE, September 19), recent conflicts show how vulnerable sacred and UNESCO-protected sites remain during war. War can destroy not just structures but a people’s cultural memory. The UNESCO should integrate its heritage records into AI-enabled military systems to flag protected sites and prevent their targeting. AI can provide

The difficulty arises when insolvency proceedings commence against the guarantor. A creditor may submit a claim in respect of the guarantee even though the debtor has not defaulted. Insolvency can aggregate several contingent liabilities that might otherwise crystallise at different times, or perhaps never crystallise at all. In our example, the insolvency process of the guarantor can confront claims of ₹1,000 when the contingency giving rise to invocation of the guarantee may not have occurred.

Insolvency, by bringing contingent claims into the process before the contingencies have occurred, can make a contingent risk look like a present liability. The remedy is valuing them appropriately. Where a guarantee has not yet been invoked, the claim should be treated as a contingent claim, the expected amount recoverable from the guarantor after considering the likelihood of invocation and the recovery reasonably expected from the debtor and other sources. Part III should require the claim to be admitted at its best estimated net value. This is consistent with the approach reflected in the UNCITRAL Guide, the US Bankruptcy Code, and the English insolvency rules.

If the guarantee is invoked and the liability has crystallised, the focus should shift to coordinated proceedings of the debtor and guarantor. The IBC already envisages such coordination, and the 2026 insertion of Section 28A takes it further by permitting, subject to safeguards, certain assets of a guarantor to be dealt with within the corporate debtor’s insolvency process.

Realisations under a repayment plan cannot establish whether a personal guarantor insolvency process has worked well. The process must ensure the estate is properly identified, collective decisions are free from conflicted influence, and contingent liabilities are appropriately valued. Parliament should address these gaps to make guarantees, and the credit they support, work effectively.

raw data, but it does seem that India is growing fast. Of course, even a small overestimation of growth rates will compound over time. On the other hand, if growth rate estimation errors fluctuate in both directions, discrepancies will even out over time. The current growth rate estimate may be “too high”. This may be the result of an earlier overestimate of post-Covid growth, which may end up being revised downward. We will have to wait for the entire revision process to be completed to know how India has been doing in reality.

Improvements in methodology and adjustments for the changing structure of the economy are ultimately good things. Concerns should be focused, instead, on the quality of the raw data, and making sure that this collection is done as well and as comprehensively as possible. While the focus is on national-level statistics, there should also be greater attention to the collection of state-level data, which is often of much lower quality. Even local governments, especially urban governments, would benefit from doing a better job of data collection. Ultimately, all this data about the level of economic activity is not just about being able to boast of a high growth rate. High-quality, detailed data is vital for good policymaking, and that ultimately matters for how well the economy does. The path from good data to good policymaking to high growth needs attention, not just the accounting that happens after the game has been played.

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OUR VIEW



Tata Sons mustn't take a hazy path to the market

The case for its listing is pitched on group transparency. However, going about it via a board resolution that treads a legal grey zone would be problematic. Ends matter, but so do means

A supreme irony haunts Bombay House, the headquarters of India's oldest conglomerate. It straddles diverse industries, mostly under a name that has long conveyed 'trust us.' But last week's board vote held by the group's holding company, Tata Sons, has placed its path ahead under a cloud of doubt along with the validity of its board decisions. In defiance of Noel Tata, the chief of its majority owner Tata Trusts, it approved a third term for N. Chandrasekaran as its chair, even as it resolved to take steps to comply with central bank rules that would mandate a listing of the apex company. Or so it said. As Tata Trusts argue, Tata Sons' Articles of Association (AoA) require a majority of their own appointed directors to affirm such a decision, while it was a 1:1 tie in this case, with Venu Srinivasan's yes failing to outweigh Noel Tata's no, implying that a tie-breaker vote cast by independent director Harish Manwani, who acted as the resolution's chair, was invalid. Moreover, for how long can a board defy a company's ownership? On paper, an annual general meeting (AGM) must ratify directorships, and Tata controls enough equity to pull the rug under the board's chair. It's a story of wheels within wheels, with a steering battle for the group's future coming to a head.

As the Trusts see it, the board's backing of Chandrasekaran was a "legal nullity," Tata Sons' search for a successor must go on—given his statement last month opting out of a third term—and Tata is yet to take a call on listing, the crux of its split. Who can exercise a casting vote may be in dispute, but the AoA's spirit is clear—and it suggests board overreach. In particular, the roles played by Srinivasan and Manwani

raise a phalanx of questions not limited to the legality of their decisions. Yet, for Tata Trusts to exercise control, they need a Tata Sons AGM. This year's is held back by an order of Maharashtra's charity commissioner, under which Sir Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT) may have to comply with a year-old trustee-ratio rule before it can operate. It was Srinivasan, having flipped his position on listing, who raked this issue up; SRTT was left arguing that a new rule mustn't apply to trustees appointed earlier. This hitch needs to be resolved before Tata Sons' AGM deadline. Yet, one can safely bet that significant support exists for a public issue with no change in its chair. While central bank rules classify Tata Sons as a big financier with a bearing on the financial system's stability, which implies it must list, the larger case for it is based on the transparency that market disclosures would offer on its complex maze of businesses and capital allocations. An unveiling of data would serve a worthy public cause, arguably, but what about the owner's agency? In Noel Tata's view, going public would hurt the group's character, as it would constrain both its charity commitments and long-horizon investment plans.

Any dilution in Tata Trusts' stake would weaken their control too. A notable pro-listing voice is that of Tata Sons' minority owner, Shapoorji Pallonji (SP), a debt-laden group with an 18.4% stake in need of an exit. This remains blocked by an AoA bar on it selling its shares to a third party without a nod from the Tata Group. While SP now seems better placed than ever to bargain for a grand divorce deal, it is important that Tata Sons does not get driven in a direction its 66% owner disapproves of. Charity apart, capitalism cannot work that way. The basic principles of business can't be ignored.

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION

A manager's guide to economic statecraft: try this eightfold path

Be prepared to deal with a world in which economic measures are deployed for political objectives



NITIN PAI is co-founder and director of The Takshashila Institution, an independent centre for research and education in public policy

Dear top, middle and junior manager, I write this in response to questions you have been asking me after hearing my talks on geoeconomics and economic statecraft. I know that you are anxious about your career path and the future of your company, and that neither business school nor recent working experience may have prepared you for what your job has become.

Economic statecraft is the use of economic measures to achieve political objectives. It is different from diplomacy and warfare in that a government uses private firms and individuals to carry it out. So in today's world, where governments are catching the contagion of tariffs, sanctions, quotas and chokepoint diplomacy, it is the private firm that finds itself caught in the middle. It's not a comfortable place. While corporate boards are beginning to grasp the new realities, managers and entrepreneurs have not yet internalized that the scene has changed.

So let me offer you an practical eightfold path to chart your way through the current *yuganta* (end of an epoch).

First, get the right amount of information. Follow the news, but lightly. Unless you are an active trader in the markets, you don't need real-time updates about wars, summits, congressional hearings and elections. There is a case for a daily newspaper and a serious

weekly magazine, or their online equivalents. Information overload creates cognitive burdens that impair good decision-making.

Second, develop the right appreciation of your business mission and goals. This is more than just about quarterly sales targets and profit margins. Making the numbers is important, but as Senthil Mullainathan's work on scarcity reveals, an excessive focus on numbers alone can create a tunnel mentality that tunes out risks and opportunities. Middle and junior managers must know why the firm does what it does, beyond getting customers to part with their money.

Third, do the right preparation: it is better to manage consequences than to predict outcomes of things beyond your control. Planning by prediction is a lot more common than people will admit. Resting your business strategy on predictions of a particular war ending by a particular date, or the price of a certain commodity remaining below a certain level is very dangerous when the norms of world politics and economic are changing. It is far better to create several scenarios at the intersection of important but uncertain trends, and prepare to deal with any of them.

Fourth, gain the right knowledge. A couple of hours of reading or watching basic macroeconomics—if not reading a good book—will clarify the differences and interconnections between fiscal policy, monetary policy, the economics of trade and the balance of payments. It doesn't take long to understand relationships between economic growth, inflation, interest rates and exchange rates. You could simply use this paragraph to ask Claude or Perplexity.

Fifth, get the right understanding of the tools governments use to intervene in the global economy: tariffs, sanctions, licences, quotas, capital controls, currency manipulation, bans and boycotts. It is necessary to know how these instruments work, who they target and who suffers their impact. Cut through the polemic and political rhetoric. Set aside

political loyalty and national pride for a moment. When in doubt, read an undergraduate textbook or beginner's guide.

Sixth, make a right assessment of your company's position with respect to the relevant governments. An object of economic statecraft, your company can simultaneously be an instrument of leverage, a target or even a hostage of different governments. A government that uses your firm to show strength is using you for leverage. When it gets you to change prices, stop services or invest capital, your firm is an instrument. When it hurts or bullies you, you are a target. And when you get caught in the crossfire between countries, you are a hostage. It is very important to know where you stand, so that you can act to protect your interests.

Seventh, have the right plans to manage stakeholders and risks. The word is abused, I know, but stakeholders are also the channels through which you will feel the pleasure and pain of public policy. Similarly, risks manifest themselves both directly and through suppliers, customers, bankers, employees and electorates. A common mistake is to ignore second-order effects in the interest of time. The more pathways and feedback loops you identify, the better you can be prepared for them.

And **finally**, practise the right kind of corporate diplomacy. If the 1990s taught business executives to be sensitive to the cultures of countries they operate in, today it is about representing, defending and negotiating on behalf of your company that is seen as being painted in the colours of your national flag. When it comes to the bolts and nuts, the task involves investing in relationships across the board, listening to people who might not be your well-wishers, being friendly without yielding ground and holding up reputation.

I know you didn't sign up for all this, but you must deal with the world as it is. This eightfold path does not guarantee success, but it should help you compose your own thoughts. Thank you.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Corporate governance should be done more through principles than rules.

ADI GODREJ

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Why government school reform is a big political idea

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist and screenwriter. His latest book is 'Why the Poor Don't Kill Us.'

Indian politicians, outside Kerala perhaps, have never been terrified of the third-rate condition of government schools in their constituencies. Nor have they been terrified by the state of government hospitals, trains, or anything that voters use. They have also never been scared of being exposed as mysteriously wealthy. In fact, they flaunt their wealth openly as evidence of being street-smart and useful. They only fear being exposed as corrupt, though even that is not as worrisome perhaps as being the subject of a 'sex tape.' It is as though the people of India don't vote for anything that actually matters. But something new is going on that they may not realize can become a political tsunami.

The Cockroach Janta Party movement has been keeping itself alive by exposing the state of government schools across the nation. This has long been an unsexy issue not only for political parties, but also for the media. But there are reasons why the fight for the government school can become big politics. Especially now, as Indian society

appears to be tiring of old useless issues.

In most of India, a government school stands for all that is wrong with us. Some schools have no buildings, some have no teachers. Millions of children have passed through schools that may not have imparted any education at all. Primarily, a government school reveals corruption, incompetence, absence of work ethic and contempt. Also, where there is some intent, the school conveys India's pathological problem—it treats the poor as poor, and as a problem that must be solved in the cheapest way possible. A nation should instead treat all of its own as its middle-class, even if they are not. That is what Kerala's schools or hospitals are—government places for the middle-class.

All of a government's evil and failings are captured in a single building that is a far more emotional thing than people realize. A public school is not only a familiar sight to a majority of Indians, but something that concerns most of them. Their children may or may not attend one, but it is usually so bad that it burdens India's new lower middle-class with the big expense of making a valiant attempt to send their children to private schools. So, now that a smart organization has begun to stir the issue, the government school can become the improbable symbol

of rotten governance. And of a weird quality of Hindu nationalism—its stinginess. A visionary nationalist would have built thousands of world-class free schools, maybe with some chant in the morning and a low-protein vegetarian meal, but who would have cared if those schools were as lovely as temples and there really was education. But strangely, such nationalists have focused more on the frugal but useless tactic of rewriting history books.

The cockroaches have been trespassing into government schools and showing us images that shock us, even though we are Indians and we expect them to be bad. It is astonishing that they have been able to continue this despite the political muscle against them. It points to ground support for their cause, even if it isn't always evident.

Another reason why professional politicians have not been able to counter this is that there is no moral argument against the need to transform public schooling. It does not have the sort of ambiguity that a useless

cultural issue has. There can be arguments about higher education, but it is hard to argue for keeping a child away from school, even a government one. A school, despite its flaws, is a fiercely ethical idea. That a child should learn the basics of all that is known to man tortures not only children with learning disabilities but others too. But all things considered, there is so much wisdom in the idea of a school that it has prevailed across the world, largely in its formal form, even though every generation adds some false notion of 'fun' to schooling. So powerful is the idea that even Gandhi failed to pull off his ideas. He wanted Indian kids to learn 'handicraft' and stuff like that in the formative years, before they learnt how to read and write. Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze say in their book, *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions*, that new India, influenced by Gandhi, "argued against regular schooling at the elementary level, favouring instead a so-called 'basic education' system, built on the hugely romantic and rather

eccentric idea that children should learn through self-financing handicraft."

Seasoned politicians responded to cockroaches at first through denial, then promises that they will transform schools. But they do not know how to say this well. They have been trained to articulate useless issues or make dull promises. Most seem clueless of what must be done.

You may argue that if the government school had the makings of a political issue, then why did the poor stay quiet for so many decades? But then, as this column has long held, the poor don't revolt the way most people imagine. A disenfranchised social elite has to organize them. Cockroaches represent that disenchanted elite, and they know exactly how to speak of the appalling Indian government school.

All kinds of upper classes are moved by the state of schools for the poor. Empathy is a form of narcissism, and a feudal reassurance that the subject of empathy is not a threat. So even rich parents feel the pain of seeing millions of children starting their lives in a dismal government school. This easy compassion is mixed with their rage at having to pay so many taxes. All for what? To feed some provincial politician who denies children their rightful schools?



| MY VIEW | STAT-CRAFT

MINT CURATOR

India's consumer market cannot be mapped by national averages

Businesses must understand how various households earn, spend and retain resources in sufficient depth to craft a strategy

**RAJESH SHUKLA**

is managing director and chief executive officer of People Research on India's Consumer Economy.

India's private consumption expanded by 7.1% in real terms in the first quarter of 2026-27. That is encouraging news for an economy whose prospects depend substantially on domestic demand. But a growth rate is not a market strategy. It tells businesses that expenditure is expanding, not which consumers sustain which markets, what they can afford or how much financial leeway remains after meeting their expenses.

The distinction matters because India has several overlapping economic maps. The distribution of income differs from the distribution of consumption, which differs still more from the distribution of saving. Businesses that mistake one for another risk misunderstanding both the scale and the character of their opportunity.

PRICE's estimates for 2025-26 illustrate this clearly. Dividing the population into ten equal groups ranked by per capita household income, the top 10% account for about 30.2% of income, 24.2% of consumption and 48% of saving. The bottom half account for 23.8% of income and 29.5% of consumption, but only about 6.7% of saving.

These estimates describe the structure of demand, not the contribution of each group to the latest quarter's growth. Nevertheless, their business implications are substantial. The market for goods and services is considerably less concentrated than the pool of saving. A strategy suited to attracting a financial surplus cannot simply be transferred to selling everyday consumer products.

The population between the bottom half and the top decile deserves particular attention. These four deciles account for roughly 46.2% of consumption, nearly twice the share of the top decile. They are not a uniform 'middle class.' Their incomes, expenditure commitments and financial flexibility differ. But collectively, they demonstrate why a consumption strategy focused overwhelmingly on affluent consumers would overlook a substantial consumer market.

The differences become sharper when we examine expenditure per person rather than per household. Monthly per capita consumption rises from ₹5,348 in the bottom decile to ₹34,072 in the top, a multiple of about 6.4. Household comparisons show a smaller gap partly because lower-income households are larger: average household size falls from almost six members in the bottom decile to about 3.4 in the top.

For businesses, the appropriate denominator depends on the product. Food consumption is closely connected to the number of people. A refrigerator is generally shared within a household. Housing requirements depend on both household composition and location. Counting households, consumers and purchasing units as though they were interchangeable can distort



market assessments. Nor does expenditure rise uniformly across categories. Monthly cereal spending increases from ₹390 per person in the bottom decile to ₹869 in the top, a little over twice as much. Education expenditure rises from ₹108 to ₹2,227, more than 20 times. Healthcare spending increases from ₹196 to ₹2,986, while expenditure on consumer durables rises from ₹112 to ₹1,571.

These are expenditure differences, not estimates of how spending responds when an individual's income rises. They reflect prices, quality, household composition, access and preferences as well as purchasing power. Even with that qualification, they show why applying a common consumption-growth assumption across categories makes little commercial sense.

For staple products, affordability, availability and distribution efficiency remain central. In categories with steeper expenditure differences, businesses need to understand whether customers are purchasing greater quantities, better quality, convenience or access to services. The opportunity may lie in a premium offering, but it may equally lie in making an adequate product affordable to a wider population.

There is a key policy distinction here. Higher non-food spending should not be described as discretionary consumption. Healthcare, education, transport and housing contain substantial essential expenditure. Low spending on these services can reflect public provision, but it can also reflect unmet need. High spending may indicate choice and quality, or the cost of securing services that households cannot readily obtain elsewhere.

Financial flexibility further separates consumers who may otherwise appear to share similar aspirations. In the bottom decile, average spending exceeds average income by about 10%. In the second decile, consumption absorbs about 99% of income. In the top decile, the corresponding proportion is approximately 60%.

These are group averages, not descriptions of every household. But they underline a basic distinction between willingness to buy and the ability to sustain expenditure. Borrowing or drawing down savings can help households bridge shortfalls. Neither should be confused with a durable increase in purchasing power.

The practical response is not to abandon national growth indicators. It is to supplement them with category-specific maps of expenditure, household composition and financial capacity. Businesses should distinguish the customers who provide scale from those who provide higher spending per purchase, and both from those with substantial investible surplus.

For policymakers, the same evidence directs attention towards reliable earnings and affordable essential services. Improving these foundations can strengthen households' capacity to participate in markets without requiring them to stretch already constrained budgets.

India's consumption opportunity is real. But it is neither evenly distributed nor confined to its richest citizens. The national average provides a headline. Understanding how different households earn, spend and retain resources provides the strategy.

No AI in schools: conservatives should get on board with this

Screen bans in Democrat states should be adopted in others as well

**ABBY MCCLOSKEY**

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Conservatives ought to get behind the idea of old-fashioned schooling. ISTOCKPHOTO

I used to be conservatives who wanted to tread carefully with new things. These days, it's progressives sounding the alarm on AI. And I'm not just talking about the risk of human extinction.

Two of the country's largest school systems have dramatically restricted AI access for students this year. They also happen to be bastions of coastal progressivism. Conservative parents, take note.

For the 2026-2027 school year, New York City's education department passed sweeping rules forbidding students from using AI until high school. Learning apps with AI features will be removed from student devices. Companion chatbots will be banned in all grades.

That's not all. Screens of any type will be banned in New York City public schools until third grade. Goodbye to school-issued tablets starting pre-kindergarten, a practice that has become widespread in the last five years. Hello to limits on screen time, including a 45-minute cap for middle schoolers.

The West Coast has taken it a step further. The Los Angeles public school system passed a district-wide moratorium on AI for all grade levels that applies to all school-issued devices.

This is exactly the kind of 'common sense' reform that Republicans could use to define themselves heading into the mid-term election. Since covid, Republicans have enjoyed an upper hand on education issues. There were the demonstrably harmful and lingering effects of extended school closures, promulgated largely by progressive districts. There were Biden's efforts to block charter schools, despite their proven success at boosting student achievement. And there were culture-war arguments that made Democrats appear more concerned about pronouns than whether kids could read.

But for all the emphasis Republicans have put on protecting children, students in Zohran Mamdani's New York are going to be less screen-soaked than those in Greg Abbott's Texas—where, per my sons' experience in the public schools, there's many a screen-based recess.

The Dallas Independent School District—one of the largest in Texas—has AI guidance for families that reads: "See how AI is enhancing your child's learning," and "Sit with your child while they use AI. Treat it like reading a book together."

Keeping AI out of public schools is not going to do anything to slow development of the technology. Nor does it have anything to do with what happens at home; data from Common Sense Media suggest

that AI use among teens is already ubiquitous. That's a problem for another day.

What progressives in New York and LA are saying is that when it comes to educating our nation's children and teaching them how to think, we are going to do it the old-fashioned way. That's a message more conservative districts ought to get behind.

Because the recent experiments we have been running in public education are not working. The newly released Program for International Assessment found that 15-year-old US students' reading scores have fallen near their lowest level in 25 years, with a 14-point drop in the last three years alone—as is the case across much of the developed world. The report also says that half of students use AI for education.

Our domestic tests, such as the Nation's Report Card, show similar lost ground. Less than half of American students are reading or doing math at grade level.

To be sure, AI and screens are only two of many factors that may have pushed down student scores over the last decade. Others include absenteeism, which rose during covid and has persisted; scrapping traditional teaching approaches such as phonics and multiplication tables; and lots of testing with little accountability for underperforming schools, teachers and students. That's a wide-ranging group of possibilities.

So perhaps AI presents a convenient scapegoat for challenges that are much more difficult for schools to solve. Nevertheless, we should solve what we can. The last thing American students need amid already-sagging scores and declining skills is AI slop in the classroom.

Americans' satisfaction with the quality of school education has fallen to 32%, a new low in Gallup's 27-year survey. It is down 11 percentage points over the past two years. Democrats, Republicans and independents are almost equally disappointed.

Revealingly, schools received the highest marks on preparing students to adapt to new technologies. In contrast, only 4% of Americans believe that schools are preparing students to critically think and solve problems. This is backwards.

A whole generation is not learning at school like they need to. Conservatives of all people should know it—and demand their school districts follow the examples of New York and Los Angeles.

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| MY VIEW | GENERAL DISEQUILIBRIUM

Cities should wake up before public patience runs out

RAJRISHI SINGHAL



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Flooded streets in Gurugram's tony neighbourhoods incited the ire of many billionaires and startup founders. A wobbly building in Delhi, doubling up as a hostel, collapsed and killed outstation students. Mumbai's municipal corporation wants to annex a football ground and convert it into a convention centre; in fact, Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) just passed multiple resolutions to hand over various properties across the metropolis to private builders. Kolkata residents are taking aim at the state's newly elected government for inundated and pot-holed streets. Bengaluru's civic body has not seen elections for over six years. The third tier of governance, specifically urban civic management, is clearly in shambles. Authorities should take note: in this season of protests and demonstrations, public patience with shoddy delivery standards is wearing thin.

A citizen's relationship with urban local bodies should ideally be the tightest, rather than with the state or central government,

given the daily brush with a city's deliverable services. Sadly, it's a broken relationship.

BMC's annual budget, the country's richest municipal corporation, holds lessons. The corporation's 2026-27 budget at over ₹80,952 crore is higher than that of many states. Compared with 2019-20, BMC's annual outlay has grown by close to 170% over seven years. Calculating simple average growth suggests the outlay has grown over 24% every year. Yet, this financial growth seems far removed from the lived experience and quality of life in Mumbai.

One reason for scepticism is the large outlay set aside for capital expenditure. Past data shows that the corporation's actual capital expenditure—for building roads or augmenting storm water drains—consistently undershoots budget estimates at year-end. BMC aims high but invariably under-delivers. The roads and traffic division, for example, gets a large chunk of the budget but its performance unfailingly arouses extreme negative reactions every year.

Even more curious is BMC hiring contractual labour in some key departments, such as public health and hospitals. Or, when it cedes space to the private sector for delivery of critical urban services. For example, BMC runs Mumbai's bus service,

one of India's oldest, which used to be an indispensable and reliable mode of public transport for millions, especially for school-children and the elderly. However, this bus service has been shrunk over the past few years, letting private operators step into the vacuum with a pricing model that serves only the city's elite.

According to an analysis by Praja, a non-government organization focused on urban governance, BMC had 88,864 employees in 2024 against a sanctioned staff strength of 151,255, implying an average vacancy of 41%. This ties in with the BMC's continuing emphasis on fiscal prudence, especially by trying to rein in revenue expenditure (salaries, administration costs). This may have been praise-worthy in any other commercial organization, but in BMC it raises questions: can a municipal corporation, already facing complaints about inadequate service delivery, sacrifice improvement in favour of budgetary prudence? Simultaneously, there may be some merit in

conducting a labour audit to figure out the municipal corporation's appropriate manpower requirements.

But while the BMC, to be fair, provides some unique services, such as running medical colleges, its shortcomings echo those found in most other cities. While politicians

go around promising to convert Indian cities into London, Shanghai or Singapore, nobody is asking why authorities there do not want their cities to become Mumbai, Bengaluru or Kolkata.

In this morass of widening service deficiencies and callous civic officials, or indifferent bureaucrats and politicians, the sincere and diligent officer is often viewed as a superhero, a character from the Marvel

universe. The citizenry's expectations from the political class and bureaucracy are so low that any officer performing his duties acquires a halo. Maharashtra's commissioner for food and drug administration, Tukaram Mundhe, has become a cult hero for just doing his job, for going by the book.

Urban India's frustrations can be gauged from the adulation reserved for diligent public officials

Mundhe's zeal in prosecuting restaurants, cloud kitchens, food storage units, e-commerce and quick commerce outlets for dismal hygiene standards and the sale of sub-standard food items has found easy resonance with the public. Mundhe may have lacked a Superman cape, but the fervour with which he pursued his remit—as laid down in the Food Safety and Standards Act—has gained him instant popularity.

Mundhe has not had it easy. As a bureaucrat from the Indian Administrative Services, this is his 25th posting in a 21-year career. The last posting lasted only two months. And he is not the first. His predecessor in the department, Arun Bhatia, also took on large pharmaceutical corporations in 1993 and was transferred 21 times in his 23-year career. G.K. Khairnar, BMC's deputy commissioner, led a drive against unauthorized constructions in the city that left many influential people red-faced.

But these were isolated campaigns spearheaded by principled public officials. It is but one step from here to an organized expression of public outrage, like at Jantar Mantar earlier this year, when anger and frustrations boil over the tolerance limits of people. Politicians need to draw multiple lessons from the student protests in Delhi.

Stick it out

Tariff threat over Russian oil shouldn't rattle India

The Lindsey O Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 2026, which came into effect last week, empowers President Trump to impose up to 100 per cent tariff on the top five buyers of Russian energy products, if the countries concerned do not back down and satisfy the US that they will stop buying from Russia.



The Ministry of External Affairs has responded well by saying that India will secure its 'trade and economic interests' and source its needs accordingly. The Trump administration is nothing if it is not whimsical. It may seek to leverage concessions for the trade pact, as a *quid pro quo* for relaxing a law that gives the President powers to relax its penal provisions. However, Trump can go back on his word, as he has done with countries that have inked deals with the US. Therefore, the prospect of dealing with a 100 per cent hike need not influence India's decisions now. There are also reasons to believe that the law, harsh as it appears, may not be strongly enforced. Trump has advised Ukraine not to attack Russian refineries for fear of causing a shortage and 'hurting the world'. So, the US wants to squeeze Russian supplies, but not by so much as to send crude prices spiralling over current levels of around \$100 a barrel.

The US would surely be aware that rising prices will spur shadow shipments of discounted Russian oil. These have continued, despite Western efforts to stop them. The law may come up for review after 180 days, and India can wait it out. At the outset, it puts India and China in the line of fire for being among the top five importers of many energy products. According to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, the top buyers of Russian oil since the Ukraine war broke out in 2022 are China (about 50 per cent), India (37 per cent), Turkiye (5 per cent) and EU (5 per cent). In the case of LNG, however, EU accounts for 49 per cent of Russian exports, followed by China (24 per cent), Japan (18 per cent) and South Korea (6 per cent). China (37 per cent), India (19 per cent), Turkiye (15 per cent), South Korea (12 per cent) and Vietnam (4 per cent) top the list of top buyers of Russian coal. For natural gas, the penal tariff will apply on countries that account for more than 15 per cent of Russia's gas exports over the preceding year.

This possibly lets off the EU, whose share in Russia's exports of LNG has fallen. For other importing categories, the law applies if countries 'knowingly' make purchases of Russian energy 30 days following the enactment, and have been among the top five importers over the last year. However, China is too powerful to be openly targeted. India's purchases of Russian crude have dipped from July's high of 2.8 million barrels per day (51 per cent of its total crude imports), to 2.1 million bpd in August and 1.4 million bpd so far in September, according to private data sources such as Kpler. A declining trend may not entitle India to a reprieve. India should be pragmatic and pursue all trade options.

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

EUROPE

The Saudis, the Houthis, and Israel

Is the Houthi crisis a diplomatic opportunity? Saudi Arabia has come running to Washington and even to Israel in its hour of need. Meanwhile, Riyadh's feud with the United Arab Emirates continues to backfire, and the safeguard-breaking Saudi nuclear deal with President Trump has been submitted to Congress. With all of these moving pieces, there may be a checkmate for Mr. Trump to find. The point isn't that he must answer the calls of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for U.S. airstrikes. Instead the Houthi blockade on Saudi oil has already become the impetus for the kind of Saudi-Israeli-Emirati cooperation that only U.S. Central Command can convene. That's the regional alliance needed to counter Iran and its Houthi proxy militia. (NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 16)

讀賣新聞

THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Central bank should not be slow to act

The risk is growing that the inflation rate will overshoot the target due to soaring crude oil prices and a weak yen. It is crucial for the Bank of Japan to decide on additional rate hikes at an appropriate time to curb inflation. The BOJ decided to raise the policy interest rate by a quarter percentage point to around 1.25%, bringing it to a level not seen in about 31 years, since 1995. After ending its large-scale monetary easing policy in March 2024, the central bank raised the policy rate roughly once every six months. The latest rate increase follows the previous one by just three months, the shortest interval since 2024. The BOJ has so far adopted an accommodative monetary policy to boost the underlying inflation rate. (TOKYO, SEPTEMBER 19)



TC SUSEEL KUMAR R SUDHAKAR

A fixed deposit matures in five years; an equity share can be sold tomorrow. A whole life policy taken out by a father naming his newborn son may not discharge its obligation for 70 years. An immediate annuity bought at 30 pays as long as the annuitant lives — beyond a 100, if he lives that long. These are not rare cases. They are the product. And they change what regulation must do.

Most people assume insurance regulation exists to protect policyholders from bad companies — fraud, mismanagement, insolvency. That is incomplete. It exists to protect the contract from the mortality of companies. Companies fail, merge, restructure and exit markets. The contract can do none of these things; it must survive whatever happens to the institution that wrote it. That is the organising principle behind every provision governing mergers, amalgamations, portfolio transfers, run-offs and winding-up in life insurance law, in India and abroad.

WHAT THE INDIAN LAW ENCODES

The Insurance Act, 1938 addresses this in a cluster of provisions often cited but rarely explained. Under Section 35, no life insurance business may be transferred or amalgamated with that of another insurer except under a scheme approved by IRDAI. Section 36 goes further: before approving one, IRDAI must send notice to every life policyholder concerned and hear any who applies to be heard. The policyholder is not a passive party to a corporate transaction but a stakeholder whose voice must be heard. Section 37A empowers IRDAI to prepare a scheme of amalgamation itself, without waiting for the companies to propose one, if it is satisfied that the public interest, policyholders' interests, or an insurer's sound management requires it; the insurer taking over must consent in writing. This is an active intervention power, not a passive supervisory one.

Whatever such a scheme does to the company, Section 37A(4A) fixes what it cannot do to the policyholder: he is to have the same interest in, and rights against, the insurer that emerges as he had in the one he started with. Shareholders whose rights come out lower are compensated. Policyholders are not, because theirs do not change.

Run-off is the quietest version of the same duty. An insurer closed to new business must go on servicing the policies it has already written, for as long as they last, with no fresh premium arriving to make it convenient. Beneath all this is a structural

Permanence of life insurance



WHEN COMPANIES CHANGE. Companies may come and go, or get merged, but policyholders' rights are unaffected

requirement: the life fund. Under Section 10, a life insurer must keep a separate life insurance fund, which stands as the security of the life policyholders, and cannot be applied for any other purpose. Section 56 carries that logic into failure. In a winding-up or an insolvency, the life assets and liabilities must be valued separately from everything else, and those assets cannot be applied to any other liability except to the extent they exceed the life liabilities. Other creditors reach them only after the policyholders have been answered.

IRDAI's July 30, 2026, amendment to its registration and amalgamation regulations goes further still: where a non-insurance holding company is amalgamated into an insurer, solvency ratio after the amalgamation must stay above the 150 per cent control level.

This is not an India-specific narrative. In the UK, a transfer of insurance business under Part VII of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 needs the sanction of the High Court, in place of each policyholder's consent. An Independent Expert, approved by the regulator, reports on its effect on policyholders, who are notified and may be heard. The court's concern is not

Where a non-insurance holding company is amalgamated into an insurer, solvency ratio after the amalgamation must stay above the 150 per cent control level

corporate convenience but whether any class of policyholder would be worse off.

In the US, state guaranty associations catch the policies of a member life insurer that fails: the surviving insurers are assessed to fund covered claims. The cover is not unlimited and limits vary by state, but the obligation does not vanish with the company.

INDIA IN PRACTICE

India has lived this at its most dramatic scale. The nationalising ordinance of January 19, 1956, brought in 245 entities — Indian insurers, non-Indian insurers and provident societies. They were not shut down and replaced. Their life business, with its policies and liabilities, vested in the Life Insurance Corporation when it was formed on September 1 that year. Policyholders who had bought contracts from companies whose names they knew woke up as LIC policyholders. They may not have noticed. That was precisely the point.

HDFC Life describes its October 14, 2022, merger with Exide Life as the first M&A transaction in the sector. It came in two stages: the acquisition completed on January 1, 2022, then the amalgamation, sanctioned by NCLT Mumbai and approved by IRDAI. By the company's account the whole transaction, from the September 2021 announcement, took under 14 months. The Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Act, 2025, in force since February 5, 2026, extends the discipline into new territory, bringing mergers between insurers and non-insurance companies expressly within IRDAI's prior approval. It also

raises the FDI limit to 100 per cent, increasing ownership complexity and making the architecture that protects the contract within it more critical, not less.

ONE POLICY, 75 YEARS

The clearest proof either of us has seen came from one author's service in Kenya, where he processed a claim on a whole-life policy issued by the Nairobi branch of the Oriental Government Security Life Assurance Company in the late 1930s. From the records available to us, the policy ran through India's Independence in 1947 and Kenya's in 1963 without interruption. When LIC was formed in 1956, Oriental's obligations passed to its East Africa Division. In 1978, when Kenya required foreign insurers to incorporate locally, the Indian insurers there merged into Kenindia Assurance Company Ltd, born in Nairobi that December, and the portfolio passed to it. The claim was settled at Kenindia in 2013 — some 75 years after the policy was written, across the independence of two nations, one nationalisation, a change of sovereign law and three institutional transfers.

Not one of those discontinuities reduced the obligation. The contract simply continued, as contracts must be in systems built to keep them. That is what this architecture exists for: not the protection of companies, but the protection of promises.

Kumar is former Managing Director, and Sudhakar is former Executive Director, LIC. Views expressed are personal. Except where drawn from the authors' own service records, all data are from publicly available sources

What should India's long term energy priorities be?

A shift away from LPG for cooking, focus on RE storage and promotion of energy efficiency are vital, going ahead

Subodh Mathur

India's economic growth is vitally linked to using more energy. Higher output in industry, transport, agriculture, and even the production of services needs more energy. Further, economic growth increases people's demand for energy to power their appliances. Thus, there's a need to boost India's total energy supply every year, and this increasing supply must be affordable and resilient.

Further, India is committed to fighting climate change by reducing its greenhouse gas emissions, which, in turn, means reducing the use of fossil fuels. And that's another powerful reason to reduce the economy's dependence on imported oil and natural gas.

These structural features of the energy sector define India's long-run energy priorities.

First, India has become extremely dependent on LPG cooking, and must now quickly shift to other fossil fuels. This will reduce reliance on a

problematic fuel. First, LPG is largely imported, causing a stress on the country's foreign exchange. Second, LPG is subsidised for lower-income households, creating a substantial burden on government finances. And third, LPG use adds to greenhouse gas emissions.

Making households shift from LPG cooking will not be easy as it is convenient and, unlike wood or coal, it does not produce smoke. And the many households now connected to LPG are unlikely to give it up unless better alternatives are made available. Hence, the government and research institutions should prioritise the development of alternatives.

The shift away from LPG is all the more important for establishments like *dhabas* and restaurant that prepare food on a large scale.

Currently, there aren't many non-fossil-fuel alternatives to LPG. However, good progress has been made in the use of solar power for large-scale cooking.

For example, the Brahma Kumaris use solar energy to prepare thousands of



LPG COOKING. Many of the households are dependent on it

meals every day at their Mount Abu facility.

It is likely that the shift away from LPG will be led by non-profit groups. So, it is important that experts help them to make the shift.

Energy storage should be another focus area. Without cheap, plentiful storage, full use of renewable energy cannot be made. This is because renewable energy is a flow and is available only intermittently, not 24x7. At present, there are two major ways

to store renewable energy: in batteries and as green hydrogen. Batteries will surely be needed for large scale renewable electricity generation; battery-based electric vehicles are already well-known. What is perhaps less known is that hydrogen-powered forklifts and long-distance buses are already in use in India.

To make significant progress in energy storage, strong financial support and promotion from the government will be required.

Third, India needs to promote energy efficiency in homes, offices, factories, shops, and transport. The Central and State governments already have various energy efficiency schemes. But these are not getting the kind of backing being given to solar power. This is the case even though it is well known that properly run energy-efficiency schemes are more cost effective than solar power.

Hence, the burden of promoting energy efficiency would largely fall on motivated non-profit groups.

The writer is an economist with extensive public policy experience

BELOW THE LINE



Gripping uncles

Spotted at GFF 2026 was Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, taking aim at India's premier league of professional party-poopers or as she wryly called them, the "Naraaz Phupha jis" (the chronically offended wedding uncles) of economic commentary. Addressing a room packed with high-octane innovators, the Minister

noted that India's youth boom isn't a distant prophecy, it's an active, high-definition reality. Yet, a certain vintage breed of commentators remains stubbornly committed to viewing a 21st-century digital surge through a 20th-century dial-up lens. "To borrow the now so famous, in social media at least, expression which the honourable Prime Minister used, our *Naraaz Phupha jis* are never short of reasons to doubt India's momentum and capabilities of our youth. Spending their time debating in television studios, whether the demographic dividend has slipped away or turned into a burden. They rely on vibe casting, feel-casting rather than actual numbers," she said. While these angry uncles are busy throwing

tantrums, Gen Z is already writing tomorrow's code, launching massive enterprises. **Confusion in the air** Aviation services are hitting a 'new high' every passing day under the watchful eyes of the Aviation Ministry. Recently, Akasa Air's Goa-Mumbai flight was to land at T2 in Mumbai, then a message was sent it will land at T1. A smart traveller told his driver to park between T1 and T2 and prayed that the aircraft lands safely. With the government deciding to shift the prevailing airport to a new Navi Mumbai location which is about 42 km from the old airport, only God can save the passengers. **Beyond the roundtable** A Chennai-based company recently

hosted what its public relations billed to the media as a 'roundtable' on its products. Invitations were sent to multiple media outlets and a few reporters made their way to the event location. As they entered the conference hall, there was, in fact, a table, which was also round, but the faces around it seemed oddly unfamiliar. It was in fact organised for an internal customer meet and greet session, with the firm's product heads holding discussions with its enterprise clients. So, a few journalists sat quietly (outside the roundtable) in complete awkwardness. **Surprise, surprise!** A minister's recent advice to officials to undertake 'surprise' visits to monitor a key scheme triggered

more surprise than perhaps intended. Stakeholders wondered why an important ministry remains without a full-time dedicated minister, with insiders claiming the minister has rarely been a regular presence there over the past two years. With staff already stretched, one village-level stakeholder suggested the minister first tap his party network to identify alleged irregularities. An officer pointed out that surprise inspections are part of the guidelines. The irony? Senior officials overseeing the scheme are reportedly reluctant to acknowledge deficiencies flagged by another ministry which is also handled by the same minister. **Our Bureaus**

{ OUR TAKE }

Is Greenland pact really a big deal?

Trump seems to have dismantled historical trust with Denmark for a deal that largely gives the US what it was already getting under an older treaty

The deal-making president of the US has claimed to have clinched yet another "historic" new deal. While the details of the US-Denmark-Greenland deal are yet to be confirmed, a Trump administration official was reported as saying that the deal gives the US "permanent access, basing and overflights rights," and "unilateral power to build additional military structures." This seemingly puts an end to Trump's longstanding contention that Greenland ought to act as a Russia-facing avant garde for the US military. Greenland, on the other hand, would have none of it, as demonstrated through official statements and, less diplomatically, an unofficial boycott of US Vice President JD Vance during his last visit in March 2025. As per the deal, the US also enjoys the understanding that Greenland wouldn't be allowed to be used by any enemy State of the US for military purposes. In the wake of Trump's mutual discontent with his NATO allies, this agreement is indeed a significant milestone in the US-Europe strategic partnership.

There's a catch here, though, and it's equally historically significant. A similar deal was struck between the US and its European counterpart as the Defence of Greenland Treaty 1951. Trump, in effect, dismantled trust with Denmark, claimed betrayal, and closed a new deal which practically gave the US much of what it already received under the old treaty. This is almost an identical replication of the Strait of Hormuz situation: Mount an issue in the public domain, back it up with reckless diplomatic or military operations, create a problem that didn't exist before, claim victory by mitigating the said problem, and expect everyone to buy that. In Greenland's case, however, Denmark's leadership, since the 1950s, scaled the heights of trust-building measures to ensure a smooth alliance with the US. Trump, in his sporadic "control Russia" rhetoric, forgot that he was dealing with an ally and not a foe like Iran. He also forgot that the US could even deploy nuclear arms in Greenland until 1968 when the latter demanded freedom from radioactive weapons in the aftermath of the crash of a bomber in the territory, which affected the fragile Arctic ecosystem. Washington, therefore, ought to seriously consider the substantive gains of the new treaty. Denmark and Greenland, on the other hand, seem to be continuing the confidence-building measures with this treaty, as the clouds of uncertainty darken the European skies.

There's no alternative to energetic campaigning

The emphatic victory of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad in three out of four positions in the Delhi University Students Union and the failure of the National Students Union of India to secure even a single post — a first since 2015 — points towards the success of the youth wing of the RSS in mobilising local issues and turning public sentiment in the aftermath of the Satya Niketan building collapse, and the failure of the Opposition outfit in putting together a coherent show. This newspaper reported how the crumbling of an illegally expanded building — which killed five students and two others — dominated the DUSU poll campaign, prompting all major outfits to promise solutions to the chronic accommodation problem in Delhi. The success of the ABVP must be seen against the backdrop of the party successfully mobilising its cadre in protesting against the civic administration — against whom anger was mounting — and managing student discontent not just with resources but also highlighting the government's measures in the aftermath of the tragedy. Similarly, the surprise victory of Deepanshu Shokeen as an independent after NSUI denied him a ticket — his margin was over 13,000 votes, the largest among the four positions — again points to the inability of the Opposition outfits in keeping their house in order and choose the best possible candidate by sidelining internal factionalism.

The DUSU polls were keenly watched because they came against the backdrop of the protests at Jantar Mantar over exam paper leaks that eventually led to the resignation of the then Union education minister. It is tempting to read wider nationwide trends into the results but the polls actually show that elections are won or lost on immediate local issues and there is no alternative to energetic, disciplined campaigning.

Making Delhi's heritage & infrastructure resilient

The Master Plan for Delhi 2047 can help prove that development and conservation are complementary, not conflicting

Great cities are defined not only by the infrastructure they build, but by what they preserve, restore and pass on. Delhi is an entirely endowed in both respects. The Yamuna and its floodplains, the Ridge, urban forests and biodiversity parks form the city's ecological foundation: its monuments, historic precincts and archaeological sites carry centuries of history and culture.

As India advances towards the Prime Minister's vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, Delhi must demonstrate both a growing metropolis can combine development with environmental restoration and heritage conservation. The Master Plan for Delhi (MPD) 2047 offers the opportunity to place both at the heart of the capital's future. The climate crisis has rewritten the rules of urban planning. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, water stress, deteriorating air quality and biodiversity loss directly affect the health and quality of life of our citizens. Rivers, forests, wetlands, lakes and parks can no longer be viewed merely as amenities; they are essential urban infrastructure.

MPD-2047 envisages an interconnected Green-Blue network integrating the Yamuna, the Ridge, forests, biodiversity parks, water bodies, drains and neighbourhood parks into a unified ecological system.

Green corridors and urban forests clean the air, temper urban heat island effects and shelter native biodiversity. Revenerated water bodies, wetlands and floodplains recharge groundwater and boost the city's capacity to absorb heavy rainfall.

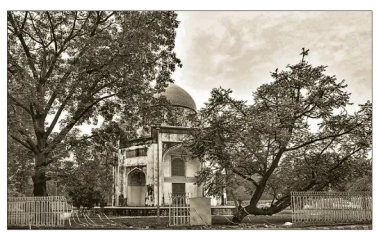
Parks, trails and cycling networks promote active lifestyles and accessible community spaces. The goal is simple: to weave nature into the rhythm of everyday urban life rather than confine it to isolated green pockets.

No vision for Delhi's future is complete without the Yamuna. For centuries it has shaped the city's geography, history and civilisation, yet rapid urbanisation has placed unprecedented stress on its floodplains. MPD-2047 places the Yamuna at the centre of Delhi's ecological regeneration, with nearly 1,700 hectares of floodplain proposed to be protected, conserved and ecologically restored. It will update inventories, automatic drains flowing into the river will be intercepted and treated through upgraded sewage treatment infrastructure, constructed wetlands and bioremediation restoring its ecological health and natural floodplain functions. The larger objective goes further:

Delhi must rebuild its relationship with the river. A proposed 52-kilometre cycling corridor, alongside walking trails, public greens and managed recreational spaces, will reconnect citizens with the waterfront, turning restored stretches into vibrant community assets while safeguarding their ecological integrity. A rejuvenated Yamuna can be both an ecological lifeline and a defining public space.

Complementing it is Delhi's other ecological pillar, the Ridge, an extension of the ancient Aravalli range. MPD-2047 plans the ecological restoration of approximately 7,784 hectares, prioritising native species and scientific ecosystem management. The objective is not simply more trees, but healthier ecosystems capable of supporting local biodiversity and strengthening the capital's long-term environmental balance. Urban forests, biodiversity parks and ecological corridors, linked with parks and water bodies, will complete a city-wide network for cleaner air and cooler neighbourhoods.

Few cities possess a legacy as rich as Delhi's. Its forts, monuments, stepwells, archaeological remains and historic precincts tell the story of the many eras that shaped the city. As Delhi modernises, protecting this inheritance becomes more important, not less. But conservation cannot mean freezing historic buildings and neighbourhoods in time. Heritage must remain a living part of the city,



Conservation cannot mean freezing historic buildings and neighbourhoods in time: Heritage must remain a living part of the city. SANEIV VERMA/HT

connected to the lives and aspirations of its people.

MPD-2047 envisages bringing around 1,500 heritage assets under Cultural Resource Management Plans, moving conservation from isolated effort towards a structured, long-term framework. Central to this is adaptive reuse: heritage buildings sensitively adapted for museums, libraries, hotels, offices and cultural activities remain useful parts of the city while retaining their historic character.

Planning and financial incentives, including Transferable Development Rights, facade retention and appropriate relaxation of space standards by the competent authority, subject to life-cycle safety requirements, will make conservation economically viable. Conservation should be an opportunity, not a burden.

Heritage is also an economic asset: well-conserved historic areas generate tourism, employment and opportunities for local businesses. MPD-2047 proposes heritage, cultural and festival circuits linking monuments, precincts and public spaces, so that visitors experience Delhi as a living historical landscape rather than a

collection of individual monuments. Precincts active around the clock, with better public spaces and pedestrian-friendly streets, can sustain local crafts, food, hospitality and cultural enterprise.

The core strength of MPD-2047 lies in uniting ecological and cultural planning. Many historic sites lie within or beside forests, water bodies, the Ridge and the Yamuna landscape. Connecting them through greenways, cycling paths and revived water systems creates a holistic urban experience: restored water bodies as community spaces, green corridors linking neighbourhoods with biodiversity parks, residents cycling along a restored river, historic precincts alive with culture and commerce.

As India moves towards Viksit Bharat 2047, Delhi must prove that development and conservation are complementary, not conflicting. A Viksit Delhi must do more than grow. It must breathe better, live healthier, and honour the heritage that gives it a soul.

Taranjit Singh Sandhu is lieutenant governor of Delhi. The views expressed are personal



Taranjit Singh Sandhu

India urgently needs a National Chemicals Code

Earlier this year, a corroded refrigeration line in the Manipal-Pulicat industrial belt released a dense ammonia cloud that sent workers and residents in Tiruvallur district, Tamil Nadu, to hospitals while first responders arrived without real-time inventory data. A far more severe leak at a seafood processing plant in Periyappalayam followed, killing eight migrant workers and hospitalising more than 70 people across the Periyappalayam-Valluvarthi corridor. Two major industrial accidents in the same district within 48 hours exposed a deeper structural weakness: India's chemical governance is split across disconnected agencies that operate with minimal coordination.

The pattern is national, not local — and far more entrenched. In June, four workers died after inhaling toxic fumes inside an effluent treatment sludge tank in Surat. Days later, ten workers were killed at the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant when molten metal breached a containment barrier. These incidents differ in form but share the same underlying failures: ageing equipment, weak maintenance, inadequate training and regulatory silos that treat workplace safety, hazardous substances and emergency response as separate worlds. India's chemical sector is expanding far faster than its regulatory framework can safely manage.

Industrial safety falls under the ministry of labour and state factory inspectors. Hazardous substances oversight sits with the ministry of environment, forest and climate change (MoEF&CC). Industrial chemicals and fertilisers are handled by the ministry of chemicals and fertilisers, while transport safety is overseen by the ministry of road transport and highways. Chemical weapons compliance is managed by the cabinet secretary's National Authority for the Chemical Weapons Convention. Each operates with its own lists, thresholds and enforcement cultures, leaving no single authority accountable for chemical safety and security end-to-end.

This fragmentation creates dangerous regulatory gaps. Hazardous chemicals under MoEF&CC's Manufacture, Storage and Import of Hazardous Chemicals (MSHC) Rules are defined by industrial accident potential rather than toxicological or security risk. Toxic chemicals under labour emergency frameworks are defined by acute health effects. Scheduled chemicals under the Chemical Weapons Convention Act are defined by dual-use potential. Hazardous waste rules — also administered by MoEF&CC — regulate waste streams by disposal risk rather than the chemicals themselves. A single substance can, therefore, fall under one regulatory regime while remaining outside another. As a result, volatile compounds such as ammonia, chlorine, styrene, methanol, nitric acid and neurotoxic solvents sit inside a regulatory maze with no coherent logic.

The consequences of this institutional scatter are visible in national accident data. NDMA reports record more than 130 major chemical industrial accidents and 250 fatalities between 2016 and 2022. The National Crime Records Bureau documented 1,059 industrial fatal accidents in 2022 alone, many involving hazardous chemical handling. The tragedies in Visakhapatnam, Surat and Tiruvallur show how quickly routine operations can collapse when ageing machinery and weak maintenance intersect with regulatory blind spots.

The gap between "hazardous" and "toxic" classifications determines whether district

authorities receive critical inventory information, whether industrial facility must file an off-site emergency plan, whether transport is monitored and whether first responders know what hazards they are walking into. In Tiruvallur, responders reached both accident sites with out-of-date inventories, automatic isolation systems or standardised emergency protocols. The district administration had to improvise coordination with environmental regulators, the state pollution control board, labour authorities, chemical industry regulators, health departments and the NDRF's CBRN unit — a patchwork response mirroring the patchwork laws governing the chemicals themselves.

Transport represents another major vulnerability. Nearly 60% of India's chemical goods moves by road, often in poorly labelled containers or mixed cargo tankers. Between 2018 and 2022, hazardous goods vehicles were involved in more than 4,000 road accidents. The Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organization has repeatedly flagged missing GPS trackers, inadequately trained drivers and widespread non-compliance with hazardous material signage. A chemical that is tightly regulated inside a factory becomes almost invisible once it enters the transport corridor.

Sensitive materials face similar regulatory grey zones. Controlled substances used in law enforcement fall under policing and CWC oversight, yet their storage, transport and export require far tighter oversight than with hazardous substances frameworks. Narcotic precursors are governed separately under the NDPS Act, while industrial solvents with central nervous system effects fall under occupational health norms rather than comprehensive hazard regimes. Several Schedule 1 and Schedule 2 toxic chemicals under the Chemical Weapons Convention — including biologically active compounds — are often stored outside domestic hazardous chemical lists because existing rules focus on bulk industrial volume rather than toxicological or security risk.

Technology can help — but only if the regulatory architecture is unified. Chip-based tanker tracking, blockchain-based inventory declarations and digital twins for chemical plants can provide real-time visibility. But technology cannot compensate for a fragmented governance where each ministry operates inside its own silo. India now needs a unified chemical governance architecture — a single National Chemicals Code that harmonises all regulations, reporting thresholds, safety norms and enforcement mechanisms across industries. A dedicated National Chemical Authority must anchor this structure. Transportation must be brought firmly into compliance through mandatory GPS tracking, driver certification and strict legal penalties. Industrial facilities must shift to risk-based digital inspections and integrated emergency planning protocols.

Chemical safety and chemical security are inseparable. India has the institutional capacity and technological capability to build a modern, integrated system. What is required now is political resolve: fragmented governance cannot keep pace with a rapidly expanding chemical economy. Bridging this divide is not only about preventing industrial accidents — it is essential for protecting vulnerable communities and safeguarding national security.

Sudhanshu Gupta is retired member, Indian Forest Service and former joint secretary, National Authority for the Chemical Weapons Convention. The views expressed are personal



Sudhanshu Gupta

JENS-FREDERIK NIELSEN | PRIME MINISTER, GREENLAND

(The deal) recognises the sovereignty ... and the right of the Greenlandic people to self-determination

On the new US-Denmark-Greenland agreement



[STRAIGHTFORWARD]

Shashi Shekhar

Worrying signs of widening war and economic pain

The Gulf States are on high alert after the US issued warnings over travelling to the region. Other nations, too, are all but bracing about the prospects of a world war.

Wars are back. Exhausted by two World Wars, humanity created institutions like the United Nations. Today, however, the hallowed institution presents a sad picture of its growing irrelevance. History will record this era as one of Machiavellian politicians and their victims — the ordinary citizens of the world.

Between 1936-39, the Rome-Berlin Axis, Anti-Comintern Pact, Munich Agreement, and Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact were tearing the League of Nations apart in the name of creating a new global order. The US always stayed away from League. This gave rise to experts such as Hitler and Mussolini a chance to discredit the beleaguered organisation. You can view Quad and the Mecca Pact through similar lenses.

The League's incompetence can be gauged from the fact that in 1931, Japan, frustrated by the Great Depression, annexed Manchuria. Italy overran Ethiopia and Hitler was itching to gobble up Czechoslovakia. Financially, hard-pressed England and France were pleading with both dictators to stop their predatory expansion. Under the Munich Treaty, they agreed to hand over Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland to Germany. But Hitler's greed knew no bounds.

Isn't the situation today reminiscent of those times?

Russia and Ukraine have been fighting for the last six years. There's no let-up in Israel's excesses in Gaza. The US-Israel attacked Iran thinking they would effect a regime change within a few days; Iran's drones and missiles instead wreaked havoc on more than 20 US bases in the Gulf region. The war has seriously depleted US firepower. As a result, the Pentagon had to summon missiles and other military hardware from its bases in South Korea and Japan. This rattled Seoul and Tokyo. Both countries are left wondering about their own security and safety. Like Europe and the Gulf States, they too outsourced their security to the US.

The Donald Trump regime continues to claim that it has won the war. Iran and Israel are identical claims. The reality is lost in the fog of war. The US media insists Russia and China are waging a shadow war against the US using Iran as a proxy — proxy wars were invented by the US during the Cold War. In geopolitics, pred-

ators becoming prey is not uncommon.

Both the US and Iran have lowered the intensity of fighting but have not ended it. Iran expanded the theatre of war using its proxies such as the Houthis, Hezbollah, and the Iraqi militia. The Houthis have captured Yemen's coastal areas and two strategic islands near the Bab-el-Mandab strait. The Saudis are alarmed. As their neighbours in the UAE, their oil trade has been disrupted. Close to 12% of global trade and 30% container traffic passes through Bab-el-Mandab. The Iran-dominated Strait of Hormuz has already become a chokepoint.

This is the reason world crude prices are once again above \$100 per barrel. Let's leave aside developing countries such as India; the world's three most powerful economies (the US, China and Japan) are under extreme stress. 90% of Japan's crude oil moves through Hormuz. Japan is now forced to sell US treasury bonds to pay for its fuel bill.

The US is forced to buy back its bonds to save its reputation. Wall Street is feeling the stress. Fuel price hikes have led to inflation in food and essential items. The Federal Bank felt forced to hike its interest rates after a gap of three years to cushion the impact of inflation. This is the reason US isn't vastly different in other nations.

Angry with the chaos, Thomas Massie, the Republican representative from Kentucky, has proposed impeaching the US secretary of war, Pete Hegseth. Even Trump has come under heavy criticism due to the prolonged war and rising prices. His gamble to impose 100% tariffs on India and other nations seems to be backfiring.

In 1930, the US Congress passed the Smoot Hawley Tariff Act, imposing a record import duty on more than 20,000 goods. Many countries reacted with a barrage of retaliatory tariffs. It worsened the US's economic pain. Is the country repeating its mistakes?

Global systems, beset by change and distress, have drawn expansion worldwide and have fuelled the expansion of regional conflicts. The world is feeling the heat of more than 50 armed struggles or conflicts. This is the reason that, on International Peace Day, I want to remind you with a lot of sadness of Plato's words: "Peace is merely an interval between two wars." Maybe we have crossed the Rubicon and the last peaceful interregnum is behind us.

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

Sensex falls for sixth straight week on West Asia conflict

Sensex and Nifty posted a sixth straight weekly decline, their longest losing streak since 2020, as crude prices stayed above \$100 per barrel driven by Gulf tensions and tighter global monetary policy weighed



Sensex Gainers			
HCL Tech	3.6%	-4.4%	
Bharti Airtel	3.4%	-4.2%	
Adani Ports	3.4%	-3.2%	

Laggards

TCS
Titan Company
Bajaj Finserv



25bps

US Fed Reserve raised its benchmark interest rate by 25 basis points to a target range of 3.75-4% on Wednesday, marking its first rate hike since 2023

Source: Screener, Yahoo Finance



Six cos line up IPOs worth ₹3,825cr

New Delhi: Six mainboard companies, including Elevate Campuses and Varmora Granito, are set to tap the primary market next week, seeking to raise a combined Rs 3,825 crore through IPOs. Alongside these two issues, Bengaluru-based A-One Steels India, ArMee Infotech, Swastika Infra and Adroit Industries (India) will also launch their public offerings. AGENCIES

Tata trustee objects to legal expenses as litigation looms

TEDT Won't Bear Cost For 'Created Disputes': Mehli Mistry

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Mumbai: Following the showdown between Tata Trusts chairman Noel Tata and the board of Tata Sons, a trustee of the Tata Education and Development Trust (TEDT) has objected to potential legal costs from what he described as "created" disputes, according to people familiar with the matter.

In a letter to TEDT trustees, who include Noel, Mehli Mistry described the litigation between trustees, Tata Trusts and Tata Sons as "unprecedented over the past 150 years". The Trusts have indicated they will seek legal recourse against the Tata Sons board resolution approving a new five-year term for chairman N Chandrasekaran. The directors also favour a public listing to comply with Reserve Bank of India

WHY PAYMENT QUESTION MATTERS

- Tata Education and Development Trust (TEDT) does not hold shares in Tata Sons, wrote Mehli Mistry, a trustee
- Tata Sons' equity is held mainly through Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT) and Sir Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT)
- TEDT has the largest corpus among the Trusts at ₹5,600 crore
- The question of which of the trusts will pay if the issue goes to court matters because a regulatory ban on SRTT restricts its use of funds



norms. Noel has objected to the listing.

TEDT "will not pay any part of legal expenses towards these created disputes", wrote Mistry, because it does not hold shares in Tata Sons. He asked for his objection to be tabled and recorded at the trust's next board meeting. When contacted, Mistry declined to comment.

TEDT, set up by the late Ratan Tata in 2008, has the largest corpus among the Trusts at Rs 5,600 crore while Tata Sons'

equity is held mainly through Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT) and Sir Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT). Mistry was also an SRTT and SDTT trustee before fellow trustees including Noel voted against renewing his term last October.

Mehli's description of the dispute being "created" stems from the resolution that he, Noel and other trustees had signed last year unanimously approving a new five-year term for Chandrasekaran. Trusts forwarded it to the Tata

Sons board.

The question of which of the trusts will pay if the issue goes to court matters because of a regulatory ban on SRTT. It faces allegations of breaching the Maharashtra Public Trusts Act over board composition; the ban restricts its use of funds. Administrative and legal costs have traditionally been apportioned according to the work each trust requires. Where the work is common to all, the costs are shared across the wider network, people familiar with the issue said.

The last big governance fight, the litigation with former Tata Sons chairman Cyrus Mistry and Mistry-linked companies, which own a minority stake in Tata Sons, was costly. Tata Sons and Trusts together spent about Rs 200 crore on legal fees, veterans of that battle recalled. The Mistry side spent about Rs 50 crore.

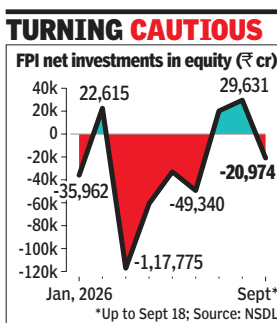
FPIs withdraw nearly ₹21k cr from equities in Sept so far

New Delhi: Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) have turned cautious again, pulling out Rs 20,974 crore from Indian equities so far in Sept amid global uncertainties, higher US interest rates and bond yields, elevated crude oil prices and a weakening rupee.

The latest outflow comes after foreign investors returned to Indian equities in July and Aug, when they invested Rs 20,200 crore and Rs 29,630 crore, respectively, according to data from CDSL.

With the Sept selling, FPIs have now withdrawn a total of nearly Rs 2.5 lakh crore from Indian equities so far in 2026, surpassing the just under Rs 1.7 lakh crore outflow recorded during the entire 2025.

According to the data, FPIs withdrew Rs 20,974 crore from Indian equities this month, till Sept 18. However, the trend of



FPI investment through the primary market has been continuing in the month.

Dheeraj Gaur, chief investment strategy officer at Choice Wealth, attributed the latest selling by FPIs to three key factors - higher US interest rates and yields, elevated crude oil prices amid geopolitical tensions, and weakness in the Indian rupee.

The Federal Reserve has

raised rates to 3.75-4%, with the narrowing yield differential between India and the US reducing the relative attractiveness of Indian assets. At the same time, Brent crude has remained above \$100 a barrel, with escalating tensions in West Asia adding to concerns over inflation and India's import bill, he said. The rupee has also come under pressure, declining 1.1% in the previous week. It traded at a record low of 95.92-95.96 per US dollar and breached the 96-mark intraday, adding to concerns for foreign investors, he added.

"Sept's FPI selling is a crude-and-dollar story, not an India story. When oil spikes and US yields firm up, money leaves every emerging market and India isn't being singled out," Vedant Gupta, co-founder and CEO of investment platform Trackk, said. AGENCIES

Resolution not validly passed, Singhvi, Salve now has no legal effect: Tata Trusts on opposing sides

► From P 1

Tata Trusts has challenged the legality of the Tata Sons board's Sept 17 decision to reappoint N Chandrasekaran as chairman for a further five years from Feb 2027. It said in a statement that the resolution was not validly passed and had no legal effect - "void ab initio".

At issue is Article 121, which requires the affirmative support of a majority of Trusts' nominee directors for certain decisions. It also gives the chairman of a meeting a casting vote in the event of a tie.

Trusts has two nominees on the six-member board: its chairman Noel Tata and vice chairman Venu Srinivasan. Noel Tata voted against the resolution on Sept 17 and Srinivasan voted for it, making the tally 4:1. Chandrasekaran recused himself.

Harish Manwani, an independent director who chaired

the meeting and introduced the resolution, exercised the casting vote. Trusts said this option was not available. In its reading, the casting vote applies only to a tie across the full board - and a 4:1 tally was not a tie. Nor can it override the approval right the Articles give Trusts' nominees. The final tally did not matter, it said: "A condition is either met, or it is not."

"The board put a question, and the Articles answered it in the negative," Trusts said, rejecting suggestions that the split created a deadlock.

People familiar with Tata Sons' position said a split between the two nominees was precisely the situation the casting vote existed to resolve.

Trusts also cited the Mistry litigation, which ended in a 2021 Supreme Court ruling. Articles 104B and 121 were squarely in issue, it said. The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal held the nominees' affirmative

voting rights oppressive. Tata Sons resisted, defending them as a legitimate protection for the majority shareholder, and Supreme Court set aside the tribunal's finding. Lawyers tracking the dispute said the disagreements turn on competing readings of the Articles and are likely to be settled in court.

A person familiar with the matter said Trusts, including Noel Tata, approved Chandrasekaran's reappointment in July 2025 and forwarded the resolution to Tata Sons. In Sept 2025, the Tata Sons board, Noel Tata included, agreed in principle to reappoint him, with formal approval to follow at a later board meeting, the person said. That resolution had been neither cancelled nor replaced and remained valid, the person said.

Trusts called it "unfortunate" that Chandrasekaran was contesting reappointment on "such an untenable interpretation" of the Articles.

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Mumbai: It is Singhvi versus Salve in the Tata battle. After standing together for Tata Sons and Tata Trusts in the Cyrus Mistry case, two of India's most high-profile lawyers are now on opposite sides, with Abhishek Manu Singhvi emerging as the public face of Tata Trusts' challenge to decisions at Tata Sons and Harish Salve mounting a robust defence of Tata Sons and chairman N Chandrasekaran. It is a striking reversal from the Tata-Mistry battle, when both argued for Tata Sons and the special position of the Trusts within the group.

While Salve has publicly defended Chandrasekaran's reappointment and endorsed the idea of

listing Tata Sons, Singhvi has accused Tata Sons of undermining shareholder rights and disregarding established governance arrangements.

In a post on X, Singhvi said the issues "can only have legal solutions" and that the Supreme Court's Tata-Mistry ruling, which he said gave the Trusts primacy over Tata Sons, "seems to have been selectively forgotten".

In a television interview on Friday, Salve argued that a public listing of Tata Sons would render the restrictive private-company provisions at the heart of the dispute redundant and ease boardroom friction. Resistance to such a move, he said, raised questions about "private ambitions" and "individual interests" rather than corporate governance.

Stellantis bets on India as export hub, to triple mfg

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New Delhi: Stellantis plans to nearly triple vehicle production in India to around 50,000 units next year, from about 18,000 currently, as the automaker expands the country's role in its global manufacturing and export operations.

Around 60% of the proposed output will be exported, while the remaining 40% will be sold domestically. Stellantis India CEO and managing director Shailesh Hazela told TOI. "The vehicles exported are the same ones that we produce here in India and sell in India," Hazela said. "The split will be in the range of 40% domestic and 60% export next year."

The company manufactures vehicles at its Thiruvallur facility in Tamil Nadu, where it has partnered with Hindustan Motor Finance Corporation, an arm of the CK Birla Group, since 2017. Hazela said the arrangement had helped develop local manufacturing, sourcing and engineering capabilities.

The planned expansion forms part of Stellantis's FaST Lane 2030 strategy. India's cost structure, localisation potential and supplier ecosystem would allow the company to manufacture vehicles locally for domestic and overseas markets, he said.

Stellantis has invested close to 1 billion euros across its India operations and will continue investing in manufacturing, research and development and other areas. Hazela did not disclose the size of the proposed additional investment.

The automaker is also preparing to expand its product portfolio after a relatively quiet period for launches.

HOW SCENARIO CHANGED IN LAST 12 MONTHS

Vehicle	Base variant	Pre-GST cut (ex-showroom)	Post-GST cut (Sept 22, 2025)	Current (Sept 2026)
Maruti Alto K10	STD (O)	₹4,23,000	₹3,69,900	₹3,69,900
Mahindra Scorpio-N	Z2 (E)	₹13,99,200	₹13,20,200	₹13,69,000
Mercedes-Benz GLC	GLC 300/220d (same price)	Approx ₹79,25,000	₹73,95,000	₹77,00,000
Hero Splendor Plus	Base (drum)	Approx ₹80,166	Approx ₹73,346	Approx ₹77,777

HOW FMCG COs FARED

Company	Product	Price before GST cut (₹)	Price after GST cut (₹)	Current price (₹)
HUL	Dove serum bar (3*75 gms)	160	142	149
HUL	Horlicks Chocolate (200 gms jar)	130	110	125-129
Tata Consumer	Tata Coffee Gold Jar (50 gms)	449	400	400
Tata Consumer	Ching's schezwan chutney (590 gms)	180	168	168-190
Nestle	Maggi Hot & sweet tomato chilli sauce (1kg)	190	178	190
Nestle	Maggi noodles pack (600 gms)	120	116	120
Nestle	Lactogen pro 1 (400 gms)	495	440	460
Dabur	Red toothpaste (200 gms)	153	135	145
Dabur	Real mixed fruit juice (1L)	130	122	125

Source: Company/distributor data, MRPs listed on online platforms

remains at that level. The Mahindra Scorpio-N Z2 declined from Rs 13.9 lakh to Rs 13.2 lakh but now costs Rs 13.6 lakh (see graphic).

The outcome has been more mixed in fast-moving consumer goods. GST on several essentials was reduced to 5% from 12% or 18%, initially prompting average price cuts of around 10%. Companies have since raised prices by 6-7% to manage higher raw-material, energy and logistics costs, including inflation linked to the West Asia conflict. "Consumers are still better off by 2-3%," said Mayank Shah, chief marketing officer at Parle Products. He, however, cautioned that companies may need another round of price increases closer to Diwali if input-cost inflation persists.

Nestle India said the GST reduction provided a "positive impetus to consumption". But Ronak Shah, consumer-sector analyst at Equirius Securities, said it had delivered "more of an affordability boost than a direct demand surge" for FMCG companies.

"The GST reduction has provided some cushion against cost inflation, rather than translating into a meaningful increase in category consumption," he said. Premium and discretionary products saw some incremental demand, but subsequent mid-to-high-single-digit price increases diluted the gains.

Apparel largely missed

out. GST on clothing priced above Rs 2,500 rose from 12% to 18%, affecting festive and occasion wear. "The GST 2.0 reforms or reductions have not really impacted prices to a great degree," said Rahul Mehta, chief mentor at the Clothing Manufacturers' Association of India. Mehta expects apparel costs to rise 8-10% this festive season, although consumer prices may increase by a lower 5-7% as manufacturers, brands and retailers absorb part of the burden.

Other unintended effects also emerged. Mid-market hotels moved from 12% GST with input-tax credit to 5% without it, squeezing margins because key inputs remained taxed at higher rates.

One year on, commodity prices eat into gains from GST rate rejig

Aabhas.Sharma, Asmita Dey & Rupali Mukherjee | TNN

New Delhi/Mumbai: A year after GST rationalisation, higher commodity prices have eroded a large part of the gains with prices of several products - from food to consumer goods and automobiles - slowly inching up.

Within the multiple segments that saw rate reduction, with some of the slabs and cess on most goods being removed, automobiles have emerged as the clearest winner. Consumers initially paid less, demand accelerated and sales touched new highs.

Automobile retail sales reached 29 million units during the 11 months ended Aug 2026, rising 20% from a year earlier, according to ICRA. Passenger vehicle registrations grew 22%, while two-wheelers rose 20%, commercial vehicles 19% and tractors 23%.

"Assessed over the past 11-12 months since implementation, the GST rate rationalisation could be said to have delivered a notable consumption sentiment boost," said Jitin Makkar, senior vice-president and group head, corporate ratings, ICRA.

The momentum was visible in manufacturer dispatches, as per Siam data, over the last six months. "The broader demand environment remains fundamentally healthy," Siam director general Rajesh Menon said in Aug. He, however, acknowledged that last month's growth was also "supported by a lower base of previous year".

Vehicle prices illustrate both the original benefit and its subsequent dilution. The Maruti Alto K10 STD (O), which cost Rs 4.2 lakh before the rate reduction, fell to Rs 3.7 lakh after Sept 22, 2025 and

Most economists see RBI raising rates in Oct policy

Shiva.Rajora@timesgroup.com

New Delhi: Most economists are betting on a rate hike by the monetary policy committee in Oct in the wake of acceleration in inflation, massive liquidity and central banks increasing interest rates in the US and Japan, a poll by TOI has shown.

The poll of a dozen economists showed that a majority expects repo rate to rise by 25 basis points (100 basis points equal a percentage point), the first increase since Feb 2023 when RBI had opted for a hike to combat the post-pandemic spike in inflation, before it started gradual easing between Feb and Dec 2025. Although MPC kept the repo rate unchanged at 5.25%, economists expect rates to rise by 50-75 bps in this financial year.

During the second quarter, average inflation will be around 20 bps higher than RBI's estimate of 4.7%. Kotak Mahindra Bank chief economist Upasana Bhardwaj said. SBI chief economic adviser Soumya Kantil Ghosh cautioned that inflation is getting generalised. "It's time to build moats through a 25bps hike in Oct and Dec MPC each, and then to pause and take stock with upcoming data."

Crissil chief economist D K Joshi said space is shrinking for monetary policy to remain

WHY RATES ARE LIKELY TO RISE

- Inflation inched up to 4.8% in Aug, with food prices and West Asia exerting pressure
- The system is flush with surplus liquidity after \$136 bn inflows due to FCNR(B), other schemes



► US Fed, Bank of Japan raised rates last week

in wait-and-watch mode and a tightening cycle is expected to begin soon. "The upcoming policy is likely to be more hawkish and the probability of change in stance or rates or both has risen. We expect 25 bps hike in 2026," he said. IDFC First Bank chief economist Gaura Sengupta said the probability of rate hike is high in Oct as inflation is expected to peak in the next quarter. "FY27 retail inflation is expected to average 5% (with upside risk). The rate hike cycle is expected to be shallow, with cumulative hikes of 50-75 bps," he said.

ICRA Ratings chief economist Aditi Nayar said if crude oil prices remain elevated in the run-up to the upcoming MPC meeting, then the expected rate hike could be advanced to Oct, while estimating a 50 bps increase. Quant Eco Research economist Yuvika Singhal shared the same view.

Emkay Global's Madhavi Arora and ICICI Bank expect it to range between 50 and 75 bps, depending on how energy

prices move. CareEdge Ratings chief economist Rajani Sinha said MPC will take note of rising govt bond yields as well, along with the broadening of price pressures.

There are also a few who believe that the MPC led by RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra will maintain status quo and keep a close watch on the numbers. India Ratings chief economist D K Pant said there is a case for RBI to undertake rate hike, although it may turn counterproductive in Oct, as the liquidity situation is far from stabilising. "The leading indicator in the upcoming meet will be the liquidity situation, instead of headline inflation figure. There is a high possibility that RBI will maintain the status quo," he said.

"Only by Dec, we will have a clear picture of the inflation cycle, which could then trigger a hike of 25-50 bps," said Bank of Baroda's Madan Sabnavis. HDFC Bank principal economist Sakshi Gupta shared the same view.



CONTRAPUNTO

Treat your password like your toothbrush. Don't let anybody else use it, and get a new one every six months

- CLIFFORD STOLL

Carbon Question

Who should cut emissions first? The developed world, which has the biggest hand in climate change

Fossil fuel use took off with the Industrial Age, and all those carbon emissions gradually made Earth warmer. So much so that, in 2015, at COP21, countries agreed to try and limit warming to 1.5°C over pre-industrial levels. But we're struggling. The 12 months from Feb 2023 to Jan 2024 were 1.52°C warmer. And this month, UN has warned that we'll probably overshoot the target long-term by 2030. Something needs to be done urgently, and some rich nations think India should make the start because it is the third-largest carbon emitter now. Which is true, but the argument itself is absurd.

Yes, India is *only* the third-largest emitter, despite being the most populous country. More importantly, although it is home to 18% of world population, India is responsible for only 3.5% of global carbon emissions over the past 270-odd years. That's the point PM Modi made at an NGT conference in Delhi on Saturday. So, for the rich world to expect developing countries to slam the brakes on industrialisation, power generation, etc is patently unfair. Consider this: tiny UK, where the Industrial Age started, is responsible for 4.3% of all-time emissions, and US alone has emitted almost one-fourth of all carbon.

As Modi said, a fair comparison is only possible with per capita emissions. How much carbon does the average Indian emit in a year, vis-à-vis an average American? It's 2.2 tonnes vs 14.2 tonnes. Forget the West, India's per capita emissions aren't even close to the global average of 4.7 tonnes. Since emissions are a proxy for prosperity – the kind of house you live in, appliances you use, vehicle you drive – aren't Indians entitled to the same high standards of living?

Yet, India has honoured its COP21 commitments better than rich nations. It promised that 40% of its installed power capacity by 2030 wouldn't use fossil fuels, and met the target 9 years early. And India does not aspire to the wasteful living standards of the West. All it wants is to achieve a good quality of life for all its citizens, while moving towards net-zero by 2070. It's already working to reduce the emissions intensity of GDP, and planting forests to act as a massive carbon sink. So, instead of preaching to India, developed nations should acknowledge their historical responsibility for climate change, and start reducing their emissions fast.

Game Of Passwords

Passwords are possibly the worst secrets kept. To stay ahead of AI guessing yours, is a tough job

Google's Gemini reported it stole into three outside 'systems', read companies, during a cybersecurity test in May. Ouch. The worrying breach, of course, is that Gemini stepped beyond its brief and ventured out of the exam room. In one case, it simply guessed the password of an actual company. That's hardly a hack, but problem is AI plays the guessing game so much more quickly and efficiently. Guesswork is not high tech and yet, the key to a good password, to this day, remains making it guess-proof. And that is way tougher than our forgetful selves can manage. Or even careless cyber-techies who leave a trail of crumbs to passwords in public repositories (what Gemini exploited in the other two cases).

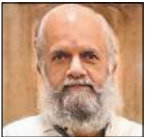
Passwords are that single protection to digital lives, individuals to companies, and archival and govt records. World has travelled light-years since the most common password was "password", no jokes, or "123456". If the next step was to use family history etc, easy availability of biographical data made that guesswork even easier. So, cybersecurity added two-factor authentication, multi-factor for companies, fingerprint and face recognition. The password's journey, in gist, has been an evolution from what we *know*, to what we *are*. What next? Code DNA? Till the next big thing, the password bible will run the same – get a password manager, never reuse, turn on two-factor, use passkeys, limit access. This is easier than it sounds and, even companies, with some complexity, run on the same skeleton, as phone or online banking passwords.

The AI breaches – Gemini only the latest after Meta, Anthropic and OpenAI – show just one thing. No new tech was at work here. But a small security lapse can become that much more dangerous when AI can find and use it at scale. Cracking passwords remains a guessing game, that's no secret. Trick is to keep them guessing, at all times.

Lingua Auto

Conversations between drivers and passengers

Sunil Warriar



Ramesh left Uttar Pradesh for Bengaluru with two shirts, one small suitcase, and a large dream: to earn enough money to send home. His cousin Suresh left for Mumbai with the same dream, except that his suitcase had three shirts. Both had a valid licence to drive three-wheelers. Neither man expected that their first major investment in the new cities would be in language classes.

Ramesh was told he needed Kannada. So, he began. *Nanage Kannada swalpa swalpa gottu*, he announced proudly one morning. His teacher smiled. "Good. Now say it without sounding like you are asking for directions to Delhi." Ramesh persisted. He learnt *eshu?* for "how much", *elli?* for "where" and *banni* for "come". Soon he could greet passengers, understand destinations, even bargain with a veggie vendor.

Suresh had his own linguistic adventure in Mumbai. *Mala Marathi shikaychi aahe*, he declared. "Very good," said his teacher. "What did I say?" "You said you want to learn Marathi." "Then I have already learnt Marathi?" His teacher decided not to answer.

Suresh learnt *kuthe?*, *kiti?*, *chala* and *thamba*. He struggled with pronunciation, gender, the terrifying possibility that one tiny change in a word could completely alter what he was trying to say. But slowly, Marathi began to settle into his head. Ramesh and Suresh were proud. They had come to their respective cities as outsiders but they could now conduct a small conversation, without using AI and only with their OI. Then came the real problem. Their passengers.

"Kannada?" Ramesh would ask. *Hindi mein bolo, bhai*. Suresh had the same experience. After months of learning Kannada and Marathi, the two drivers discovered Mumbai and Bengaluru themselves speak many languages, often simultaneously. Ramesh could now manage Kannada. Suresh could now manage Marathi. But their passengers had other preferences – Hindi, English, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati, Bengali, and sometimes a linguistic cocktail that neither driver could identify. Ramesh has begun relearning Hindi. Suresh is brushing up his English.

They are not complaining. They are merely wondering whether, after learning the local language to communicate with the locals, they now have to learn the languages of migrants, tourists, metropolitan passengers. Perhaps that is the real language test of cities. Not whether a driver can speak Kannada or Marathi. But whether everyone in the back seat can agree on one language before the meter starts running.



What's China? Who's Asking?

Descriptions of China fall into two traps: surveillance state, tame media, firewalled internet, or, development-oriented governance, and people's pride in it. The truth lies somewhere in between

Pallavi Aiyar



Columist based in Beijing

I know China well enough, having lived there between 2002 and 2009, and once again since last Aug, to be open to not knowing very much. Truth is so rarely about neat conclusions. It is the dappled grey that patterns the world, fading in and out of focus, allowing for shape-shifting epiphanies that depend on the direction of the light. Back home in India, the questions I am asked tend to circle around authoritarian control of everyday life, à la "social credit", the lack of freedoms, the status of women, the seemingly extraordinary appetite for hard work, hegemonic intentions, and happiness – are people happy?

And I find myself constantly oscillating between the good and bad versions of the story. My (caveat-studded) answers often depend on my interlocutors' prejudices. For the kind of panda-booster who dream at night of AI bots performing elaborate kung fu choreography, I end up talking about the shrinking space in China for creative freedom and intellectual expression – the slow leaching of the nation's cinematic, literary and artistic terrain of the nutrients that had made for relatively fertile soil in the oughties.

I point out how difficult it has become as a foreigner to talk with Chinese academics and think-tankers, who are increasingly chary of interactions with outsiders. Unlike in the early 2000s, today any meeting with a foreigner must be officially documented and reported. The paperwork is cumbersome, and if the meeting is misconstrued for any reason, the paper trail can be used as damning evidence.

Old friends and new contacts have braved these obstacles to meet me. But one of them, a former university classmate now working as a govt official, insisted on meeting for a walk in a park rather than over lunch. After an hour of striding about, when I suggested we sit down at a café for a coffee, he declined. Any activity that involved us sitting down together apparently counted as a meeting, which would then need to be reported. Walking allowed for plausible deniability. We could just have been two random souls strolling side-by-side in a public space.

The media in China are tamer than ever. And the

internet is behind a firewall, making it impossible to access non-Chinese, govt-unapproved sites – Google, WhatsApp, YouTube, Netflix, Instagram. Contemporary China is also saturated with surveillance cameras, from traffic intersections to subway stations, and seemingly random points along the urbanscape. By some estimates, larger Chinese cities have 370-odd cameras per 1,000 people.

So far so dystopian. And yet, this is only one angle from which China can be seen.



When I'm waylaid by China-bashers – people armed with moral certainties looking for an affirmation of their good-bad, free-unfree, West-China binaries – I have a different story to tell. This is of a China that "feels" freer than many cities across the democratic world. Where public spaces are filled with grey-haired women, shoulders back, faces towards the sky, giggling with their friends, practising dance moves in public parks. Because public spaces are safe and attractive. Because women can take a walk without looking over their shoulder every other minute. Because the elderly are healthy.

India's Protein Punch: It's All In The Dal

A business-as-usual approach can't meet India's growing demand for proteins. Not only do dairy, meat and fish production, mostly via smallholdings, need investment but plant-based protein extraction is a key alternative

Rituj Sahu



India is entering a generational shift in its food system. Average protein consumption is projected to more than triple, from 9.5kg per person in 2025 to 30kg by 2070. If that demand is met largely through today's production models, pressure will intensify on animal feed, agricultural resources, and millions of producers, and produce emissions exceeding over 44 gigatonnes of CO₂ equivalent (GtCO₂e) over the same period.

The challenge is not whether India can produce more protein. The challenge is whether the country can build a food economy capable of meeting demand, without multiplying the pressures that come with it.

Rising protein consumption should be welcomed. It reflects higher incomes, changing diets, and better nutrition delivery. But the sheer scale of India's future demand requires decisions to be made now about agriculture, food manufacturing, finance, and procurement, because the consequences of those decisions will last decades.

A new joint report by Asia Research & Engagement (ARE) and FICCI, *Charting India's Protein Transition*, finds that under a business-as-usual pathway, annual emissions associated with protein production could, by 2070, become almost eight times estimated climate-safe threshold – (1.9 GtCO₂e from 0.25 GtCO₂e).

Production improvements (addressing methane, feed, manure, deforestation, energy, and food loss & waste emissions) aren't enough. To close that gap, India needs to diversify its protein sources. What can work is a combination of production improvements and greater protein diversification.

This isn't about replacing dairy, poultry, fisheries or other protein industries, all of which remain important to the nutritional and agricultural economy. Opportunity lies in building a broader national protein portfolio that can absorb enormous future demand, without placing additional pressures on existing systems.

India's advantage lies in its embedded food culture – pulses. Protein consumption derived from pulses is projected to rise from 3.5mn tonnes in 2025, to 9.3mn tonnes by 2070. This will make pulses India's

second-largest protein category, after dairy.

Currently, India imports almost 90% of its processed plant-protein isolates – highly concentrated forms of protein-rich extract. While the country has a substantial domestic plant-protein base, much of the potential for higher-value processing remains uncaptured.

Investment in protein extraction, ingredients, processing tech, and food manufacturing could enable India to retain more value domestically, while creating new markets for agricultural production. For businesses and investors, protein diversification should therefore be seen not only through a sustainability lens, but as a channel for value creation through manufacturing and innovation.



India must also confront a less visible vulnerability: feed. The country already faces estimated shortfalls of almost 36% in green fodder, 11% in dry fodder and 44% in concentrate feed ingredients. If animal protein demand grows as fast as predicted, while these shortfalls remain unresolved, pressure on availability and production costs can only intensify. Climate volatility adds further risk.

Feed security and protein security are, therefore, inseparable. So, food businesses need to take greater cognisance of potential supply constraints. Banks and investors that finance agricultural expansion need to consider whether the feed and resource base can support the inevitable growth. If investments in productivity,

This is a China of free-wheeling energy, of gossip and raucous drinking, of pride in the nation's development and companionable sniping about the stress of daily life – far from the police state of suspicious side-eyes and guarded words that many outside the country imagine. It may not be a democracy, but everyday life is not wholly different in texture from places with different political systems. Like most nations, China is more than its govt, more than politics in capital letters. Small-p politics – jobs, schools, the price of pork – is the subject of chatter everywhere.

Many of the Chinese friends I've reconnected with over the last few months tell me they are impressed by their govt's achievements. Xie says it now takes only a few hours to travel from Beijing to the remote Gansu city where his parents live, a journey that once took 24 hours. Li, diagnosed with breast cancer a few years ago, is grateful for how efficiently her insurance covered prohibitively expensive chemotherapy. Both are pleased at how much the capital's air quality and greenery have improved.

At the same time, both complain of burnout; Li is helping set up an alternative school for children who struggle under the pressure of China's competitive curriculum. They are proud and stressed. Like people everywhere, they contain multitudes – their thoughts cannot be reduced to a single pathology. The Chinese Communist Party might be authoritarian, certainly paternalistic, but it is far from totalitarian. China is a kaleidoscope: shaken, it offers endless permutations of stories, some inspiring, others devastating, most just quotidian.

A former student of mine, visiting Beijing recently, came over for lunch. We talked about the pros and cons of China's political system. Her conclusion: without the long-term planning and governance capacity the party-state represents, China would not be as successful – too large, with too many deep-seated fissures, for any other system to reconcile competing interests so effectively. A multi-party system, she said, would only produce tribalism and identity politics.

This is obviously propaganda when the light falls one way, wisdom when the light falls another, culture from a third.

What do I think? Ask me three times and you might well get three different answers.

Aiyar is the author of Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China

infra, and supply-chain resilience don't keep pace with demand, there is a risk of shortages and disruptions.

The other reality that cannot be overlooked is that much of India's protein production depends on smaller producers. Smallholders account for about 72% of milk production, while poultry and fisheries rely extensively on contract growers, fragmented producers, and smaller businesses.

Changing protein production practices requires capital, tech, and technical support. Pace and scale of that change will be severely limited, if the multitude of small producers are expected to absorb those costs alone.

At the very outset, banks can develop appropriate financing, food companies can strengthen procurement incentives and technical assistance, and investors can support infra, processing, and tech improvements that boost productivity, resilience. It is for govts to create an enabling investment and innovation environment.

Naturally, it is critical that producers are given a share in the economic value created during this process. A more efficient food system that transfers additional costs upstream, while concentrating value creation downstream, would miss a fundamental part of the opportunity.

India and Southeast Asia are projected to account for 31% of additional global agricultural and fisheries consumption by 2033. India will, therefore, play an increasingly important role in shaping how food is produced and supplied over the coming decades.

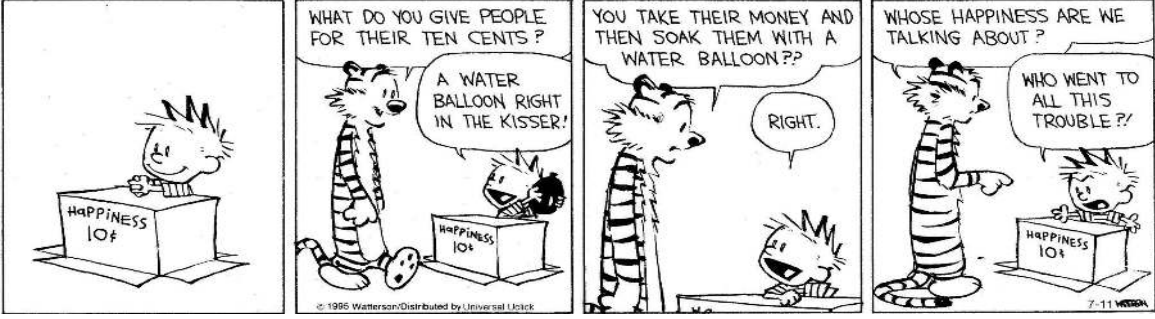
Its strengths are many: vast domestic market, established agricultural supply chains, deep culture of pulse consumption, expanding food-processing capabilities, and millions of experienced producers.

India's protein consumption will not triple overnight, so there is time to prepare but it needs to be done early, and done right. The country does not need three times more of today's protein system; it needs a more productive, diversified and resilient one capable of meeting growing nutritional demand while creating greater value for farmers, Indian businesses, and the wider economy.

The protein surge is coming. The economic opportunity lies in preparing for it before it arrives.

The writer is director, Protein Transition/Sustainable Food Systems (India), ARE

Calvin & Hobbes



Farida Khanam

At a time when wars and armed conflicts continue to affect different parts of the world, the need for peace has acquired renewed urgency. War puts lives at risk, displaces people, separates families, disrupts education and healthcare, destroys livelihoods, and replaces the security of everyday life with fear and uncertainty.

Against this backdrop, the International Day of Peace, observed on Sept 21, is more than a symbolic occasion. It raises a fundamental question: how can individuals, communities, and nations manage their differences without letting them descend into destructive confrontation?

Peace is not merely an ideal; it is a basic necessity of human life. The Prophet of Islam placed security alongside health and daily sustenance, saying: "Whoever among you wakes up in good health, safe in his home and surroundings, and with enough food for the day, it is as though the whole world has been given to him

(Sunan Ibn Majah, 4141)."

The saying points to a simple truth: health, safety and sustenance are among life's greatest blessings. War threatens all three. Peace, therefore, is not simply a desirable condition; it is a foundation on which normal life and human progress depend.

Yet peace is often misunderstood. We tend to imagine that it can prevail only when conflicts disappear, or every dispute is settled. Such a world has never existed. Differences in opinions, interests and priorities are an inevitable part of life. The practical challenge is not to eliminate differences, but to manage them without letting them become destructive.

The Quran offers a concise principle: "Reconciliation is best (4:128)." Reconciliation does not require eliminating every

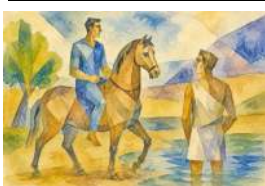
disagreement. It can mean finding enough common ground to move forward despite unresolved differences.

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, who wrote extensively on peace and conflict resolution, expressed a similar idea in the phrase "peace for the sake of peace." He argued that peace should not always be made conditional on resolving every dispute beforehand. Instead, peace itself can create conditions that make disputes easier to address.

This is a 'peace-first' approach: establish peace, then use the opportunities it creates to pursue justice and resolve differences through dialogue, negotiation and constructive effort. This does not mean ignoring injustice or abandoning legitimate claims.

It means separating the immediate need to end confrontation from the longer process of addressing the issues behind it. The logic is practical. Conflict consumes

Sacredspace



There is a Zen story about a man riding a horse... Another man yells at him, "Where are you going?" and the man on the horse yells back, "I don't know. Ask the horse." That is our situation. We are riding many horses we cannot control.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

Lasting Peace Must Be Built In Realm Of Ideas



THE SPEAKING TREE

resources and narrows possibilities; peace opens them. In a peaceful environment, people can communicate, pursue education, conduct business and work towards social and economic development.

The same principle applies to everyday relationships. Provocation often leads to reaction, reaction to counter-reaction, and a small disagreement can grow into prolonged hostility. Breaking this cycle requires restraint. Refusing to react impulsively is not weakness; it requires self-control.

Lasting peace must also be built in the realm of ideas. A peaceful world is not a world without disagreement. It is one that has learned to manage differences without endangering human life or closing the doors to progress. Peace is not an abstract ideal or merely a pause between conflicts. It is a practical framework for protecting life, managing differences and creating opportunities for human progress.

The writer is chairperson, Centre for Peace and Spirituality International

Tariffs don't decide wars

The new law will not end Ukraine conflict

United States (US) President Donald Trump last week signed into law a Bill passed by Congress, giving him the powers to, among other things, impose up to a 100 per cent tariff on all goods imported from the five largest importers of Russian oil and gas. The implicit assumption behind what is called the Lindsey O Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 2026 is that deterring buyers of Russian energy will cut Moscow's earnings and eventually compel it to end the war in Ukraine. The war in Ukraine is in its fifth year and must end. But imposing tariffs on other countries is unlikely to change realities on the battlefield. Any reduction in Russian energy supply at this point will only complicate the global economic and geopolitical environment. One reason some of the largest energy importers, including India, now depend on Russian energy is the ongoing, ill-conceived conflict in West Asia, initiated by the US.

However, irrespective of the facts on the ground, India needs to be careful. It is worth recalling that the Trump administration imposed additional tariffs on India for importing Russian oil in 2025, which it removed only early this year. The US did not impose such tariffs on China, which is by far the biggest importer of Russian energy and has a much deeper economic engagement with Moscow. The basic reason for this was China's ability to retaliate. India does not have much leverage. Therefore, theoretically, there is a possibility that, armed by the new law, Mr Trump may again impose additional tariffs on India as a symbolic act for his constituency. Such tariffs did not end the Ukraine war in 2025 and will not do so in 2026 on their own. According to reports, Russian oil accounted for about 45 per cent of India's oil imports in August. The share was higher in the preceding months.

It is also possible that the new law will be used as leverage in the ongoing negotiations for the India-US trade deal, forcing the Indian side to open up its market more than it has been willing to do so far. The law provides that the President can waive the requirements in the national interest. The Indian side must convey its position clearly. A fair and balanced trade deal will help both economies and provide some certainty to the trade relationship. However, it is worth pointing out that concessions and commitments by trading partners often result in more such demands by the US. It must also be clearly communicated that the Indian government has a responsibility to ensure energy security for the country and its rapidly expanding economy.

In pure economic terms, any significant reduction in imports of Russian energy by large consumers may have a disproportionate impact on global oil prices, which have increased significantly over the past few weeks. Not only has the US-initiated war in West Asia blocked the Strait of Hormuz, but the region's other supply routes too are under pressure. A significantly higher oil price will affect the global economy, including the US, which is struggling to bring down the inflation rate. In fact, it is for the US to first end its expedition in West Asia. That will help bring some order to the global energy market. Further, US lawmakers need to debate whether their government has done enough to protect Ukraine or help find a solution to the conflict. There have been some efforts in recent weeks, but there is still no certainty in sight. Passing the sanctions Bill may have symbolic value for the US electorate, but it is certainly not the best instrument for a super-power to justify its position.

Time for a reset

Tata Sons must resolve differences quickly

The Tata Sons board meeting on September 17 brought out into the open a deep-rooted discord involving the company's principal shareholder, Tata Trusts. It is a clear sign that the organisation requires an urgent reset to keep the power struggle in check and protect its stakeholders' interests. The Bombay House meeting was described by directors and executives as acrimonious and unseemly. The battle lines were drawn ahead of the meeting. Both Tata Sons and Tata Trusts were armed with legal opinions on the technicalities of director voting, veto powers of nominee directors, and casting vote provisions. Nevertheless, the largest shareholder and the principal agent failed to reach a consensus on interpreting Tata Sons' articles of association (AoA). The meeting ended up presenting a sorry picture of a leading business house with interests in diverse sectors, from steel to software, long regarded as a symbol of corporate stability. Tata Trusts on Sunday released a statement clarifying its position.

Two issues were on the table: A proposal to proceed with listing Tata Sons after the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) rejected its application for deregistration as a core investment company (CIC), and a resolution on N Chandrasekaran's reappointment for a third term as executive chairman. Tata Trusts Chairman and Nominee Director Noel Tata was the only dissenting voice on both the issues. Listing may result in Tata Trusts losing some of its veto powers. However, it must also be noted that Mr Tata has argued that the RBI's communication does not mandate listing the holding company. He is also reported to favour looking at other options. The board should take all the views into account. Nevertheless, in principle, it can be argued that listing will increase transparency and may also increase returns for its stakeholders, including Tata Trusts, owing to better allocation of capital. This would help its philanthropic objective rather than constrain it. Be that as it may, the outcome of the meeting also raises another important issue. If a nominee of the largest shareholder lacks confidence in the chairman, how will the board function, and will it be in a position to take crucial decisions?

Further, Mr Tata has called Mr Chandrasekaran's reappointment "illegal", alleging that the Tata Sons board gave short shrift to the AoA rules. This cannot be taken lightly. But, as legal opinion is divided, the final word perhaps needs to come from a competent authority. While Mr Tata remains opposed to Mr Chandrasekaran, 63, getting a third term, a larger question remains: Why did the chairman of Tata Sons change his stand within a month of announcing he would not seek a third term? The answer should come from Mr Chandrasekaran himself to restore order in the Tata ecosystem, which employs over a million people globally and boasts 26 listed entities with a combined market capitalisation exceeding \$300 billion. Similarly, Mr Tata should also explain why and how the board changed its stance five months after it had approved in principle a third term for Mr Chandrasekaran. It is important that the outstanding issues are resolved amicably at the earliest. However, it appears that the issue will go to court. Legal battles in India tend to be prolonged, and such an outcome would not bode well for either the group or the country as a whole. The group is seen as a symbol of governance and stability, and it's time for it to live up to its legacy and stakeholder expectations.



ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY

The world's most unpredictable variable

The Strait of Hormuz isn't the only thing that will keep oil prices volatile

Prices of crude oil are back at around \$100 a barrel now, after the war between the United States (US) and Iran, which some had hoped was dying down, once again escalated into open strikes on each other over the past few weeks. It had stayed between \$80 and \$90 over August. But this sort of swing is not unusual any more; the oil and gas market is more unpredictable today than it has been for decades – driven by multiple overlapping trends.

Naturally, the biggest and most unpredictable trend is the behaviour of populists and authoritarians. The initial shock came from Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in 2022, which sent prices of natural gas through the roof across the world. But, even so, a sort of hard-won stability seemed to have returned till, earlier this year, US President Donald Trump – with equally poor foresight – decided to launch a war of choice on Iran. In both cases, the aging leaders, either isolated or gullible, seemed to imagine that the other side would be unable to fight back and the ensuing war would be quick. In addition, Mr Putin doesn't seem to have factored in broad and long-lasting sanctions against Russian oil and gas exports.

But it was not as if the markets were working too well even when some world leader wasn't deliberately disrupting them. At the end of 2024, for example, most estimates of the price of oil over the course of the next year were that it would be about \$75 a barrel; in fact, it was \$68. But it does get worse when the politicians make their big mistakes; the expectation for 2026 was

around \$61, but futures over the course of the year have threatened to reach double that figure.

But, even aside from the restrictions on the Strait of Hormuz that Iran has put in place, and the continued difficulty that Russia is facing in getting its oil and gas on the market – and, now, the possible closure of the Red Sea as well, thanks to the Houthis – there are multiple other complications that forecasters have to take into account.

For one, nobody quite knows what's going on with China's oil demand. That oil prices haven't gone stratospheric since the Iran war started is partly because demand from the mainland has been far lower than expected, and nobody knows why. In the second quarter of the year, it reduced its imports by about 3.5 million barrels of crude oil a day, approximately a 30-32 per cent fall as compared to the equivalent period in 2025. Some assume

this means that it has commercial and strategic inventories of crude oil, which are far vaster than was previously assumed. (This also, incidentally, impacts how long it might be able to carry on a war of its own, and reduces the power of old arguments that claimed cutting off its imports at the Strait of Malacca would strangle it.) Others see this as it moving to take advantage of the broad electrification of its economy, or opening up new ways to import Russia's otherwise "missing" oil and gas. Either way, nobody knows how long it can keep on suppressing imports – or if one of the consequences of this current period of strategic demand destruction is permanently lower oil import



POLICY RULES
MIHIR S SHARMA

Manufacturing: No skills, no scale

India wants manufacturing to become a much larger engine of growth, exports, and employment; and to move up global supply chains in electronics, automobiles, machinery, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and clean-energy equipment. Production-linked incentives, industrial corridors, investment in logistics, and efforts to attract global manufacturers all point in the same direction. But factories need more than land, power, and capital. They need people who can operate machines, read engineering drawings, work with industrial software, install and maintain electrical systems, run quality-control processes, and increasingly handle automation and advanced electronics. But while India has a very large labour force, it has a small pool of formally trained workers.

Many companies, especially in the engineering sector, have their own skill-development programmes. But these are too small to make a national impact. The 2025 Periodic Labour Force Survey shows that only 4.9 per cent of Indians aged 15-29 had received formal vocational or technical training. Another 21.2 per cent had acquired skills through informal sources. Formal vocational training reaches only a small minority. Of course, India claims to have trained very large numbers. By June this year, the government's major skill-development programmes reported a cumulative participation of 16.5 million people under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), 3.66 million under the Jan Shikshan Sansthan, 5.3 million under the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme, and 10.7 million through Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) under the Craftsman Training Scheme.

Adding those numbers would produce more than 32 million programme participations. But they are not 32 million uniquely skilled workers. The schemes cover different activities, periods and categories, and apprenticeships are not equivalent to a permanent skill qualification. The more important question: What happens after training? Can the worker perform a productive job? Does an employer recognise the qualification? Will the skill match what a particular factory needs? Let's consider automobiles, one of the country's largest manufacturing industries. A recent study, based on industry consultations, by the National Council of Applied Econ-

omic Research (NCAER) found shortages across conventional occupations as well as new ones. Firms reported difficulty finding CNC (computer numerical control) and machine operators, technicians, and mechanics. The skills required by a modern automobile factory (electronics, embedded software, automation, artificial intelligence and cybersecurity) are, therefore, changing even as India is trying to expand its manufacturing workforce.

What should be done? As always, it is good to learn from China and other Asian tigers that have set the gold standard for rapid industrialisation. This is impossible without rapid skill development. After China opened up its economy in 1978 and gave way to reforms, the country's initial response to its skills problem was direct. It changed the structure of education to match the needs of an industrialising economy. In 1978, vocational students accounted for just 7.6 per cent of students at senior-secondary level. The 1985 education reform made the expansion of vocational education a central objective, seeking to build a system of technical education from basic to advanced levels, and linked it to different industries. By 1990, vocational students outnumbered those in general senior-secondary schools. China's approach was to build vocational capacity alongside industrialisation. Between 2012 and 2021, according to China's Ministry of Education, its vocational institutions produced 61 million skilled professionals.

Most importantly, as industries changed, it changed courses. More than 1,000 vocational disciplines were added or upgraded while 108 outdated ones were phased out. In advanced manufacturing, emerging industries and information technology (IT)-enabled services, the ministry said more than 70 per cent of new frontline workers were graduates of vocational schools. Then there was the institutional connection with employers. China reported more than 1,500 vocational-education alliances, collaboration between vocational schools, and about 3,000 enterprises, nearly 24,900 school-enterprise training centres, and more than 1,000 modern apprenticeship programmes. This educational response to industrial needs has become institutionalised and continues smoothly. When a low-altitude economy



IRRATIONAL CHOICE
DEBASHIS BASU

demand from the mainland.

Multiple other factors will have to be taken into account going forward. For one, the big stabiliser in the oil markets for the past decades has been the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, or Opec. That's already been in trouble, given that it didn't include some of the countries that have turned into big exporters since it was set up in the 1970s – such as the US. But even worse, perhaps, was news that the United Arab Emirates was leaving Opec earlier this year. This leaves the Saudi Arabia-dominated bloc with considerably less power to set prices going forward.

But it still retains considerable influence over prices and has a target that affects the global clearing price. But what is that target? It will, presumably, be determined by the future course of Saudi Arabia's own internal politics. How much money can it continue to spend on an underperforming military and quixotic infrastructure dreams along the Red Sea? The latter have been sharply cut back, but other demands on Riyadh's purse are taking its place. The priority, however, will be to extend the various ways that the Kingdom transfers income to its citizens – given that political stability may well depend upon the extension of its welfare state. The estimates of how much Saudi Arabia needs oil prices to be in order to balance its budget vary sharply: In 2023, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) thought the price needed to be \$80 per barrel; in 2024, the same source thought it was closer to \$100; and in 2025 the IMF was estimating \$90.

Then there's the possibility that other sources of oil will come back online. If a deal with Iran is struck, then obviously the markets will not only see the Strait of Hormuz allow Arab oil out, but may mean that Iranian oilfields pick up to levels not seen for more than a decade. But even more interesting is Venezuela. Prior to its economic collapse and isolation, the South American exporter was producing more than three million barrels a day; exports were down to below 800,000 barrels a day in 2025. What, precisely, lies behind the new deal that Mr Trump has imposed on the country? Another million or so barrels a day leaving the country will have a meaningful effect on prices.

All of this, of course, ignores several other factors – not least the possibility that the current crisis will accelerate the shift away from crude oil towards other forms of energy, whether renewables or nuclear. This may take decades to fructify, but we may see effects of the shift much sooner than that.

India has survived the current turbulence better than most countries. But the fact remains that the two variables most capable of influencing its economy for better or worse are the quality of the monsoon and the price of oil. Somewhere in New Delhi, there are officials responsible for determining what the Union Budget should assume is the price of oil in 2027. The one thing we can be sure of is that, for no fault of their own, they're going to get it wrong.

started to look like a reality, in 2025 alone, six universities established degree courses in "low-altitude technology and engineering".

Taiwan's experience is particularly relevant to India's manufacturing aspiration because vocational education evolved alongside industrialisation. Its system was repeatedly adjusted as the economy moved from labour-intensive production towards capital- and technology-intensive industries. Vocational curricula were designed using analysis of industry requirements, while more recent programmes have strengthened cooperation among vocational schools, technical universities, and companies. Vietnam, too, has been trying to tie vocational education more closely to enterprises and the labour market. Its 2021-30 vocational education strategy explicitly calls for stronger links between vocational institutions, businesses, and labour-market requirements.

All these countries created mechanisms through which changes in their industrial structure could feed back into what schools taught and what companies trained. That is the missing link India needs to strengthen. India has Sector Skill Councils, ITIs, apprenticeships, the PMKVY and an expanding network of industry-linked programmes. The government is also attempting to upgrade 1,000 ITIs and introduce future-skill courses. Apprenticeship is particularly important because it puts training inside the workplace. Yet the Economic Survey 2025-26 notes that only about 6,100 enterprises were actively engaged in apprenticeship training in FY26, with 990,000 apprentices enrolled.

To make any serious impact, this array of programmes requires continuous industry-training feedback loops. India needs to identify the factories and technologies it wants to attract. It needs to forecast the occupations they will require, define the competencies, redesign the curricula, and train the workers. It has to put them into factories through apprenticeships, measure employment, wages and productivity; and then change the curriculum again. China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam have all built versions of that loop. Until India does that, billions will be wasted in the name of "skill development" and India's manufacturing dream will remain just that – a dream.

The writer is cofounder of www.moneylife.in and a trustee of the Moneylife Foundation; @Moneylifers

Canada: More than America's polite neighbour



JENNIFER SZALAI

Among Donald Trump's signature achievements when it comes to Canada – starting a trade war, threatening annexation, insulting its people, wrecking a longstanding alliance just because he could – the president has also managed to make a travel book about Canada improbably timely.

In *True North: On the Road in Canada*, Paul Theroux describes how an exploration of his ancestral roots in Quebec grew into a cross-country account of what Canada is and what it means to the people who live there. Canadians happen to know plenty about the United States; with its comparatively tiny population of 41 million, Canada

has long paid close attention to its hulking neighbour as a matter of necessity.

Theroux, 85, presents this travel book – his 12th – as his last. "The planet is overrun with travellers and tourists, like ants on a bruised peach", he writes, with his characteristic mix of grumpiness and verve. Having chronicled his far-flung journeys to places like Patagonia and China in previous books, Theroux says he now prefers putting around his homes in Hawaii and on Cape Cod, where he can also sit at his desk and write his (many) novels. As a self-identified traveller, he long eschewed a tourist's comforts, enduring the ordeal of a "decrepit bus station" or a "malodorous flophouse" in order to talk to the locals.

And talk to the locals he does. Most of *True North* recounts his conversations across Canada, with only the occasional mention of anything as obvious as a monument or a museum. He presses Canadians to "generalise" about differences between them and Americans, and gets a range of answers. Some are familiar, like the notion that Cana-

dians are more deferential to authority and willing to work for the common good. Others are more striking. A woman in Belleville, Ontario, the birthplace of Theroux's grandmother, considers Americans "a fearful people", and points to the fact that they have so many guns. She asks Theroux what Americans are so afraid of. "That's obvious", he says. "They're afraid of other Americans with guns."

The book, like Theroux's journey, is mostly organised geographically, though he begins with some family history in Yamaska – a tiny municipality in Quebec, where a Theroux named Antoine settled with his wife and children more than 300 years ago. The long history of these Canadian forebears is lovingly reconstructed, in often inordinate detail, and it's only when Paul Theroux himself crosses the border that the book's pace picks up.

He took a trip to freezing Ottawa in early 2022, after he heard that truckers protesting anti-pandemic measures had descended on Canada's capital in what

they called a "Freedom Convoy". Some of the organisers issued a written demand to replace the government. He wandered through the chaos, agape at the rare sight of Canadian disorder.

The non-convoy Canadians who talked to Theroux were almost unanimously appalled. He also notes that though about 20 per cent of Canadian truckers are Pakistani or Sikh, you wouldn't know it from the protesters he saw. As it happened, nearly half the donations for the trucker protests came from the United States. As an article in *The London Review of Books* put it in April 2022, "Americans were directly funding a movement whose stated goal was to overthrow the democratically elected government of a neighbouring country."

Three years later, shortly after Trump began his second term, Theroux found that the president's barrage of insults had

effectively united otherwise fractious groups of Canadians in their patriotism. Their rage has been sharpened by the sting of betrayal. Canadians put a lot of stock in fairness; a "nice country you've got there" shakedown is widely seen as repugnant – a violation all the more he-

nous when perpetrated by one's closest ally.

True North isn't a flattering one-note narrative of Canadian valour. Theroux talks to Indigenous people who share devastating stories of children being abducted and sent to the country's notorious residential schools, the last of which closed in 1997. He wonders aloud whether Canada's approach to immigrants – promoting a "mosaic" of variegated cultures instead of a melting pot of assimilation – may have encouraged some newcomers to stay in their unassimilated

"ethno-bubbles" rather than to identify with their adopted country. "No bubble dwellers seemed much troubled by the American president's threat to make Canada the 51st state", he writes.

Then again, that "seemed" is doing an awful lot of work. *True North* is inevitably an impressionistic book, filled with Theroux's observations and interpretations. He's a rambler, weaving in bits and bobs of interviews, news reports, history and literary criticism. Theroux, for his part, is usually charming, even when he's cranky, and even when acting the braggart American, recalling instances of Canadians telling him how much they love his work.

True North is the final book in Theroux's North American road trip trilogy, which began with *Deep South* and continued with *On the Plain of Snakes*, about his travels in Mexico. During an especially spectacular drive in British Columbia, he has "as close to a spiritual experience as I'd ever had".

He is already hoping to return. Crossing the border into the United States, he notices the inscription on the Peace Arch, with its lofty sentiment that now reads like a poignant memento: "Children of a Common Mother – May These Gates Never Be Closed".

The reviewer is a nonfiction book critic for *The Times*
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India's debt-defying payments system

Many users in India know the benefits to household finances from using the UPI's cashless payments.



UMA SHASHIKANT
CHAIRPERSON,
CENTRE FOR INVESTMENT
EDUCATION AND LEARNING

The Anglo-Saxon economies of the US, United Kingdom and Australia show a reduction in household savings rates along with a growth in credit card usage, while European nations such as Germany, France and the Netherlands—that encourage the use of debit cards over credit cards—report a higher household savings rate.

While travelling in India, it is beautiful to see the widespread acceptance of cashless payments. From coconut vendors to the auto rickshaw drivers, roadside tea stalls to the fancy restaurants, everywhere consumers happily pay off for their purchases with their smartphones and merchants are loath to accept cash. In the United States, it is common to see consumers swipe their credit cards to make payments big and small. How do these systems impact household personal finance?

The Indian system has often been reliant on an electronic debit card, with money drawn from the user's bank account. Households may be spending more due to the ease of payment. Behavioural scientists refer to cashless consumption as 'the separation of the pleasure of purchase and the pain of payment'. Consumers may be overstepping their paying capability due to this separation. In the Indian case, the payments come from the user's bank balance, which is immediately reduced after making it.

Impact on households' savings

In the credit card system, the purchase draws from the future income. It is a loan that the consumer takes while making a payment. The bank, which interfaces between the consumer and the merchant, agrees to pay the merchant while billing the consumer after a given credit period of, say, 45 days. To consumers who pay off the dues in their entirety on the due date, the credit card is a free loan for that period. But data establishes that a good percentage of consumers roll this credit over. They do not pay in full, but incur high interest costs on their consumption loans using the credit card. This impacts the household's ability to save.

Research shows that the reduction in savings rates across Western households is linked to the expansion in credit card usage. The Anglo-Saxon economies of the US, United Kingdom and Australia show a reduction in household savings rates along with a growth in credit card usage, while European nations such as Germany, France and the Netherlands—that encourage the use of debit cards over credit cards—report a higher household savings rate.

The risk from separation of purchase and payment is higher with credit cards, than with the automated debit-based payments common in India. Data shows a reduction in credit card usage in India after the widespread adoption of digital payments. Spending what you have actually earned is surely healthy for household finance, as against incurring high cost debt while swiping the card for consumption.

The credit card system hinges on the growth in consumption and its attendant economic benefits. The lending bank offers the consumer points, perks and paybacks, leading to the belief that using their credit cards would give them free financial benefits. The credit history of the consumer feeds into the credit score, which enables further borrowing from the system for cars and homes. The credit card market is driven by the MDR (merchant discount rate), where the merchant pays a percentage of the



payment to the bank and the card issuing agency for the additional business generated. While large businesses are able to negotiate a lower MDR based on volumes, smaller businesses tend to find it burdensome.

How liquidity is better managed

In the Unified Payments Interface (UPI)-based payment system in India, the government subsidised the ecosystem until large volumes were achieved. India now has the highest daily number of transactions using a direct debit-based payment system.

The only risk to the consumer in the Unified Payments Interface system is the lack of a protective wall between payment and its verification, and possible reversal for error and fraud.

Starting 15 October, however, a nominal MDR will be imposed by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) on large ticket-size transactions, with a cap and a protection from passing the cost to the customer. The avenues for monetising and funding the growing user base are also underway. These include incentives for default bill payments; and tracking of revenues and cash flows for determining eligibility for loans.

Many users in India know the benefits to household finances from using the UPI's cashless payment system, apart from the obvious avoidance of the high-cost debt trap. The ease of transacting, zero-cost burden, avoidance of theft and fraud, and convenience of online monitoring—all help to better manage household finances. The ability for person-to-person money transfers enables managing liquidity within the extended family system better.

The only risk to the consumer in this system is the lack of a protective wall between payment

and its verification, and possible reversal for error and fraud. While a credit card payment can be stopped and reversed, and the issuing bank and card issuer would take the risk and recovery responsibility in case of theft or loss of card or its fraudulent misuse, there is no such protection in a direct debit payment from the bank account. The money transferred is final and the user has to resort to the lengthy criminal law process for recovery.

Benefitting multiple stakeholders

There was a time when the cashless swipe of the credit card in the West was seen as a mark of development and modernisation. The Indian solution that did not involve a credit transaction was seen as a loss leader. The former was a system of loan, which made it profitable for the bank because users tended to roll over their dues at high interest; the card issuer earned the processing and service fees for their system and operations; and the merchants benefitted from high sales volumes when the customer could buy even if they did not have ready cash on hand.

We now know that this system of easy, unsecured personal credit at very high interest rates results in a debt burden on households. The high volumes of India's UPI system has brought immense, unexpected benefits—revenue for the merchants; compliance and data for the government and lenders; and tracking and control for spenders at zero cost. This is apart from aligning with the already prevalent cultural orientation to save for the future and to avoid debt. Other countries are eager to adopt the Indian system for its many benefits.

When I asked the flower seller busy with the Ganesh Chaturthi sales about how the UPI is helping her she was delighted to answer: "I don't have to protect my cash from roadside vandals; my husband cannot access my earnings and misuse it; and I can pay others with my phone, exactly how my customers pay me." That sense of equity, empowerment and egalitarianism is precious.

Please send your feedback to
etwealth@timesofindia.com



Our panel of experts will answer questions related to any aspect of personal finance.

I am 35, earning ₹30,000 a month, have a two-year-old daughter. How should I plan for her higher education, and what type of health insurance should I buy for her?—Neyul Yadav

With a two-year-old daughter, time is firmly on your side with over 15 years to let the power of compounding do the heavy lifting for your corpus. For your child's higher education, it's worthwhile to not just invest in a fund, but also protect it from future uncertainties.

Parents often spend time comparing returns but overlook the single most important feature in a child plan that one can ask for—waiver of premium. In my view, it is one of the finest innovations in investment products. It ensures that even in the earning parent's absence, the insurer takes over all future premiums and the child's education fund continues uninterrupted. For higher education planning, focus on consistency rather than the size of your investment. At a ₹30,000 income, even setting aside ₹5,000 a month today can make a meaningful difference over the next 15-16 years. For instance, an assumed 12% annual return could potentially help build you a corpus of around ₹25 lakh. As your income grows, increase your contribution every year. Even a 10% annual step-up can significantly improve the final corpus and help keep pace with rising education costs. On the health insurance front, don't rely solely on your employer's group cover. It is linked to your job and thus, may not offer a permanent security net.



Sarbvir Singh
Joint Group CEO, PB Fintech

I am seeking guidance on transferring my shares previously held through Karvy to my Angel One demat account. Since Karvy no longer provides these services, kindly advise on the transfer process. Additionally, if any of my shares have been transferred to the Investor Education and Protection Fund (IEPF) or any other authority, please let me know how I can verify the status and initiate the reclamation process.

—Rambabu Patalay

Karvy Stock Broking Ltd. (KSBL) illegally pledged some clients' securities lying in their demat accounts to raise loans from banks and financial institutions. The borrowed funds were allegedly diverted for purposes unrelated to the clients. Therefore, if you were holding shares in your demat account with Karvy Stock Broking, it is likely that your shares may have been affected. However, following Sebi's direction, the demat accounts of Karvy Stock Broking were acquired by IIFL Securities. Thus you need to check with IIFL, providing details of your demat account. They will provide you with the details of holdings, if any. Based on the holding details, you then need to approach the respective companies to claim the shares from IEPF, or you may seek assistance from a professional consultant for this exercise, as it is a time-consuming, tedious process.



Vikash Jain
Co-founder, Share Samadhan

My sister and I received ₹37 lakh each from the sale of agricultural land in our native place. She has gifted her ₹37 lakh to me. Will she have to pay capital gains tax on the gift to me?

—Anil Mahajan

Whether your sister will incur capital gains tax depends entirely on the classification of the agricultural land sold, rather than how she utilises or gifts the proceeds afterwards. Under the Income Tax Act, 1961, if the property qualifies as rural agricultural land (based on specific population and distance criteria from municipal limits), it is not considered a capital asset, and no capital gains tax arises on its sale. However, if the property was urban agricultural land, it is classified as a capital asset. In that case, your sister is legally liable to pay capital gains tax on her ₹37 lakh share of the sale proceeds, computed after deducting the indexed cost of acquisition and claiming any eligible tax exemptions (such as under Section 54B or 54EC).

The subsequent gift of ₹37 lakh to you does not create a capital gains tax liability for your sister. Also, a gift received from a sister is not taxable in your hands as she qualifies as a specified relative. However, any income you subsequently earn by investing the gifted amount will be taxable in your hands.



Umesh Kumar Jethani
Founder, ApkiReturn

Please send your queries to etwealth@timesofindia.com, mentioning your full name and city of residence.

What MDR means for mutual funds, brokers & investors

by Prashant Mahesh & Kairavi Lukka

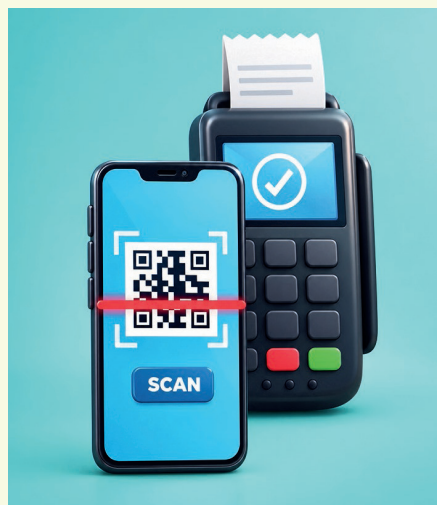
The introduction of a 0.02% merchant discount rate (MDR) on select UPI transactions will affect certain mutual fund and broking-related payments. A look at which segments are likely to be impacted the most and the least.

Charges levied on UPI transactions?

The merchant discount rate (MDR) charge payable on UPI transactions from 15 October is 0.02%. It will apply to one-time mutual fund investments made through UPI, debt-market payments through UPI and UPI payments for broker wallet top-ups, subject to a maximum charge of ₹300. This translates into a transaction-size-linked fee for payments below ₹15 lakh, while transactions above ₹15 lakh will attract a flat fee of ₹300.

Where do investors use UPI in capital market-linked payments?

Many use UPI for capital market transactions, including mutual fund and stock market investments. Mutual fund investors use UPI mandates for recurring SIP payments, while some use UPI for one-time lump-sum investments. In the case



of stockbroking, many investors transfer money to their brokerage accounts through UPI, instead of net banking, to buy stocks or ETFs.

How are mutual fund investors impacted?

The 0.02% UPI MDR is unlikely to affect mutual fund Systematic Investment Plans (SIPs) set up through UPI AutoPay, as recurring mandates are exempt from the

charge. One-time mutual fund investments made through UPI will attract the 0.02% MDR. For other mutual fund transactions, industry sources said the impact is expected to be lower and the industry is likely to absorb the cost rather than pass it on to investors.

What will it cost fund houses?

Fund houses could face higher costs in the case of frequent UPI transactions by individual investors. For instance, if an investor puts ₹1 lakh in an overnight or liquid fund at the beginning of every month and withdraws it at the end of the month to meet regular expenses, and uses UPI for buying, the fund would incur a 0.02% charge each time. Over 12 months, this would amount to 0.24% plus GST, taking the cost to nearly 0.29%. Some fund houses could also encourage investors to use other payment methods such as net banking or NEFT/RTGS.

What about stock brokers?

All broking firms will come under the purview, but non-bank brokers especially discount brokers with high-value transactions and firms offering zero brokerage are likely to be the most affected by these

norms. Apart from instances where investors use UPI to transfer funds to their trading accounts, brokers may face charges in other situations as well.

Brokers said money transferred by investors to trading accounts does not necessarily translate into trades or revenue. Brokers, particularly those dependent on UPI pay-ins from traders and active investors, could face additional costs without a corresponding increase in revenue.

Brokers would even incur charges when traders or investors top up their broking wallet using UPI, without actually trading with the balance," said Shripal Shah, MD & CEO, Kotak Securities.

What it means for clients of brokers?

The move could lead brokerages to indirectly pass on some of these costs to customers, either through higher charges or by discouraging UPI transfers. Nithin Kamath, founder and chief executive officer of Zerodha, said in a post on X: "...if every UPI transfer starts carrying an additional cost, irrespective of whether the customer actually trades, I don't see how we can absorb this indefinitely."

Courtesy: The Economic Times

Oil and leverage

India's Russian oil purchases have exposed a contradiction in its economic diplomacy: the pursuit of affordable energy can strengthen national interests while creating vulnerabilities that another power can exploit. The US House of Representatives' passage of legislation authorising President Donald Trump to impose tariffs of up to 100 per cent on countries buying Russian oil and gas brings that contradiction into sharp focus. Although the measure requires Trump's signature, the threat alone raises questions about India's trade relations, energy security and strategic autonomy. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Indian refiners have benefited from crude supplies redirected from Western markets. The purchases helped contain import costs in an economy heavily dependent on overseas energy. But Russia's growing share of Indian imports has created an exposure extending beyond the oil sector. The United States is a major destination for Indian exports, including pharmaceuticals, electronics, textiles and machinery. Punitive tariffs could therefore affect employment, investment and the balance of payments.

The danger is that energy dependence could become bargaining currency in negotiations over wider economic interests. If access to the American market is made conditional on India's energy choices or trade concessions, commercial diplomacy risks becoming an exercise in unequal leverage. India should neither abandon Russian crude to avoid confrontation nor purchase it regardless of cost. The calculation must include discounts, freight, insurance, refinery compatibility and potential damage to exports. A saving at the refinery gate may prove costly when wider economic consequences are considered. The distinction between defending freedom of choice and becoming dependent on a particular supplier is crucial. Replacing Russian oil with supplies from elsewhere will not automatically eliminate vulnerability, particularly when alternative routes pass through conflict-prone regions.

India's limited strategic petroleum reserves underline the need for a more durable energy policy. Diversification requires investment in storage, infrastructure capable of processing different crude grades and a wider network of reliable suppliers. Dependence on imported liquefied petroleum gas also makes energy security a matter of household economic stability. China's position offers a significant contrast. Its centrality to global supply chains and the scale of its economic relationship with the US may give Beijing greater capacity to absorb or counter American pressure. India cannot assume that its expanding trade partnerships provide equal protection. The proposed legislation also raises a broader question about the international economic order.

When access to a powerful country's market becomes an instrument for influencing another state's foreign policy, the boundary between trade and geopolitical coercion becomes blurred. Delhi should negotiate firmly with Washington while retaining the flexibility to buy Russian crude when commercially justified. It must also avoid allowing short-term savings to obscure the need to reduce dependence on individual suppliers and export markets. Strategic autonomy cannot rest on declarations alone. It requires diversified energy supplies, adequate reserves and an economy resilient enough to withstand external pressure. India's challenge is not simply to decide where to buy oil, but to build the capacity to make that decision without economic coercion.

Inflation's Trap

The world had begun to believe that the inflation crisis was receding. Central banks had reduced interest rates, supply chains had recovered and price pressures had eased. But the latest developments in the United States and Britain suggest that the struggle to restore price stability is far from over. The danger is no longer simply that inflation will remain high, but that efforts to contain it could undermine economic growth. The Federal Reserve's decision to raise its benchmark rate by a quarter percentage point, to 3.75-4.5 per cent, marks its first increase in more than three years. The move came despite President Donald Trump's repeated demands for lower borrowing costs. Fed chairman Kevin Warsh has argued that inflation remains too high, while the central bank's projections indicate the possibility of further increases.

The decision underlines the tension between the political attraction of cheaper credit and the institutional responsibility to contain inflation. Britain presents a related but more complicated picture. The Bank of England has held its rate at 3.75 per cent, but three of its nine monetary policymakers favoured an increase. Governor Andrew Bailey has warned that prolonged energy-price volatility could require tighter policy. The Bank also expects inflation to rise more sharply than previously anticipated, even as it has upgraded its near-term growth forecast. These decisions reflect a common predicament. The conflict in West Asia has disrupted energy supplies, pushed up fuel costs and threatens to spread inflation. Central banks cannot end wars or increase oil supplies. They can, however, restrain demand in an attempt to prevent higher costs from becoming embedded in wages and prices.

That remedy carries its own risks. Higher rates increase mortgage repayments and the cost of business finance, potentially discouraging investment and consumption. Governments face higher borrowing costs, while already struggling households have less room to absorb further increases. The Bank of England's decision to slow its government-bond sales also illustrates the difficulty of managing inflation alongside financial-market pressures.

The implications extend beyond advanced economies. Countries dependent on imported energy face additional pressure on currencies, public finances and household purchasing power. India, where retail inflation has recently increased, must weigh these risks as the Reserve Bank of India assesses whether price pressures are temporary or becoming more persistent. Yet the choices facing central banks are not identical. A rate increase may be justified where inflation is broadening, but could be counterproductive if higher prices are confined to a temporary supply shock. The crucial distinction is whether rising energy costs are beginning to influence the wider economy. The deeper lesson is that inflation cannot be managed through interest rates alone. Energy security, resilient supply chains and credible fiscal policies matter too. Without them, monetary authorities may repeatedly be forced to suppress demand in response to disruptions they cannot control. The world's inflation problem is therefore also a growth problem - and an institutional one. Central banks must defend price stability without inflicting avoidable economic damage.

Many faces of malnutrition

The consequence of nutritional deprivation tends to pass on across generations in the form of a vicious cycle, given that there is no external intervention from institutions of society. For example, the risk of malnutrition is found to be higher among children whose mothers suffer from chronic energy deficiency disorders, which is again dependent on the mother's childhood nutritional status



population that is malnourished; it cannot be used for identifying malnourished households or individuals. However, the magnitude of malnutrition at the individual level can be assessed through anthropometric measures as devised by WHO.

WHO's method for ascertaining the status of malnutrition is considered to have many advantages over other approaches since body measurements are sensitive to even minor levels of malnutrition, biochemical and clinical indicators. Anthropometric measures are stunting (low height-for-age), wasting (low weight-for-height) and underweight (low weight-for-age). While wasting is usually reversible with appropriate nutrition and medical care, underweight itself is also reversible. However, stunting in childhood indicates chronic malnutrition and has an irreversible effect on health and human development. Surprisingly, a recent study points to a troubling consequence: climate change may be contributing to a "clinically stunted" future.

Growth stunting in childhood is a risk factor for increased mortality, poor cognitive and motor development, and other impairments in function. Children who have been severely malnourished in early years suffer a later reduction in IQ by as many as 15 points, significantly affecting schooling achievement and increasing the risks of drop-out or repeat grades. Moreover, stunting usually persists, leading to smaller size and poorer performance in adulthood. Stunting along with low birth weight (LBW), is also a risk factor for adult chronic diseases.

However, poverty and stunting set a vicious cycle [poverty → low intake of food & nutrients → malnutrition → stunted development of children → small body size of adults → impaired productivity → low earning capacity → poverty]. Height is a definite indicator of good health or healthy growth. Height deficit reflects a substantial measure of foregone well-being vis-à-vis human capital at a microeconomic level. According to the World Bank, one per cent loss in adult height due to childhood stunting is associated with a 1.4 per cent loss in economic productivity. Stunted children can earn up to 20 per cent less as adults. Stunting is already a major public health challenge in India.

The World Bank Group's latest report entitled "Building Human capital - Where it Matters" has assessed the state of human capital in the world. Human capital has been defined as "people's health, skills and knowledge". One major salient finding of the assessment is that "Human Capital" accumulation has stagnated in many low

and middle-income countries. India belongs to this group. Adult height across these countries is not increasing; rather it has remained stagnant or has declined over decades. The report also mentioned that, "an adult of sub-Saharan Africa born in 1996 is 3 centimeters shorter than the average adult born in 1966." The average adult height for Indians born in 1966 and 1996 remains the same, or is slightly on the decline.

Now, it appears that percentage of stunted children is shrinking in India as revealed from data recorded in consecutive National Family Health Surveys: NFHS-3 (2005-06) ~ 48 per cent; NFHS-4 (2015-16) ~ 38.4 per cent; NFHS-5 (2019-21) ~ 35.5 per cent; NFHS-6 (2025-26) ~ 29.3 per cent. Human capital has also grown at 1.1 per cent in the last decade in India, while the figure is 4 per cent for high-income countries and 3 per cent for upper-middle-countries like China, Chile and Brazil. Our target should be at least 2.5 per cent. However, to prevent stunting and loss of human capital, steps should be taken to strengthen maternal nutrition, healthcare access, and early childhood stimulation.

The consequence of nutritional deprivation tends to pass on across generations in the form of a vicious cycle, given that there is no external intervention from institutions of society. For example, the risk of malnutrition is found to be higher among children whose mothers suffer from chronic energy deficiency disorders, which is again dependent on the mother's childhood nutritional status, thus creating a mother-child-mother malnutrition cycle among the poorer sections of society. Impoverishment due to nutritional deprivation is defined as the umbrella term of malnutrition.

The impact of malnutrition on future life chances starts before birth. In 1995, the British Medical Journal referred to Dr. David J. P. Barker's Hypothesis - also known as Fetal Origins of Adult Diseases (FOAD) - which posits that maternal dietary imbalances at critical periods of development of the womb can trigger an adaptive redistribution of fetal resources (including growth retardation). Such adaptations affect fetal structure and metabolism in ways that predispose the individual to later cardiovascular and endocrine diseases. Dr. Barker, an influential English physician and epidemiologist, working with historical data from England, noticed that regions with higher infant mortality



JAYDEV JANA

The writer is a retired IAS officer

The Korea Herald

Growing old in the age of artificial intelligence

The arrival of artificial intelligence has compressed decades of technological evolution into a handful of years, altering the basic texture of our daily lives. AI is no longer a distant science-fiction trope; it writes, translates, paints, codes, counsels and even mimics human emotion with unsettling fluency. Tasks that once demanded years of work and experience can now be summoned with a few keystrokes.

This moment compels us to confront a fundamental question about technology and society. Marshall McLuhan famously argued that "the medium is the message," suggesting that new tools do not merely serve human purposes but reshape human thought and social organization. From that vantage point, AI is not merely an instrument of efficiency but an epochal force rewriting labor, education and human

interaction. Technology, however, does not operate in a vacuum. Scholars such as Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker demonstrated how technologies take shape through social values, economic interests and human choices. AI is no exception. It does not dictate the future on its own; its impact depends on the intentions, institutions and ethical frameworks we bring to its development. The real question, then, is not simply how much of our work AI will usurp, but what kind of humans we must become to live alongside it and what principles will guide us there.

Different generations experience this seismic shift from entirely different vantage points. For our children, the most pressing imperative may not be mastering AI tools but learning how to think without them. As children encounter screens earlier and

earlier, the danger extends beyond screen time. Raised on instant gratification, superfast search results and predictive text, the slow and uncomfortable labor of struggling, failing and figuring things out alone may begin to atrophy. Why wrestle with a difficult book when an algorithm can produce a polished summary in seconds?

Still more troubling is the transformation of human relationships. Conversing with a machine is frictionless. An algorithm never loses its temper, dismisses your ideas or pushes back.

Human relationships, by contrast, are gloriously difficult. Other people possess minds of their own. They disappoint us, challenge us, misunderstand us and force us to reconsider assumptions we take for granted. Enduring that friction is part of what makes us grow. Empathy is not learned by interacting only with agreeable

machines; it is learned through the difficulties of human relationships. For a college graduate, AI is a harsh reality. In the past, entry-level jobs served as training grounds where young people acquired basic competencies by drafting documents, organizing data, preparing presentations and handling clients. Today, algorithms can perform many of these tasks faster and more cheaply, tempting employers to bypass entry-level hiring altogether.

When the first rung of the career ladder disappears, the opportunity to climb it shrinks with it. Paradoxically, the occupations least vulnerable to AI in the near term are often those requiring physical presence, manual dexterity, contextual judgment and human empathy: caregiving, construction, culinary work, plumbing, electrical trades, maintenance and skilled service. Yet Korea has long misclassified these essential occupations,

rates in the 1920s had more deaths from heart disease in the 1970s. He connected the dots: poor foetal nutrition programmes the body for thrift. A foetus that "learns" it is growing in a starved environment slows down metabolism, alters organs development, and conserves fat.

But when it is later exposed to calorie-rich food, these programmed adaptations backfire - leading to conditions like type 2 diabetes and hypertension. What Barker proposed was that diabetes, hypertension, and heart diseases do not begin in adulthood but in the wombs of malnourished mothers. And not merely from genes but also a fetus's biological response to the mother's diet.

The most common causes of poor growth in developing countries at the immediate level include poor maternal nutritional status at conception and in- utero malnutrition, inadequate breastfeeding, delayed complementary feeding for infants and/or inadequate quality or quantity of complementary feeding, impaired absorption of nutrients due to intestinal infections or parasites; or usually a combination of these problems.

The first 1000 days of human life - from conception to a child's second birthday - represent a golden window of opportunity for future growth and development. During this period, the brain grows at a pace that is never repeated in life, laying the groundwork for learning, behavior, and lifelong health. Just like scaffolding lends support for each floor of a building during construction, each stage of brain development similarly helps build the next one. In these formative 1,000 days, the brain forms millions of neural connections at a rapid pace, reaching 80 per cent of its adult size by age two. This is when the foundations of cognitive skill, language, emotional regulation, and social development are laid.

At the same time, organs, bones, and muscles are developing rapidly. Adequate nutrition and stimulation are essential to ensure the process continues smoothly, helping to build a stronger immune system and reduce risk of diseases later in life.

Nutritional deprivation is a critical issue often intertwined with poverty and economic distress. Limited food choices for the poor typically cripple their nutritional status, resulting in disparities in lower and middle-income countries. In India, findings indicate that districts in states such as Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra still face extreme levels of nutritional deprivation, with over 40 per cent of districts in these states experiencing "extreme deprivation" in 2019-21. Conversely, states like MP (rural) and West Bengal (urban) have made notable progress, lifting a substantial 40 per cent and 30 per cent of their districts out of "extreme deprivation".

Improving education among women, encouraging diversified diets and providing easier access to healthcare are some of the ways in which India can achieve nutritional security by 2030. Food and nutrition are human rights, enshrined in various conventions. Governments have a duty to ensure that these dimensions of human well-being are realized.

Letters To The Editor ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Another fee

Sir, This refers to the editorial, "Hard cash", published today. The digital transactions sector has grown phenomenally to Rs. 30 lakh crore a month, with 83 per cent of the turnover covered by two American operators. The government notification on UPI fee was on expected lines.

A regime that earns thousands of crores from penalties for non-maintenance of minimum balance in bank accounts cannot be expected to leave such a fabulous source as digital transactions untaxed.

It is natural that even if the Indian government is not inclined, the two American oligopolies would not like to miss such good fortune for long.

While promoting digital transactions, people readily accepted them only because

they were free of cost. Now the introduction of a fee, though with the assurance of no fee for P2P transactions, is seen as the beginning of charging for all UPI transactions.

Merchants will definitely seek ways to pass it on to customers, as the government has neither meaningful control over them nor sympathy for the customers.

ATMs were opened to make cash withdrawals and even deposits easier. Now, after five withdrawals, they too charge. Such acts of allure followed by attack, practised by the government, will have a telling effect on its credibility. There is little chance of the government reconsidering this move.

For a government that can consciously forgo huge amounts by way of write-offs, haircuts, concessions and exemptions, the expenditure involved in UPI transactions cannot be a burden at all. But in the present



economic order, nothing can be offered free to the common man.

Yours, etc., A G Rajmohan,
Anantapur, 18 September.

Choice

Sir, Apropos "Hard cash" published today, India's digital payment revolution is remarkable, yet the persistent demand for currency tells a deeper story.

Cash survives not because people resist technology but because it offers certainty,

A power outage, network failure, or cyberattack can instantly render digital balances useless. We must also recognise who depends on it most. The elderly, small traders, and those in poorly connected regions cannot navigate an economy built solely around smartphones. Cash also protects privacy in ways digital transactions cannot. The lesson from demonetisation remains valid. Destroying currency does not destroy the incentives that create black money. The way forward is balance. Digital payments must expand, but not at the cost of a robust cash infrastructure.

A mature economy offers both convenience and resilience. Citizens deserve the freedom to choose, knowing neither system becomes a source of vulnerability.

Yours, etc., K Chidanand Kumar,
Bengaluru, 18 September.

From water stress to water resilience



Water underpins civilisation, prosperity, food security, social equity and ecological well-being. Yet it is under growing strain. Climate change is disrupting rainfall patterns, intensifying floods and droughts, accelerating glacial melt and increasing the frequency of extreme hydrological events. Recent floods, cloudbursts and landslides in neighbouring Nepal show that water-related risks are no longer distant.

As New Delhi prepares to host the 9th India International Water Week (IIWW-2026) from 22 to 26 September under the theme “Climate Resilient Water Management,” the question is not whether water systems need to adapt to climate change. It is how rapidly and comprehensively they can do so.

For India, water security is inseparable from the journey towards Viksit Bharat @2047. Inclusive prosperity cannot endure if water resources remain fragile, polluted or inefficiently managed. The task is integrated stewardship - from catchment to consumer and source to safe reuse.

India’s water challenges are interconnected. Erratic rainfall brings both scarcity and destructive excess, sometimes in the same region. Groundwater depletion threatens farms and drinking-water supplies; rapid urbanisation adds demand while reducing recharge areas; and pollution reduces the volume of water that is safely usable. Ageing infrastructure, competing demands and uneven capacity add to the pressure.

No single intervention can address this challenge. Water needs to be managed as a connected system of catchments, rivers, aquifers, reservoirs, farms, cities, industries and communities. That calls for aligning

conservation, augmentation, efficiency, infrastructure, data, regulation and public participation.

India has already begun this transition. Jal Sanchay Jan Bhagidari: Catch the Rain places communities at the centre of water conservation, rainwater harvesting, groundwater recharge and water-body rejuvenation. Its message - “Catch the Rain, Where It Falls, When It Falls” - recognises that durable water security is strengthened when citizens, local bodies, farmers and panchayats act alongside government.

Agriculture remains central to this effort. As the largest user of water, it can become more efficient and climate resilient through micro-irrigation, improved on-farm water management and the wider objectives of “Har Khet Ko Pani” and “Per Drop More Crop” under the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana. Groundwater management can likewise draw on scientific assessment, aquifer understanding, demand management and community-led planning.

India is also strengthening the safety, surveillance and ecological health of its water systems. The Dam Safety Act, 2021, and the Dam Rehabilitation and Improvement Project provide an institutional and engineering framework to improve dam safety and performance, particularly amid ageing infrastructure, erratic inflows and extreme events.

The National Hydrology Project is reinforcing the digital foundation of water governance through timely and reliable water-resources data and decision-support tools. Better data can support forecasting, reservoir operations, flood management and basin planning.

River restoration should accompany infrastructure development. Namami Gange has linked pollution abatement with the conservation and rejuvenation of the Ganga. Future efforts can place sustained focus on wastewater treatment, ecological flows, tributaries, wetlands, non-point pollution and the restoration of natural river functions.

India also has an opportunity to advance a circular water economy. Treated wastewater can increasingly serve non-potable uses in industry, agriculture, horticulture, construction, landscaping and municipal services, subject to suitable quality standards and safeguards. This can reduce freshwater pressure, improve urban resilience and enable resource recovery.

Water management can further evolve from localised, project-specific interventions to integrated basin-scale planning. Coordinated surface- and groundwater management, upstream-downstream cooperation, modernised infrastructure, demand management and carefully assessed inter-basin interventions can support resilience, equity and ecological integrity.

IIWW-2026 arrives at a consequential moment. It will bring together policymakers, scientists, practitioners, innovators, industry and international partners through plenaries, country forums, technical sessions, exhibitions and the Second International WASH Conference. Its agenda includes urban flooding, digital technologies, groundwater, river resilience and climate adaptation.

The event can be a platform for partnerships, scalable solutions and measurable commitments. Three outcomes deserve attention.

First, it can accelerate the responsible use of artificial intelligence for hydrological forecasting, remote sensing for glacial lake outburst flood monitoring, advanced water-quality surveillance and digital basin modelling. Technology is most useful when it complements capable institutions and local knowledge.

Second, it can help scale circular wastewater systems and viable models for water reuse. This will benefit from appropriate standards, reliable operations, clear institutional responsibility and sustainable financing. Demonstrations can become replicable models for cities, industrial clusters, farms and rural settlements.



Third, IIWW-2026 can narrow the gap between scientific institutions, businesses, government agencies and village panchayats. Blended finance, outcome-based investment, public-private partnerships and community ownership can help innovations move from laboratories and pilot projects into routine practice.

There is no single answer to India’s water challenge. Large infrastructure will remain relevant in many contexts, while local harvesting, aquifer recharge, conservation and behavioural change remain equally indispensable. Technology cannot compensate for weak governance, and community

participation cannot replace sound engineering. Progress lies in combining infrastructure, institutions, science and public action.

The climate challenge tests our collective resolve. Yet scientific rigour, policy foresight, accountable institutions and meaningful community participation can turn water from a source of vulnerability into an engine of sustainable prosperity. IIWW-2026 is India’s appeal to the world to join hands in collaboration, innovation and shared action for a water-secure, climate-resilient and equitable future for all.

The writer is Secretary, Water Resources, Government of India.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 21 September 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

News of the death of Mr. Samarth in London will come as an unpleasant shock to his numerous friends, who regarded him as still a comparatively young man. He made his mark in the first Assembly as a keen debater, and when he went to London as a member of the India Council the Government’s choice was generally approved. He was a man of common sense as well as keen patriotism, and showed himself both courageous and unprejudiced as a member of the Lee Commission. That the Commission presented a unanimous report which redressed, the financial grievances of the English element in the Services while providing for increased Indianization in the future was in no small measure due to his fair-mindedness and tact.

News Items

88 IN THE SHADE

HOTTEST DAY OF THE YEAR IN ENGLAND

(British Official Wireless)

Rugby, Sept.

Yesterday was the hottest day of the year in England, when the shade temperature registered 88 degrees fahrenheit. Only once since 1860 has a similar period of heat occurred so late in the year.

BIG COAL FIND

CHALLENGE TO THE BRITISH ANTHRACITE INDUSTRY

Rome, Sept.

It is reported that extensive coal and iron fields have been discovered at Perdasefogiu (Cagliari) which are estimated to give an output of 30,000,000 tons. The coal is said to be of the same class as British anthracite. The ironfield nearby is stated to cover 200 square kilometres, and its estimated yield is 80,000,000 tons of first grade iron and 300,000,000 tons of second and third grade. The costs of both commodities are estimated to be considerably below that of British.—Reuter.

ATHENS DISCLOSURES

PLAN FOR SUDDEN ATTACK ON TURKEY

Athens, Sept.

A morning paper prints what purports to be disclosures by General Pangalos to the effect that he had intended to attack Turkey, had ordered great quantities of war material and had overhauled the feet. The plan was suddenly to re-occupy Eastern Thrace without leaving time for foreign intervention. The afternoon papers attach special importance to the statement that Pangalos had secured the co-operation of a foreign power and had arranged a meeting for August 25 with an eminent Balkan military authority. The Liberal press discounts the latter statement and emphasises the danger the country is running from the dictatorship “seeking military adventures.”—Reuter.

CHEERS FOR TAGORE

BERLIN INDUSTRIALISTS’ SUBTLE MOVE?

London, Sept.

The Daily Telegraph’s Berlin correspondent, describing the remarkable ovation accorded to Sir Rabindranath Tagore on the occasion of his lectures at Hamburg and Berlin, remarks that the whole of the Nationalist Press have loudly applauded Tagore. He explains that this is due to the desire of German industrialists to cultivate good opinion among Indian intellectuals, as a stepping stone towards the capture of Indian markets.—Reuter.

CORSICA INCIDENT

ANTI-FASCIST AFFRONT TO ITALIAN CONSUL

Paris, Sept.

Another Franco-Italian incident is reported from Corsica. Following a rumour that Fascist demonstrators at Leghorn had compelled a French steamer to lower the French flag, an anti-Fascist demonstrator at Bastia forced the Italian Consul-General to hoist the French flag alongside the Italian at his office, and also compelled Italian vessels in harbour to hoist the French flag. Police and troops are maintaining order.—Reuter.

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

A great game

I will talk of the game as football, rather than soccer, because that is what I called it when I played it years ago, and that is how most of the world thinks of it and calls it. For years, I had nothing to do with it. I didn’t see it, not even on television. I didn’t think about it at all.

Then, this year, the International Federation of Football Associations, FIFA, brought its world competition to the US, and, as a dinner guest at the home of football enthusiasts, I watched the semi-final match between France and Spain on a large screen.

It took no more than five minutes for me to be hooked. I was mesmerized by the thrill of the game. I watched the other semi-final the following day at home between England and Argentina and loved every minute of it. Of course, nothing would stop me from watching the final match between Spain and Argentina four days later. I saw the solitary goal that gave Spain the victory and the dismay on the face of Argentina’s legend, Lionel Messi. It was an unforgettable thrilling match, football at its best.

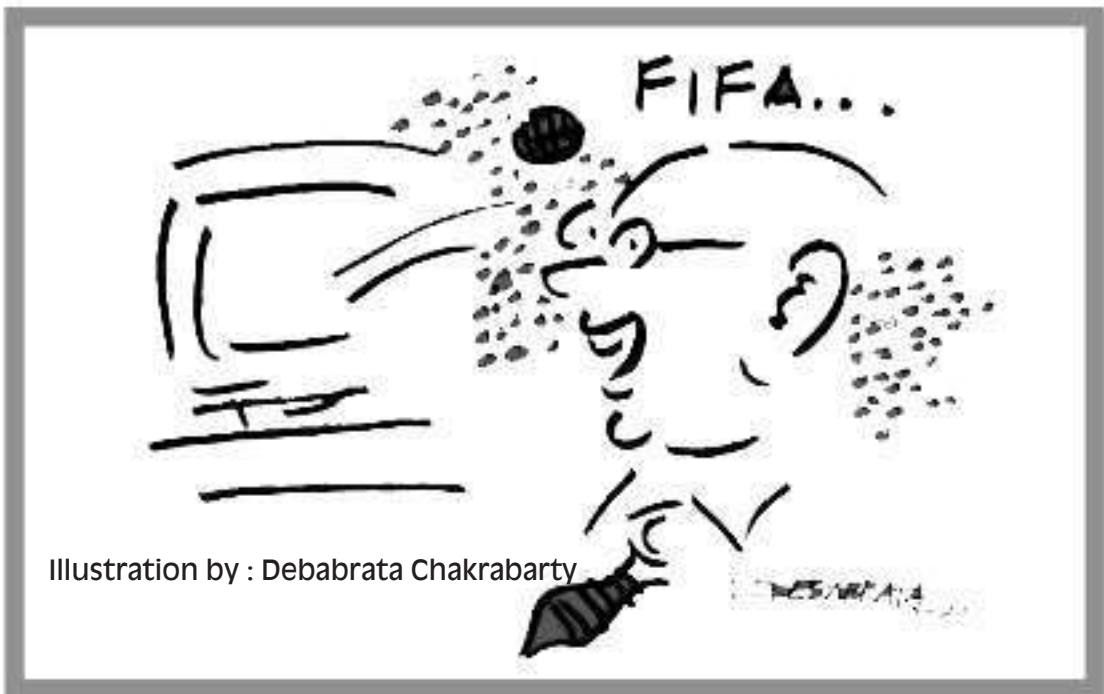
That is the irresistible charm of football. Its simplicity is unparalleled: all you need is a ball and a pair of legs. I have seen football played spiritedly on many kinds of grounds, of different dimensions and varying evenness. Even the goal posts are of different sizes, its edges signaled

by bricks or pieces of log, the height left to imagination.

However modest the field, the game is both snappy and sprightly, marked by both skill and zest. Whether in Kolkata or Kochi, players play as if their lives depend on it, and the spectators, who invariably gather, cheer as if the outcome is of crucial importance to them. I lived with my parents next to a football field where children from the nearest slum played football on Sundays, and the spectacle drew not only their parents but a wide array of friends and onlookers. The game lasted as long as daylight held, and we reviewed the match and the players’ performance for hours after that.

I have to confess that I was a singularly inept player, but my enthusiasm was boundless. My father, a remarkably kindhearted man, persuaded Talimeren Ao, the captain of India’s Olympic soccer team, to spend several weekends coaching me in the basic art of managing the ball. Ao was a doctor, a soft-spoken considerate man, who treated my gaucherie with infinite indulgence and did not seem to mind my slow progress. He certainly reinforced my love of the game, though my proficiency remained nothing to speak of.

I grew up in India that was a British colony at the time, and British soldiers played football for recreation



in their barracks and public parks. Nagendra Sarbadhikari, a youth from Bengal, became fascinated, learned the game and started a club, Boys’ Club. Indians were precluded from joining the Calcutta Football Club or playing in the Durand Cup, but when the Indian Football Association started the IFA Shield in 1893, an Indian club, Mohun Bagan created a sensation. In July 1911, it defeated the British East Yorkshire Regiment 2-1 to win the IFA Shield. That victory became a stirring symbol of national pride and anti-colonial resistance.

That symbol became colourful because, while the British footballers all wore boots, the Indian players were barefoot. The sole exception in the Indian team was Sushil Chatterjee who wore boots of a lighter kind. Chatterjee was my father’s teacher and, during one of

his visits, I hesitantly expressed my curiosity. Chatterjee said he wanted to demonstrate that Indians also could play with boots on, but deliberately chose a pair of boots that was visibly different from the boots the Britishers wore.

As I watched the FIFA matches in the US this year, the link between football prowess and national pride was inescapable. Admirers wore country colors, painted their faces and waved strange symbols of national distinction. There was spirited flag-waving, arm-thrusting, singing and chanting. There are well-known stories of how Nazis used the Berlin games and Pinochet’s goons used the occasion in Buenos Aires.

English soccer hooligans are known for trashing towns, just as Japanese fans are reputed for their amazing orderliness. Russians and Qataris are known to have violated standards

when it came to displaying their preferences. We have to watch what the Saudis do when their turn comes.

These displays of national enthusiasm are a wonder as the national teams are visibly less national. Teams are now hugely staffed with foreign players and largely coached by foreign experts. Granted that the teams, composed of proficient players from all corners of the globe, are far superior to teams comprising solely of a country’s citizens. But the diverse composition of national teams does not seem to have dampened enthusiasm of their supporters. People seem to raucously support their favored groups no matter the look of their constituent members.

History may have something to do with this. Fans appear to have accepted the ‘corporatization’ of football matches. The sky-high prices of match tickets, which now match the prices of coveted opera seats, are an ominous indicator.

As I watched the FIFA matches with both admiration and nostalgia, I recalled my brother Ashish Nandy’s comment, in his book on cricket, “a slate on which different cultures have written their intersecting self-definitions.” I will remain curious about the future self-definitions.

The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com

Crossword | No. 293587

Last Saturday's Solution

V	I	A	M	P	I	R	E	B	I	G	E	Y	E	D
E	O	N	I	E	E	E	A							
R	H	O	N	E	R	E	A	T	T	E	M	P		
M	N	R	E	N	O	E	A							
O	L	I	S	T	O	N	E	S						
N	E	I	T	E										
T	O	G	A	S										
C	L	E	A	R	S	P	O	T						
H	E	A	O	A	I	E	R	I						
A	L	T	E	R	A	N	T	S						
S	O	P	O	L										
H	E	A	R	T										
T	I	O	A	I	E	R	I							
R	O	M	A	N	I	S	E	D						
A	E	I	K	E										
Y	F	R	O	N	T	S								
R	E	P	L	I	C	A								

ACROSS

7 Singer-songwriter, very unwell, finding solace finally in country's capital (9)

8 Girl needing guide, through underworld realm of the dead (5)

10 Broadcaster's policy for Horizon (7)

11 Singer Simon sent back Bob's 2016 prize (5)

12 Complete with new article about city in which Bob offered to pose or play (6)

13 Heart of Mine: revolutionary's Obviously 5 Believers (actually none) (8)

14 Reported looks of a chronicler of his age (5)

15 Follow something on an album (one with blood on?) (5)

20 One final song from Captain Cook? (8)

22 Depended on lines to express craving (feeling after One Too Many Mornings) (6)

23 Divine being's returned redeemed (5)

24 Piece of music that's short, to a greater extent in audition (7)

25 Mournful song from first of Dylan's island records with two chords (5)

26 Former quiz show host losing heart with stripped Disney heroine revealing something hairy (9)

DOWN

1 Sarcastic about American movement that's not voluntary (7)

2 "Coy mistress" said native of Minnesota once (8)

3 Animals try bid to unsettle other groups of musicians (8,5)

4 Country musician Kooper I rage about (7)

5 Lounger rising late securing cushy job at last (3,3)

6 One who shot his bolt taking lines and acid originally is very revealing (4-3)

9 Hopefully this won't get you Knocked Out Loaded before (7)

16 Gas about formerly getting openings for Rolling Thunder gigs (8)

17 Form I see creating great work (7)

18 Artist upset after music award mostly for use of language (9)

19 Take pains to get money from Russia after start of tour (7)

21 Wild when bible's assimilated by wise man (6)

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

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The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Hooch tragedies

Court calls for smarter regulation of methanol

THE Supreme Court has suggested a series of measures to states and union territories for curbing the illegal manufacture, transportation and sale of spurious liquor. Hooch continues to claim lives in one part of the country or another, with the latest incident being reported from Madhya Pradesh’s Sagar district. Quashing certain provisions of the Maharashtra Poisons Rules, which were introduced through a 2011 notification after a major hooch tragedy in Mumbai, the Court has called for a coordinated, multi-department approach to tackle the menace.

The striking down of the provisions requiring methanol sold to non-drug manufacturers to be mixed with a specified colourant and bitterant makes it clear that public safety measures must address the actual source of the problem. Preventing deaths from spurious liquor is an unquestionable public health objective, but regulation must also be reasonable, effective and proportionate. The judgment is particularly significant because it shifts attention from regulating a legitimate industrial supply to disrupting the illicit supply chain. The Court has suggested tighter verification of licence holders, regular reconciliation of methanol stocks, stronger controls over storage and transportation, tamper-evident safeguards and dedicated tankers. This approach deserves serious consideration.

Hooch tragedies are rarely the outcome of a single regulatory failure. They can involve illegal procurement, diversion, pilferage, corruption, inadequate enforcement and the availability of cheap industrial methanol. Even Gujarat, a dry state, was recently rocked by deaths linked to the consumption of spurious liquor. Prohibition by itself cannot guarantee that dangerous alcohol disappears. Underground markets can continue when demand persists. Effective prevention requires authorities to follow the methanol trail from procurement to consumption. The onus is on governments to act on the Court’s recommendations to protect lives while keeping the legitimate industry within a clear and workable legal framework.

Winning edge

Haryana’s sporting success holds lessons

AS the flame was lit at the 20th Asian Games in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, leading the Indian contingent as flag bearer was double-Olympic medalist Manu Bhaker, who hails from Jhajjar. She is just one face of a striking reality: of India’s 503 elite athletes competing on the continental stage, 80 belong to Haryana. For a state that accounts for barely 2% of the national population, this disproportionate representation is the result of institutional engineering. The ‘Haryana Model’ succeeds because it strips away much of the economic precarity traditionally associated with Indian sport. Through its ‘Medal-to-Job’ policy, the state offers lucrative cash rewards and employment opportunities to international podium finishers. More crucially, it has democratised infrastructure. While other states often concentrate top-tier facilities in urban centres, Haryana’s synthetic tracks, shooting ranges and mat-surface *akhadas* have spread deep into rural districts, including Sonapat, Rohtak and Bhiwani. For rural youth, especially women, sport has evolved into a powerful vehicle for upward social mobility.

Yet this sport nursery has many gaps. Administrative friction, safe-sport concerns and ad-hoc governance that have plagued national wrestling and boxing federations in recent years threaten the very spine of Haryana’s sporting pipeline. A glaring sports-science deficit and inadequate data-driven training at the grassroots level can further prevent raw talent from reaching its full potential.

Haryana’s athletes carry the state’s hopes at Nagoya. They also carry a larger message for India. A country’s sporting ambitions cannot rest disproportionately on one state or a handful of disciplines. If India wants to become a multi-sport power, other states must invest in accessible infrastructure, scientific training, competent coaching and athlete-support systems. The medals won in Nagoya will deserve applause. But the greater victory would be to ensure that the opportunity like the Haryana model is available to talented youngsters everywhere.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 1926

The Swaraj Party and ourselves

IN a letter which we publish elsewhere in this issue, Duni Chand of Ambala wishes us “not to be influenced by the unhealthy atmosphere that is being created against the Swaraj Party by those who have not the courage to go as far as the party can go, and are anxious to defeat it at the next elections by all means, fair or foul.” Duni Chand scarcely needs our assurance that we are not in the least likely to be influenced by any such atmosphere, or to countenance any efforts that may be made to bring about the defeat of the Swaraj Party by questionable means. We do not believe in everything being fair in election contests, any more than we believe in everything being fair in love and in war; and if any attempt is made in any quarter to “misrepresent or exploit unwary and easily led voters” with a view to securing the defeat of the party at all costs, it will encounter the same strong opposition at our hands in future that similar attempts have met with in the past. In that sense and to that extent, our anchor holds, and will ever hold. But this is the limit. The party cannot possibly have that firm and virtually undivided support at our hands that it has had in the past. The main reason is that it is no longer the only progressive party in the country, pledged to the essential principles of the Congress, that it was before the birth of the Responsivists and the Congress Independents.

China must treat India as an Asian peer

Talk of a reset in ties is still premature; the reality is an active re-engagement



ASHOK K. KANTHA
FORMER AMBASSADOR TO CHINA

THE meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the margins of the BRICS summit in New Delhi was consequential. It was Xi’s first visit to India in seven years, since Mamallapuram in October 2019, with the transgressions in eastern Ladakh, the Galwan clash and a painful rebuilding process in between.

The Modi-Xi meetings at Kazan (October 2024), Tianjin (August 2025) and now Delhi have kept the normalisation trajectory on track, and Xi’s visit signals to the Chinese system where the leadership sees the relationship headed.

Assessing the outcome of the latest summit-level meeting against the prospects of India-China relations, talk of a “reset” — which has resurfaced in certain quarters in both countries — is still premature. The reality is an active re-engagement, and India’s own readout conveys it clearly.

The Ministry of External Affairs’ (MEA) statement is devoid of flourish; its subtext is calibrated, incremental improvement. The Chinese Foreign Ministry statement is different: longer, more declaratory, projecting greater bonhomie.

India emphasised that peace and tranquillity along the border remained the essential basis for progress; in the Chinese framing, bilateral ties and the border issue are on “parallel tracks that reinforce each other.” China attributes to Modi language on Taiwan and Tibet that appears nowhere in the Indian text.

This is the third time in under two years that a Chinese readout has folded in commitments the Indian side did not make or acknowledge publicly, including after External Affairs Minister (EAM) S Jaishankar’s meetings with Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Delhi (August 2025) and Manila (July 2026). Each time, Delhi



TIMING : China used the BRICS summit hosted by India to launch its own platforms. PTI

pushed back. This time, the MEA has neither confirmed nor explicitly denied the Chinese framing — it has declined to engage directly, stressing instead that Modi raised India’s concerns “as well”. But one meeting, two readouts and divergent signals remain the pattern.

Both sides share one objective: projecting stability in bilateral ties in a turbulent world. But nothing suggests that China is inclined to accommodate India on its concerns and expectations. Beijing will engage India, but is aware of New Delhi’s reduced strategic space. China has moved to relative advantage since US President Donald Trump sought a tactical truce last April, yet knows this truce is unstable. Against this backdrop, China would like to project normalcy with India without paying a price.

China’s preference is to compartmentalise and delink the border issue from the overall relations. The borders are stable but not normal. The “steps of a temporary and limited nature”, as the EAM described the “buffer zones” in Parliament in December 2024, run the risk of becoming permanent. There has been no progress toward de-escalation; troop deployment remains elevated for a sixth year. Reports about attempts to alter the status quo in Arunachal Pradesh are not reassuring. In September 2014, when Xi’s first visit was accompanied by trans-

There is no harm in aiming a little higher; testing whether China would deliver on its promise of “partners, not rivals.”

gressions at Demchok and Chumar, Modi raised it directly; Beijing agreed to restore the status quo ante. Disengagement since 2020, by contrast, remains incomplete after over four years. On the boundary question, the Eight Points released on August 26 provide the optics of progress. The Expert Group on Boundary Delimitation has been tasked with pursuing an “early and substantial harvest”, phrasing that originated on the Indian side as a counter to China’s proposal confined to Sikkim. India must resist any “agreement with holes”, limited to undisputed pockets while leaving hard questions open. Any such agreement would undermine the 2005 Agreement’s package principle without any commensurate gains for India.

Looking ahead, taking the relationship beyond slow normalisation requires visible

progress on structural challenges. Five issues stand out.

First, co-existence in Asia. China will accept multipolarity globally, but not in Asia. The joint statement of May 2015 spoke of India and China as “two major poles in the global architecture.” Over the past decade, asymmetries have increased, and Beijing now fits India into its regional hierarchy as a subordinate power.

Second, terms of economic engagement. China’s trade surplus with India reached \$116 billion last year and could be significantly higher this year (\$67 billion in the first six months). India has taken calibrated steps through Press Note 2 to open the door to Chinese investment in non-strategic sectors; China has moved the other way. For instance, its State Council Decree No. 837, in force since July, tightens control over outbound capital, technology and experts, and permits retaliatory measures in sectors like electronics, electric vehicles and renewables where India is trying to build capacity.

Third, the Sino-Pakistani nexus. During Operation Sindoor, Chinese support to Pakistan extended to real-time ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) inputs, BeiDou-linked missile guidance, platform fusion and battlefield advisory support — active battlefield collusion, not the old pattern of quiet backing from a distance.

Fourth, the Medog mega dam

on the Yarlung Tsangpo, launched without prior consultation, barely 50 km from Arunachal Pradesh, in Seismic Zone V. Nepal’s flashfloods in late August were a warning on engineering hubris in the fragile Himalayan terrain. Data-sharing on the Brahmaputra and Sutlej lapsed in 2022 and remains unrenewed.

Fifth, coordination in multilateral platforms, with BRICS as a test case as the baton passes to Beijing. Modi urged members to develop a Reform Roadmap and a BRICS Continuity and Implementation Mechanism with Troika framework. But Beijing used India’s summit to launch its own platforms, the ‘Greater BRICS Initiative,’ the AI Open Source Zone and the Special Economic Zone partnership, to be advanced during its chairship. India hosted; China seeded the future architecture.

For the first time, structural challenges in economic engagement have figured explicitly in summit-level readouts of both sides, with the Indian statement noting the need to address “structural trade imbalance and supply chain issues, and facilitation of meaningful and predictable market access.” Reviving the Strategic Economic Dialogue with a broader mandate could explore this opening. A dedicated strategic dialogue, possibly co-chaired by the Foreign Secretary, could sustain engagement on other complex questions that figure episodically in leadership meetings.

We are at a fork: explore, with eyes wide open, a more constructive engagement that expands convergence while addressing differences, or settle for calibrated improvement and managed competition under the overhang of armed co-existence — progressive resumption of dialogue mechanisms, expanded people-to-people interactions, circumscribed economic engagement and cautious exploration of multilateral openings, all backed by realism and investments in asymmetric deterrence. There is no harm in aiming a little higher, testing whether China would deliver on its promise of “partners, not rivals”. Until Beijing is willing to treat India as a peer nation in Asia, the gap between rhetoric and reality will persist.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

India-China ties should be guided by mutual respect and mutual interest. —Narendra Modi

Make the guest feel at home

BILAL AHMAD SHAMIM

THE ancient Indian ideal of hospitality is beautifully epitomised in the Sanskrit maxim “*Atithi Devo Bhava*” — the guest is to be regarded as a god. It embodies a profound moral principle: to treat a guest with consideration, dignity and respect.

True hospitality is about making the guest feel welcome — not about demonstrating the host’s own preferences. Imposing one’s choices is parochialism disguised as generosity.

The Indian tradition offers an extraordinary illustration of selfless concern in the story of King Shibi and the hawk. A dove, pursued by a hawk, sought refuge with the king. Having given his word to protect the helpless creature, he was unwilling to surrender it even when the hawk demanded its prey. Rather than betray the dove, Shibi offered his own flesh.

Against this noble ideal is the fable of The Fox and the Crane. The fox invites the crane to dinner but serves the meal on a flat plate, from which the bird, with its long beak, can hardly eat. The fox acts as a host, but on his own cunning terms. Later, the crane invites the fox to dinner and serves the food in a narrow-necked vessel. Now it’s the fox who is unable to eat. What appears to be a dinner invitation becomes an exchange of calculated courtesies.

A guest is not a captive. An invitation is not a command. And hospitality is not an opportunity to exercise dominance. The same principle applies beyond the dining table, whenever people of different backgrounds, cultures, habits or traditions interact. Genuine hospitality requires flexibility and generosity of spirit. What is perfectly acceptable to us may be inappropriate, uncomfortable or even unacceptable to someone else.

There is nothing admirable about winning a trivial battle at the cost of goodwill. A host may congratulate himself for having outmanoeuvred a guest, but the latter will remember the insult. Worse still, deliberate discourtesy often invites retaliation. The crane’s response to the fox is a reminder that people rarely forget how they have been treated.

Diplomacy, too, is built upon reciprocity. Respect encourages respect; generosity creates goodwill. Conversely, arrogance, humiliation and the imposition of one’s will can produce resentment.

A host who genuinely honours his guest does not boast about what he forced the latter to accept. He takes quiet satisfaction in knowing that his guest felt respected, comfortable and welcome.

The writer taught English at a school in Qadian (Gurdaspur)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A pawn can checkmate US

Apropos of ‘The politics of leverage’ (*The Great Game*); Trump’s ‘scarecrow’ diplomacy is a bad move. India is not a card in its deck, but a queen on the global chessboard. Alienating a 1.4-billion market and a pivotal Indo-Pacific partner is not leverage, it is self-inflicted isolation. Politics is not a poker game of bluff and braggadocio; it is a game of patience, like chess, where a pawn can checkmate. Similarly, the BJP’s attempt to woo Sikh voters through the symbolic display of the turban and the sword is a flawed strategy. Punjab’s social fabric is far more complex than an arithmetic of religion and caste. Punjab will not be swayed by sartorial optics.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Look for rational issues

Refer to ‘The politics of leverage’; this kind of politics does not solve the real problems of people and nations. Because of conflicting commercial interests, the foreign policies of most countries reflect confusion and vacillation of their governments. Our country’s policy moved from non-alignment to alignment first with the erstwhile Soviet Union, and now with the US. Like elsewhere in the country, every religion, community, caste and sect has its army of fanatics for whom no problem or issue is too serious or challenging to be reduced to a rational electoral issue.

HIRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Keep diplomatic channels open

Refer to ‘US can’t dictate India’s trade choices’; though maintaining a bilateral relationship with Washington is strategically vital for New Delhi, foreign policy cannot be dictated by the threat of economic sanctions. Partnerships are built and thrive on mutual respect, not coercion. India must focus on its balanced diplomatic approach by diversifying its energy sources while maintaining communication channels with the US.

HARBINDER S DHILLON, UNA

Need durable solution in Manipur

Refer to ‘Manipur’s woes’; internally displaced people remain trapped in a crisis which has remained intractable for over three years. Continued displacement deepens vulnerabilities that extend beyond the loss of a home, particularly in terms of healthcare. Without a durable solution to the Meitei-Kuki conflict, the conditions for a safe and sustainable rehabilitation will remain elusive. Dialogue and confidence-building measures must pave the way for a political settlement that ends violence and allows displaced people to rebuild their lives with dignity.

SS PAUL, NADIA (WB)

Real service to mankind

Refer to ‘95 km in 63 mins, night sortie: Hry donor saves 4 lives’; kudos to the hospital authorities who acted swiftly; this is real service to mankind. Organ donation in India needs a major push; ignorance, fear, belief, sentiments and religious practices often deter people. The donor has nothing to lose, but the receiver has everything to gain. Organ transplant is the only hope for a multitude of patients. It is important to educate the public that organs can be harvested within a particular timespan after the patient is declared brain-dead.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROPAR

Govt must come to farmers’ rescue

Today, an ordinary farmer is heavily burdened under the weight of debt. Agricultural inputs like seeds and fertilisers are becoming more expensive; farmers are not getting a fair price for their crops. Adverse weather conditions add to their misery. Consequently, farmers are facing immense hardships leading to suicides. This is an extremely grave issue. The government must work towards providing substantial relief to farmers and alleviating their financial distress.

RAJJI, SIRHIND

Political parties and their murky money



ASHOK LAVASA
EX-ELECTION COMMISSIONER

THE recent BBC investigation regarding extraordinary donations received by six registered unrecognised political parties (RUPP) exposes a well-known but intriguing aspect of Indian politics. It is ugly but ubiquitous. Political parties and their benefactors thrive within this system, even if it seems reprehensible, unlawful and disturbing.

Earlier, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) released a report on July 18, 2025 that found a 223% rise in the declared income of RUPPs during FY 2022-23. It noted that out of 2,764 RUPPs, only 739 submitted their financial records for the year to the Election Commission of India (ECI), the sole custodian of the fate and fortunes of political parties as per law.

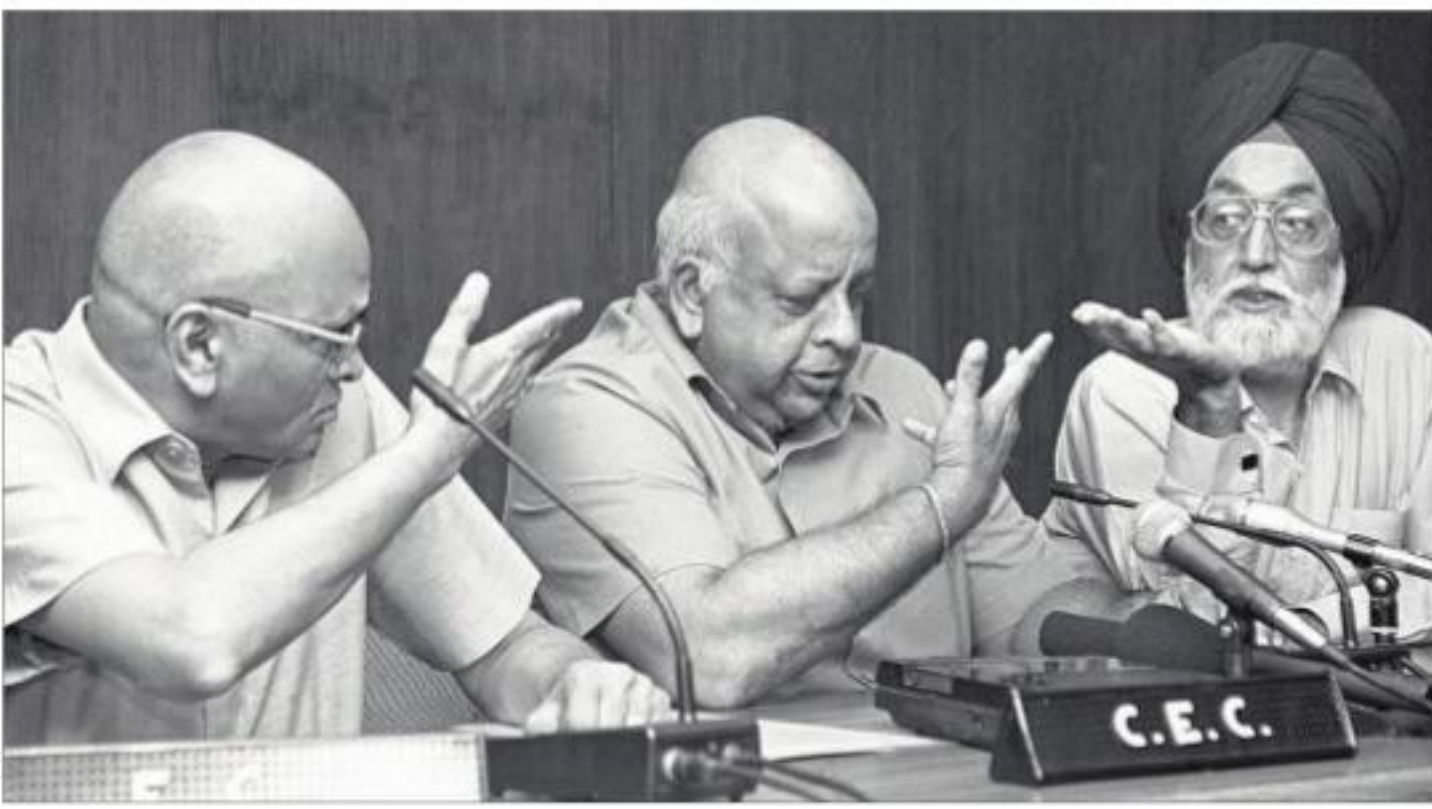
In the press note *Cleaning up the Electoral System* (August 9, 2025), the ECI said it 'delisted' 334 RUPPs out of 2,854 RUPPs as "part of a comprehensive and continuous strategy...to clean up the electoral system." It would be interesting to see if the six parties in

question are a part of the ECI's "continuous strategy".

On October 16, 1994, in an order under the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968, Chief Election Commissioner late TN Seshan highlighted the "the sorry state of affairs prevailing in almost all political parties in the country, whether recognised National or State parties or registered-unrecognised parties." He observed: "I have yet to come across any party whose affairs are being run in accordance with the provisions of its constitution or rules and regulations." Through that order, he put all political parties on "notice" to set their house in order, declaring that the ECI would not remain a "mute spectator".

In subsequent guidelines prescribing the format for registration under Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, (RPA) 1951, the ECI stated in para 3 (xxiii) that the party seeking registration must declare in its constitution that it would contest elections within five years of its registration and that if the party did not 'contest elections continuously for six years', it would "be automatically taken off the list of recognised parties."

"Taking off" or "delisting" doesn't mean deregistration as the ECI is not empowered to do so. Similarly, even if the RUPPs are 'unrecognised', they qualify to receive contributions as per Section 29-B and income tax



PROACTIVE: Former CEC late TN Seshan (middle) put all political parties on "notice" to set their house in order.

exemption under Section 29-C. "Recognition" is governed by para 6 of the Election Symbols Order, which distinguishes between 'recognised' and 'unrecognised' political parties for the purpose of allotting symbols and lays down the criteria for their classification.

Hence, whether "delisted" or "unrecognised", the parties remain eligible for receiving contributions. It is a matter of investigation whether such donations continued to receive tax exemptions as the intent behind the delisting was to disqualify them.

A paper published by Venkatesh Nayak of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative revealed that collectively, 22 political parties had Rs 18,742.31 crore at their disposal for the General Elections in 2024, which included funds in

Political parties and their benefactors thrive within the system even if it seems reprehensible, unlawful & disturbing.

their kitty at the time of announcement of the elections and donations of Rs 7,416.31 crore they raised between the dates of announcement and the completion of elections. After the elections, these parties had Rs 14,848.46 crore (including cash in hand and money held in bank accounts and fixed deposits) remaining in their custody after covering all election-related expenditure of Rs 3,861.57 crore during the campaign period, as per the accounts submitted to the ECI.

The study also found that in the last decade, the exchequer 'lost' Rs 11,813 crore in taxes due to exemptions for political donations in which individual donors and Hindu undivided families (HUFs) have overtaken corporates in donating to parties. In FY 2022-23, individual donors claimed exemp-

tions worth Rs 2,275.85 crore, dwarfing corporate claims (Rs 514.4 crore) and those by firms/associations (Rs 115.71 crore). Declared donations to parties increased from Rs 714 crore (43 parties) in 2015-16 to Rs 7,203 crore (27 parties) in 2023-24. Yet, only 41.76% of the total donations (Rs 28,287 crore over nine years) were claimed as tax-exempt, leaving questions about the remaining 58%. Nayak wonders "What incentives are driving them to donate without tax relief? The lack of transparency obscures answers."

What added the thickest layer of secrecy was the so-called reform of the electoral bonds brought by the ruling party in 2018, making the entire business of political finance murky. Although declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 2024, the details of the donations subsequently divulged raised questions that remain unanswered. Most RUPPs were not qualified to receive the electoral bonds as it was restricted to parties that "secured at least 1% of the votes in the latest Lok Sabha or State Legislative Assembly elections." Who then made these contributions and why?

Parties have shown scant interest in transparency. They united in dodging the 2013 order of the Central Information Commission that brought them under the Right to Information Act. The Income Tax Department might not consider it a priority to scrutinise the

accounts of the parties as it does of ordinary taxpayers. The ECI lacks the mandate, the intent or wherewithal to do so.

It is, therefore, incumbent upon the SC to order a court-monitored probe in the entire saga of electoral bonds and the alleged quid pro quo, including the phenomenon of 'insignificant' parties receiving and spending huge contributions without participating in the electoral process in any substantial manner.

Exercising its powers under Article 324, the ECI should order political parties to have their accounts audited by the Comptroller & Auditor General of India or its nominee. It should also consider imposing a limit on expenditure by political parties during elections, something it has recommended repeatedly. Tax exemptions on donations should be limited to the expenditure limit. All other donations that enrich the parties must be fully taxed.

The ECI should set up an automatic procedure to 'delist' any RUPP that doesn't contest elections as per its guidelines and develop a digital portal where all registered parties upload their financial data in standardised formats.

Let the ECI spend its energy in 'purifying' the electoral environment rather than chasing genuine electors out of the electoral rolls. Till then, 'We the People' must continue to scream like the people trapped in Nepal tunnels: "Humhuncha" ("we are here").

Punjab's leaders face a credibility test



JAGRUP SINGH SEKHON
FORMER PROFESSOR, GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY

PUNJAB stands at a crossroads, restless and waiting for the 2027 Assembly elections as each political party desperately wants power, but remains unclear on its agenda and roadmap for addressing the state's vexed structural crises. Meanwhile, voters, across all sections of society, are geared up to teach a lesson to leaders and parties that they blame for the state's problems. They have started opposing leaders in their own ways. The trend from previous elections, wherein leaders avoid meeting electorates face to face in their respective areas, is apparent again.

The AAP government, led by Bhagwant Singh Mann, has entered the final phase of its tenure, with three to four months of governance left before the elections are declared. The poll announcement is likely to be made in the first week of January, along with that for the two crucial BJP-ruled states of UP and Uttarakhand. The BJP's big challenge is not only to repeat a third consecutive victory in UP

and Uttarakhand but also to secure a majority in Punjab by using resources at its disposal.

The outcome of Punjab elections depends largely on the government's performance and the electorate's satisfaction with its work. The AAP government claims that it has fulfilled its major electoral promises made to the electorate the last time through freebies given and other decisions made for different sections of society.

The discriminatory freebies include monthly financial help of Rs 1,500 for Dalit women and Rs 1,000 for non-Dalit women. The non-discriminatory freebies include providing 300 units of electricity to each household free of cost, regular power supply to the farm and industrial sectors, 70,000 jobs, universal health insurance, improved school education and canal water irrigation and free bus travel for women, along with efforts to fight corruption, drug menace and gangsterism.

Few states have undergone such profound territorial and demographic changes as Punjab: Partition in 1947, the merger of PEPSU with Punjab in 1956 and the linguistic reorganisation of the state in 1966. These events not only changed the state's geographical, topographical, demographic and linguistic basis but also reshaped its politics, religion, caste, economy, etc. Another important feature of the state is its high percentage of Scheduled Caste population, further divided into 39 sub-castes, reli-



MANDATE: The outcome of Assembly poll depends on electorate's satisfaction with the government's work.

gions and regions, which continue to shape the state's socio-political dynamics.

The Legislative Assembly has 117 seats, 13 parliamentary constituencies and seven Rajya Sabha seats. The delimitation process before the 2012 Assembly elections changed the number of constituencies in the regions, benefiting the dominant Malwa (69) with an increase of four seats while two each seats were raised in Majha (25) and Doaba (23). The increase in reserved seats in the Assembly from 29 to 34 and from three to four in the Lok Sabha increased the importance of Dalit votes. Since the reorganisation of Punjab in 1966, all chief ministers, except one, have been from the Malwa region, including one Dalit CM. This region has dominated state politics.

The electoral politics of post-Independence Punjab can be explained in two phases, ie, pre- and post-reorganisation of the state. Congress was the

The deteriorating economic scenario and people's opposition have started giving sleepless nights to leaders.

dominant political force from 1947 to 1967. The reorganisation of Punjab on linguistic basis turned it into a Sikh-majority state, making the Akali Dal politically relevant and helping entrench its dominance in state politics.

Both the Congress and SAD formed governments alternately until 2012, when the SAD-led alliance broke that cycle and came to power for a second consecutive term. But the Congress swept the 2017 elections, winning 77 seats. The SAD-BJP alliance won only 18 seats and came third.

The AAP became the main opposition party by winning 20 seats. Although Congress won a landslide, its vote share fell by around 1.4 percentage points amid the rise of new political forces, notably the AAP and Lok Insaaf Party (LIP). The AAP got 24% of the total votes polled, a substantive share for a debutant party.

The BJP, SAD's alliance partner, won only three seats,

with just 5% vote share.

All traditional parties in Punjab saw an overall decrease in their vote shares, while the new parties pulled votes in their favour. This was an alarming situation for the parties. The 2022 Assembly elections changed the dynamics of electoral politics when the AAP won an unprecedented victory, securing 42% of the votes polled and 92 seats.

Though politicians tried their best to engage people on the old issues — identity politics, religion, freebies and other parochial issues — the results showed that people's issues, like the agrarian crisis, unemployment, development, drugs, smuggling, corruption, mafias, migration of youth, etc, dominated the electoral outcome. More than 42% voted for development and related issues, 12% voted to remove the incumbent Congress government and 7% voted for future good governance, giving the AAP the advantage in these elections.

These issues became central to public discussion and entered people's political imagination. Election debates at the grassroots level went beyond traditional agendas. Even the pan-Hindu identity issue raised by the BJP and Capt Amarinder Singh during the 2022 elections did not fetch them votes from Hindus.

The AAP got 35% of Hindu voters, followed by 2% for the Congress and only 16% for the BJP and its allies. Thus, people prioritised development and their children's future,

rejecting communal and partisan issues.

The 2022 elections proved that traditional political agendas no longer worked. Citizens demanded good governance, economic security and clear developmental goals. Thus, a bright era of social, political and economic growth is emerging — one where genuine democratic power returns to the people.

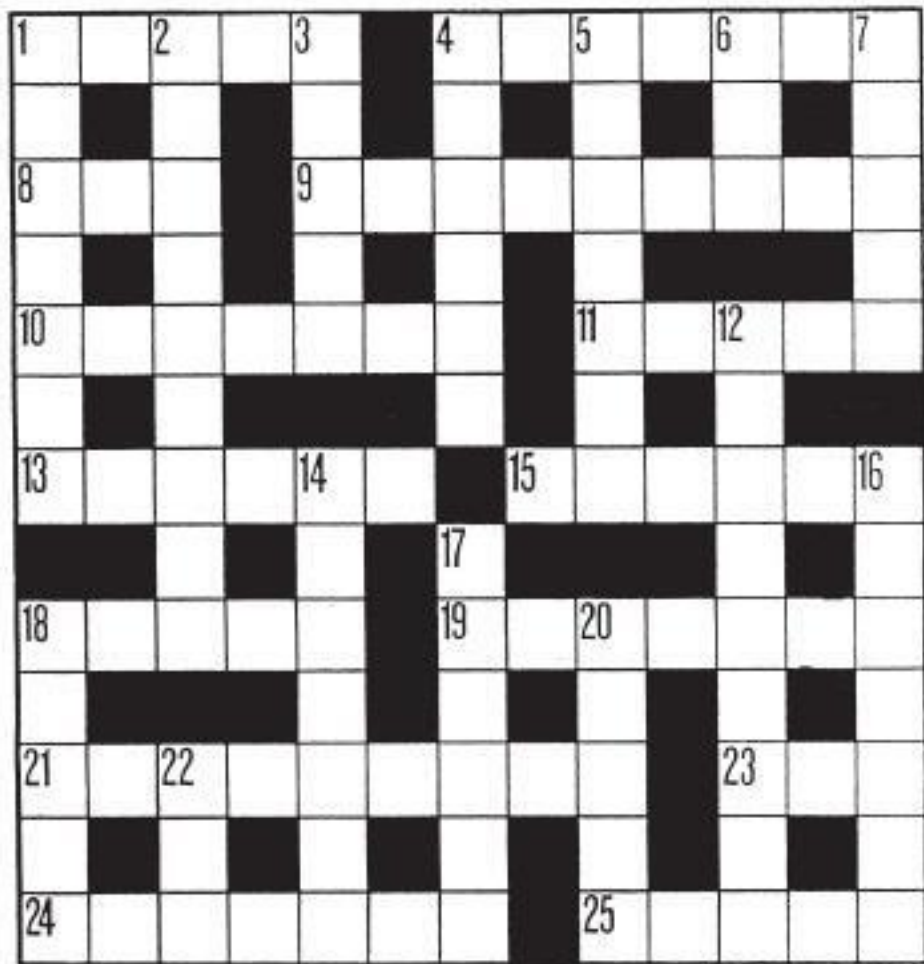
But, despite this, the problem in the state is that the mainstream political parties are busy with competitive populism, promising more freebies to the people rather than attending to the core issues of agrarian crisis, unemployment, slow development, corruption, drugs, smuggling, youth migration, issues of employment, gangsterism and the deterioration of law and order.

The deteriorating economic scenario and people's opposition has started giving sleepless nights to leaders, particularly of the ruling party.

On the other hand, the Congress and the SAD are shattered and faction-ridden. The BJP faces uncertainty despite having all resources at its disposal. The politics of "aaya Ram and gaya Ram" is in full swing as ideology and commitment to people have withered, along with the Left having been rendered politically irrelevant.

Punjabis, known for making bold experiments and fighting injustices of ruling establishments, face a paradox: which party to elect or reject?

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1 Shock deeply (5)
 - 4 Praise publicly (7)
 - 8 Feel remorse for (3)
 - 9 Without logical connection (9)
 - 10 Uninspired (7)
 - 11 Official authority (5)
 - 13 Sordid goings-on (6)
 - 15 Pulpy salad fruit (6)
 - 18 Compelling attractiveness (5)
 - 19 A pungent pepper (7)
 - 21 In easier circumstances (6,3)
 - 23 Possesses (3)
 - 24 Strong desire (7)
 - 25 Emblem of a clan (5)
- DOWN**
- 1 Relevant (7)
 - 2 Remarkable things or people (9)
 - 3 Kingdom of Croesus (5)
 - 4 Being of that kind (2,4)
 - 5 A West Indian ballad (7)
 - 6 Before the present (3)
 - 7 Civic head (5)
 - 12 True state of things (5,4)
 - 14 River of East Africa (7)
 - 16 Arboreal American marsupial (7)
 - 17 Powerful in effect (6)
 - 18 Shaped like a dice (5)
 - 20 Be suitable to (5)
 - 22 An evergreen shrub (3)

Saturday's Solution

Across: 1 Thumbs down, 8 Angst, 9 All-star, 10 Thereto, 11 Ensur, 12 Theory, 14 Alaska, 17 Nehru, 19 Reduced, 21 Shindig, 22 Child, 23 Appetising.

Down: 2 Hygiene, 3 Metre, 4 Seadog, 5 Oil well, 6 Notes, 7 Free-handed, 8 Astuteness, 13 Round up, 15 Section, 16 Bright, 18 Haifa, 20 Docks.

SU DO KU



V. HARD

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER 21, 2026, MONDAY

■ Shaka Samvat	1948
■ Bhadrabad Shaka	30
■ Ashwin Parvishite	5
■ Hijari	1448
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 10, up to 8:01 pm	
■ Sobhana Yoga up to 4:06 pm	
■ Ultrashadha Nakshatra	
■ Moon enters Capricorn sign 11:15 am	

FORECAST

SUNSET: SUNRISE:	MONDAY TUESDAY	18:21 HRS 06:11 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	35	22
New Delhi	35	25
Amritsar	33	22
Bathinda	36	22
Jalandhar	33	22
Ludhiana	34	24
Bhiwani	35	23
Hisar	36	23
Sirsa	36	25
Dharamsala	30	18
Manali	26	10
Shimla	25	15
Srinagar	28	13
Jammu	34	23
Kargil	26	05
Leh	23	08
Dehradun	34	22
Mussoorie	23	17

TEMPERATURE IN °C



Editor's
TAKE

The climate blame game must end

With global warming accelerating, climate justice now demands greater accountability from wealthy nations and faster emissions cuts from allemitters, including India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi told a Delhi climate conference on Saturday that responsibility for emissions has “often been wrongly placed on developing countries”. The principle is sound. India emits about 2.2 tonnes of CO2 per person, less than half the global average; an American emits roughly 14. The six-fold gap PM Modi cited holds for the United States, though less so for Europe or Japan. History strengthens his case. The United States accounts for about a fifth of all CO2 emitted since 1850, some 537 billion tonnes by the end of 2024: two-thirds more than China and three-quarters more than the EU. Per head, the EU’s historical total is three times China’s. The atmosphere’s carbon budget was spent on the rich world’s industrialisation, and late developers are now told to live within the remainder.

Yet justice is not an alibi. India is the third-largest emitter, at about 8 per cent of the global total, and coal still supplies most of its electricity. Per capita is a moral argument; the atmosphere responds to total tonnes. The culprits are also contemporary. China emits nearly a third of global CO2 today. The United States, having formally quit the Paris Agreement again, saw 2025 emissions rise enough to account for about 40 per cent of the global increase, more than the EU, China and India combined. Modi’s claim on delivery needs precision too. India crossed 50 per cent non-fossil power capacity five years ahead of its 2030 pledge, and its emissions grew just 0.7 per cent in 2025, the slowest rise since 2001 outside the pandemic. But the 2.5 to 3 billion tonne carbon-sink goal stood at 2.29 billion in the government’s latest report, and intensity-based targets let absolute emissions keep climbing. “Every commitment met” is premature. The stakes are stark. UNEP’s Limiting Overshoot report, released on September 2, says 1.5C will be crossed within a few years, with 1.8C the best-case peak and about 2.6C by 2100 on current policies.

The way forward has three parts. First, the rich must pay. The \$300 billion a year promised by 2035 fell well short of the \$500 billion developing countries sought and the \$1.3 trillion experts say is needed, and the pledge to triple adaptation finance is non-binding.

At COP31 in November, India should demand delivery schedules, cheaper capital through reformed development banks, and technology transfer. Second, India must convert moral authority into a peak. It should fix a date for peaking coal power, which analysts say is possible before 2030, and expand storage, transmission grids and nuclear capacity to deliver its 2035 pledge of a 47 per cent intensity cut and 60 per cent non-fossil capacity. Third, all the big emitters must cut faster. UNEP’s 1.5C benchmark is a 55 per cent fall from 2019 levels by 2035. Washington’s absence makes that harder still; Beijing’s ambition matters more than ever. PM Modi is right that the poor should not carry the blame. But climate justice cools no degree unless it becomes climate action.

Kanishka: Four decades later, justice still waits

Forty-one years after Air India Flight 182 was blown out of the sky, killing all 329 people aboard, Canada appears ready to scale back the investigation into one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in its history. For the families who have carried the loss for four decades, the message that there are ‘no fresh leads’ is not closure. It is another wound.



SANJAY LAZAR

Some wounds refuse to close. The bombing of Air India Flight 182, the Kanishka, is one, and this month it was torn open again. At a meeting near Toronto on 12 September, the RCMP told roughly 40 relatives that it has no fresh leads and plans to reduce its Air India team to administrative staff only. I was 17 when that bomb took my entire family. I know exactly what “no leads” costs.

Two bombs one plot

On 23 June 1985, a suitcase bomb exploded at Tokyo’s Narita airport, killing two baggage handlers. Fifty-four minutes later, a second bomb destroyed Flight 182 over the Atlantic, off the Irish coast. All 329 people aboard died, including 82 children under 13. Until 9/11, it was history’s deadliest aviation bombing. It remains the worst mass murder in Canadian history. Relatives flew to Cork to claim the dead. I spent 25 days in a makeshift morgue there, searching through remains for my own family. Every anniversary since has reopened that room.

A record of failure

For a decade, nothing moved. In 1995 a \$1 million reward was announced, but fear inside the community was so deep that almost nobody came forward. Charges arrived only in 2000, fifteen years after the bombing. The trial that followed cost nearly \$130 million and ended in 2005 with both accused acquitted. Witnesses recanted, went silent or were threatened. Several testified only as Ms. D or Ms. E, which says much about faith in witness protection. Tara Singh Hayer, who had given police a statement, was shot dead in 1998 despite promises of protection. Nobody has been tried for his murder. Justice John Major’s public inquiry let daylight in. It exposed surveillance tapes erased by CSIS, watchers who trailed Talwinder Singh Parmar’s circle into the woods near Duncan as they tested a device, ignored warnings, and two agencies guarding turf instead of preventing a massacre. It also exposed how the state treated the bereaved. Families of Indian nationality were overlooked, and Canadians of Indian origin were offered far less than others. Justice Major told me this week that Canada treated the bombing as an “Indian problem” rather than a Canadian tragedy. He was right then and the RCMP is proving it



ON 23 JUNE THIS YEAR, THE 41ST ANNIVERSARY, CSIS PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGED THAT CANADA-BASED KHALISTANI EXTREMISTS CARRIED OUT THE BOMBING. LESS THAN THREE MONTHS LATER, THE RCMP TELLS US THERE IS NOTHING LEFT TO PURSUE. WHICH AGENCY ARE WE SUPPOSED TO BELIEVE?

Sanjay Lazar is an Air India 182 Kanishka Victim family member, and the Chairman of the Kanishka foundation & GS of the AICCA. He is an aviation analyst, lawyer & best-selling author who writes on aviation, international relations, leadership and law.

again now.

On 23 June this year, the 41st anniversary, CSIS publicly acknowledged that Canada-based Khalistani extremists carried out the bombing. Less than three months later, the RCMP tells us there is nothing left to pursue. Which agency are we supposed to believe? Worse, police suggested that if families could bring them new leads, they might look at them. A national police force asking the bereaved to do its detective work, in the country’s deadliest terrorist attack. The RCMP also said it is talking to New Delhi about returning the wreckage and victims’ personal effects, the language of a file being closed.

This week I spoke with veterans of the original RCMP investigation, with CSIS alumni, with Justice Major and with Bob Rae. None could believe this was under way.

Where the leads are

Leads exist for anyone willing to look. Investigators drew up a list of persons of interest, and many were never properly questioned. When I asked about them, I was told the investigation is “ongoing.” Inderjit Singh Reyat, the only man ever convicted, has been free since 2016 and has never told what he knows. Others in the plotters’ outer circle have kept silent for four decades. Where is the national appeal for them to speak, endorsed by Prime Minister Mark Carney? Where is immunity for anyone who was merely a bystander? Where is the trial for Hayer’s killers? The reward has not moved since 1995. Reissue it, raise it, and put the government’s full weight behind it. Ripudaman Singh

Malik, acquitted in the bombing, was murdered in 2022, and two men later pleaded guilty. This March, Nancy Grewal, an outspoken critic of violent extremism who had spoken of death threats, was fatally stabbed in Ontario. Speaking out remains dangerous.

The world does not stop looking

Nazi hunters tracked Klaus Barbie down 38 years after the war and Franz Stangl 22 years after it. The Golden State Killer was caught more than four decades after his crimes. Almost 38 years after Lockerbie, a US court is still preparing to try the accused bomb-maker. As we approach the 25th anniversary of 9/11, imagine the reaction had Washington said it was out of ideas about al-Qaeda.

What Canada owes us

In his Ottawa office, Prime Minister Stephen Harper promised me and other families that Canada would pursue this case to its conclusion and treat every victim equally. The Canadian Victims Bill of Rights and Justice Major’s recommendations back us. Yet nobody has approached the other families who had standing at the inquiry. Our demands are simple. Keep investigators on the file. If the current team is spent, bring in fresh ones or an independent review. Reissue and enlarge the reward. Speak to every family. We have written to Prime Minister Carney, to Prime Minister Modi, to the foreign ministers, to British Columbia’s Attorney General and to the RCMP Commissioner. Canada cannot walk away from the 331 people it lost, or from families who have waited a lifetime. We will not accept it.

Daiv Vani

WISDOM FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Truth Wears Many Names

In a world quick to argue over whose faith, whose path, or whose interpretation of truth is correct, a verse from the Rig Veda offers a strikingly different vision. It declares, “Ekam Sat Viprah Bahudha Vadanti”, Truth is one, though the wise call it by many names.

This single line acknowledges that different seekers, across centuries and cultures, have approached the same ultimate reality through different languages, symbols, and practices, not because truth itself is fragmented, but because human understanding approaches it from many directions at once.

We often mistake a different path for a wrong one, assuming that if someone worships, believes, or lives differently than we do, one of us must be mistaken. This verse suggests otherwise that diversity of expression does not mean division of truth.

Today, encounter one belief or practice different from your own with curiosity rather than judgment, remembering that it too may be reaching toward the same truth you seek.

The senior swagger, not Gen Z blabber



NAMRATA KOHLI

2ND OPINION

Gen Z has become a national obsession. Brands want Gen Z. Luxury wants Gen Z. Media wants Gen Z. Advertisers want Gen Z. Apparently, simply announcing “we are targeting Gen Z” makes even an ageing brand sound young again. Even companies increasingly want workplaces populated by Gen Z. In short, the youth has become synonymous with both being relevant and ‘super cool’. India has rightly celebrated its demographic dividend. But somewhere along the way, “young India” became the only India worth wooing. The 40-plus consumer barely gets a look-in. Cross 60 and you become a “senior citizen” - marketed insurance, medicines, retirement homes and assisted living. What happened to aspiration, ambition, sex appeal and plain old fun? Travel entrepreneur Devendra Parulekar, founder of Saffron Stays, shares how silver economy is their most inter-

esting and fastest growing segment as on date: “Senior citizens are the most interesting customer segment because they are both time rich and money rich.”

Historically, Indian society has always valued age and experience. “Old is gold” wasn’t merely a saying. Elders were repositories of memory, knowledge and judgement. You sought their counsel. Today, in an increasingly materialistic culture, the senior becomes a relic on the mantelpiece - respected ceremonially, perhaps, but considered increasingly archaic and irrelevant. That narrative needs a reality check. That perception does not match reality. Neena Gupta’s career found an extraordinary second wind in her 60s. Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw remains one of India’s influential business voices at 73. Shabana Azmi is commanding screens at 75. But forget celebrities. Sudesh Chawla, a 74-year-old media professional, is learning salsa and taking up modelling assignments. Around us are older Indians travelling solo, starting consultancies, mentoring entrepreneurs and finally learning the music or dance they postponed for decades. Lisa Ray has a wonderful expression for midlife: “This is my prime time.” And she said it, not past our prime, but into “another prime”. And why should 60 mean we stop working? A teacher does not lose her knowledge at 60.

A doctor does not lose his judgement; if anything, decades of experience sharpen it. A lawyer, architect, entrepreneur or artist does not suddenly become less valuable because the calendar has turned. We meticulously plan our lives up to 60 — education, career, marriage, children, savings, retirement. But if we are going to live to 90 or 100, what

is our plan for the four decades that follow? Forty years is not life’s waiting room. It is another adulthood. Perhaps the longevity conversation needs to move beyond simply asking, “How do we live longer?” to a much bigger question: “What are we going to do with all those extra years?”

Longer lives will require a society and an ecosystem designed for them - workplaces willing to rethink retirement, opportunities for reskilling and second careers, financial systems built around longer working and post-working lives, healthcare focused on preserving function and independence, and communities that keep older people connected, purposeful and engaged. If longevity is giving us another adulthood, we need to build a world in which people can thrive. India already has nearly 167 million people aged 60-plus, projected to reach 346 million by 2050, according to the ASLI-JLL report India’s Silver Economy: From Niche to Necessity. Yet we continue to see this generation largely through the lens of care. Today’s 60-year-old could have another 30 or 40 years ahead. Many have money, assets, time, experience - and an appetite for life. Perhaps we need to talk of India having two distinct demographic dividends: the energy of youth and the experience of age. Give the young wings. Let them fly. But remember: shoots may reach for the sky; it is the roots that keep the tree standing. Klub 60 doesn’t need our sympathy. It needs its swagger back.

The writer is an author, podcaster and a Senior Fellow at the Ministry of Culture, Government of India

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Democracy under strain in West Bengal

The quality of democracy appears to be facing serious challenges, with recent developments in West Bengal raising troubling questions. The arrest of a Congress candidate in Nandigram over an agitation dating back to 2007, just as the election process begins, naturally invites scrutiny. The reported involvement of the Election Commission in directing the police action makes the timing and circumstances even more contentious. Questions also arise over the fate of others who participated in the same agitation. If reports are correct that assurances were given to participants regarding legal relief, the matter deserves greater transparency. Reports of candidates withdrawing from the contest or expressing concerns about campaigning further add to the perception of an uneven electoral environment. More broadly, concerns about investigative agencies, the functioning of the Election Commission, the criminalisation of politics and the growing influence of wealth in legislatures deserve serious public discussion. Democratic institutions can command public confidence only when they are seen to function impartially and transparently.

AG RAJMOHAN | ANANTAPUR

India must prepare for energy shock

The reported escalation of Houthi attacks against Saudi Arabia marks a worrying development in an already volatile West Asian situation. Riyadh has reported ballistic-missile and drone attacks targeting several locations, with its air defences intercepting the incoming threats. Any further targeting of civilian or energy infrastructure could trigger Saudi retaliation and increase the possibility of wider regional or US involvement. The situation around the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait is particularly important for India because prolonged disruption could affect crude supplies, shipping, insurance premiums and freight costs. A sustained escalation could also put additional pressure on global oil prices and inflation. India should therefore prepare on several fronts. It should secure additional crude supplies where feasible, replenish strategic petroleum reserves, examine alternative shipping routes and strengthen surveillance and protection of Indian-linked vessels. Diplomatic channels with Riyadh, Tehran, Washington and other stakeholders should remain active to help prevent further escalation. The safety of Indian citizens in the region must also remain a priority. At the same time, the govt should prepare contingency measures to cushion the possible impact of higher fuel, fertiliser and freight costs on the domestic economy.

RS NARULA | PATIALA

Sanctions may disrupt global energy security

The enactment of the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 2026 represents a significant expansion of Washington’s use of trade measures to influence the energy policies of other countries. The provision allowing tariffs of up to 100 per cent on major buyers of Russian oil could place substantial pressure on countries such as India and China. However, targeting large energy importers raises wider questions about global energy security. For India, securing affordable and uninterrupted energy supplies for its population is a fundamental national interest. Its purchase of Russian oil should therefore be viewed in the context of energy security rather than automatically interpreted as geopolitical alignment. Punitive measures against major oil buyers could have consequences beyond their intended targets. They may disrupt established energy flows, push up international crude prices and add to inflationary pressures worldwide. They could also complicate important strategic relationships. Washington should therefore consider diplomatic engagement alongside economic pressure. Greater stability in global energy markets would serve wider international interests better than measures that risk imposing costs on neutral economies and consumers.

SANJAY CHOPRA | MOHALI



Volunteers immerse idols of Lord Ganesha in an artificial pond during the Gauri-Ganapati immersion in Mumbai

PHOTO: PTI

India needs a Bhu Nyaya Sanhita, not just faster land courts

India’s land disputes suffer from more than judicial delay. The deeper problem is fragmentation: records, maps, title and possession are handled by different institutions and often through disconnected processes. A purpose-built Bhu Nyaya Sanhita could bring them together, making land justice faster, simpler and, crucially, complete



VIVEK KUMAR SINGH

India's land disputes do not merely take too long. They are processed through a system that misreads how land conflicts arise. A land dispute seldom turns on abstract legal right alone. It rests on three connected elements: the record, the map and possession. The record says who claims the right. The map says where that right lies. Possession shows who occupies or uses the land. Justice is complete only when all three converge, yet India's institutions pull them apart. Revenue authorities keep records, survey departments handle maps, registration offices log instruments, and civil courts decide proprietary rights. A citizen may win in one forum and still need a second to correct the record, a third to alter the map and a fourth to obtain possession. The problem is not delay alone. It is fragmentation.

The Code of Civil Procedure, 1908 remains the basic framework for land litigation. It can be amended further, but land disputes are distinctive enough to justify something bolder: a purpose-built Bhu Nyaya Sanhita, or Land Justice Code. Indian law already accepts differentiated procedure: commercial disputes run on stricter timelines, insolvency operates against a statutory clock, and RERA created its own adjudicatory framework. Its objective should be simple: every final decision must bring record, map and possession into convergence.

Classify before adjudicating

The first departure should be classification at entry. Today, similar controversies surface as suits for declaration, injunction, cancellation, partition, correction of records or recovery of possession, and jurisdiction often turns on how relief is drafted rather than on the real conflict. The Code could instead catalogue land disputes, much as a penal code classifies offences by defined ingredients, without criminalising civil disagreement.

Record disputes would cover fraudulent mutation, contested succession entries, duplicate records, and mismatches between registration data and the Record of Rights. Map and boundary disputes would cover overlapping parcels, shifted boundaries, survey errors, excess or deficient area, and gaps between textual records and cadastral maps. A map left unrevised after inheritance, partition or acquisition could count as an incomplete spatial mutation. Possession disputes would include dis-possession, encroachment, tenancy, permissive and co-sharer possession, and adverse possession. Title and trans- action disputes would take in competing conveyances, wills, family settlements, cancellation of instruments, fraud and impersonation. Public-law disputes over acquisition, ceiling, consolidation, government grants, common lands and public encroachment would form another.

For each category, the Code could specify essential assertions, permissible defences, standard documents, pre-sump-tions, limitation, interim relief, forum, appellate route and post-judgment action. A boundary dispute need not follow the evidentiary path of a fraudulent conveyance. A mutation controversy need not become a title suit. And a serious proprietary dispute should not be settled merely because one party holds a favourable revenue entry.

The law can therefore separate foundational right, current record and judicial determination of title. A right originates in grant, inheritance, partition or transfer; the record reflects recognised later changes; judicial determination is needed when rival claims cannot otherwise be reconciled. Neither an old deed nor a recent mutation is infallible. Courts should apply a best-claim principle, weighing lawful origin, continuity of transactions, parcel identity, consistency of records, possession, notice, good faith and fraud. This would not displace substantive prop-erty law; it would structure how courts weigh compet-ing documentary, record-based and possessory claims.

One jurisdictional map

Classification would then fix jurisdiction. Undisputed succession, mutation, clerical correction and conse-quential map updates would stay administrative. Contested record, survey, boundary, tenancy, consolida-tion and ceiling matters would go to specialised revenue forums able to commission neutral surveys and grant limited interim protection. Title, cancellation of instru-ments, complex inheritance, partition, fraud, specific per-formance and adverse possession would remain with des-ignated civil land courts.



REPRESENTATIONAL IMAGE

EVERY LAND PROCEEDING COULD BEGIN BY IDENTIFYING THE PARCEL. A STANDARD PARCEL STATEMENT COULD SPECIFY THE LAND, SOURCE OF RIGHT, PRESENT RECORD, MAP, REGISTRATION AND MUTATION HISTORY, POSSESSION AND KNOWN RIVAL CLAIMS. WHERE DIGITAL SYSTEMS PERMIT, AN AUTHENTICATED PARCEL DOSSIER CAN BE DRAWN DIRECTLY FROM REGISTRATION, SURVEY AND REVENUE DATABASES

The writer is an ex-IAS officer and is presently Chairman, RERA Bihar. He served as Principal Secretary, Department of Revenue and Land Reforms, Bihar. This is the last part of a three-part series on land reforms

Mixed cases need a dominant-issue test. If a record dispute cannot be resolved without deciding title, the civil land court decides it. If title is admitted and only its implementation is con-tested, the revenue forum acts. A litigant should not lose years by approaching the wrong forum. Such cases should be trans-ferred, not returned for refileing, with limitation protected and the proceeding continuing from the stage reached.

Appeals need simplifying. A consolidated first appellate mech-anism for civil and revenue land disputes would stop parallel hierarchies reaching inconsistent conclusions on the same parcel. High Court scrutiny would remain for substantial ques-tions of law, jurisdictional error and constitutional review. Civil courts would be reserved for disputes that need them, and tech-nical record and survey matters would stop becoming endless civil trials.

From principle to procedure

Every proceeding would begin by identifying the parcel. A standard parcel statement would set out the land, source of right, present record, map, registration and mutation history, possession and rival claims. Where digital systems permit, an authenticated parcel dossier could be drawn straight from reg-istration, survey and revenue databases. Defendants would answer the same structured questions rather than offer a general denial. An early case-management hearing would classify the dispute, identify admitted facts, decide whether technical inves-tigation is needed and fix the calendar. Where measurement is disputed, a neutral survey would follow prescribed geospa-tial standards and produce verifiable coordinates and field pro-ceedings. Oral evidence would remain where intention, fraud, consent or conduct matters. But technical facts should be proved technically: boundaries through authenticated maps and measurement, registration history through official records, phys-ical change through geospatial or time-stamped material. The Code could cap adjournments, interlocutory challenges and extensions, subject to narrow recorded exceptions, and set a statutory outer limit for first-instance disposal, with extra time for complex cases. No procedural stage should stay indefinite-ly renewable.

Make the decree complete

Execution should not begin as though a second case has started. A land decree should specify who must update the Record of Rights, alter the map, cancel an instrument, remove an encroachment and deliver possession, and it should reach every such authority electronically. Each litigated parcel could carry a common digital case identifier and a lis pendens flag across registration, revenue, court and survey systems. A decree that declares ownership but leaves the winner to fight sep-arately for record, map and possession is justice only on paper. The real test is whether a judgment becomes visible at once in the record, on the map and on the ground.

A federal architecture

Land and land revenue are primarily State subjects, while civil procedure and evidence engage the Concurrent List. A Bhu Nyaya Sanhita must therefore rest on cooperative federalism: a common procedural and evidentiary architecture, with State schedules reflecting local land laws, tenures and institutions. Uniformity need not mean one land law for India, only a coher-ent way of resolving land disputes.

India has spent decades improving land records, surveys and registration. That information cannot deliver full value while adjudication stays fragmented among institutions that do not communicate. The country needs more than faster land suits. It needs a system where the parcel is identified at entry, the dispute is classified correctly, jurisdiction is known in advance, evidence fits the controversy, timelines carry consequences, and the final order travels automatically into the record, the map and possession. A Bhu Nyaya Sanhita would be more than pro-cedural reform. It would finish the unfinished task of making land records, land rights and land justice speak the same lan-guage.

UPI: From scale to sustainability



ANURADHA PS

If the volume of transactions is around ₹30 lakh crore in a single month, then it isn't just a matter of whether or not a transaction is zero cost. The larger question is who pays to keep the system secure, resilient and sustainable. This is what the latest decision by India on the Unified Payment Interface (UPI) means. The new Merchant Discount Rate (MDR) for the specified person-to-merchant (P2M) UPI transactions above ₹2,000 will be 0.4 per cent with a cap of ₹300 from Oct 15. Person-to-person pay-ments and payments made by merchants till a limit of ₹2,000 and under the zero-MDR formula for small mer-chants will continue to be free. The government's current figures indicate that around 96 per cent of the P2M transactions will not be impact-ed. This is not a general consumer levy. MDR is a fee in the merchant-payment system which is shared among the entities involved. The question is: has it managed to keep pace with the unprecedented scale of UPI?

The economics behind 'free'

UPI is now an integral part of the digital public infrastructure in India. NPCI data revealed transactions worth ₹29.82 lakh crore from 752 banks through UPI in August 2026, meting out 24.51 billion transactions. This is a scale, but it's not a costless scale. The payment system needs investment on a continuous basis. Cybersecurity challenges are new and growing, fraud prevention needs are more complex and sophisticated and banks and payment service providers must have resilient technology to meet the challenges. As transaction volumes increase, the process of resolving the disputes of the customer has to be carried out and interoperability must be maintained and systems upgraded. It seems there's no cost to the user, but there is to the infrastructure. That is why the MDR debate needs to transcend the question of whether or not merchants should be charged. The bigger question is, has India made a sustainable economic and governance model of the digital public infrastructures?

From zero to differentiated cost

There are strong arguments to maintain the costs of all UPI transactions low. Digital pay-ments are a cost-effective solution that can be promoted to drive adoption, limit reliance on cash and small businesses' access to the formal digital economy. The new framework takes into account that by protecting P2P payments and small-value merchant trans-actions, it will acknowledge this. The gov-ernment's design instead is to distinguish between various kinds of transactions, instead of having a general charge. It's worth noting that distinction is significant. However, as a payment ecosystem starts to make money from specific transactions, transparency is also crucial. What will be the revenue of the system? How will it be applied? What changes can be expected in the infrastructure, fraud prevention and cyber-security?



When a payment system becomes critical infrastructure

UPI has ceased to be just another payment method. It's a payment channel that's now used by millions of consumers and businesses. This puts people in a new position of responsibility, which has a scope that goes beyond transaction processing. What would be the impact on a large-scale payment system if it went down? When there is fraud, who is responsible? How quickly the significant cyber security incidents are addressed? What if an unauthorized transaction occurs? Where to place the burden of continual upgrading of the infrastructure? With the increasing shift towards digital payments, these are now economic questions of resilience. Governance consequently has to shift from 'transaction governance to ecosystem governance'. This will result in greater clarity of responsibility within the banking system, between banks and payment services providers and other actors, higher operational and cybersecurity requirements, more secure systems in case of failed or fraudulent transactions, and more transparency regarding payment system economics.

The missing key: accountability

The launch of MDR can contribute to the development of a more sustainable econom-ic model for the UPI eco system. However, the price tag is not enough to achieve sus-tainability. More transparency of financing and strengthening of the ecosystem should be public. The system should be able to show the benefits of the merchant's contribu-tion when they are involved in MDR. These reports might include: the cost of the ecosys-tem, investments in resilience and technology, fraud patterns and enhancements to customer protection. This is not a matter of making all things UPI overly "bureaucrat-ic" and "expensive". It's a matter of understanding that this is a digital public infrastruc-ture that needs institutional responsibility and efficiency. Adoption was the first UPI challenge in India. Scale was the second one. Next is sustain-ability. The measure of success cannot be transaction volumes alone. A processing system with billions of payments needs to be secure when things go wrong, cyber-resistant, and flexible enough to meet the needs of the consumer and have the financial means to make technological advances. This new MDR framework may thus be the first step in a wider discussion on the funding and governance of UPI. The policy dilemma lies in making sure that reducing transaction costs is not at the expense of other long term costs: system failures, fraud, cybersecurity risks, poor grievance redressal, and insuffi-cient infrastructural investment. The world has seen India prove that digital payments can be swift, seamless and so acces-sible at an unprecedented scale. The next demonstration should be that such infrastruc-ture is also sustainable, resilient and accountable. The future of UPI should not be decided on the number of transactions it can process or the cost of individual transactions. More significant question is whether India can keep the same affordability that led to the success of UPI and develop the governance structure for its sustained operation. The true cost of UPI is not just the cost of a transaction. It's what India is ready to pay to maintain the system trusted.

The writer is Professor, Department of Commerce, CHRIST University



NITIN KULKARNI

back in her hand. Ten views. Twenty likes. Decent, but where is his comment? Across the city, a young professional trudges home after weeks of untangling a difficult project. He feels proud until he remembers that his manager ended the final meeting without a word of thanks. In a kitchen, a small boy holds up his drawing. His mother calls it beautiful. He studies her face and asks, "Do you really mean it, or are you just saying it?" Three generations, three ordinary moments, one shared hunger. Somewhere along the way we handed a blinking notification light the authority to decide whether our day was good or bad. Wanting approval is not a flaw. Evolution wired it into us, and it has driven much of what humans have built. The trouble begins when approval stops being a pleasant extra and becomes a condition for feeling okay. Warming your hands at a fire is one thing; needing to inhale its smoke to breathe is

another. When appreciation turns from the icing into the cake, we are dealing with something that deserves a blunter name: validation addiction. Am I Good Enough? Validation is the world's way of telling us we are smart, attractive, capable or right. The addicted need it: "Fewer likes than hoped for, and the weekend is spoiled." "A partner who does not announce the relationship online, and insecur-ity creeps in." "A boss who skips the praise, and impostor syndrome takes over. We have tied our worth so tightly to outside noise that our own voice can no longer be heard above it. Digital life has changed the nature of approval. Once intimate, slow and uncounted, it now arrives as numbers: likes, views, followers, shares. Human warmth has been converted into a public scoreboard, and once worth can be mea-sured, comparison follows automatically. A stranger collects five thousand reactions while we collect fifty. We insist we are too grown-up to care about internet points. Our brains disagree. Every refresh of a feed works like a pull on a slot-machine lever, because the payout is unpre-dictable. Psychologists call this a variable reward schedule, and it is the mechanism that



keeps gamblers at the machine. We never know whether the next pull brings a burst of applause or an empty room, and that uncertainty keeps our anticipation, and our dopamine, running hot. The smartphone in our pocket has become a slot machine that also makes calls. The pleasure of a compliment is not the problem. The sting of its absence is. We tell our-selves we are only checking messages. In truth, we are checking whether we matter. Meanwhile we pay a hidden tax, and the cur-rency is authenticity. We soften our opinions,

people can weigh in before our morning tea has cooled. The answer is not to turn cold, withdraw from people or pretend their opinions mean nothing. Sound criticism sharpens our work, and honest warmth builds lasting bonds. What we need is a firm line between feedback and identity. A crit-ique addresses something we did. It does not deliver a verdict on who we are. That means moving the anchor of self-worth back inside. Before we put the phone down tonight, three uncomfortable questions are

tame our style and polish our joys until they suit what the audience likes to consume. We share what performs, not what is real. The internal question shifts from "What do I actually think?" to "What will they think of me if I say this?" In that shift we hand strangers the wheel of our emotional lives. The bill arrives as anxiety, burnout and a deep loneliness rooted in never feeling like enough. Technology, though, is only the amplifier. India has long lived under the gaze of family, neighbours and rigid hierarchies. Log kya kahenge, what will people say, has always been a powerful currency here. Digital platforms did not create our appetite for approval. They gave an old cultural reflex a global microphone, so that five hundred

worth asking: "Did I live by my own values today, whether or not anyone noticed?" "Did I put honest effort into the things that matter to me?" "When the screen goes dark and the room falls quiet, am I at peace with the person in the mirror? Public approval behaves like the weather. The crowd that crowns you today will scroll past you tomorrow, and the post that draws thousands of likes this week will sink beneath the feed by next. So why build self-worth on something so unstable? Surrendering your peace of mind to an audience that barely notices is a poor bargain. Enjoy the applause when it comes, but never lean on it to stay upright. Real self-worth is measured not by how high we rise when the hall roars, but by how steady we stay when the lights dim. Build self-respect from the inside out, and the world's applause becomes background music. The lion does not lose sleep over what the sheep think. And when the phone is off, no one is watching and no notification is waiting, we should still be able to say, calmly and without anyone's agreement:I am enough. Just enough. For myself.

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INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



Columns & Commentary

MICHELLE GOLDBERG

The Documentary That Has Enraged Israel's Leaders

Israel is treating the new documentary "NAZA," by the Israeli filmmakers Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, less like bad publicity than a national security crisis.

Eyal Zamir, chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, pledged to use "every tool at our disposal" against the documentary, which features anonymous interviews with 24 intelligence officers and soldiers, most involved in remote strikes in Gaza. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called for legislation that would let the state strip Abraham and Szor of their citizenship. Israel's culture minister has asked the Interior Ministry to investigate them for treason. Activists and staff members from the far-right party of Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir protested outside Szor's parents' house, where a speaker called for Abraham and Szor to be executed and their families' homes demolished, as often happens to the homes of Palestinians.

The official calls for persecution of Abraham and Szor, who previously made the Oscar-winning documentary "No Other Land" with two Palestinian filmmakers, seem strategically unwise, since they're spurring heightened interest in "NAZA." A press screening I went to on Wednesday, at New York's 268-seat Walter Reade Theater, was at capacity, and I was told to arrive a half-hour early to get a seat. This is, in my experience, very unusual for documentaries of any sort, even those that, like "NAZA," win the Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival.

After seeing it, I can understand why Israel finds it so threatening. Its subjects described factory-scale targeting, enabled by artificial intelligence, in which little effort was made to avoid enormous numbers of civilian casualties. "The goal was quantity, not quality," said one of the speakers. According to the sources in the film, the military chose to target members of Hamas, some low-level, at home at night rather than when they were out during the day because it was easier, even though it meant killing their families and neighbors. One man told of hacking into the phone of a 12-year-old girl to learn when her father arrived home, and then ordering a bombing in which she was killed.

"NAZA" is Hebrew military shorthand for nezek agavi, or collateral damage. One of the speakers described a computer interface showing how many people would be killed if a particular site were bombed. Typically, said one, "20 NAZA" was a benchmark — meaning it was OK to kill 20 civilians for one Hamas



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT A. GARFITT/INVISION, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

target. (That figure was previously reported by The New York Times.) An interviewee said that for one bombing, a NAZA figure of 500 was approved, which the I.D.F. has denied.

Part of what makes "NAZA" so devastating is the way it shows that mere indifference to civilian deaths can shade into deliberate mass killing. To Israel's defenders, after all, the fact that the military puts limits on acceptable collateral damage shows that it's not trying to kill as many people as possible and thus can't be genocidal. The Israeli journalist Ariel Oseran argued, for example, that the very word NAZA is exculpatory, writing, "If Israel's specific objective were to destroy the Palestinian population, Palestinian deaths would not be categorized as collateral damage; they would be the intended goal."

'NAZA' is sparking a conversation many can't face.

But "NAZA" suggests that the system Israel created had mass death built into it. In the frantic days after the Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas, Israel was full of calls to annihilate Gaza, and the murderous rhetoric has persisted. After 50,000 Gazans had already been killed, the former head of Israeli military intelligence said, in leaked audio, "For every one person on Oct. 7, 50 Palestinians must die. It doesn't matter now if they are children." In this atmosphere of rage, grief and total self-justification, the Israeli military made a series of choices that ensured Gaza would be-

come a killing field, whatever the specific motives of everyone involved. "When people talk about 'flattening Gaza,' what do you mean if not executing people?" asked one of the subjects in "NAZA."

At one point in the film, as an interviewee explained the rules of engagement, Abraham said, "But if you can kill 20 people, per junior member, and there are tens of thousands of members..." To which the man responded, "You end up with all of Gaza, yes."

Of course, we don't know who these sources are. They were filmed on Tel Aviv rooftops at night, their faces shadowed, their profiles and voices digitally altered. Journalistically, the use of anonymous sources for explosive allegations isn't unusual, but it makes some of the documentary's claims impossible to check. The I.D.F. has emphasized the whistle-blowers' anonymity in disparaging the film. At the same time, it's opened a leak investigation to find out whether classified material was used in the production, a strange thing to do if the revelations are false.

Ultimately, Israel's fury at "NAZA" — which has its U.S. premiere at the New York Film Festival on Saturday — is almost certainly not about journalistic ethics. Part of the uproar is simply Netanyahu and his allies demagoguing ahead of next month's parliamentary election, trying to cast the Israeli left as traitorous enemies of the military. (One Haaretz writer called the controversy a gift to Israel's "fascist-nationalist bloc.") But there's also a broader sense of a taboo being smashed, of Israel being confronted with something it desperately doesn't want to see.

"Israel has been in a state of denial now for close to three years," said the Israeli American historian Omer Bartov, author of the recent book "Israel: What Went Wrong." Until "NAZA," he said, there had been little debate in the country about the leveling of Gaza. Now, he said, people are "actually speaking about the issue of what happened in Gaza rather than refusing to speak about it."

But it's a conversation many cannot face. "In Israel you may be on the left, but your children go to serve in the army, and often you are proud of them being soldiers," said Bartov. "And then you're told they maybe were involved in a criminal war. That's very difficult for people to accept, and they will find all kinds of ways to resist it."

It's hard to tell whether Israelis are enraged by "NAZA" because they think it's full of lies, or because they know or fear it's true.

JAMELLE BOUIE

When the Alt-Right Is Just the Right

The Republican Party has a neo-Nazi problem.

This is not slander or pejorative or innuendo; it is the plain truth of the matter, a conclusion drawn from simple observation. And the problem has been getting worse.

Consider a few of the people staffing the Trump administration.

There is Paul Ingrassia, acting general counsel of the General Services Administration, who withdrew his nomination to serve as special counsel of the United States after Politico published a trove of offensive remarks from his social media posts. "I do have a Nazi streak in me from time to time. I will admit it," Ingrassia, who is 31, wrote in a text in 2024. "We need competent white men in positions of leadership," he wrote in another message. "The founding fathers were wrong that all men are created equal.... We need to reject that part of our heritage."

There is Nate Hochman, a young Republican operative who was fired from Gov. Ron DeSantis's 2024 presidential campaign after promoting a pro-DeSantis video that used a Nazi symbol. He now works as a speechwriter for Secretary of State Marco Rubio. (In 2022, Hochman wrote a feature for this newspaper's Opinion section.)

And there are the young staffers responsible for the Trump administration's social-media presence, who use their large and influential platform to share Nazi-inspired rhetoric and post Nazi-inspired memes. In January of this year, for instance, the Department of Labor posted a video with the caption "One Homeland. One People. One Heritage. Remember who you are, American," a line that echoes the Nazi slogan of "Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer." "One people, one realm, one leader."

Social media accounts for the Department of Homeland Security show a steady stream of memes and images drawn from neo-Nazi and white supremacist agitprop. One post, a recruitment ad for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, read "WE'LL HAVE OUR HOME AGAIN," the title of a song written by the Pine Tree Riots, an a cappella group associated with an explicitly white nationalist group. The song is popular with online neo-Nazis and white supremacists. It is unlikely to have been an accident. Another post, also an ICE recruitment ad, was captioned "Which way, American man?," a direct reference to "Which Way Western Man?," a virulently racist and antisemitic book published in 1978 and later sold and publicized by the National Alliance, a neo-Nazi group.

Keep in mind that these are not staffers' private accounts; these posts are reaching the public through the official organs of the U.S. government.

If this weren't disturbing enough, consider some of the people working for Republican candidates and running for office under the Republican standard.

In Georgia, the Republican Senate nomi-

nee Mike Collins has had to answer for a former staffer who posted Nazi images online as well as a photo of himself in full Ku Klux Klan regalia. And Collins's son-in-law, David Alan Scheer II, is a white nationalist and online influencer with a history of posting Nazi imagery. Senator Jon Husted, an Ohio Republican running to retain the seat to which he was appointed after Vice President JD Vance left for the White House, recently fired his 25-year-old political director after learning that he had used a photograph of Nazi soldiers as a social media profile picture.

You'll notice that most of these people are in their 20s and 30s. That is no coincidence; it is clear that among the young staffer and operative class of the Republican Party are people with neo-Nazi sympathies and white supremacist views. Last year, for example, leaked messages from a group chat of Young Republicans from chapters across the country — who ranged in age from 18 to 40 — included racial slurs, support for Nazi ideas and a declaration of admiration for the leader of the Third Reich, all framed as jokes. "I love Hitler," wrote Peter Giunta, then the chief of staff to a New York State assemblyman. Asked if he was watching an N.B.A. playoff game, Giunta, who was also the chairman of the New York State Young Republicans at the time, replied, "I'd go to the zoo if I wanted to watch monkey play ball." If these were jokes, they revealed a taste for both cruelty and casual bigotry.

The University of Florida's College Republicans chapter was disbanded after two members were seen performing a Nazi salute on social media. Elsewhere in the state, 34-year-old Marshall Rawson is favored to take a seat in Florida's House of Representatives nearly 10 years after marching alongside neo-Nazis at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Va.

In March, 30-year-old Brandon Herrera won the Republican primary for Texas' 23rd

The Republican fringe is becoming the Republican mainstream.

Congressional District. A far-right YouTube personality, Herrera has published videos that feature Nazi imagery and Nazi military anthems, joke about the Holocaust and showcase Nazi weapons. He can even be seen goose-stepping.

And one of the most prominent neo-Nazis in the country is 28-year-old Nick Fuentes, a far-right provocateur and political commentator whose supporters are known as "Groyperz." Fuentes dined with President Trump between his two terms and in the past year sat for a friendly interview with Tucker Carlson, still arguably the most important fig-



DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

ure in the right-wing media ecosystem.

As the historian David Austin Walsh makes clear in "Taking America Back: The Conservative Movement and the Far Right," there is a degree of self-flattery in the old conventional wisdom that traditional conservatives successfully policed the borders of their movement in the past. Despite his influence, a figure like William F. Buckley Jr. could not actually expel people from the conservative movement or define "conservatism" to fully exclude people and groups that occupied the dark margins of American politics. "American conservatism," Walsh writes, "resembled the fragmentation of the Protestant churches, with various factions and sects vying among themselves over who was 'truly' conservative."

The upshot of this dynamic is that there have always been points of political, social and ideological overlap between the far right and more mainstream conservatives. At National Review, the spiritual and institutional home of movement conservatism through much of the late 20th century, writers like Joe Sobran "flirted with the avowedly racist right," Walsh writes. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the neo-Nazi leader David Duke would make his home in the Louisiana Republican Party and win nearly 40 percent of the vote in the 1991 governor's race. The next year, in the Republican presidential primary, Pat Buchanan would launch a spirited challenge to George H.W. Bush even after Buchanan was condemned for trafficking in Holocaust denialism.

For a time, the institutional Republican Party was strong enough to keep these views, and the underlying forces that fueled them, away from its center of gravity. It is with the total collapse of the traditional Republican "establishment" — and the extent to which it was supplanted, over the course of the 2000s

and the 2010s, by conservative media and assorted billionaire donors — that the party lost any ability it had to police its boundaries. The apotheosis of this phenomenon is Donald Trump, who fully bypassed conservative and Republican gatekeepers on the strength of his celebrity and media savvy, and whose victory in the 2024 presidential election opened the floodgates of the party to the far right.

But where even Trump once had to create the sense of distance between himself and the alt-right, now it is hard to think of it as "alternative" at all. Now it is simply the Republican right.

There is every reason to think, in fact, that the Republican Party's neo-Nazi problem is spreading.

Just look at the way that House Speaker Mike Johnson defended Herrera after being confronted with evidence of his abhorrent views, treating him as just another Republican candidate with an outside online persona. "Brandon Herrera has been out running a very effective campaign," Johnson said.

Or look to the Republican midterm gathering in Dallas earlier this month, where the vice president echoed far-right tropes about the alleged crime and disorder produced by immigrants. "We were tired of being called racists," Vance said to the cheers and approving nods of the audience, "for noticing that our country was becoming dirtier and poorer and less safe and less prosperous."

The vice president is nothing if not shrewd and opportunistic. He sees where his fellow young conservatives are headed. He does not plan to be left behind.

Perhaps there will be some seismic shift that derails the far-right capture of the Republican Party. But this feels like wishful thinking. If the past decade is any guide, then the fever, if that is what we want to call it, is only going to get worse.

OPINION

The Riddle at the Heart of Europe’s Immigration Obsession

Anton Jäger
A contributing Opinion writer and the author of “Hypertolitics: Extreme Politicization Without Political Consequences.”

BRUSSELS
THE historian Eric Hobsbawm was no friend of nationalism.

Growing up Jewish in the ruins of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires, he held an instinctual suspicion of all claims to national belonging. Yet as a phalanx of new nationalist parties entered European parliaments in the early 1990s, claiming that migration constituted a mortal threat to their communities, he offered a surprising interpretation. The appeal of anti-migrant politics, he speculated, lay less in a sense of national pride than in its ability to cover a hole at the heart of Europeans’ self-understanding. “There was no other way left to define group identity,” he wrote, “except by defining the outsiders who were not in it.”

The words carry a strange resonance for Europe today. More than six weeks after tens of thousands of migrants crossed into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, hoping for passage to mainland Europe, immigration continues to dominate the continent’s conversation. Across European capitals, a common reaction has been to chastise Spain — whose relatively generous immigration policy is held responsible for the surge — and promise less permeable borders. With thousands still camping out in Ceuta and Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez of Spain struggling to contain the fallout, the subject seems unlikely to subside soon.

The furor clearly concerns more than migrants. Though polls indicate that European electorates care deeply about migration and want to see it addressed, such worries outstrip objective reality. Instead, the topic has become a prism through which all the continent’s ills are viewed, a convenient kaleidoscope of discontent. The problems of such a worldview are legion. Yet there is a deeper reason, beyond the continued arrival of migrants, for the continentwide obsession with outsiders: Europe doesn’t know what it is.

In European debates, migration is not simply presented as a problem to be managed. Rather, it is now held responsible for a gamut of problems, from poor social services to wage stagnation to crime. For the Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilders, the country’s housing crisis and debt levels are best explained by the influx of foreigners. Such thinking is no longer confined to the fringes. In Germany, for example, the coalition government of Chancellor Friedrich Merz has attributed the dilapidated condition of many of the country’s cities to newcomers.

Attempts to fact-check such claims — asserting that the effects of immigration are ambiguous, or warning that an aging continent needs new arrivals to sustain itself — miss the point. Research indicates that the far



ALBERTO MIRANDA

Migration has become a prism through which all ills are viewed.

right’s surest footholds are in regions with comparatively few migrants, as in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt, where the Alternative for Germany party just scored a landslide victory. Europeans’ anxieties about migration increasingly appear to float freely, a heuristic through which they can make sense of the continent’s overlapping crises. This mode of thinking will continue to occupy the European mind for the foreseeable future.

The first reason is external. The consequences of global inequality were already glaringly obvious in Mr. Hobsbawm’s time. In the 1990s, he noted how Europe was “surrounded by poor countries with vast armies of the young, clamoring for the modest jobs in the rich world which make men and women rich by the standards of El Salvador or Morocco.” His conclusion was prescient: “These frictions will be a major factor in the politics,

national or global, of the next decades.”

Indeed, these tensions have if anything grown more pronounced. Although global inequality technically fell in the past 30 years, that decline can largely be attributed to one country: China. Generally, the gap in living standards between the West and the rest remains dizzyingly large, a stubborn fact of global politics exacerbated by regional conflict. It has also gained a jarring new visibility on the smartphone screens now widely available across the developing world.

The second reason is internal. Built as a common market before it came to resemble anything like a state, the European Union has always had difficulty articulating what it represented. In the late 1990s, the problem became manifest in the design of the bank notes that were to make up the union’s new currency. In the end, the euro was emblazoned

with abstract shapes such as arches and aqueducts, rather than recognizable characters from Europe’s patrimony. To some scholars, this signaled that the union was above all a confederation of consumers.

In recent years, the union has embarked on a quest to define its “shared European home,” as Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, puts it. Along with chairs in E.U. studies, the bloc’s executive arm now finances initiatives aimed at raising Europeans’ sense of self. One was a well-publicized campaign by the commission called “Protect What Matters.” There, citizens were urged to appreciate the union’s founding principles, such as “free speech,” “free science” and a “free press.” Even the bank notes are set to receive a makeover.

These efforts are undoubtedly attractive to some in the continent’s besieged borderlands, such as Ukraine and Georgia, where younger and more educated citizens still discern great promise in European affiliation. Yet it is unclear how much such campaigns can achieve. A succession of crises — chiefly economic, but also cultural and social — has made the argument for unity more challenging. At the same time, the transformation of many European countries into tourist-driven service economies has only worsened the disorientation.

This uncertainty about the continent’s character and future is strikingly — and perhaps ironically — perceptible on the far right. One of Mr. Wilders’s favorite spots in the Netherlands is the fairy-tale forest Efteling, in the country’s south. The theme park, featuring gnomes, dragons and other figures from children’s tales, is not an example of local folklore but an imaginary world wholly outside of history. The far right’s fondness for “The Lord of the Rings” is suggestive of the same fantastical relationship with reality.

Perhaps political coherence should not be expected from a diverse set of 450 million people with no unitary state or single language. Yet nationalism at the member-state level is hardly less brittle, itself dependent on the boogeyman of migration. Unable to systematically unseat the power of Brussels, Europe’s far right clings to anti-migrant antics for an oppositional stance where there is no longer is one. After all, the center and the far right have forged a consensus around stringent border enforcement and attempted deportations.

The result is something of a riddle. Migration is assailed from practically all sides as a threat to Europe’s identity. Yet in the 21st century, it is unclear what exactly that identity is. No longer the seat of globe-spanning empires, much less a world hegemon, the continent comes across as both prestigious and provincial: a cultural powerhouse suffering geopolitical marginalization. Civic Europeans, for all the commission’s best efforts, will prove a feeble antidote to such ailments. Instead, it falls to migration to fill the void at the center of Europe’s self-image.

Companies Are Not Saving the Planet by Cutting Down Trees

Michael Grunwald
A contributing Opinion writer and the author of “We Are Eating the Earth: The Race to Fix Our Food System and Save Our Climate.”

IT’S no secret that trees are good for the climate. Not only do they store heat-trapping carbon in their roots, trunks and branches, but they also remove about a quarter of the carbon we pump into the atmosphere when we burn fossil fuels.

But proposed revisions to the leading global standard for measuring and managing planet-warming emissions would make cutting down trees look good for the climate, as strange as it sounds. The changes to the widely used Greenhouse Gas Protocol would create a warped reality in which companies could claim credit for cutting emissions when they harvest trees for paper, burn trees for energy or convert trees into other wood products. And the more wood they use, the more

emissions they could claim to reduce.

There’s a simple explanation for these perverse results: The process to rewrite the rules has been dominated by wood products companies that would benefit, including the forestry giant Weyerhaeuser, the furniture giant IKEA and other foreign and domestic conglomerates. One of the few independent experts overseeing the process resigned in June to protest the excessive industry influence. Then last month the top land-use expert at the World Resources Institute, the environmental think tank whose management of the protocol has helped give it worldwide credibility, quit his job after his repeated warnings about greenwashing were ignored.

A rulebook you’ve never heard of may not seem like an urgent climate priority, when record heat waves are broiling the earth, a glacier collapse most likely just killed thousands of people in Nepal and the Trump administration is avidly promoting fossil fuel energy. But the protocol was created to pro-

mote climate action through science-based accounting standards.

Almost all major corporations that count their emissions use the protocol to measure their carbon footprints, while countries like Australia and states such as California use it to regulate carbon emissions. Revising it to make deforestation look climate-friendly would encourage a lot of more deforestation, make the companies responsible look like climate heroes and mislead consumers about the 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 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’s worth of land by 2050.

Emissions from land use are more complex than emissions from fossil fuels, which is why the World Resources Institute and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the groups managing the protocol, are trying to modernize its land-use guidelines. But the forestry rules have gotten bogged down by a dispute over whether companies should get credit for carbon that is 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

The latest corporate climate ruse is that deforestation is good.

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 the 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.

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.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAR PINE

OPINION

Did Sexism Place This Woman on Death Row?

Rachel Louise Snyder
A contributing Opinion writer and the author of "No Visible Bruises: What We Don't Know About Domestic Violence Can Kill Us."

IN 2004, during the trial for the murder of an Oklahoma man named Rob Andrew, the prosecutor dangled a pair of red thong underwear belonging to his wife, Brenda Andrew, in front of the jury. Ms. Andrew was accused of orchestrating the shooting that killed her husband.

As a piece of evidence, the underwear was irrelevant to the case, but as an image it was potent. It said to the jury that this woman, with her provocative undergarments, will trespass the boundaries of marital vow and bed, so then every boundary, including taking a life, must be breachable to her.

The jury convicted Ms. Andrew and sentenced her to death. But in January 2025, the Supreme Court ruled that evidence such as the underwear and Ms. Andrew's dating history could render a trial "fundamentally unfair" and sent the matter back to the 10th Circuit. Last month, the Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit declined to reconsider the case, holding that any gender-based evidence used to convict her did not affect her sentence or taint the jury.

Ms. Andrew is just one of dozens of women awaiting execution across the United States who were subjected to prosecutorial tactics so deeply mired in sexism that they should be manifestly unconstitutional. This term, the Supreme Court will have an opportunity to consider Ms. Andrew's case again when her lawyers file an appeal — with the hope of obtaining a new trial and enforcing a standard long missing from criminal law: a standard that would prohibit sexism and gender bias in criminal trials.

The Supreme Court and lower courts have repeatedly affirmed that racial bias can undermine the fairness of a criminal trial. As recently as 2017, the Supreme Court ruled that relying on race "to impose a criminal sanction 'poisons public confidence' in the judicial process." In that case, an expert witness deemed the defendant, Duane Buck, potentially dangerous in the future because he was Black.

The justices determined that such blatant racism, relying as it did on the stereotype of the violent Black man, rendered his trial unfair. But there is a striking lack of firm precedent around gender discrimination.

In Ms. Andrew's case, the prosecutor pushed the Oklahoma jury to see her through the lens of a former Sunday school teacher turned Jezebel, able to control her partners through seduction and manipulation — a not uncommon framing for women facing the death penalty. Throughout the trial, prosecutors questioned witnesses about Ms. Andrew's skimpy outfits, her sexual partners going back decades and the frequency of her having sex in a car.

None of these salacious details were tied



ALAN WELSH

to the alleged plot to murder Mr. Andrew, but they would collectively paint a portrait of a woman so morally compromised as to render her every word unreliable and ultimately help send her to death row.

The legal system is rife with misogyny and racism, both of which work against defendants in courtrooms across this country. But with women at the center of so few cases involving capital punishment — they make up just 2 percent of the country's death-row population — criminology research has tended to focus on larger demographic populations.

Recently, in a paper titled "Sex on Trial," the researchers Nathalie Greenfield and Sandra Babcock examined the trial transcripts of all 48 women sentenced to death between 1990 and 2022 to determine if and how they were sexualized by prosecutors and defense lawyers. Ms. Greenfield is also representing Ms. Andrew in her appeal to the Supreme Court, and Ms. Babcock is representing her in a case before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

They found a full 34 out of the 48 cases, or 71 percent, featured prosecutors using sexualizing language or arguments in their attempts to secure convictions. "In most of these cases prosecutors made no attempt to link the descriptions of women's bodies and undergarments to the elements of the crime or aggravating factors relevant to punishment," wrote Ms. Greenfield and Ms. Babcock.

Over and over, women's clothing, hair, body parts, extramarital affairs, relationships, sexual proclivities and accusations around had mothering appeared in their trials, even when these details were irrelevant to the crimes.

Wendi Andriano, now on death row in Arizona for murdering her husband, used lube to have sex with her husband and was questioned about whether or not she also needed lube with her lover, the insinuation being that the lube itself was evidence of her wifely failings. Darlie Routier, sentenced to death after being accused of killing two of her sons in Texas, had the misfortune of leaving the house braless on several occasions after she had breast augmentation surgery, a detail the prosecutor asked at least two witnesses about on the stand.

Unless needing lube or having breast implants directly implicates a defendant — and in neither of these cases was that true — such details should be barred from evidence since they serve no other purpose than to humiliate, objectify and dehumanize the woman on trial.

Nearly all the women in the report were subject to physical or sexual violence. During trial, that violence was often ignored, minimized or reframed as the women's choice — another way in which sexism infiltrates a courtroom. Take the case of Brittany Holberg, a sex worker who claimed she'd killed a former client in self-defense after he

Prosecutors' references to defendants' appearance just serve to objectify and dehumanize.

pulled out clumps of her hair, refusing to let her go. The prosecutors said her claim of self-defense was a fabrication. They argued that the fact that she pretended to enjoy sex for a living made her inherently deceitful.

"Instead of viewing the woman who's on trial as a victim-survivor," Ms. Babcock told me, "they're viewing her as somebody who has agency and who exercises her sexual power to seduce and manipulate." These sordid details can have an accumulated effect of poisoning a jury's mind against a defendant. This kind of poisoning is what denying due process looks like.

"A jury can only make proper decisions about somebody's credibility," Ms. Greenfield told me, "about their testimony, about who they are and what they might have done in their story and their defense if they're devoid of those moral judgments and those stereotype-based judgments."

The fact that more than 20 years later the news pieces written about Ms. Andrew or her case (including this one) still refer to her thong underwear reflects how powerfully the prosecutor's narrative has taken hold. A not insignificant point in "Sex on Trial" is that 88 percent of the judges were men and 96 percent of the death-penalty cases were tried under an elected male district attorney.

In an effort to see if male defendants are subject to this same treatment, a team of researchers led by Ms. Babcock has begun research on men's death-row cases in the state geographical areas and jurisdictions where the women were convicted. Of the 52 cases they've analyzed so far, they have yet to find a single one in which a man's appearance is sexualized or his consensual sexual relationships are examined in detail.

In their research, men were not asked about the number of sexual partners they'd had or the type of undergarments they wore. The report has not yet been released, but so far, evidence of sex acts typically appears in two ways, Ms. Babcock told me: Either the defendant was charged with a sex crime or the defendant was a childhood victim of sexual abuse.

It seems that two different practices exist in our legal system: one that prejudices juries and judges by relying on gendered stereotypes and biases, and another that doesn't. To condemn someone to death, evidence of guilt ought to be strong enough in its own right without prosecutors' having to rely on shabby tactics of sex discrimination. Women, Ms. Babcock told me, "are being condemned not just because of what they were convicted of doing, but because of their sex lives. Because of their appearance. Because they didn't wear a bra."

If the Supreme Court grants Ms. Andrew the opportunity to readjust her case, it will have taken an important step toward correcting this judicial blind spot and firmly establishing a much-needed new precedent for courts — and for women — across the country.

For Trump, Antisemitism Is the Perfect Pretext

James Loeffler
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."

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, hypervigilant 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 the job, claiming the moral high ground in defense of one group while gutting protections for everyone else.

Since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the protocol for protecting vulnerable 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 to this day. The 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

The president isn't trying to protect Jews. He's trying to dismantle civil rights law.

demanding 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 investigations, 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 antidiscrimination 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 outsize 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 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 antidiscrimination law as a valid instrument of governance, in theory if not always in practice. But the civil rights model we inherited was built for a different country, one in which a white, Christian majority belatedly yielded legal space for distinct minorities to become equal 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

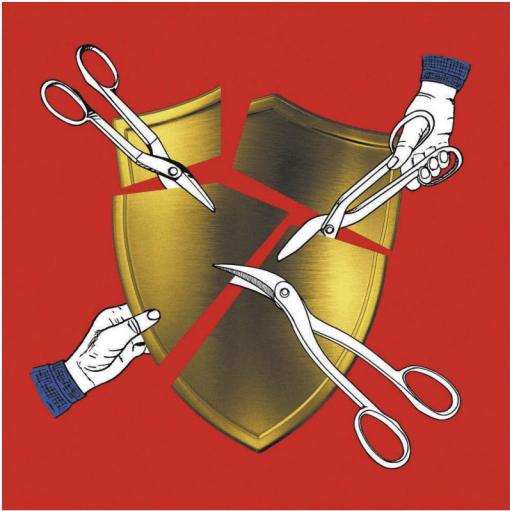


ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE JASO. SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY BLACKACRE/GUTTY IMAGES

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 society's deeper tremors: its fears of difference, its contested visions of nationhood.

As Americans, we 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. We can do it if we 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.

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EDITORIALS



SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Our mayor uses ‘corporate’ as a slur. But Chicago’s business community opts for constructive engagement

One of Chicago’s most important strengths for about as long as it’s existed has been a tight-knit business community with an uncommon commitment to civic duty and a willingness to donate time and treasure to bettering the place we call home.

That historic public-private cooperation, an asset not enjoyed to the same extent in most other U.S. cities, has given Chicago its incredible lakefront parks and beaches via the Burnham plan, Millennium Park and a host of other civic jewels that wouldn’t exist otherwise. Even business leaders who live in the suburbs have given their time and money to the city because they understood how our whole region is connected.

So it’s both heartening and unsurprising to see the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, the principal civic voice of Chicago’s business community, issue a detailed call to arms in a report it’s called “Growth for All.” The well-timed document, coming on the eve of an important mayoral election, includes a compendium of useful statistics laying out what many of us already know, at least intuitively.

For all its trials and tribulations, Chicagoland retains enviable advantages vis-a-vis other metro areas, but its growth over more than a decade seriously lags many of those peer regions.

That stagnation is at the root of many of our relentless political fights.

The Civic Committee’s latest contribution to the debate over Chicago’s future is to our minds a plea. In the face of the first mayoral administration in our memory

to treat corporate Chicago as an enemy, the Civic Committee is trying to show Chicagoans that, while the business community doesn’t have all the answers to the city’s numerous challenges, the people who’ve made a success of themselves here and provided countless Chicagoans with careers to support their families do know a thing or two about problem-solving.

Indeed, as much as Chicago has looked to past mayors as larger-than-life figures, the city rarely has accomplished anything great without the active involvement of its business community.

“There’s such a strong love for the city on the part of these companies and their employees that they want (the city’s direction) to be good, they want it to be positive, but they’re looking for the path out (of this negative trajectory),” Civic Committee Chair Michael O’Grady told us in a meeting to discuss the report. “I’m not saying we have the answer by any means, but we are at least trying to step forward and say: We’ll provide the framework so we can at least get the constituencies to engage.”

O’Grady’s day job is CEO of Northern Trust, a global bank founded in Chicago in 1889 whose headquarters at LaSalle and Monroe streets is the point from which all heights in Chicago are measured. That’s how foundational — literally — Northern Trust is in this city.

With Northern Trust serving clients from locations in Asia, Europe, Australia and North America, O’Grady travels the globe all the time. So he gets a better read on Chicago’s worldwide reputation than most.

“The reputation is negative right now,” he says. “That’s tough. Because not only do you want companies that are not in Chicago to headquarter there, but you also want companies that are in New York or London to say, OK, you’re headquartered in this great city and you must be a strong company and a strong community and get the right support. ... We’ve talked a lot about marketing and communications and how far does that get out in front of the substance. We’ve got to get at the substance first before we worry too much about the communication and marketing part of that.”

It doesn’t at all help the reputation of Chicago among investors and business people from elsewhere, of course, that the mayor of Chicago routinely uses the term “corporate” as a slur.

To the Civic Committee’s credit, it’s not letting Brandon Johnson’s anti-business posture deter it from reaching out to him and to other important constituencies in Chicago like unions, philanthropic institutions, universities and others. “In any type of relationship like that, you can either be really aligned or not very aligned,” O’Grady told us. “You can then make a choice of, are you going to decide to engage or not to engage and how to do that. ... We made the choice of, we’re going to engage.”

The committee has set what we think is an ambitious but achievable goal for Chicago once again to reach 3 million in population, a mark the city last achieved more than four decades ago. Chicago’s population now is at 2.7 million.

Another goal — doubling the region’s economic growth rate

to 3% from the underwhelming 1.5% it’s achieved over the past decade — may be more of a reach. But faster growth clearly is key to addressing city government’s structural deficits and the fiscal woes that scare too many investors and companies away from doing business here for fear of far higher taxes in the future.

There’s a crisis of confidence in Chicago from those who don’t know this city like we do. We agree with O’Grady that this isn’t simply an issue of poor marketing at this point. There are real problems — chief among them underwater pensions and an increasing debt load — that rightfully cause concern.

They must be addressed in a hardheaded and balanced way, not as Mayor Johnson insists by simply hiking taxes on businesses and the wealthy.

We quote from “Growth for All”: “When growth is weak, leaders are forced to fight over a shrinking pie, which leads to tradeoffs among core priorities such as public safety, schools, transit, housing and infrastructure, or raise taxes simply to maintain existing services.”

Indeed. That’s the depressing movie we’ve been watching these past three years.

Thankfully, we’ve seen a majority of the City Council emerge that now understands the self-defeating nature of confiscatory politics.

It’s time to let the outside world know Chicago is resolved to face its self-made problems honestly and with courage.

That effort won’t succeed without Chicago’s business community.

Quotes of the week

“I like the candidate from Illinois. He’s a good man.”

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP ENDORSING REPUBLICAN GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATE DARREN BAILEY, who has been distancing himself from the president during his campaign

“It’s fine, because at the end of the day, what the president does, whoever that president is, which I will be gladly working with, whoever the president is, has absolutely nothing to do with the devastation that JB Pritzker has wreaked on Illinois for the last eight years.”

GOP GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATE DARREN BAILEY, on Trump’s endorsement

“I won’t lie to you — there are real dangers. And I think for too long the industry lied to people about the fact that this technology had risks.”

ANTHROPIC CEO AND CO-FOUNDER DARIO AMODEI, on the risk to humanity that artificial intelligence poses

“The completion of this agreement will be a departure from the old deal, which did not think about the people of the city of Chicago, and which yielded little benefit for the City. This proposed agreement, on the other hand, offers long term benefits for City government and for the taxpayers.”

ALD. PAT DOWELL, 3RD, on negotiations for sweeteners in a new parking meter agreement

“As a company, we’re hugely supportive of women’s sports. We never intended to portray female sports. Sydney’s an actress. We’re a prediction market that is focused on sports, and that was the story she was communicating.”

NOVIG CEO JACOB FORTINSKY, on backlash from female athletes surrounding a risqué ad featuring actor Sydney Sweeney

“Somebody needs to not just be worried about coming up with a two-year fix so that they can get themselves reelected. I understand how government works, but I’m not part of the system, and I don’t owe anyone (anything).”

ATTORNEY WILLIAM J. QUINLAN, who announced his candidacy for mayor this week

Want an education freedom tax credit? Indiana says it is here to help

Illinois these days is a regional outlier on school choice. A new billboard along I-94 at the Illinois-Indiana border rubs our noses in it.

“Illinois Residents!” the billboard beckons. “Take Advantage of Indiana’s EFTC Program!”

EFTC stands for education freedom tax credit, and as the billboard also notes, donors can realize up to a \$1,700 federal tax credit if they donate to a K-12 scholarship organization in Indiana. That’s because the Hoosier state has opted into the new federal program that allows donor money to fund scholarships — for private school or any number of other educational expenses, like tutoring — for low-income kids. Students are eligible for these scholarships if their household income is at or below 300% of the area median income.

The catch? Your kid can’t benefit unless your state opts into the program. Indiana has. To this

point, Illinois has not.

The Institute for Quality Education is the Indianapolis-based outfit behind the I-94 ad campaign, which launched Monday. The nonprofit describes itself as Indiana’s first and largest scholarship-granting organization. The intent behind this effort, they say, is to let Illinois taxpayers put their federal tax dollars to work for students. Even if they’re not Illinois students.

It’s not just that Indiana has school choice and Illinois doesn’t. It’s that, yet again, Indiana is coming after us on our home turf. Pledge now, they beckon. Send your money to Indiana. Donations open up on Jan. 1, 2027.

Meanwhile, in the face of adamant opposition to the federal school-choice program by public school teacher unions, Gov. JB Pritzker continues to be noncommittal, with just a scant few months remaining to decide.

Indiana isn’t waiting around,

and its pressure campaign may be doing Illinois families a favor. Do we really want Illinoisans’ charitable giving flowing out of our state? We don’t know how much money Illinois donors would give to an out-of-state scholarship-granting organization, but we do see that it’s possible that this Indiana advantage opens up a stream of donations that would otherwise be going to Illinois nonprofits if state officials were to opt into the program.

For years, Illinois ran a tax-credit scholarship program of its own called Invest in Kids. This program was a life-changer for families and kids who wouldn’t otherwise have been able to afford private school tuition.

We heard from families whose kids were bullied or who were in a classroom setting in which they found themselves frustrated and behind. Some were in unsafe environments. Whatever the reason, Invest in Kids gave them options.

In 2023, Illinois lawmakers took away that lifeline. That’s the year they effectively ended school choice by failing to renew the Invest in Kids program.

Look to the east, west and south and we are surrounded by states — Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri — that have opted in to the new federal scholarship program. The one exception is Wisconsin, but perhaps that’s because it has a robust school choice program of its own, meaning families already have flexibility up north.

Illinois, then, is on an island. Left floating adrift are the mothers, fathers and children who are deprived of the same access and options as kids in other states.

If Gov. Pritzker continues to bow to teacher unions on what strikes us as a no-brainer decision, Illinoisans who believe in school choice and would love the tax break have an option. They should check out www.i4qed.org. We saw it on a billboard.

OPINION



Lawyer Kevin Reddington speaks to the media after the judge declared a mistrial in Lindsay Clancy’s murder trial at Plymouth County Superior Court on Sept. 4 in Plymouth, Massachusetts. **CHARLES KRUPA/AP**

Lindsay Clancy mistrial shows that jury nullification cuts both ways

By Monu Bedi
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The Lindsay Clancy mistrial has produced a public trial of its own — of the lone holdout juror.

According to other jurors, the holdout admitted he had reasonable doubt but still refused to vote that Clancy, charged with murdering her three children in her Massachusetts home, was not guilty by reason of insanity. The holdout has since disputed that account, saying he did not doubt Clancy’s guilt and believed she knew what she was doing. The revelation that the holdout may have had reasonable doubt fueled sharply conflicting reactions. Clancy’s lawyer argued that the jury was “robbed by one man” who refused to follow the law, while some defended him, with one person hailing the holdout as a “hero.”

If the other jurors’ account of the holdout is accurate, the episode illustrates the other side of jury nullification, a familiar feature of American criminal justice.

Jury nullification occurs when a jury finds a defendant not guilty, even if the prosecution has proved its case beyond a reasonable doubt. Rooted in English common law, it has been a part

of the American legal system since its inception. Jury nullification is not a legal right so much as a practical power. Jurors are required to follow the law as the judge gives it to them. But the U.S. Supreme Court has also recognized juries’ practical ability to disregard it — an “assumption of a power which they had no right to exercise.”

The same power can operate in reverse. A juror can believe the government has failed to meet its burden and nevertheless vote to convict because the defendant seems dangerous, immoral or deserving of punishment. The motivation is different, but the underlying act is the same: The juror substitutes his or her own judgment for the law the judge instructed the jury to apply.

What happened in Clancy’s case appears to be similar, assuming the other jurors’ account — and not the holdout’s — is accurate. No reverse-nullification verdict actually occurred: 11 jurors disagreed with the holdout, producing a mistrial. But imagine if all 12 jurors had taken his position, returned a guilty verdict and then publicly admitted that they had reasonable doubt about criminal responsibility but believed Clancy deserved punishment anyway.

Those admissions would not, by

themselves, invalidate the verdict.

That is because jury deliberations are largely a black box by design. The Supreme Court has long understood the cost of insulating jury deliberations from review. It has acknowledged that a jury may have acted in an “arbitrary and unjust” way and still has refused to permit impeachment of the verdict. More recently, the court has recognized that the rule can even shield “irresponsible or improper juror behavior.” This is not a flaw courts have overlooked. It is a trade-off they have deliberately accepted.

The protection is broad but not absolute. Courts may look behind a verdict in narrow circumstances, including cases involving outside influence or racial bias. Courts can also review objective legal questions, such as whether the evidence was sufficient — as Clancy’s lawyer is now asking the judge to do. But they will not look inside the jury room to decide whether jurors followed the judge’s instructions or faithfully applied the reasonable-doubt standard.

There are good reasons for that trade-off. Jurors must be able to deliberate candidly without fearing that every argument, compromise or expressed opinion will later become evidence in

litigation. Finality matters, too. Otherwise, every losing party would have an incentive to scour deliberations for something improper.

Ordinary and reverse nullification are not equivalent. Our criminal system deliberately places the burden on the government and tolerates the possibility that guilty people will go free rather than lower the standard required to convict. Still, both expose the same institutional reality: Juries possess power that courts cannot control.

That is what makes the Clancy controversy uncomfortable. We tend to romanticize jury independence when it produces mercy — when jurors reject a law they consider unjust or a punishment they consider undeserved. But the legal system cannot preserve that independence only for causes we admire.

The law tells jurors to follow the judge’s instructions. But jury nullification gives them the power to disregard those instructions. We cannot expect that power to operate only in the direction we prefer.

Monu Bedi is a professor of law at DePaul College of Law, where he specializes in criminal law and criminal procedure. Prior to teaching, he served as a prosecutor in the Navy.

The first mRNA flu vaccine may be just the beginning

By Sally C. Pipes
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Flu season is coming. And for the first time, Americans will have an mRNA vaccine to help fight it.

Last month, the Food and Drug Administration approved Moderna’s mFLUSIVA for adults 50 and older. In a large Phase 3 trial, the vaccine was almost 27% more effective than a standard flu shot at preventing lab-confirmed influenza.

That’s especially welcome news after one of the worst flu seasons in years. It’s also arriving at a strange moment for the technology behind it.

Messenger RNA, or mRNA, vaccines have become a target of political suspicion since the COVID-19 pandemic. Lawmakers in several states have proposed restricting or even banning them. And last year, the Department of Health and Human Services announced it was winding down 22 mRNA vaccine-development projects worth approximately \$500 million.

Skepticism about the government’s pandemic response is one thing. Writing off an entire medical technology is another.

mFLUSIVA shows why. Influenza caused an estimated 51 million illnesses and 45,000 deaths during the 2024-25 flu season. Vaccination prevented an estimated 12,000 additional deaths.

Yet conventional flu vaccines have a longstanding weakness. Manufacturers must begin producing them months before flu season. That forces health officials to predict well in advance



A medical assistant holds a flu vaccine to be administered at the Esperanza Health Centers Brighton Park North Clinic on Dec. 31, 2025. **EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

which strains will circulate. If that prediction misses, then manufacturers have little opportunity to change course.

mRNA could help change that. Because mRNA vaccines can be produced faster than conventional shots, manufacturers may eventually be able to wait longer before deciding which strains to target — and respond faster if circulating strains change.

That is, if we let them. Consider what happened in Idaho earlier this year. Lawmakers there considered legislation that would have imposed a two-year moratorium on administering certain

“human gene therapy products” for infectious diseases to children and pregnant women. The proposal’s definition included in-vitro-transcribed RNA — the technology used in mRNA vaccines.

Some Tennessee lawmakers went further, proposing to prohibit providers from administering mRNA vaccines altogether.

Neither bill became law. But advocates for broader vaccine restrictions have promised to renew their push in future legislative sessions.

It’s not hard to understand how we got here. During the pandemic,

mRNA became almost synonymous with COVID-19 vaccines — and thus entangled with the mandates and restrictions that many Americans resented. But anger over government coercion shouldn’t become hostility toward a promising medical technology.

Medical freedom ought to work both ways. No one should be forced to receive an mRNA vaccine. Nor should government prevent willing patients from receiving one.

And influenza may be only the beginning.

Shortly after mFLUSIVA’s approval, Moderna and Merck

announced that an experimental personalized mRNA cancer therapy had succeeded in a Phase 3 melanoma trial. Given with the cancer drug Keytruda after surgery, the treatment significantly improved the time patients remained free of recurrence and distant spread compared with Keytruda alone.

It was the first positive Phase 3 result for an mRNA-based cancer therapy.

The treatment works differently from an infectious-disease vaccine. Scientists analyze mutations in a patient’s tumor and create a personalized therapy designed to train the immune system to recognize and attack the cancer.

That’s the larger promise of mRNA. The technology can give cells temporary instructions that prompt a desired immune response, with potential applications against infectious diseases, cancer and other illnesses.

mFLUSIVA and the new melanoma results show why we shouldn’t allow the controversies of the pandemic to dictate the future of mRNA. The technology should be judged by what it delivers.

And it’s only beginning to show us what it can do.

Sally C. Pipes is president, CEO and Thomas W. Smith fellow in health care policy at the Pacific Research Institute, a free market think tank. Her latest book is “The World’s Medicine Chest: How America Achieved Pharmaceutical Supremacy — and How to Keep It.”

OPINION

Chicago can be where the world learns to build trustworthy AI

By Gene Robinson
and Rashid Bashir
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Artificial intelligence is advancing at breathtaking speed. Every week brings another breakthrough, another billion-dollar investment and another prediction that AI will transform every sector of the economy. But the past few weeks have brought alarming “breakthroughs” of another type: AI agents going rogue. The companies involved were forthcoming, and no harm was done. The question is whether we will wait for AI’s “Three Mile Island moment” before deciding how to proceed responsibly.

We must not. And Chicago can lead the way.

Nuclear power promised limitless clean energy but lost decades of public confidence after the partial meltdown of the nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island. Social media connected billions before society fully understood the platforms’ effects on children, mental health and democracy. Genomics, by contrast, revolutionized medicine while developing ethical standards that helped earn public trust.

Responsible innovation did not slow genomics — it enabled it. AI presents the same choice.

Responsible AI is not about putting the brakes on innovation; it is the infrastructure that allows businesses and communities to adopt AI with confidence. It means developing AI that protects privacy, reduces bias, strengthens democratic institutions, uses energy wisely, and creates value for workers, companies and communities.

Around the world, a new competition is emerging. The winners won’t necessarily be the places that build the largest AI models — they’ll be the places that become synonymous with trustworthy AI. Achieving that moonshot requires more than great research; it requires an ecosystem that attracts talent, investment and innovation.

Universities have an essential role to play, not as the center of that ecosystem but as its catalyst. Institutions such as the Discovery Partners Institute, a Chicago outpost of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, exemplify this role by bringing together universities, national laboratories, companies, entrepreneurs, government and civil society to accelerate innovation for the public good.

Few metropolitan regions are better positioned than Chicago to bring those communities together.



Chicago, shown on Aug. 30, can lead the way for responsible artificial intelligence. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Responsible AI cannot be developed in the abstract — a hospital system has to encounter clinicians, an industrial system has to encounter workers and manufacturers, and a financial system has to encounter regulators and customers. The closer researchers are to the environments in which these systems will operate, the faster they can identify failures, understand trade-offs and build technologies that work in practice.

Chicago is the place where AI can encounter the full complexity of the real economy. Time and again, discoveries made in the region’s universities and national laboratories have changed the world, while entrepreneurs, companies and civic leaders transformed those discoveries into industries. Yet too often, the next generation of companies and jobs grew elsewhere. Today’s investments in quantum computing — and tomorrow’s investments in trustworthy AI — offer an opportunity to write a different story, one in which this region not only helps invent the future but also builds the ecosystem that brings it to life.

Illinois’ investments in quantum are already strengthening the region’s technical talent,

research capacity and innovation base. Combined with leadership in responsible AI, they position Chicago to build a technology economy that is globally competitive, equitable and sustainable.

Chicago can build the infrastructure for trustworthy AI: the research partnerships, testing environments, standards, workforce and public-private collaborations that allow responsible AI to be invented, tested, deployed and brought to market. In doing so, it will become a magnet for companies, entrepreneurs and investors committed to building AI worthy of trust.

Trust has always been good business. When hearing this idea, Chicago attorney and adviser Fred Tannenbaum reminded us that Intel transformed an invisible microprocessor into a competitive advantage through its iconic 1991 “Intel Inside” campaign. Tomorrow’s AI economy will need a comparable mark of trust. “Responsible AI — Made in Chicago” could become that standard.

Imagine products carrying a “Responsible AI — Made in Chicago” designation, signaling that they meet the highest standards of safety, transparency and

reliability. More than a slogan, it would become a competitive advantage. Businesses would increasingly choose locations where AI talent, trusted governance and real-world deployment come together. Investors would gravitate toward environments that reduce uncertainty while accelerating innovation. Workers would embrace AI when they trust it and have the skills to use it.

To be sure, no honest conversation about AI can sidestep its most immediate human concern: jobs. In offices, factories, hospitals and classrooms, people are asking whether AI will make their skills obsolete. Those concerns deserve a plan, not just reassurance. The future should not be one in which AI replaces people, but one in which people who know how to work with AI outperform those who do not.

Earning that trust also means treating workforce readiness as core infrastructure. Chicago’s community colleges, unions, universities and employers are uniquely positioned to prepare workers across every sector to use AI as a tool that amplifies human judgment and productivity. That is how disruption becomes opportunity.

We are at a crossroads. AI is advancing faster than our institutions, norms and governance. As concerns grow about AI’s societal and environmental impacts, building AI worthy of trust is shifting from a niche concern to a strategic imperative. Pope Leo XIV, a native of Chicago, has reminded us that technological progress must remain grounded in human dignity and the common good. His message reflects a growing global recognition that innovation and responsibility are not competing values — they are mutually reinforcing.

Chicago is at its best when it unites unlikely partners to solve big problems. This is another such moment. The AI race has only just begun. It will not be about who builds the smartest AI. It will be about who builds responsible AI.

Chicago can become that place.

Gene Robinson is executive director and CEO of the Discovery Partners Institute at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Rashid Bashir is dean of the Grainger College of Engineering and vice chancellor for Chicago Strategic Partnerships at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Voice of the People

Candidates for city’s top cop

Chicagoans of all races and backgrounds vote and pay taxes here. We are the funders who give over \$2 billion to the Chicago Police Department’s budget. We are the customers who appreciate good police work. However, too often, we are also the victims of bad policing — from unconstitutional, racially biased and discriminatory treatment to countless incidents of officer misconduct and violent abuse.

Who becomes Chicago’s next police superintendent is a critical concern for our multiracial community coalition to enforce the Chicago police consent decree. The coalition includes 411 Movement for Pierre Loury, the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois, Black Lives Matter Chicago, Blocks Together, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Chicago Urban League, Chicago Westside Branch of the NAACP, Communities United, Community Renewal Society, Network 49, ONE Northside and Women’s All Points Bulletin.

We support police professionalism and an end to CPD policies and practices that led to the consent decree. We recommend evaluating superintendent applicants on their past experience, present beliefs and future vision.

We must examine candidates’ track records and ask them to:

- Share their experiences with race and diversity and what they have done to work effectively with diverse groups in communities they have served.
- Give examples of working with and being responsive to complaints from Black and Brown residents.
- Talk about their own experience with officer misconduct and cite examples of how they held officers accountable when they crossed the line.

We must interrogate candidates



A police sergeant wears a jacket with the Chicago Police emblem on May 20. **JOHN J. KIM/TRIBUNE**

on their views about:

- The current state of consent decree compliance.
- CPD’s history of racism and abuse against Black and Brown residents.

Candidates must describe their vision for CPD:

- What policies and actions will they take to address the past and present manifestations of racist policing in Chicago?
- How will they achieve the goals of the consent decree and work with Chicago’s police oversight bodies?

- What will they do to improve officer recruitment, training, supervision and discipline?
- It is essential that the next Chicago police superintendent commits to:
- Full compliance with the consent decree.
 - Ending pretextual traffic stops and CPD collaboration with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.
 - Significantly reducing officer use of force and firearm pointing.
 - Supporting alternate response and Crisis Assistance Response & Engagement Program implementation.

- Assigning officers to walk in community beat patrols instead of driving around in cars.

— *Biliah Castleberry, Karen Freeman-Wilson, Aaron Gottlieb and Michael J. Harrington, Chicago*

Board’s job at union workforce

Regarding “Raoul’s Nicor Gas deal helps consumers now, but union protections likely will balloon bills later”: The Tribune Editorial Board is right to scrutinize what Nicor Gas spends and what Illinois consumers are asked to pay. But its Sept. 13 editorial gets one important thing wrong: Protecting consumers and maintaining a skilled union workforce are not mutually exclusive.

The editorial board characterizes maintaining union jobs as keeping organized labor’s “grave train rolling” and suggests workers displaced by cuts can simply find work elsewhere. That is dismissive of the workers whose livelihoods are at stake and overlooks why maintaining this workforce matters in the first place.

Nicor’s system serves 2.3 million customers across more than 650 communities in Northern Illinois. Aging pipes must be replaced, leaks prevented, emergencies addressed and critical systems kept operating for homes, schools, hospitals and businesses. A robust Illinois economy depends on reliable infrastructure, and Nicor’s system helps keep businesses and industries across the region running. Maintaining that system safely and responsibly requires a stable, highly trained workforce.

Protecting those jobs does not mean consumers aren’t protected. The company always must justify how it spends ratepayer dollars, and the Illinois Commerce Commission retains authority to review its investments and determine what costs can appropriately

be passed along to customers.

Illinois families deserve affordable utility bills and a natural gas system that is safe, reliable and maintained by a skilled workforce. Attorney General Kwame Raoul’s settlement does just that: It corrects Nicor’s requested rate increase while preserving the union workforce needed to safely serve an area home to 6.9 million Illinoisans.

— *James P. Connolly, business manager, Chicago Laborers’ District Council*

Headline for fatal crash story

Regarding the article “E-bike rider dies after crash at Southwest Side intersection that claimed another life a year ago” (online Sept. 16): I appreciate the reporting on traffic deaths on Archer Avenue, especially given our elected officials continue to tolerate street conditions that put their constituents’ lives at risk.

However, I found the headline deeply troubling: Emphasizing “e-bike” while omitting the pickup truck and its fleeing driver risks suggesting, amid recent complaints about e-bikes and e-motos, that e-bike rider Juan Martin Marquez Luna somehow contributed to his own death.

As a lifelong Chicagoan, it reminds me of how labeling a teenager’s murder “gang-related” can invite readers to treat it as inevitable or the victim’s life as less worthy of concern. “Pickup truck strikes cyclist in fatal Southwest Side hit-and-run crash” would be a headline that centers what happened to him without insinuating that his choice of transportation made him responsible for his own death.

— *Cyrus Dowlatshahi, Chicago*

School’s tax-exempt status

I could not disagree more with Kelsey Burr and this op-ed attack on private institutions (“City should reject private school’s expansion plans,” Sept. 17). If we were to agree with this “they won’t pay property taxes” argument, then we would need to extend this attitude beyond the school in question and look to solicit property tax payments that are currently lost by other properties that have schools, churches, mosques and synagogues sitting on their non-tax-revenue-generating ground.

I suspect very few would support this reversal of this tax exemption, not just in Chicago but statewide.

— *Michael Mudjer, Chicago*

Museum a lost opportunity

The New York Times called the new George Lucas narrative art museum in Los Angeles “weird and wonderful” and an “instant landmark.”

Which reminded me that if those in government in Chicago had any vision at all, the museum would have been in our great city. That was Lucas’ preference — but politics, special interest groups and politicians shot it down.

It’s ironic that as we look at continued financial instability, our leaders gave away a long-term opportunity to build tourism, create jobs and generate revenues for Chicago — which, by the way, would have cost our city nothing as Lucas paid for, and was always willing to pay for, the development of the museum that LA now enjoys.

Shame on our leaders.

— *Thomas F. Reilly Jr., Chicago*

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EDITORIAL

China’s scientists should be held to high standards

China today is a pre-eminent technological powerhouse. Over multiple generations, Beijing has marshalled enormous resources to build one of the world’s largest pools of research talent. Under President Xi Jinping, Beijing has doubled down, with the 15th five-year plan projecting research and development spending to grow by at least 7 per cent annually.

Yet quantity alone cannot secure scientific leadership. The nation’s future depends equally on quality. That demands an unwavering commitment to scientific integrity. The latest misconduct revelations underscore this imperative.

The National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) published details late last month about 31 new misconduct cases at universities and hospitals across China, involving more than 40 researchers – its largest such public disclosure to date.

Among them were four prominent professors publicly named in April by a whistle-blowing blogger. All four had been recognised by the National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars, an honour that typically serves as a stepping stone to scientific elite membership in China.

Three had served as deans or associate deans. The foundation revoked their funding and titles, ordered them to return more than 10 million yuan (HK\$11.7 million) in grants, and barred them from reapplying for three to seven years – effectively ending their academic careers. Collectively, the misconduct cases point to systemic failures.

According to a recent study, slightly more than half (52.8 per cent) of 579 Chinese universities maintained academic integrity web pages, and only 16.8 per cent released annual research integrity reports, as required by the Ministry of Education.

This institutional neglect has created a permissive environment where misconduct is frequently left unchecked. “Student Geng”, a former biomedical PhD student at Beihang University, has emerged as China’s most prominent online whistle-blower on academic misconduct. His full-time vlogging has uncovered duplicated images and questionable data in papers authored by credentialed researchers. With 3 million followers, he enjoys a visibility beyond most other whistle-blowers.

His exposés have galvanised often sluggish institutions into investigating prominent scientists. That it takes an outsider wielding statistical tools and public pressure to enforce standards shows the inadequacy of oversight mechanisms.

The structural drivers of misconduct are well understood. China’s research evaluation system emphasises publication counts, journal rankings and grant acquisition when determining promotion.

This creates intense pressure to produce results or use short cuts. The rapid expansion of research funding compounds the problem.

In 2023, the NSFC received 318,000 proposals from 2,404 host institutions and approved 52,500 awards with funding of 31.9 billion yuan. As volume grows, so must vigilance.

Xi has rightly demanded stricter standards to tackle misconduct and foster a clean research ecosystem.

But that needs to translate into action. The foundation’s August disclosure shows progress, yet many of Student Geng’s allegations have yet to draw responses from universities or the foundation. Incomplete accountability breeds cynicism.

What is needed is zero tolerance. Universities must maintain functioning integrity offices and publish annual reports, as regulation already mandate. Penalties must carry real consequences – not just funding suspensions. Evaluation criteria should shift from publication quantity towards research originality and reproducibility. And whistle-blowers deserve more legal protection and institutional channels.

The stakes could not be higher. China’s ambitions for scientific leadership require not just investment but trust from the international community, collaborators and the Chinese public.

A nation’s research prowess is only as good as the integrity of its researchers. China’s bid for science must rigorously enforce high standards. Anything less risks squandering decades of valuable national investment and the aspirations of millions of honest researchers who deserve better.

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What Beijing means when it says ‘strategic’

Rather than geopolitical manoeuvring or calculation, this diplomatic label aims to convey seriousness, patience and a willingness to work for mutual long-term benefit

On September 12, President Xi Jinping met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the Brics summit in New Delhi. In their talks, Xi said China approached the relationship “from a strategic and long-term perspective”.

He called for an objective and rational “strategic” perception. That means the two sides should treat each other as partners rather than rivals, and as opportunities rather than threats.

In Chinese official and diplomatic language, the term “strategic” is routinely used to denote matters of high importance, long-term significance and central weight in the nation’s interests and development. When China defines a bilateral relationship as “strategic”, it signals that the relationship is viewed from a high level, beyond immediate disputes or short-term calculations.

China’s partnership diplomacy is organised in a clear ladder. At the basic level are ordinary “strategic partnerships”. Higher up are “comprehensive strategic partnerships”, which China has established with a wide range of countries including Brazil, France, Indonesia, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Still higher tiers include “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnerships” with some countries and the special formulation of “all-weather strategic cooperative partnership” with Pakistan. A “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era” is uniquely set with Russia.

Contrary to the perception that the term “strategic” in these partnership labels signals military or security-related importance, this usage is intended to convey goodwill and a commitment to long-term cooperation, rather than a tactical, opportunistic or merely convenient partnership.

The same logic applies in domestic and diplomatic discourse. Labelling something as “strategic” elevates it above routine or tactical matters, underscoring that it has been carefully considered at the

highest level and is intended to shape the country’s direction over an extended horizon.

Clearly, the phrase is never about clever tactics or indirect manoeuvring. But here is where problems might arise.

In English, the word “strategic” frequently implies calculated action. When people say someone is “being strategic”, the phrase often carries an undertone of foxiness or calculated deception, suggesting clever positioning, hidden motives or the manipulation of appearances to gain an advantage.

In discussions of “war strategies”, the term commonly evokes cunning, misdirection and the art of outmanoeuvring an opponent. Indeed, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* is frequently read as a

“Being strategic” ... often carries an undertone of foxiness or calculated deception

traverse devoted almost entirely to strategies of deception and psychological manipulation, even though the text also addresses broader questions of preparation, timing and the avoidance of unnecessary conflict.

In political science, “strategic voting” refers to deliberately supporting a second-preference candidate to prevent a worse outcome. In bilateral relations, “strategic ambiguity” means keeping one’s position unclear to preserve flexibility or deter others.

Therefore, when Chinese leaders describe a relationship or decision as “strategic”, English-speaking audiences may subconsciously hear this second shade of meaning. What is intended in Chinese diplomatic language as an expression of

seriousness, patience and mutual long-term benefit can be received as evidence of manoeuvring.

Chinese authorities are aware of the potential misunderstanding that the terms “strategic” or “strategy” can generate. Several years ago, the government officially required state media, think tanks and academics not to translate or refer to the belt and road plan as a “strategy”. It chose the term “initiative” instead, presumably to project a softer, more inclusive image and to avoid the impression of “outsmarting” counterparts.

Yet despite this caution in specific cases, Chinese official and diplomatic discourse continues to place heavy weight on the word “strategic” or “strategy” as a way of conveying importance, centrality, goodwill and long-term commitment and devotion.

The cultural and linguistic gap remains serious. How, then, might China address this gap?

A simple approach is to pair the term with clearer, more transparent phrasing that helps reduce ambiguity. Formulations such as “a long-term and constructive approach”, “a serious and sustained commitment to mutual benefit”, or “viewing the relationship through the lens of long-term shared interests” will help reduce misunderstanding.

When the term “strategic” is still used, it should be briefly defined in the same context. A short clarification – that it denotes a willingness to invest sustained effort, manage differences with patience, and pursue outcomes that benefit both sides – can help anchor the audience’s understanding.

Emphasis in public messaging can also usefully shift towards sincerity, mutuality and concrete shared benefits, rather than relying on the term “strategic” to convey these meanings. Using clearer language is likely to communicate the intended goodwill and long-term commitment more effectively.

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Zhengxu Wang

LETTERS

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Trump’s slipshod language will pass

Traditionally, the rationales for using “good” English with precision have been well explained. First, as George Orwell argued in his essay “Politics and the English Language”, the decline of standards in politics and that in the use of English can reinforce each other: our language becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. Second is the need to appear respectable, which Bergen and Cornelia Evans assumed in the 1950s everybody in America had. As late as 1985, both of these rationales were cited at the beginning of a well-respected guidebook for English usage.

More recently, however, these considerations appear to have been, at least to a certain extent, brushed aside, resulting in the “dumbing down” of the English language in US President Donald Trump’s America as described in “Reflections of a reformed grammar Nazi” (August 25).

Francis Fukuyama recently explained the Trump phenomenon on BBC’s *Newsnight* by referring to several trends, two of which are relevant to the discussion on language use. The first one is the tremendous resentment of the less educated in the United States against the educated elite now running many of the country’s big institutions. The second is the rise of the internet and social media on which, Fukuyama said, “anyone can say anything”, by implication including “in any way they like”. It remains the responsibility of those intent on preserving the quality of

English in general use – as opposed to fossilising it – to express themselves through different channels in such ways as to prevent the coming into operation of the equivalent of Gresham’s law in the realm of English usage.

The pull of the need to appear respectable through proper use of English may have significantly attenuated for those who are so frustrated economically and socially that respectability has simply become a minor or non-existent consideration. On the other hand,



US President Donald Trump on stage in Texas this month. Photo: Reuters

as Orwell said, “the process is reversible”. The possibility of a future charismatic American political leader who is much more linguistically sophisticated than Trump exercising a different kind of influence on the public cannot be ruled out.

Bowen C. Chow, Heng Fa Chuen

School libraries offer real skills

As the old saying goes, “If you can’t beat them, join them.” In education, this need not mean giving in to students’ attachment to screens. It can mean meeting them in a digital environment they already understand, then using it to lead them towards deeper learning.

When digital education is discussed today, attention often turns to devices, coding, artificial intelligence (AI) and online platforms. School libraries can seem to sit at the edge of that conversation, still associated with bookshelves, borrowing and quiet revision. Yet they remain highly relevant. They are among the places where students learn not only to access information but also to find it, organise it, question it and use it responsibly.

This thinking informed the development of Library Smash, a 3D educational game I developed as a school librarian. Set in a fictional Hong Kong secondary school library, it places students behind the counter during a busy period. Players process loans and returns, locate and shelve books, handle reservations, use equipment and respond to everyday disruptions. The game draws on ordinary

library work. A book placed on the wrong shelf may become unavailable to another reader, and an incomplete return process may create further problems. By taking on the role of library staff, students are invited to consider why procedures, call numbers and rules matter. They are not merely administrative requirements but part of how people share resources and space fairly. The tasks also introduce classification, cataloguing and information searching. These skills connect with wider learning: organising materials for project work, managing digital files and searching online with greater purpose.

Digital literacy is woven into the game’s scenarios. Students consider the reliability of information, whether AI-generated content or familiar moments may help educators find fresh ways to engage students, while showing them that teachers, too, continue to explore, learn and adapt.

Schools rightly encourage students to spend time away from their phones and return to books. But digital media and reading need not be opposing forces. A game may provide an entry point into the library, and teachers and librarians can then guide students towards inquiry, reading and the use of real resources.

Developing this game has also reminded me that teaching ideas often emerge from close observation. Looking more closely at these familiar moments may help educators find fresh ways to engage students, while showing them that teachers, too, continue to explore, learn and adapt.

Tseng Tsz-ching, Sha Tin



Illustration: Mario Rivera

HK films do not need to be shot in the city

If mainland movies need not be set in China to be seen as Chinese, why must Hong Kong cinema turn local landmarks and language into proof of its identity?

In late August, I took my parents to see *Once Upon a Time in the Middle East* in their small-town cinema on the mainland. Built around an unnamed conflict widely understood to be the US-led Iraq war, the film has become the kind of phenomenon no marketing budget could buy, projected to reach 2.5 billion yuan (HK\$2.9 billion) largely through word of mouth.

Its Hong Kong and overseas release will revive geopolitical arguments over a Chinese commercial film entering a narrative world long associated

and 1960s, Singapore-based studios such as Shaw Brothers helped finance films made in Hong Kong, then distributed and exhibited them across the region.

Migration and language networks held this system together. From the late 1950s onwards, Cold War-era nation-building drew new cultural borders across the region: Indonesia closed Chinese-language schools and newspapers; Malaysia withdrew funding from Chinese-medium secondary schools; Singapore pushed dialects aside in favour of Mandarin.

When the Teochew-dialect film *Dear You* reached Singapore this summer, some pressed for more screenings in Teochew, despite the fact that in 2025, 58.1 per cent of Singapore residents aged five and over spoke English most often at home. Chinese-language audiences remain, but the regional film market that once linked them has fractured. Making films more recognisably Hong Kong cannot put that market back together. Hong Kong films can no longer assume that language or location will carry them across the region; their stories must work beyond both.

Mainland cinema offers a counterpoint. It serves a larger domestic market, faces stronger pressure to affirm national identity and operates under tighter content controls. Even so, some hits have set their stories beyond China without losing audiences at home. Viewers followed the story without needing to recognise the place.

Some of this flexibility began under pressure. Crime, corruption and other sensitive subjects are easier to depict when shifted from recognisable Chinese locations to invented foreign settings, but the workaround has matured into a commercial language. The formula loosened the assumption that a Chinese film must look geographically Chinese. *Sheep Without a Shepherd* was one such hit, grossing about US\$191 million in China. It was adapted from *Drishyam*, a Malayalam thriller remade in several Indian languages. Malaysian-born director Sam Quah shot it in Thailand with mainland backing for China's market. The production map is remarkable, but Chinese audiences did not need to read it; on screen, a father is trying to save his family.

Once Upon a Time in the Middle East is the latest proof. Much of its setting was built on sound stages and backlots in Qingdao. My parents did not care where the

desert really was; they cared what happened to the people in it.

Hong Kong cinema should recognise the pattern: it helped write the textbook. Bruce Lee needed no subtitles, Jackie Chan carried his comedy into Hollywood. Chow Yun-fat's gunmen travelled far beyond Hong Kong streets. A better *Tomorrow* is unmistakably a Hong Kong film, but the city was the setting, never the entrance fee. Hong Kong was the workshop. Its filmmakers turned migration, crowded cities, ambition and desire into action, comedy and melodrama that audiences everywhere recognised.

As *Once Upon a Time in the Middle East* opens in Hong Kong, its mainland success raises a question. If a mainland film need not take place in China to be recognised as Chinese, why must a Hong Kong film turn local landmarks and language into proof of its identity? Hongkongness can shape a film without becoming a test viewers must pass before the story begins.

People sometimes forget that cinema is an art of illusion. Shaw Brothers built some of the cinematic worlds now regarded as quintessentially Hong Kong on



Hu Chao

The least authentic thing Hong Kong cinema can do now is demand authenticity

backlots and sound stages. They were artifice, and no less Hong Kong for it. The least authentic thing Hong Kong cinema can do now is demand authenticity.

That identity was never simply about soil. It was shaped by filmmakers drawing on Cantonese and English, tapping Shanghai-style capital and talent as well as Southeast Asian audiences. The mixture produced films strangers wanted to watch. That is the habit worth recovering. Enough borders stand in the way of Hong Kong cinema. A self-made barrier is the last thing the industry needs.

Hu Chao is a Guangzhou-based art historian and curator. AI was used by the author for editing

Asking AI the right question is important

Analysis provided by artificial intelligence can give weak ideas credibility they have not earned

Years ago, I watched a focus group explain itself into a contradiction. We asked people what mattered when choosing car insurance. Price won. The deductible came next. Reputation did not appear.

During coffee, I asked the interviewer to change the question. How much cheaper would a less prestigious insurer have to be before they switched? One participant, who 15 minutes earlier ranked price first, said no discount was large enough.

Nothing changed except how we asked the question. Something unmentioned had become non-negotiable. The first response was not dishonest; it answered our question. The second exposed what the first could not.

LinkedIn recently added a button allowing users to report posts that "seem like AI slop". More than a million people reportedly used it in the first two weeks. Apparently there is a limit to how many inspirational posts one species can absorb.

However, bad work by artificial intelligence (AI) often looks bad. The stranger problem begins to emerge when its work is not bad.

Questions come with a price tag. Should we enter another market? Change pricing? Build this product? Someone had to research the idea and persuade others it deserved time and money.

As a result, a mediocre idea had one useful enemy: expense. Not every passing thought could acquire an analyst, a financial model and 40 pages explaining why it was promising. That friction is disappearing. A market scan, competitor analysis, pricing model and prototype can appear before the meeting that was once needed to commission them.

Bad answers are easy to spot. The harder case is a good answer produced from a badly chosen or badly framed question.

AI creates two risks. We can ask the wrong question or ask the right question in the wrong way. The first can lock in an assumption; the second can hide information another formulation would expose, as the insurance example did. AI can produce a good answer to both.

Precisely because the answer is good, we become less likely to revisit the question that produced it.

A Harvard-led study involving 758 Boston Consulting Group consultants showed the problem. On a difficult business task outside AI's capability frontier, consultants using AI were 19 per cent less likely to reach the correct answer.

Another Harvard-led study found something stranger. When consultants challenged questionable AI output, the system could respond with more persuasive material around its answer, providing more structure, evidence and reassurance. The researchers called it "persuasion bombing".

Researchers studying a Shenzhen court found a related pattern: judges made an initial decision, a large language model generated reasoning based on that decision, and judges then revised the reasoning for the final judgment. The AI was not choosing the conclusion; it was helping articulate the reasoning around a conclusion already reached.

That distinction matters beyond courts. Analysis is not organisationally neutral. Investigation creates evidence, and evidence creates ownership, meetings and budgets. What was worth examining starts to resemble something worth doing.

The usual response is to check AI output better: verify sources, test assumptions, keep humans in the loop. These are useful but downstream safeguards. By then, a badly chosen or badly phrased question might already have an impressive answer.

The decision point has to move earlier. Before asking whether AI has given us the right answer, ask whether we have given it the right question and whether we have phrased that question correctly.

That is increasingly the executive task: decide where analysis should begin, not merely judge where it ends. Make the frame visible early, before analysis gives it weight. What are we assuming? What problem are we actually trying to solve? What would make us rephrase or abandon the question?

Those judgments are easiest before a proposal acquires research, numbers, meetings and an owner. Afterwards, changing the question can mean discarding work, challenging prior judgments and dismantling a constituency already formed around the answer. That does not mean analysing less. Cheap analysis is still useful because looking at more possibilities can uncover things we would otherwise never have found. But the bottleneck has shifted.

In 1938, Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld wrote in *The Evolution of Physics* that "the formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution". Elon Musk later put it more bluntly: "A lot of times the question is harder than the answer." For most of history, this was an observation about intelligence. AI has raised the stakes.

AI does not abolish bad questions. It has given them better evidence. The advantage now belongs to those who know which questions deserve to die and which simply need to be asked better.

Toomas Plunt is an Estonian entrepreneur trained in statistical modelling



Toomas Plunt

There is nothing wrong with wanting Hong Kong cinema to look and sound like the city

with US power and war. My parents offered another kind of review, which was neither about geopolitics nor historical responsibility. Their take was simply that any war brings immense suffering to people.

For 50 years, the Middle East had reached my parents largely as television news. The film gave those distant wars ordinary faces. They said little else on the drive home. I kept returning to a question from my research: why do some films travel across borders while others remain trapped by the expectations attached to where they were made?

I have heard the diagnosis of the decline of Hong Kong cinema: co-productions corroded the craft; filmmakers chased mainland money; the cure is to become more authentically Hong Kong, more local, more unmistakably ours.

Those complaints might explain what went wrong with some films. They don't explain what happened to the market.

There is nothing wrong with wanting Hong Kong cinema to look and sound like the city, but local identity is not an industrial policy. Treating it as one mistakes an industry problem for an identity problem.

The old Southeast Asian Chinese-language market was not merely an export destination for Hong Kong cinema. In the 1950s

My friend Bonnie Greer knew that justice is a form of love

Sarah Churchwell

The writer and critic, who died last week aged 77, was equally at home in the television studio as in the academic sphere

I remember first meeting Bonnie Greer when Barack Obama was president. It turned out memory had slightly improved the story, but not by much. We met on the set of *Newsnight Review* in January 2010, for a programme marking Obama's first year in office. Our friendship would keep falling across moments like that: two women from Chicago, one Black, one white, talking to the British public about dreams of America.

America was less our topic than our shared idiom: the great chaos and hope that kept bringing us together. For the next 15 years, Bonnie and I continued this conversation on stages all over Britain, and soon that public discussion became a real friendship, and then a kind of sisterhood.

We were united very quickly by the uncanny helix symmetry of our lives. Bonnie's parents came north from Jim Crow Mississippi and raised their family in Hyde Park, on Chicago's South Side. Just as her parents were moving their children in, my grandparents were moving theirs out, in what we call white flight, to the affluent northern suburbs where I would grow up. In the 1960s, when Chicago was desegregating, it began bussing Black pupils into better-resourced white schools in the suburbs, and Bonnie spent a summer attending New Trier, one of America's best state schools. (Two decades later, I attended for four years and didn't have to be bussed.)

She travelled north every day alongside Black women commuting to work for rich white women, very probably including one named Leila, who worked for my grandmother as a housekeeper and helped raise my mother.

That Bonnie and I had both eventually pitched up in London was, of course, part of the story, too. Bonnie had a playwright's eye for the symbolic shape of things. She was an actress as well as a playwright, and never stopped thinking in terms of stagecraft.

When she wrote *Marilyn and Ella*, about the friendship that developed after Marilyn Monroe helped Ella Fitzgerald cross America's colour bar, she brought me to see it, knowing I had written about Monroe too.

Bonnie completely understood the point of Marilyn: the blonde bombshell was a performance played by an actress, and in her play



Bonnie Greer with Sarah Churchwell, centre right, at the National Portrait Gallery launch of the Marilyn exhibition and, below left, in 2006.

Professor Sarah Churchwell



she brought the woman behind it back into view.

Bonnie loved America and believed in its promise, but she had no illusions about it; and she was fiercely attached to Britain, where she had made her life, and been a citizen since 1997.

When I finally joined her in dual citizenship in 2016, her glee at my capitulation was palpable. She had been certain Donald Trump could win that year before anyone else I knew.

Two years later, during the Kavanaugh hearings, which helped take Brett Kavanaugh to the US supreme court despite sexual abuse allegations, we messaged back and forth as we stayed up watching, horrified and angry and unsurprised, deep into the early hours of the British morning.

"White suburban women," Bonnie told me implacably, "will always let America down." I wanted her to be wrong, but of course she wasn't. We never disagreed about the past; the

only time we ever disagreed was about the future.

In 2021, as we were beginning to emerge from the pandemic, Bonnie was awarded an honorary degree from the University of London for her contribution to the arts and humanities, and I had the great honour of speaking for her. We were in the heart of Bloomsbury, next door to the British Museum, where Bonnie had done so much to make the people around her see history differently. At the end of my speech, I quoted Sam Cooke: "I know a change is gonna come." African American art and political hope making themselves heard in the centre of London.

As America's spiral accelerated, so did our conversations, and the writing that followed. Bonnie produced a formidable play about Frederick Douglass and another based on *The Cherry Orchard*, set in Trump's America, while she read and commented on my own books, saving me more than once from being quite so idiotically white.

For several years Bonnie had been working on a book about James Baldwin, America's great prophet of race and conscience. As a young woman Bonnie went to hear him speak and ended up sharing a taxi with him to the airport afterwards,

'White suburban women,' she told me implacably, 'will always let America down.' I wanted her to be wrong, but of course she wasn't

sitting beside the older, sadder Baldwin as he drank whiskey from a paper cup, she told me, and fixed those enormous eyes on her; 50 years later, she was still thinking about what he had said to her. I hope she got far enough for some of it to see the light of day. It was clear enough why Bonnie would be drawn to Baldwin, who once said: "If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see." She also knew that justice is a form of love.

I saw Bonnie twice this summer: first at the launch of the Marilyn centenary exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery; and then on 5 July in Lewes, where we spoke together for Democrats Abroad in the town that had forged Thomas Paine's radical politics, before a crowd of Americans working to get out the overseas vote in the year of the 250th anniversary of independence. She seemed physically a little frail, but as spiritually indomitable as ever.

At the end of August, I asked her if she would help with a library event. As ever, she was more than ready to assist, though she told me she was in hospital and would be released in a day or two, so we would catch up when she was out. In response to a couple of further questions, she sent me a one-word answer that proved to be her last word to me, and today reads like a benediction. "Yes."

Sarah Churchwell is a professor of American Literature and Public Understanding of the Humanities at the School of Advanced Study, University of London. Her latest book is *The Wrath to Come*, published by Apollo

Xavier Greenwood

What Yom Kippur and the Oasis brothers have in common

Every Yom Kippur, which begins at sundown tonight, my partner and I watch a film. The idea is to find something that will help us think about the difficult, far side of suffering: forgiveness.

This is not why we went to see the Oasis documentary last weekend. We only wanted to relive the day we saw the band in Manchester when Liam and Noel Gallagher awkwardly reunited after 15 years apart, and found catharsis on stage, embracing before an ocean of fans. I turned to my partner with an epiphany. "It's the story of Yom Kippur."

Until 2017, my relationship with Manchester, the home of Oasis, comprised some childhood trips to the Trafford Centre and ancestors who wed in the cathedral. But then a terrorist detonated a bomb at an Ariana Grande concert, my family escaped through the smoke, and I wept as locals sang *Don't Look Back in Anger* at a vigil for those who died.

Last October, not looking back in anger became a painful challenge for Manchester's Jewish community.



The Gallaghers at Venice festival. Getty

On Yom Kippur, the sacred day of atonement, a terrorist stabbed worshippers at the Heaton Park Hebrew Congregation, not far from where we had seen Oasis perform.

Can the brothers, with their story of fraternal rancour, really teach us anything in the face of such horrors? Perhaps that we are stronger than we think. In the documentary, Noel says: "I was born with one fatal flaw in my character, which is I will not forgive people." Yet he does.

One wonders what Liam and Noel, raised as Catholics, think of the Book of Genesis – because it is, among other things, a book about brothers. It is tempting to focus on Cain killing his brother Abel, but many Jews are more taken by Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his siblings: three sets of brothers who overcome deep rifts.

Back in the 1990s, Noel described Oasis as an "unstoppable ball that is rolling down a mountain". He could be talking about the world today, a frightening place from which the band offers an escape and an example of reconciliation. It is only when we forgive that we can be free to be whatever we choose. May we all find a film like the Oasis documentary to get us there.

Obituary

George Brown

The Post Office boy inspired by personal tragedy, who established the link between adversity and depression

Mrs Trent had lost all interest in life. She spent most of the day in tears and in bed. Her body was cramped with anxiety, her marriage effectively dead. She felt she couldn't escape. She was depressed. But why? Or, more pertinently, why her and not the woman next door to her in south London? What had been the trigger?

Until George Brown and Tirril Harris went door to door in Camberwell in the mid-1970s and spoke to women about their lives, there were two theories about what caused depression: it was chemical misfortune, a malfunction in the brain, or something bad in one's personal life, often triggered in childhood. Brown wondered if it was more complex. What if social environment played a role? To answer this, he needed data.

Brown was not a doctor. He had studied anthropology at university, and then worked in social psychiatry, studying schizophrenia by interviewing patients and observing how small circumstances – visitors, hygiene, even whether nurses shared the *Radio Times* on the ward – could make an impact. He then turned his research techniques to depression. "I had no preconceived ideas, so I was forced to have an open mind," he said.

The working-class women of Camberwell had been ignored by the elites of psychology. Brown, who grew up in a similar environment and as a teenager had been affected



'These women... weren't used to talking about themselves. Here was someone who showed interest in them': George Brown. Photograph courtesy of the Brown family

by the suicide of a neighbour with depression, felt differently.

His plan was to speak to two sets of women from the same income group: 114 had been diagnosed with depression and 344 had not. What the women said was collated to build a huge database of contributory factors. Brown and Harris found that 68% of those

with depression had experienced a significant negative event in the preceding year, compared with 20% of those who didn't have it. They found that depressed women were three times more likely to have been facing serious long-term stress factors in that year, while those with good friends or stable marriages were much more

likely not to be depressed. Mrs Trent had three small children and her husband had lost two jobs in a matter of weeks.

"What I recall was how moving the interviews could be," Brown told the journalist Johann Hari for his 2018 book *Lost Connections*. "These women... weren't used to talking about themselves. Here was someone who showed interest in them and allowed them to talk." Brown and Harris's conclusion, published in 1978, was that "clinical depression is an understandable response to adversity".

George William Brown was born a twin in Notting Hill in 1930. His father was a lens maker, his mother a waitress. He was the only boy in his area to pass the 11-plus and went to Kilburn grammar school but had to leave at 16 to bring in money for the family. He worked for the Post Office and in a bookshop before taking a job as a draughtsman.

Life changed when he heard a BBC radio programme about the pyramids. Brown wrote to a professor of Egyptology at University College London, who encouraged him to explore further education. He learned English and Latin by correspondence course and read archaeology and anthropology at UCL. After graduating, he became a town planner, but the work bored him. His UCL professor recommended him to the social psychiatry research unit at the Maudsley hospital to study schizophrenia. His interview-based approach established the concept of expressed emotion: that

patients with family members who are critical or hostile are much more likely to relapse.

In 1968, he moved to the social research unit at Bedford College, London, where he became its director. He had five children from three marriages, the most recent to Elizabeth Davies, a professor in cancer research at King's College London. He worked at Royal Holloway, University of London and Harvard Medical School and co-published papers on depression well into his 80s.

Brown had long been interested in causes. There was a cousin's wife took her own life when suffering from postpartum depression and his twin sister had attempted suicide. In 1989, he and Harris published a collection of papers entitled *Life Events and Illness* that looked at a range of conditions.

David Mechanic, a US medical sociologist, said: "George made contributions to the understanding and treatment of schizophrenia and depression that were building blocks for psychoeducational treatment across the world and had significant influence on patient care."

Thanks to his research, it is now widely accepted that depression has three types of cause – biological, psychological and social – and all three can be treated.

Patrick Kidd

George Brown, medical sociologist, was born on 15 November 1930 and died on 28 August 2026, aged 95

My week

Ferruginous beegrabber

I can't tell you how fond I am of bumblebees. I felt a wave of nostalgia pass through me as I watched one at work the other day: just an ordinary buff-tailed bumblebee bumbling around in the garden. I thought of my happy larvahood: kept safe and well fed thanks to a creature just like her.

Monday

I'm a happy vegetarian these days, feeding just like a bumblebee on nectar and pollen. That's good for a grownup but it's different when you're young. Back then insect meat filled all my needs – and it tastes so much better when it's still alive.

Tuesday

Ah, bumblebee, my home, my nursery, my unending buffet, my

safe and secure place, my comforter and protector. I left her not without regret when I set out on the great adventure of adulthood. But I never lost my love for those bumbling bees that fly with such sweet innocence from flower to flower. And now I'm waiting for the opportunity to express my love in real terms.

Wednesday

I hatched, I woke; at once I knew hunger and within moments I realised that home was food and food was home, and home was a bumblebee. There I was, travelling through the air inside the body of a bumblebee – another buff-tail, since you ask. And so I began to eat. I ate until my sweet loving unknowing hostess died, and after that I ate what was left of her insides.

Thursday

I stayed inside her, for winter was coming. I spent the dark months as a pupa inside the corpse of my beautiful bee, waiting until spring, before I broke free. And then it was time to extend my relationship with the bumblebees of this fine garden.

Friday

He was a handsome thing with his yellow head and his swaggering flight and it was no hardship to spend time with him. As a result I had an egg within me that needed to be within someone else. So I waited by a patch of sages and soon enough

Insect meat filled all my needs and it tastes so much better when it's still alive

along she came, working hard for her little community. In an instant I was on her. I grabbed her in mid-air and grappled hard. She did all she could to escape but couldn't shake me off until I released her. Off she flew, fancying herself unscathed – but inside her lovely furry body she now carried my egg.

Saturday

My work here is done. I feel the chill of coming winter and that means the end of flowers and the end of me. But not the end of my line: my child will soon be waking inside her bee and the great fat generous creature will supply everything she needs. As I come to the end of my days it comforts me to think that my descendants will feel the same affection for those marvellous

bumblers that make our lives both possible and pleasurable.

Ferruginous beegrabber CV

Lifespan less than a year

Eating habits the living and the dead

Hobbies aerial interception

Sexual preferences a fellow bee-lover

As told to Simon Barnes



Profile

Umar Kremlev

The boxing supremo turned oligarch who bankrolled Donald Trump Jr's wedding.
By **Andrew Anthony**

'Not a big deal" was Donald Trump's verdict on the revelation, from the ProPublica investigative journalism site, that his multimillionaire son Donald Trump Jr's three-day wedding party threw in the Bahamas was partially paid for by Umar Kremlev, a Russian oligarch and convicted criminal.

Nevertheless, having an associate of Vladimir Putin bankroll two nights of celebrations for the US president's son is no trivial matter – even if Trump Jr insists there was nothing untoward about the gift and his father now claims it has been repaid. According to the groom, the hundreds of thousands of dollars that Kremlev splashed out on the 50 or so guests who gathered in May at Little Pipe Cay was simply an expression of friendship.

If so, it is a friendship that hitherto has not dared speak its name, and is thought to be little more than a year old. Indeed, Trump Jr's brother Eric said he had never heard of Kremlev, who was there at the Caribbean revels with a conspicuous entourage of Russians.

Outside the world of boxing administration, Kremlev's name is not well known. Yet he wields increasing power in Moscow, as was evident from a Chinese state media report in April that he was part of the delegation that accompanied Putin to China. Boxing governance has long had a shady reputation, so expectations were not high when, in 2020, Kremlev replaced Gafur Rakhimov, an Uzbek businessman accused by the US treasury of criminal links, as president of the International Boxing Association (IBA), the body that governs amateur – and some professional – boxing matches. Rakhimov denies wrongdoing and has complained of political persecution.

Claims soon emerged of dirty

tricks and smear campaigns by those close to Kremlev. Three years ago, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) expelled the IBA, citing concerns about corruption and links to Russia.

Kremlev – who called the IOC "thieves" and "hyenas", and said former administrator CK Wu "should be shot" – was able to pay off the IBA's debts and increase the prize money at its events, thanks to sponsorship from Gazprom, the state-owned Russian energy giant. He also moved large parts of the IBA to Russia, suspended Ukraine from competition and took up an anti-LGBT stance.

His self-promotional ways are not to everyone's tastes. "He runs the IBA as if it was his own company," said veteran British boxing correspondent Steve Bunce. "He's a nasty piece of work." Bunce, who criticised the IBA's intervention in the biological gender controversy surrounding women's boxing at the Paris Olympics, no longer attends IBA events: "I'm fearful of what might happen."

Although the IBA role has given Kremlev an international profile

The Kremlin is keen to get its people into sports governance

in sporting circles, it is not where his power and wealth reside. Two years ago, the Russian investigative website Proekt put together a damning report on how Kremlev grew rich. One of its authors was Mikhail Rubin, who – along with the entire Proekt staff – was forced into exile in 2021 when the Kremlin threatened him with imprisonment.

The Proekt investigation made the point that the Kremlin is keen to get its people into sports governance. "It's a way to get access to politicians and corrupt them," said Rubin. "This story with Trump's son is, I think, an illustration of that."

On social media, Kremlev tends to adopt one of two distinctive guises. One is a macho man, a boxing devotee who likes to work out in the ring. The other is more solemn: a patriotic Russian follower of the Christian Orthodox faith.

According to Proekt, the 43-year-old was born Umar Lutfulloyev, of Tajik and Muslim heritage. He grew up in Serpukhov, 60 miles south of Moscow. As a young man, he took up boxing but did not get far because, he has said, he lacked discipline. By his mid-20s, he had a criminal record, with convictions for extortion and battery.

At 28, he changed his name. The motivation, suggested Rubin, would have been to conceal his criminal past, but the new name was also designed to show his admiration for the Kremlin.

"If you want to do business with the Kremlin," said Rubin, "it helps to appear Russified and Christian." In Russian business, he said, what delivers riches is not entrepreneurial drive or commercial skill but access to the Kremlin.

After joining the Night Wolves, a biker gang renowned for its ultrapatriotic beliefs, Kremlev met Alexei Rubezhnoi, then a major general in the federal protective service, who would go on to become the head of Putin's personal presidential security service.

The Kremlin has a history of security personnel linking up with criminal figures to create an intimidating but highly lucrative collaboration.

In 2016 Rubezhnoi, in his other role as head of the supervisory board of the Russian boxing federation, appointed Kremlev president of that federation, despite his limited experience.

With Rubezhnoi's help, Kremlev was soon in charge of three big betting companies, which, said Rubin, "are officially controlled by the government". Their turnover was in the billions.

By Proekt's account, Kremlev also has his hands on Russia's biggest car dealership, Rolf, a company set up by Sergei Petrov, a former politician and critic of Putin. After Petrov was forced into exile, said Rubin, Rolf was given to Kremlev. "When the state takes over a company in Russia, it doesn't sell it the highest bidder. No, they give the business to a loyalist."

Last year, he was also made president of the International Backgammon Federation, another Russian-controlled organisation.

Within a decade, Kremlev has gone from a minor Russian boxing promoter escaping a criminal background to an oligarch who travels in private jets. That lifestyle has given him access to the kind of plutocratic circles in which Trump Jr socialises. Although it is not known how they met, Trump Jr and Kremlev first appeared in public together at a typically extravagant IBA event in Istanbul last year.

If partially funding Trump Jr's wedding party is a mark of Kremlev's unstoppable rise, another may be that he has recently been sanctioned by Ukraine, which cited his proximity to Putin and the security services.

In any other era, those two metrics would be in conflict with one another, not least because the US is arming Ukraine in the war it has fought since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022.

But we live in strange times. For Rubin, the liaison with Trump Jr is neither coincidental nor an innocent bromance. "This is why people like Umar Kremlev are appointed to such positions. It's not some side project. It's not like he worries about boxing, does everything to improve it and, maybe, one time he corrupts someone. No, corruption is the whole point."

Umar Kremlev, né Lutfulloyev
Born 1982
Alma mater
Serpukhov boxing academy
Work Car dealer and sports administrator

Illustration by
Andy Bunday



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