



Turning up

Voter enthusiasm is a sign of a healthy democracy

Assam and Puducherry recorded historically the highest, and Kerala close to the highest, turnout in Assembly polls held on April 9. In Assam, 85.91% of the electorate turned up to vote, while in Puducherry it was 89.97% and in Kerala, 78.27%. It is hazardous to pinpoint the reasons for high turnouts and treacherous to read meanings into them. However, some reasons are objectively identifiable and some meaningful conjectures can be made. The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in Puducherry and Kerala culled considerable numbers of names – 7.5% and 3.2%, respectively. In Assam, given that a process for the creation of a National Register of Citizens for the State is underway, it was a Special Revision which is a less rigorous updating of the rolls that led to its shrinking by less than 1%. The smaller size of the denominator – the size of the electorate – is one reason why the turnout percentages are high. Ghost voters and duplicate entries may have been eliminated in the process. Another reason for the higher turnout is that due to intense concerns regarding potential disenfranchisement around the SIR/SR, voters may have taken a keener interest in turning up at the booth. In Assam, for instance, large numbers of migrant voters travelled home to vote. In Kerala, anecdotal reporting suggests that its migrant voters from West Asia who travel during polling season could not do so this time due to the ongoing war.

The Election Commission of India, which is facing flak on various issues, took pride in the high turnout. CEC Gyanesh Kumar termed it a "historic testimony not only for India but for the entire democratic world." Chief Ministers of all three States hailed the voter enthusiasm as a mark of popular support for the continuation of their governments, while the Opposition in all three sought to interpret it as a bugle of change. That dispute will be settled when the votes are counted on May 4, but regardless of the outcome, voter enthusiasm is the sign of a healthy democracy. That precisely is the reason why the ECI should take on board in an enabling rather than a restrictive manner all the disputes regarding the SIR. While the SIR can clean up the voter rolls, it should never become a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Rebuilding ties

India must approach foreign relations with more pragmatism, less emotion

New Delhi's recent moves to re-engage diplomatically and hold Foreign Office Consultations with diplomats in Turkey and Azerbaijan is a considerable shift in the government's policy, especially over the past year. Since the India-Pakistan conflict and Operation Sindoor in May 2025, the government had expressed its anger not just at Pakistan, but at countries that were seen as supportive of Pakistan, diplomatically or militarily during the conflict. In particular, the Ministry of External Affairs had expressed its disappointment with statements made by Turkey, Azerbaijan and Malaysia, that questioned the government's decision to launch strikes on terror sites in Pakistan after the Pahalgam terror attacks. During briefings about Operation Sindoor, as the 96-hour military conflict from May 7-10 was named, the government left out envoys from countries that it felt had not expressed solidarity with India. In a military briefing in July, the deputy chief of army staff said India had had to contend with at least three adversaries on its border with Pakistan, including Turkey. Azerbaijan too was believed to have helped Pakistan with technological support. Trade and tourism to Turkey and Azerbaijan dropped significantly for several months, as calls to boycott them went out from influential quarters. During its evacuation of Indians from Iran after U.S.-Israel airstrikes on nuclear installations in June 2025, the MEA pointedly told those heading out by land routes to use Armenia and Turkmenistan, not either Turkey or Azerbaijan. In addition, foreign policy commentary suggested that India was building an alliance of India, Armenia, and Greece as a counter to their age-old rivals – Pakistan, Azerbaijan and Turkey – who had already formed a strong trilateral grouping. Given the heated rhetoric, and the freeze in diplomatic ties, the decision to send Secretary West in the MEA, Sibi George, to Baku to revive Foreign Office Consultations with Azerbaijani counterparts last week, and to invite the Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister to Delhi this week, are significant diplomatic moves that indicate that Baku and Ankara too feel that better bilateral relations are in their interests.

In a world more fraught with conflicts that fast spiral out of control, it is necessary for New Delhi to pick its diplomatic battles more carefully. The quick escalation from government demarches to online outrage and calls for boycotts have in the past few years had a detrimental impact on bilateral ties with close friends as well as neighbours. With countries that are adversaries as both Turkey and Azerbaijan have been, given their closeness to Pakistan and positions on the Kashmir dispute, New Delhi must consider its options with less emotion and more pragmatism. India has traditionally managed relations between rivals without allowing itself to be hyped up with Pakistan, or by falling into multilateral "camps".

An alternative to Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill

The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill proposes to statutorily take forward the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) that the Union government adopted during the COVID period without consultation with State governments. The Bill is under examination of a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), which offers an opportunity to teachers, students, State governments, and civil society to submit their amendment proposals. The Bill, as it stands, is a constitutional overreach. Entry 66 of the Union List gives limited and specific legislative power to Parliament only for coordination and determination of standards in higher education institutions (HEIs). Now, the VBSA Bill gives sole discretionary power to Union government-controlled councils to determine standards, conduct inspection, and exercise independent, unlimited powers and functions. Under the Bill, the Education Ministry has usurped the authority of allocating funds to HEIs.

The Bill does not envisage participation of higher education institutions in decision making. Bureaucratic overreach is written into each provision of it. Bureaucrats have been given the charge of transforming higher education. The Bill dilutes the University Grants Commission (UGC)'s consultative requirements. Section 13 of the UGC Act provides for inspections for the purpose of ascertaining the financial needs of a university or its standards of teaching, examination, and research. The UGC is statutorily required to undertake inspections only after consultation with the university. The VBSA Bill, which covers Central and State-funded universities as well as private universities, takes away the autonomy of the governing bodies of Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and Inter-University Centres.

In the name of "Bhartiya Knowledge", the Bill seeks to sow the seeds for Hindutva ideologies. It explicitly undermines the multi-cultural character of Indian knowledge. It allows bureaucratic control, centralised ways of prescriptive regulation, determination of standards, and accreditation process. The Bill seeks to promote hyper globalisation and to regulate based on outputs legitimised in global rankings. It does not seek outcomes for national innovation, self-reliance, and social justice. The Bill has been brought in to allow the Centre to withdraw from the obligation to promote education as a public-good enterprise for common good and push dependence on loans for higher education. It does not provide for the enforcement of affirmative action and reservation to SCs/STs and OBCs. It does not seek



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inter-institutional, inter-State and inter-regional justice.

Justice to States

The National Research Foundation (NRF) was proposed in the NEP 2020 to provide research funds to State universities (SUs). As of now, it has no provisions to provide block grants to SUs for integrated scholarship (teaching, research, and outreach). The State Higher Education Councils (SHECs) need to be represented on the councils envisaged under the VBSA Bill. The Councils should provide for consensual decision making to pursue a jointly strategic direction. The SHECs should also have a clear mandate and space for influencing the future of HEIs. The Bill should explicitly affirm the role and contribution of associations of students, teachers, and non-teaching staff in the governance of higher education by involving HEIs' senates and academic councils in gathering feedback on planning and progress.

Under the Bill, the Regulatory Council (Vinayam Parishad) is envisaged as the primary enforcer of governance and institutional norms. The Bill should not give the Centre a free hand and responsibility for formal recognition, authorisation, and closure of institutions. It now provides for graded financial penalties for regulatory violations. No institution should be closed without getting the consent of the government of the State where it is located. Under the Bill, the accreditation council will outsource the task of accreditation to a network of third-party accrediting institutions to circumvent the deliberative process and sideline the desirable outcomes that the society expects the HEIs to contribute to. The Accreditation Council (Gunvatta Parishad) provides for technology-driven quality assessment. The approach to regulation should be deliberative and process-oriented; it cannot be prescriptive.

Output-based evaluation (patents and publications), focussed on assessment of institutions based on educational outputs (learning levels and employability), may not have much to do with the desirable outcomes. Evaluation should be outcome- and impact-centric. The Standards Council (Manak Parishad), sitting in Delhi, cannot be expected to define standards and attributes for all types of higher education. The standards will have to be shaped industrial sector- and State-wise.

Constitutionally speaking, education is a subject under the Concurrent List. The VBSA Bill's provisions are applicable to all State governments. The State governments should have a role in the determination of standards,

accreditation, and regulations. The determination of standards, accreditation, and regulations cannot be a top-down affair. Currently, States fund their higher education systems. The Bill does not offer social and inter-regional equity. Under it, private sector higher education institutions do not provide for equity and social justice. The State governments can and should be expected to take care of priorities such as contribution to school education, environment, climate, local resources rejuvenation, and local economic development.

The amended Bill must give 50% weightage each to SHECs and the Union government's councils in the process of regulation, accreditation, and determination of standards, so as to focus on the goals of space for inter-regional equity, linguistic and cultural autonomy, social justice, innovation, fundamental science, new technologies, and global excellence. The Bill should also consider incorporating a provision for regional councils to accommodate emerging ecological and socio-technical aspects in their deliberations.

The amended Bill should provide for an alternative framework for governance of higher education as a shared responsibility to build enabling mechanisms into the structures to be developed for transformative governance. The Bill must have a separate Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) to disburse the funds available to the Ministry of Education for the integration of teaching, research, and outreach. The HEGC will have to provide not only regular funding to Central institutions but also generous funding to laggards run by the States to bridge the historical discrimination, structural gaps and voids, and deficits arising out of lack of support for research and outreach.

SHECs' role and contribution should be legislated to realise the vision and strategy of joint implementation of standards, accreditation, and regulation through the proposed verticals in the form of three separate councils. The councils for regulation, accreditation, and standards determination should be maintained by academics and professionals and have their own separate budgets. The SHECs should be duly funded by the HEGC to enable the process to become a shared responsibility. All the cesses that are presently provided for the implementation of the shared responsibility should be at the disposal of the HEGC. Who should regulate what should be explicitly stated in the amended Bill. The public purposes of higher education should be specifically mentioned to disburse allocations for the outcomes proposed for consideration.

State Higher
Education
Councils should
be represented
on the three
councils
envisaged
under the Bill

Bolstering deterrence through submarine dominance

On April 3, the word 'Aridhaman' found mention in Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's cryptic post on X. This prompted widespread speculation that it signalled the quiet commissioning of INS Aridhaman, the third submarine in the Indian Navy's SSBN (nuclear ballistic missile submarine) programme. Launched in 2009, the Indian Navy commissioned its first SSBN, INS Aridhaman, in 2016, followed by the second submarine, INS Arighat, in 2024. Speculation about the commissioning of INS Aridhaman assumed momentum since last year after Admiral Dinesh Tripathi, Chief of Naval Staff, confirmed that the submarine was in the final stages of its trials. The next submarine in this series, which is of the Aridhaman class as well, is likely to be commissioned next year.

Compared to its predecessors, INS Aridhaman and INS Arighat, INS Aridhaman has greater firing power and marks a gradual upgrade in the series of SSBNs commissioned by the Indian Navy. It is a larger 7000-tonne vessel, which can reportedly carry up to 24 K-15 Sagharika missiles, and up to eight nuclear-tipped K-4 or K-5 missiles. In contrast, the previous submarines in this series hold the capacity for carrying 12 K-15 Sagharika missiles and four K-4 missiles.

Through the commissioning of INS Aridhaman, India appears to have further emboldened its nuclear triad, which refers to New Delhi's capability to launch strategic nuclear delivery systems from land, sea, and air. Importantly, apart from India, the P5 countries – the U.S., Russia, China, France and the U.K. – possess the nuclear triad capabilities. In addition to this, the commissioning of the submarine further enhances India's deterrence capabilities in the maritime domain. Strengthening of



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sea-based deterrence is seen as especially critical, given that it has rapidly emerged as a key imperative in bolstering India's nuclear capabilities. To be sure, India's nuclear outlook is anchored on its 'no first use' policy. However, the strategic environment in the Indian Ocean is continually worsening, led by increasing Chinese presence in the region by way of research and survey vessels which possess dual-use technologies and run the risk of being deployed for the purpose of intelligence gathering. Sea-based deterrence is indeed critical to forestall adversarial manoeuvres by China and even Pakistan.

Notably, the Indian Ocean has for long remained dormant due to the lack of any significant maritime security conflict. However, in today's time, the changing nature of warfare, which possesses the possibility of swift transition from one domain to the other, makes it essential to strengthen deterrence capabilities across all domains – land, air, and sea. More recently, the evolving conflict in West Asia serves as a crucial reminder of how modern warfare is not limited to a single domain anymore. What started as American and Israeli air campaigns against Iran has quickly assumed a critical maritime character, whereby the Strait of Hormuz has now emerged as the epicentre shaping much of the future of this war. Furthermore, last year, Operation Sindoor, India's measured counter-terror response against Pakistan, too demonstrated that a naval dimension to the campaign could have indeed been a possibility. Wars in this era do not belong with different domains in silos but rather remain susceptible to spilling over to other domains as well. This complexity of modern warfare underlines why

possessing nuclear triad capabilities, especially boosted deterrence, will continue to remain a key priority for India's national security apparatus.

Furthermore, the SSBN project has significantly boosted India's defence establishment's quest for self-reliance in defence production. With active conflicts persisting in different strategic pockets of the world, a strain in defence supply chains appears to be on the horizon. For India, the prolonged Russia-Ukraine war has spurred momentum in strategies to work towards self-reliance in defence production given Moscow's importance for India as a traditional defence partner.

In addition to this, plans to soon induct a fourth vessel of the Aridhaman class is likely to guide India's SSBN programme going forward. Importantly, New Delhi also seeks to commission India's first fully indigenously designed nuclear attack submarine (SSN) by 2036, with the commissioning of the second in the programme in 2038. The rapid strides taken by the Indian Navy in building its nuclear-powered submarine programme signals that submarine dominance is fast emerging as a key component in scripting New Delhi's strategy to bolster deterrence.

Going forward, the key challenges confronting the Indian Navy in this domain are likely going to emanate from how efficiently New Delhi balances spending its resources on upgrading its submarines programme with how it inducts new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and autonomous systems in design and production of these vessels. At a time when the roster of the Indian Navy's assets is continually compared with that of China, it will be critical for New Delhi to keep pace with Beijing.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Sign of a democracy alive

The turnouts in the Assembly polls in Assam, Kerala, and Puducherry have proved that the Indian voter still reposes considerable faith in the electoral process and is determined to make his or her vote count. Although the Election Commission has carried out the Modi government's mandate of undertaking a systematic disenfranchisement campaign, the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls, and has deprived crores of Indians the right to vote guaranteed

under the Constitution, those who survived the onslaught are keen on voting and this is a sign that the Indian democracy is still alive and kicking.

C.V. Aravind
Bengaluru

Towering cricketer

In the passing away of Sri C.D. Gopinath, Tamil Nadu Cricket has lost a towering figure who was a prominent player along with late A.G. Kripal Singh in the sixties. I remember people flocking to MCC grounds (presently MA Chidambaram stadium) regularly on Sundays to

watch them entertaining the crowds with their batting. Gopinath was a leg side player while Kripal Singh enthralled the audience with silky late cuts. Gopinath was a shrewd captain who took Tamil Nadu Cricket to great heights in zonal and national competitions. I wish TMCC will honour him by instituting some commemorative awards.

V. Jagadeesan
Chennai

The passing of cricketer C.D. Gopinath at the age of 90 marks the end of a

remarkable life. Over the decades, he earned respect not only for his professional accomplishments, but also for his integrity and humility. Gopinath's contributions extended beyond his immediate field, as he remained actively engaged in public life and social causes.

Rukma Sharma
Jalandhar

Temple entry

The Supreme Court has remarked that we must 'follow the sampradaya' ("Follow rituals, observances of a temple or

stay out: SC", April 10). Temple etiquette, such as wearing a dhoti or removing one's shirt, do not cause the exclusion of a certain group of people. Menstruation, however, is not a choice like a dress code; it is biological. If we had always followed temple rituals and observances, would the landmark temple entry reforms of the 20th century ever have taken place? At that time, the exclusion of "lower" castes was defended using similar arguments of 'sampradaya'. Menstruation is still widely considered impure and

many families in Kerala still restrict their menstruating members from certain rituals and social events. The Court's stance risks reinforcing such beliefs.

Rishi Suniti
Kerala



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GROUND ZERO



Evicted villagers show their voters' ID, now deemed invalid, in Kachutali in Kamrup Metropolitan district of Assam. RITU RAJ KONWAR

In Assam, first evicted, now erased

After a revision of electoral rolls in Assam, many people, mostly Bengali-speaking Muslims evicted from government land, lost their voting rights and now hold voter IDs deemed invalid. The fear of being made non-citizens is strongest at Kachutali village, about 30 km east of Guwahati, where more than 2,000 voters could not be a part of the democratic process of electing a new government, reports **Rahul Karmakar**

Babur Ali, 62, and his son Mukaddas Ali, 33, were among the approximately 350 people who had gathered outside two polling stations — Sonapur Pathar Lower Primary School and a government facility at Kachutali Part 1 — in central Assam's Kamrup Metropolitan district on April 9. They hoped against hope that the officials beyond the Lakshman Rekha, a line at least 300 metres from the entrance to each polling booth, which they were told not to cross, would restore their voting rights. These 350 women and men represented more than 2,000 people across three parts of Kachutali, who had ceased to exist as voters after the Special Revision (SR) of electoral rolls was conducted in Assam between November 2025 and February 2026.

All the adults of Babur's 15-member family demonstrated outside the Sonapur Pathar Lower Primary School, barring his youngest son, Samsul. Around the same time, 20-year-old Samsul cast his vote at a booth in the Chenga Assembly constituency of western Assam's Barpeta district. He hoped his vote would make a difference to his family, who are now about 120 kilometres from where their home once stood before an eviction drive in September 2024. Samsul used the postal address of his maternal uncle in Barpeta district to enlist as a voter. He listed his father's voter ID number in the "relative" column, even though the Election Commission had removed his father's name from the voters' list in Kachutali, under the Di-moria Assembly constituency.

"We are happy for the youngest member of our family, but we fail to understand how the government accepted him as a voter after deleting the name of our father, who has been voting at Kachutali since 1985," says Mukaddas.

Mukaddas was a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader and contested the 2018 panchayat polls. He thought his association with the ruling BJP made his family immune to any drive against the 'Miya' people — a pejorative for Bengali-speaking or Bengal-origin Muslims — that the party unleashed after it retained power in 2021.

He was wrong; his house was among the first 150 that the local administration began demolishing on September 9, 2024, to clear about 100 bighas or 33 acres of notified tribal land. A year later, he found his name missing from the voters' list along with some 2,000 others. They were among the 2.43 lakh voters removed from the revised electoral rolls released in February.

"If my removal from the voters' list is a message that I am an Indian no longer, how was it that I was allowed to contest an election and even given a card by the Kamrup Metropolitan District Commissioner after my documents were cleared," he asks.

Displaced by the river

According to government records, Assam has 30 tribal blocks and 17 tribal belts notified decades ago to safeguard the land rights of the State's protected class. Abdul Aziz, 91, and Jayvan Haque,

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If my removal from the voters' list is a message that I am an Indian no longer, how was it that I was allowed to contest an election after my documents were cleared?
MUKADDAS ALI
Former BJP rural polls contestant

80, say they were not aware of the status of the land in Kachutali when they bought it.

"We have agreements for land purchased from the Karbi tribal people in the 1980s. We also have the receipts of *khajna* (land tax) paid till the time of our eviction. The government says these land documents are *kutcha* (not legal) and we have no right to live here," says Haque, who often spends his time staring blankly from the veranda of the Kachutali Jamia Masjid at the spot where his house once stood.

About 80 evicted families are now living in cramped shanties around the mosque, which was spared during the 2024 demolition. Haque and Aziz are from Mayang Gazarbi, a village that disappeared over 40 years ago after the Brahmaputra river washed away its last homes. Located about 16 km north-east of Kachutali, the village lay near the meeting point of the Brahmaputra and its southern tributary, the Kolang river. It also sat at the junction of three districts — Kamrup (before it was divided), Darrang, and Morigaon. All the evicted families in Kachutali say they were displaced by the river from riverbank villages around the tri-junction of these districts.

"We would perhaps not have come here had the Brahmaputra not swallowed up our riverbank homes and homesteads. Some of us still grow crops on the *chars* (sandbars) near our original homes, apart from the farmlands we purchased from the tribal people, which we no longer have access to," Haque says.

Holding his voter ID, now rendered useless, Haque says his family faced a similar situation years ago. During the 1979 revision of electoral rolls for the Mangaldai Lok Sabha by-election, a cousin was included in a list of about 36,000 people marked as 'doubtful voters'. Mayang Gazarbi was part of that constituency.

The list sparked the Assam Agitation of 1979-85, which aimed to drive out non-citizens from the State. Over time, "non-citizen" started to mean Miya or Bangladeshi or the more politically correct term, illegal immigrants. "We have never been made to feel wanted since, but things were not as bad as now," says Aziz.



The deserted Kachutali polling station on April 9. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Soon after taking charge as Chief Minister in May 2021, Himanta Biswa Sarma announced his government's resolve to free various categories of government land, including forests and community grazing grounds, from encroachment. The drive began with Garukhuti in Darrang district in September 2021. The All Assam Tribal Sangha and other indigenous organisations began mounting pressure on the government for a similar action across the tribal blocks and belt. The Kamrup Metropolitan district authorities issued a notice to the Kachutali residents in September 2024, allegedly giving them three days to vacate the land they had occupied.

The eviction began on September 9, 2024, to clear about 100 bighas of land. Tensions escalated when the displaced villagers reoccupied the land three days later and clashed with the officials who resumed the demolition process. Two men, Haider Ali and Jubahir Ali, died in police firing, while 33 others were injured in the clash. A group of 48 evicted people approached the Supreme Court, which issued a stay order on September 30, 2024. However, residents say the authorities carried out another eviction drive in April 2025, demolishing the last of the houses and structures in the targeted area. At the end of the operation, more than 650 families were relocated temporarily to three camps within a kilometre of the area they were evicted from.

"The eviction notice was not as scary as the one we received in November 2024 from the electoral registration officer. It said that our names might be deleted from the voters' list because we have ceased to be ordinary residents of Kachutali," says 34-year-old Akkas Ali, a farmer who has been surviving on occasional work in the urban centres nearby.

"We were told to reapply (for enlisting as voters) from wherever we came. We reapplied in Kachutali because we had nowhere else to go, but our applications were rejected. At the District Commissioner's office in Guwahati, we were advised to get a certificate (confirming they are residents in an area under the jurisdiction) from the *gaonbarah* (village chief), who said we needed a valid voter ID to get the certificate. Our Aadhaar cards, ration cards, and other documents were ignored. It was as if everyone conspired to deny us our voting rights," he adds.

The office of the district electoral officer told the media that the notices served on the evicted people and the action thereafter were part of a special summary revision of the electoral roll. Jiten Kakati, the *gaonbarah*, merely said he had followed a certain process.

Depriving people of voting rights

In 2025, the Chief Minister said over 1.29 lakh bighas or 42,000 acres out of an approximately 29 lakh bighas (about 3,900 sq. km) of government land had been freed from encroachers. He also said individuals evicted from illegally occupied land will have their names removed from the voters' list. Ahead of the April 9 Assembly polls, he sought another five years for the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government to complete the eviction mission and "break the backbone of Miya's politically".

Legal experts say the government has the right to evict encroachers from its land, preferably after giving them adequate time and adopting a humanitarian approach. "You can evict a bona fide Indian voter from a place where he or she is not legally permitted to settle. Encroachment of land is a criminal offence that needs to be dealt with accordingly. The criminality of the act does not empower the State administration to deprive people of their voting right, which is connected to their citizenship status," says Fazluzzaman Mazumdar, a Gauhati High Court advocate.

"The conditions with Form 7 issued by the Election Commission say that a voter can be deleted from the electoral roll if he or she is dead or has migrated permanently to another place and has enrolled there or if someone complains

against him or her, provided it is legally proved," Mazumdar says. He adds that the deletion of voters for an unrelated illegal act is unfair. They have the right to appeal to the Election Commission for enrolment. If that does not work, they can file a writ petition at the High Court under Article 226 of the Constitution of India (for the enforcement of fundamental rights). "Unfortunately, the affected people are mostly poor and uneducated," he adds.

Ibrahim Ali, a 45-year-old trader, says the villagers lost a fortune to stay the eviction in vain. "We can rebuild a house, but how can we earn for it when we don't have access to our farmlands? Most of us had to sell our livestock because we had no place to rear them. Under such circumstances, we cannot imagine going to the court to restore our voting rights," he says.

D-voter scare

Most two decades after putting a question mark on the citizenship of a section of voters in the Mangaldai Lok Sabha constituency, the Election Commission issued a circular in July 1997, directing the Assam government to remove non-citizens from the electoral rolls. Assam, thus, became the only State with a 'D-voter' or 'doubtful voter' category in its electoral rolls. During the intensive revision of the electoral rolls that followed, almost 3.7 lakh people were marked 'D'. They were barred from contesting elections and casting their votes.

In 2005, when a house-to-house survey was carried out by the poll panel, a large number of people marked 'D' in 1997 could not be traced. This list was officially revised to 1.81 lakh. Almost two decades later, Chief Minister Sarma said Assam has 97,987 'D-voters' and the tag was removed from more than 89,000 people from 1997 to 2023. He also said that 26,144 'D-voters' received notices from the Foreigners' Tribunal, while 11,819 cases were pending.

The Foreigners' Tribunals are quasi-judicial courts that adjudicate the citizenship of a person referred by the Assam police's Border wing, which is tasked with detecting and detaining suspected foreigners. Based on documents, the tribunals either declare the suspected foreigners as Indians or send them to detention or transit camps, to be eventually "deported to the country they came from".

Announcing the SR exercise for Assam on November 17, 2025, the Election Commission specified that the details of 'D-voters' should not be included during the house-to-house verification. It said that the particulars of all such voters have to be carried forward to the draft electoral rolls without any change. Any modification in a D-voter's status, including removal or deletion of the 'doubtful' tag, can be made only based on an order from the Foreigners' Tribunal or a court.

"We were never doubtful voters, but the government put us in a new category — deleted voters — not because we are foreigners but because they say we occupied lands we were not supposed to, although we have land purchase deeds," Ibrahim says.

The residents of Kachutali hope the next government will settle them or allot them some space to live without having to wear the non-voter tag on their foreheads. "We did not expect the BJP leaders to come to us offering help. Members of other political parties, including the Congress and All India United Democratic Front, who claim to be friends of the minorities, let us down; they did not even visit us. So, we are not sure if we will get justice after a new government is formed," Haque says.

The evictees fear that deletion from the electoral roll was the first step to robbing them of their citizenship and deporting them. "A government that can make us homeless can also kill us. Being dead should be better than living a life of uncertainty," Annaf Ali, 65, says.

The Statesman Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India - founded 1818

Return Window

As NASA's Artemis II mission prepares for its high-speed re-entry and scheduled splashdown in the Pacific off San Diego, it marks more than the end of a test flight. It marks the quiet return of a capability the world had not exercised in over half a century - the ability to send humans deep into space and bring them back safely.

That capability, once demonstrated during the Apollo programme, had long existed more as legacy than as living practice. Artemis II changes that. The Space Launch System has performed as intended, the Orion spacecraft has sustained human life beyond Earth's orbit, and the unpredictable interface between crew and machine has been tested in real conditions.

Delays, if they come, will not be failures but signals of system stress, revealing where Artemis is a durable programme architecture or still a collection of ambitious, loosely aligned missions. There is also a wider strategic context. With India's Chandrayaan-3 and China's Chang'e-6 demonstrating advanced robotic exploration, the renewed push for human missions reflects not just scientific curiosity, but geopolitical positioning.

When Orion descends toward the Pacific, it will close one chapter. Whether it opens another depends not on what has been proven, but on what can be sustained.

Platformed Servitude

In India's cities, the hiring of domestic help is being quietly transformed from a social arrangement to a digital transaction. What was once negotiated through neighbourhood networks is now mediated by platforms such as Urban Company and newer entrants like Pronto, promising speed, standardisation, and reliability.

The Buddhist Circuit initiative across six northeastern states further extends this logic into India's most ecologically rich and underexplored regions. The global Buddhist tourism market, drawing travellers from Japan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and an aspirational Chinese middle class, is one the UNWTO has consistently identified as among the world's most undercaptured faith-based propositions.

Over time, incentives narrowed, penalties increased and workers absorbed greater risk. Domestic work is now entering that same trajectory, but with an added layer of invisibility because it takes place behind closed doors.

What is missing from this transformation is any meaningful expansion of labour rights. There is no institutional framework comparable to the protections envisaged under the Code on Social Security 2020, nor any serious move toward collective bargaining. The platforms have digitised employment without redistributing power.

But this efficiency rests on compressing the worker's time, mobility, and dignity into a tightly optimised service model. India is not witnessing the modernisation of domestic work so much as its reorganisation. The informality has not disappeared; it has been systematised. And unless regulation catches up, the future of this vast workforce may be defined not by empowerment, but by a more efficient form of precarity.

Tourism Renaissance

There is an argument for Indian tourism that transcends WTTC projections: the argument from civilisational identity. India is the only living civilisation that has sustained an unbroken thread of intellectual, spiritual, and artistic tradition across five millennia.

Union Budget 2026-27 marks a qualitative leap in India's approach to Tourism Governance - moving from sporadic interventions to a structured, multi-dimensional policy architecture aligned with the civilisational ambitions of Viksit Bharat@2047. There is a particular kind of intellectual excitement that arises when a Union Budget does not merely tinker at the edges of a sector but fundamentally reimagines it.

To appreciate Budget 2026-27's significance, one must first understand India's current structural position in global tourism. According to the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Development Index 2024, India ranks 39th among 119 nations - a remarkable climb from 54th in 2021. More tellingly, India is one of only three countries globally to secure top-10 rankings across all three resource pillars: Natural Resources (6th), Cultural Resources (9th), and Non-Leisure Resources (9th).

The budget's tourism provisions can be analytically organised into five thematic clusters: experiential destination development, human capital formation, sectoral diversification, fiscal facilitation, and digital enablement. On experiential destination development, the government's commitment to transforming fifteen archaeological sites - Lothal, Dholavira, Rakhigarhi, Samath, Hastinapur, and Leh Palace among them - into curated, immersive cultural destinations represents a paradigm shift in heritage governance.

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THE KATHMANDU POST

Fuel frenzy

The escalating conflict in West Asia and the subsequent disruption of the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz, have triggered a severe economic tremor across the world. Nepal included. With petrol prices reaching a record Rs202 per litre in the Valley after the state-owned monopoly increased rates for the third time in less than a month, the structural fragility of a nation dependent on imported fossil fuels is undeniable.

Approximately Rs 300 billion in national capital is drained annually to pay for petroleum products. The current instability threatens the foundational economic pillars of agriculture, industry and services, placing nearly 25 percent of the Gross Domestic Product at immediate risk of sectoral disruption. While the demand for electric vehicles is currently surging by 50 to 60 percent, the path to a green economy is obstructed by a confluence of rising costs.

Letters To The Editor

Male dominated

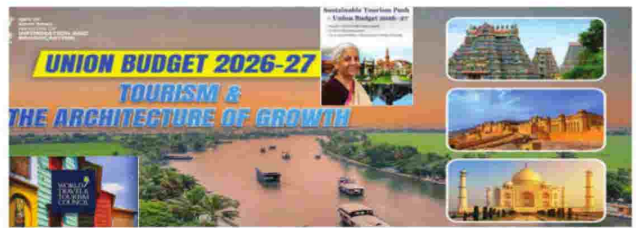
Sir, The Nari Shakti piece by Prime Minister Narendra Modi published today on the Perspective page is undoubtedly commendable.

The bill was first proposed in 1996, it took more than 30 years for its implementation in our robustly patriarchal environment and specifically the government.

Also increasing the number of seats from 543 to 816, a 50 per cent expansion, implies 273 seats will be reserved for women. This is a re-consolidation of the male dominated Indian parliament it seems to me.

Consensus

Sir, This refers to the article "Let us empower our Nari Shakti together" penned by Prime Minister Narendra Modi published in today's Perspective page. While the prime minister's passionate call to countrymen in general and sitting MPs of both houses in particular to remain committed to women's empowerment and facilitate the passage of the bill to advance women's reservation is heart-warming, the



and culturally extraordinary - yet underleveraged - region. The global Buddhist tourism market, drawing travellers from Japan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and an aspirational Chinese middle class, is one the UNWTO has consistently identified as among the world's most undercaptured faith-based propositions.



The writers are, respectively, Director and Assistant Professor at the Indian Institute of Tourism & Travel Management, an autonomous body under the Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India

identifies as the primary determinant of tourist experience quality: the human interface at the point of cultural encounter. The establishment of five Regional Medical Hubs - integrating AYUSH services, diagnostics, and medical value tourism facilitation through PPP frameworks - positions India within a global market estimated at over USD 100 billion (IMTJ).

India's hosting of the first Global Big Cat Summit in 2026, with 95 range countries represented, translates India's extraordinary conservation success - five of the world's seven big cat species call India home - into a sustained predictability in a volatile global market.



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discussion in Parliament should be cordial and accommodative of the shades of opposition viewpoints on the issue to build a consensus. The decision should be collective, as the prime minister has urged and not controversial.

The recent SIR exercise is shocking evidence of a glass ceiling.

It is not revealing that the number of women voters has dipped to its lowest in over a decade following the SIR exercise - 969 voters for every 1000 male voters.

That women in some other major states have also been disenfranchised is similarly appalling. Married women relocating to their marital homes are said to have borne the brunt of the exclusionary process.

Yours, etc., Ardhendu Chatterjee, Durgapur, 9 April.

Light that shows India the way

NARENDRA MODI

Today, 11 April, is a deeply special day for all of us. It is the birth anniversary of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, one of India's greatest social reformers and a guiding light for generations.

Mahatma Phule was a great reformer. In addition to that, his was a life of moral courage, restless enquiry, and unshakable commitment to social good.

Born in the great state of Maharashtra in 1827, Mahatma Phule emerged from modest beginnings. But his initial hardships never stood in the way of his learning, his courage, or his commitment to society.

forever; whatever the challenges may be, one must work hard, acquire knowledge, and mitigate those challenges instead of doing nothing about it.

From his school days, young Jyotirao was deeply curious and became a voracious reader, often reading books far beyond what children his age were expected to engage with.

Throughout his life, learning and education became central to Mahatma Phule's mission. He recognised with rare clarity that knowledge is not a privilege to be guarded, but a force to be shared.

Therefore, if schools are to be opened, they should first be opened for girls. He worked to create a new social imagination in which the classroom became an

instrument of justice and equality. His vision for education inspires us today. Over the last decade, we have worked to make research and innovation a cornerstone for the youth of India.

Due to his knowledge and wisdom, Mahatma Phule developed a strong understanding of areas such as agriculture, healthcare, and rural development. He often said the injustice towards our farmers and workers weakens our society.

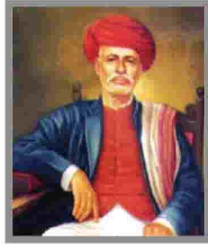
Mahatma Phule opined, 'ज्ञानमयं समाजतिलकं सन्मानं अधिकां मिलतं नहीत, तोपयतं परं स्वाधीनमिच्छतं नहीत। True freedom cannot be achieved until everyone

in society is granted equal rights). And for that, he built institutions that translated this vision into action, contributing to a just society. The Satyashodhak Samaj, founded by him, was one of the most important social reform movements in modern India.

His personal life, too, carried lessons in courage, always working and being among the people took a toll on his health. But even the most serious health challenges did not dim his resolve.

No remembrance of Mahatma Phule can be complete without a respectful mention of Savitribai Phule, who was herself one of the tallest reformers of our nation. As one of India's pioneering women teachers, she played a defining role in advancing education for girls.

I fondly recall my visit to Pune in 2022, when I had offered tributes to Mahatma Phule at his grand state in the city. As we mark the beginning of his bicentenary year, the most fitting tribute to Mahatma



Jyotirao Phule is about renewal. Renewal of our commitment to subjects close to his heart, such as education. Renewal of our sensitivity to injustice.

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

'HP cannot run on loans'

Six-time MLA, Jai Ram Thakur (61) has a strong personal and political base in the Seraj constituency of Mandi district in Himachal Pradesh.

His elevation as the Chief Minister in 2017 marked a generational shift in Himachal Pradesh politics and the beginning of a trend where leaders from humble, grassroots backgrounds could rise to the state's highest office.

Unlike his predecessors, Thakur came from a modest rural family in Mandi district, rising through the party ranks. His ascent symbolised meritocratic leadership, grassroots connect, and a new era for Himachal's politics.

Q: Himachal Pradesh is facing rising debt and revenue pressures. How serious is the situation, and is the state heading towards a financial emergency?

At the financial situation of Himachal Pradesh is indeed a matter of serious concern. Over the past few years, the state's debt burden has increased significantly, and the government is increasingly relying on borrowings to manage routine expenditure.

Q: Which government policies do you believe have worsened Himachal Pradesh's fiscal situation?

Several decisions taken by the present government have contributed to the growing financial pressure in Himachal Pradesh.

to the growing financial pressure in Himachal Pradesh. One major issue is the increasing dependence on loans to meet regular expenses.

Q: What are other reasons behind the current financial crisis? Do you think the politics of guarantees has worsened the state's finances?

Reckless appointments have also contributed to the worsening financial situation. The appointment of Chief Ministers, Secretaries, advisors, and Officers on Special Duty with cabinet rank appears to have been done largely to accommodate political associates.

Q: In your view, has the government failed to control spending or boost revenue?

The government must cut unnecessary expenditure, improve revenue generation, and bring greater transparency in financial decisions to achieve stability.

Q: The government has deferred salaries for ministers and officials as an austerity measure. Do you see this as necessary or just symbolic?

The decision to defer salaries appears to be an attempt to send a message to the public and project a sense of seriousness.

my tenure ended, the debt had reached around Rs 69,500 crore. Now, after three years of the Sukhji government, the debt burden has crossed the Rs 1 lakh crore mark, which means that more than Rs 40,000 crore has been added.

Q: Is Himachal's fiscal crisis real, or is the government overstating for political gain?

We have to acknowledge that the financial condition of the state is indeed challenging. However, the steps that should have been taken to address the situation have been disappointing.

Q: If the financial crisis is real, should there be an all-party consensus on economic reforms instead of playing blame games?

Yes, definitely. The truth is that responsibility must be fixed. Considering the state's financial health, there should be no political appeasement in the name of guarantees.

Q: As a senior BJP leader, will you raise Himachal's financial concerns with the Centre or push for a special package?

Definitely. Recently, I met the Prime Minister, the Finance Minister, and the Home Minister and raised the issue of the much-needed financial assistance for the state.

Q: Centre-State relations are a key political issue. How would you assess the current ties between Himachal Pradesh and the Centre? Is the state getting adequate support?

Our state has consistently received strong support from the Centre. The state received Rs 25,350 crore in 2021-22, Rs 23,073 crore in 2022-23, Rs 25,815 crore in 2023-24, Rs 25,813 crore in 2024-25, Rs 26,540 crore in 2025-26, and is expected to receive Rs 25,634 crore in 2026-27.

ruled against the move and directed that the deducted salaries be paid back with 6 per cent interest.

Q: How do you see the state government's decision to impose taxes or introduce a new cess?

Instead of imposing additional taxes, the state government should focus on generating revenue through better economic management without burdening the public. The decision to impose a widow and orphan cess on petrol and high-speed diesel was also not a healthy step.

Q: The government argues hill states face structural disadvantages. Is a special financial package from the Centre justified?

Considering the present scenario, it is evident that the state needs support from the Centre. The state government should carefully plan and work out a clear case to present the situation and seek a special financial package.

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Just a few days ago, the state received significant support in the form of an interest-free loan of Rs 3920 crore for 50 years under the Centre's 'Pride of Hills' scheme.

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Q: What is your reaction to the state government's recent budget?

As it is disappointing and reflects a sense of despair in my view, it is a complete failure, as it appears far removed from ground realities and lacks both vision and direction.

For the first time in the history of the state, the budget size has actually decreased by around Rs 3,500 crore compared to the previous budget, which raises serious concerns about the government's economic management and priorities.



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100 Years Ago News Items

RESUMING DEBT DISCUSSION

FRENCH PAYMENTS & THE BUDGET

It is understood that the French Finance Minister, M. Raoul Fretz, has been asked to make arrangements which, in the absence of anything at present unforeseen, will enable him to come to London in a week's time.

It was arranged that the payments should be smaller in the earlier years, increasing later, and it is assumed that Mr. Churchill in the Budget speech fixed for April 26 will desire to include in his calculations the amount to be received from France during the coming financial year.

DILATORY COUNCIL

POIGNANT END TO HOPES OF RESTORATION

It is absolutely certain that when Sir Herbert Barker, the manipulative surgeon began to practise, the medical profession was not alive to the importance of his methods.

That they are now widely practised is due undoubtedly to Dr. Asham's bravest and on behalf of the profession's best interests.

The Medical Council must now regret its inaction. His death removes a courageous figure, and it is pitiable to think that the last act which would have brought solace was denied him.

Crossword | No. 293431

Crossword puzzle grid with numbers 1-16 indicating starting points for words.

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Grid showing the solution to yesterday's crossword puzzle.

ACROSS

- 9 Jagger carrying a cut-price book (9)
10 Article written about one following crook (5)
11 Hide as soon as having entered state (7)
12 Woodcutter's commercials for broadcast (4)
13 Wave where tense friend abroad welcomes our settler (7)
14 See 21 Down
15 Speaker pretty terse before start of session (7)

DOWN

- 1 10 of 5 behind credit offered by wine society? (15)
2 Thus denied start, stopped by this writer's book (8)
3 Best Frenchman brought into cup game (4)
4 Tailored fragments for an admirer (8)
5 Unfortunate wife to look to Chuck? (7)
6 Jolly Jack seen aboard sturdy launch (5,3)
7 Separate identity given in disreputable bar (6)
8 Larger ears on this adult French palatine tweaked (8)
9 Occasionally liable, tax ultimately high (4)

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

thehindubusinessline.

SATURDAY • APRIL 11, 2026

Fair deal

SEBI must move on restoring open market buybacks

The world over, securities market laws look favourably upon companies buying back their own shares. Indian regulations have however flip-flopped on this issue. Since April 2025, companies have been barred from buying back shares through the open market route. However, share buybacks are necessary for the free flow of capital within the market ecosystem. Therefore, it is good to see a Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) consultation paper, which proposes to bring back buybacks through the open market route.



There were two major reasons why open market buybacks were frowned upon. One, they were seen as inequitable to shareholders. In the tender offer route, all shareholders get an opportunity to offer their shares to the company, which are then proportionately accepted. In market buybacks, only select investors who sell in the market while the buyback window is open get to participate. However, market buybacks are not as unfair as they seem. Regulations require companies to make public announcements of buyback programmes much ahead of the event, giving all shareholders the chance to participate. Buyback announcements also trigger a rerating of the stock, so they offer a good exit opportunity to all shareholders, irrespective of whether they participate in the buyback.

Two, the taxation of buybacks as 'deemed dividends' from October 2024 led to tax arbitrage. Investors ended up paying high rates of tax at slab rates on shares sold to the company during the buyback, while share sales outside of this attracted lower capital gains tax. This anomaly was removed in the latest Budget, with buybacks now subject to the same capital gains tax regime as market share sales. On worries about vested interests manipulating stock prices through buybacks, SEBI regulations have checks and balances in place. Companies cannot buy back shares from their promoters or persons in control. They cannot launch buyback offers if their shares are thinly traded. Open market buybacks can also be executed only through the exchanges, and companies cannot buy more than 25 per cent of the average trading volume of their share on any given day. Their purchase orders must also be placed within a 1 per cent range of the last traded price of the share. These rules effectively prevent vested interests from misusing market buybacks.

SEBI's proposal is timely. One, India Inc is sitting on a cash pile, with many companies reluctant to invest in capital expansion. Buybacks by such companies will allow surplus capital to flow back to investors, who may redeploy it in more productive avenues. Two, buybacks shrink companies' equity base and lift their per share earnings. They can help correct valuation excesses in sections of India Inc. Most important, with foreign investors on a relentless selling spree and domestic institutions the only buyers, Indian equities are struggling with an over-supply problem. Corporate buybacks can absorb some of this excess and shore up investor confidence.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



MADAN SABNAVIS

An issue that has been flagged of late is the outstanding forwards position of the RBI. It is around \$68 billion as of January-end at the shorter end, meaning thereby that this amount will go out of the system in course of time. This is probably one of the higher positions in the last two decades or so, with high numbers being witnessed during Covid and the Ukraine war.

Critics subtract this amount from forex reserves, which are currently \$698 billion as on March 20 to gauge the effective reserves of the country. In fact, often this is subtracted from the foreign currency assets which was at \$558 billion as of March 20 to paint a grim picture of available resources being just \$490 billion. At the rate of around \$65 per month of merchandise imports, the import cover ratio is spoken of as being 7.5 months against the conventional ratio of 10.7 months when aggregate reserves are reckoned. How to make sense of these forwards positions?

FORWARDS POSITION

The forwards position is a net outstanding forward contracts of the RBI after all their buy (long) and sell (short) positions are considered. Hence the \$68 billion position is the potential outflow of dollars from the RBI over the coming months/years. These positions arise due to three main reasons.

The first is that there have been several buy-sell swaps of dollars often in the range of \$5-10 billion undertaken by the RBI to infuse liquidity into the system. These could be for 1-3 years and will stay on the books until they are due. Such swaps are an integral part of the liquidity management framework of the RBI which targets the weighted average call rate through various measures. This measure really has nothing to do with managing the currency and is more in the nature of a monetary measure.

Second, the RBI sells (or buys) dollars in this market to send strong announcement signals to the market. Typically a sale in future tells the market that there will be infusions at a later date which, in turn, will keep speculation in check. Intuitively this is a messaging system and does not involve any sale of dollars in the spot market. This has become particularly more frequent starting from Covid time where forwards have been combined with spot sales to achieve the desired results.

Third, the RBI takes positions in the NDF market, which is the non-deliverable forwards segment, which is housed overseas. This offshore

Getting a grip on the forwards position of RBI

PRUDENT APPROACH. There has been adroit management of the RBI in this respect



GETTY IMAGES

market by definition is cash settled meaning thereby that on the due date the gains and losses are cash settled.

There is no physical transfer of dollars which were dealt with. Several banks do their hedging in this market based on their domestic positions in the domestic market. Also this is an open field for speculative activity where one need not put foreign currency on the table and still hope to make gains.

Therefore, the outstanding position needs to be viewed against the backdrop of these modes of transaction of the RBI in the forwards market. Further, these positions can be rolled over just as is done in any derivative market including commodities where deliveries are not common. This means that on the due date of expiry of the contract the same can be extended for a further period of time. Therefore, forex management by

RBI is complex and is done based on the situation to ensure that there is less volatility in the market.

CROWDING OUT RESERVES

Intuitively, it can be said that treating this \$68 billion as a necessary outflow at various periods of time need not be true. Also during the course of the time period, the RBI would independently be taking buy (long) positions in the market which will even out these payments. The RBI could also be buying dollar as spot transactions from banks in the ordinary course of activity to stabilise a strengthening rupee. Therefore, the crowding out of forex reserves due to payments on the forwards position is only a theoretical possibility and rarely will materialise and there will always be countervailing action taken to ensure that there is stability in the system.

In this context, data on the same over the last 2 years can be examined which can put the present numbers in context. The RBI presents data based on maturities of up to 1 month, 1-3 months, 3 months to one year and above 1 year. As can be surmised, those beyond a year would involve largely the swap transactions undertaken to infuse liquidity into the system. Quite significantly, the ratio of maturities of above 1 year to total outstanding positions has been increasing since February 2025 from around 11.3 per cent to almost 60 per cent by January

2026. This also means that this was a fallout of the RBI providing liquidity rather than intervening in the forex market.

Now, the sum total of all outstanding positions during this period of 22 months, which were maturing in one month period, was \$325 billion. This would be the case if all deliveries of these short positions had taken place as scheduled. However, forex currency reserves (gold and SDRs are excluded to better capture the movements in only the currency assets) increased by \$13.4 billion during this period. This means that there have been several rollovers of contracts or compensatory long positions taken in the course of the period to ensure that this did not result in depletion of reserves.

What all this means is that there is adroit management of the forex position by the RBI all the time to ensure there is smooth activity in the market. This task involves looking at both the forex market as well as the liquidity issues continuously as they are inexorably linked with one another. As a central bank, both the objectives have to be met with measures that can impact the market. This in turn is straightened out through other measures like open market operations when swaps result in liquidity management issues for the banks.

The author is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda; views are personal

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Unfortunate fallout of cyber crime investigations

There were 2.8 million cybercrime complaints in 2025. But investigation has led to unfair account freeze of small businesses

Ganga Narayan Rath
Chirayu Sharma

In the shadows of the digital boom, a new kind of "vottage industry" has emerged — one that doesn't manufacture goods, but systematically manufactures deception. While the Netflix series *Jamtara - Sabka Number Apega* — brought the gritty reality of rural phishing hubs into our living rooms, it was merely the opening chapter of a much larger, more dangerous story.

The series highlights an important truth — cyber fraud today is less about sophisticated hacking and more about psychological manipulation. Fraudsters impersonate bank officials, investment advisers, the police and the judiciary, using urgency and fear of law to trick individuals into sharing sensitive financial information.

India faces a dual challenge: it's the fastest growing digital payments economy and, simultaneously, one of the most targeted nations for cyber-syndicates. The latest figure from the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre shows that India clocked a record 2.8 million cybercrime complaints in 2025, a 24 per cent increase from the number reported in 2024.

While aggressive real-time intervention by authorities — leveraging the Citizen Financial Cyber Fraud

Reporting and Management System — saved over ₹8,000 crore, the total financial drain remained massive. Indians lost approximately ₹22,495 crore to digital criminals alone, representing a staggering 0.7 per cent of the national GDP.

As we move through 2026, the industrialisation of fraud is evidenced by the termination of over 3 crore fraudulent mobile connections by DoT and TRAI.

FREEZE FACTOR

Along with digital fraud, an unintended secondary crisis has surfaced: administrative overreach through widespread, indiscriminate debit-freezing of bank accounts. In the urgent effort to trace and recover stolen funds, law-enforcement agencies — mainly Cyber Crime Cell — have increasingly relied on account freezes as a primary investigative tool. These actions are frequently proving to be disproportionate to the suspected crime.

Data from early 2026 indicate that while 28.15 lakh cybercrime complaints were registered last year, the resulting "blanket freezes" have trapped an estimated ₹12,000 crore belonging to innocent parties. For India's 6.4 crore MSMEs, a single suspicious credit of ₹100 can result in the total freezing of an operational account. Even a meagre ₹20 credit to an unsuspecting push-cart vendor is resulting in debit-freeze.



DIGITAL PAYMENTS. Need for more vigil | JETSOBHANTO

This financial paralysis for small traders and salaried professionals is a violation of the fundamental right to trade and livelihood guaranteed under the Constitution.

Despite cybercrime being digital, the process of restoring frozen bank accounts remains largely physical, slow, and document-heavy. A small trader or salaried individual whose account is frozen by a cybercrime unit located in another State or region often faces what can only be described as a "justice cost", often requiring legal assistance. This geographical and procedural disconnect has become the true "pinch point" for ordinary Indians.

With account-freezing timelines stretching from four to seven months, businesses lose access to working capital during capital operating cycles, leading to stalled trade, missed payments and, in some cases, permanent financial

distress. Data linked to the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre indicate that over 2.6 million "Layer 1" suspected mule accounts have been flagged as authorities attempt to track layered fraud transactions.

While such action may be essential to curb digital crime, blanket scrutiny has emphasised that judicious or indefinite freezing without proper judicial authorisation raises serious concerns of proportionality.

Addressing the growing menace of digital fraud requires a coordinated response involving individuals, financial institutions, technology platforms, enforcement authorities and sectoral regulators. Strengthening digital literacy must become the first line of defence. Nationwide financial awareness campaigns, particularly in Tier-2 and rural regions, should accompany India's digital expansion. Banks and fintech companies must accelerate the adoption of AI-driven fraud detection systems, behavioural analytics, and real-time transaction monitoring to identify suspicious activities before financial losses occur.

Ultimately, safeguarding India's digital future will depend not only on technological safeguards but on building a culture of digital responsibility where innovation is matched with trust, awareness, and resilience.

Rath is a former central banker and Sharma is an independent researcher. Views are personal

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

Mudra high

This refers to the report 'Mudra loan disbursements hit a record ₹5.64 lakh cr in FY26' (April 10). The scheme has popular among those engaged in low-scale economic activities who lack access to credit. The mudra loan products enabled the beneficiaries to acquire assets for their businesses and services.

For lenders, retail loans are more profitable and have less potential for asset quality deterioration. However, it is imperative to create awareness among borrowers.

VSK Pillai
Changanacherry (Kerala)

Sensible forecasting

This refers to the article "Charting an intellectually honest way of forecasting" (April 10). The piece rightly highlights how traditional baseline forecasts fail in today's volatile environment. Policymakers often appear overconfident, which can mislead both markets and the public. A shift towards scenario-based forecasting is sensible, but it must be communicated clearly. Institutions should present a few realistic scenarios with transparent assumptions, not technical jargon. Regular updates, based on incoming

data, would improve credibility. Further, independent review of forecasts can reduce bias.

SM Jeeva
Chennai

Points to ponder

This refers to the news report 'Haryana, Karnataka, Telangana are top talent magnets' (April 10). That just six States in India are self-sufficient in net talent attraction for white-collar jobs is something other States need to ponder. States providing a business-friendly environment have done well. Besides, the study shows the reasons

for the States topping net positive talent balance are — future-ready world-class infrastructure, strong global pull, scalability and preferred career destination among others.

YG Chouksey
Pune

Cautious mode

Apropos the Editorial 'Wait and Watch' (April 10). The MPC's decision to pause interest rates is a sober recognition that inflation today is driven less by demand excess than by supply shocks from war and weather. Raising rates would risk stifling growth without easing

these pressures. The real test lies in strengthening banks, managing capital flows, and sustaining rupee stability. Prudence must be matched by agility, with policy remaining transparent and data-driven. India's credibility in navigating global headwinds will rest on balancing resilience with foresight, ensuring that monetary caution does not slip into inertia. The pause is valid, but the path ahead demands vigilance, adaptability, and a willingness to recalibrate swiftly when circumstances shift.

K Chidananand Kumar
Bengaluru

[OUR TAKE]

Who moderates the moderators?

The government may not always act disinterestedly, and leaving this to platforms owned by firms headquartered abroad isn't a defensible proposition

India's proposed amendments to the Information Technology Rules, 2021, would bring Community Notes—a crowdsourced fact-checking feature on X—under the ministry of information and broadcasting's regulatory remit whenever they touch news and current affairs. HT has reported. Simply put, it will allow the government to take down a note correcting a minister's claim. Officials call the change procedural. The government has made this argument before. The PIB's Fact Check Unit, notified in 2023, empowered it to flag content on its own business as false, with platforms risking loss of safe harbour if they did not comply. The Bombay High Court struck it down as unconstitutional. The Centre has challenged the ruling. The court's reasoning was straightforward: A government that determines what is false about itself is not a fact-checker.

That said, Community Notes are not always accurate, and not always disinterested. For instance, a note beneath a post by President Droupadi Murmu—in which she stated that the government works for marginalised and vulnerable communities—appended a clarification that the head of State is constitutionally obligated to serve all citizens, not a particular constituency. The President's statement was not incorrect; the note, in tenor, reframed a commitment to constitutionally recognised protections for the vulnerable as partisan overreach. How notes are ranked, who contribute to them, what motivates their interventions—all of this sits behind a black box that only X can look into.

Still, for all its flaws, Community Notes is the closest the internet has come to a self-correcting mechanism that does not vest editorial judgment in either a corporation or a State. But it operates in a vacuum left by a deeper failure. Newspapers, broadcasters, and wire agencies still operate under editorial codes, legal liability, and verification norms—the accountability architecture that accompanies their reach. Social media give influencers the reach of a newspaper with none of the accompanying accountability. Neither platforms nor governments have built anything to bridge that gap. The proposed amendments do not distinguish between an accuracy problem and a political inconvenience, and they hand the power to make that distinction to the party least equipped to make it disinterestedly. Nor are the platforms a credible alternative. The proposition that private corporations headquartered abroad should arbitrate speech is no more defensible than the proposition that a government ministry should.

India must build an independent regulatory body for social media content moderation, insulated from government direction and platform capture, with defined scope and appellate mechanisms. It has built such institutions before: the markets regulator (SEBI), for one. It has not built one for content moderation, partly because both the government and the platforms have found the current ambiguity useful, and also because regulating content that moves at the speed of the internet demands technical imagination that bureaucracy has not demonstrated. Instead, it has sought a ministry with a takedown power. The internet gave everyone the equivalent of a printing press. That in itself poses questions pertaining to misinformation and trust. The question of who holds social media—platforms and users—accountable cannot be answered by either the government or the platforms, because both are parties to the dispute.

[THIRD EYE]

Barkha Dutt



OPINION

Iran war diminishes the idea of America, and UN's relevance

Never before has the global body seemed as redundant, powerless and defunct as it does today. And never has the US looked as much of a parody as it does now

I don't know if the Iran war will end any time soon. But here are two things that have most certainly ended—the idea of America and the relevance of the United Nations. Never before has the UN seemed as redundant, powerless and defunct as it does today. And never has the US looked as much of a parody as it does now.

I say this as someone whose childhood and post-graduation years—two major formative phases—were shaped by and in New York. If there was any sense of belonging I felt outside of my own country, it was in New York, where my parents lived and worked for a sizeable time, and where I have returned to in every possible break I get. So much so that there is a bench memorial to my father in Central Park in the city that has had a profound imprint on our family's living memories.

Donald Trump has single-handedly reduced one of the greatest countries of the world—a country connected to the aspirational dreams of millions of Indians—to an ugly caricature.

There has been, in his second term as President, a normalisation of the unimaginable—the threat to wipe out civilisations, abusing your adversary and referring to them by the most offensive slurs, dismantling global systems of trade and communication just because you can, and unleashing a reckless war for which the rest of the world is paying the price.

Of course, the people of a nation are not the same as their governments. As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney argued in his landmark Davos speech, the story of an international order based on rules has always been "partially false... the strongest would exempt

themselves when convenient." And sure, the American assumptions about unilateralism did not begin with Trump. But that Trump has been able to run a bulldozer over diplomacy, civility, fair play and minimal decency without immediate consequences at home is nothing short of astounding.

Polls show that the Iran war is unpopular, including within the Republican base. But given how roundly insulated the American public is from anything outside of the country's borders, I have my doubts about how emotionally invested they are in forcing Trump's hand. In short, unless he's impeached, he will get away with wrecking havoc on the global economy, taking lives and dragging the entire world into his singularly created mess.

It's staggering that just one man can have this much world-altering power with no checks at home or abroad. American exceptionalism—the idea that distinctly American values define the "free world" and are universally applicable—died a long time back. Now, it's the actual reverse. That an American president can inflict damage on the entire world because of pure recklessness, while nation-states and multilateral forums look on helplessly, tells you that the so-called global order was already broken.

POLLS SHOW THAT THE IRAN WAR IS UNPOPULAR, INCLUDING WITHIN THE REPUBLICAN BASE. BUT GIVEN HOW ROUNDLY INSULATED THE AMERICAN PUBLIC IS FROM ANYTHING OUTSIDE OF THE COUNTRY'S BORDERS, I HAVE MY DOUBTS ABOUT HOW EMOTIONALLY INVESTED THEY ARE IN FORCING TRUMP'S HAND



No single entity has been as irrelevant as the UN. The very foundation of the UN Security Council, the most powerful body within the UN, is rooted in a version of imperialism. BLOOMBERG

No single entity has been as irrelevant as the UN. The very foundation of the UN Security Council, the most powerful body within the UN, is rooted in a version of imperialism. How can the world in 2026 persist with a 1945 decision that allowed five countries a veto on all global decision-making?

Here's the key responsibility of the UNSC (with five permanent and 10 non-permanent, rotating members), as spelled out in Article 24 of the United Nations Charter: "In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its Members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security..." Reading it out loud brings home how farcical this mandate is given that at least three of the five permanent members have not hesitated, to varying degrees, in starting military conflicts to pursue their own expansionist ambitions.

Trump, for instance, is already talking about turning his attention to the next "conquest". And quite frankly, given how the Americans have behaved vis-a-vis Iran, bombing the nation in the middle of negotiations in February, why would the Chinese not take this moment to make a move on Taiwan? Mercifully, Xi Jinping has taken the route, so far, of

dialogue, meeting this week with Taiwan's leader of opposition and calling Taiwan a "shared homeland".

But, as assassinations of adversaries becomes acceptable State policy, the UNSC has utterly failed to maintain the international peace it was tasked with. Besides, why should just five nations hold the keys to the vault, just because that was the decision taken 80 years ago?

Even among these so-called Big Five, the failure to genuinely stand up to Trump is there for all to see. Keir Starmer, for instance, has said multiple times that the Iran war is not the UK's war. So why were Americans allowed to use England's bases for military operations against Iran? Technically, the use of these bases is for defensive missions. But when the US has clearly spoken of the intent to blow up bridges and power plants, who believes that these operations are defensive?

The truth is the world is already in a new version of the Cold War where the most brutal, unfiltered, and ugly form of the might-is-right dictum is being played out. And multilateralism has failed.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

Lost in narratives, a true picture of Bengal's growth

As another round of assembly elections in West Bengal approaches, discussions around the state of its economy have inevitably resurfaced. Whatever one's political views, the dominant narrative about the state's economy is laced with nostalgia—a glorious past followed by a steady decline relative to the rest of the country since the 1960s.

Yet, there is a puzzle: Our research with Boston University economist Dilip Mookherjee shows that in terms of the growth rate of real state domestic product (NSDP) per capita—a standard measure of a state's economic prosperity—over the entire period for which we have comparable data (1960 to 2024), West Bengal has had very similar performance to that of the rest of India.

Only a careful analysis can bring out the true picture. Otherwise, one can pick numbers and make the state's performance look better or worse.

For example, if we take nominal numbers and restrict attention to 17 major states in terms of population (and taking the pre-split units for the four major states that split up later), West Bengal ranked fifth in the 1960s, falling to the 12th spot in recent years, beaten even by states such as Rajasthan and Odisha, which were typically behind earlier.

However, nominal income reflects both output and prices, and without adjusting for price levels, this could give a misleading picture. If we adjust for prices at a disaggregated level

and look at real income, West Bengal's rank does not show such a dramatic decline, and the state turns out to be slightly below average (10th or 11th) most of the time, with some dips during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

We know ranks are not a very robust measure of a state's per capita income since a small change or not adjusting for price changes or how population projections since 2011 have been calculated could make one state overtake another.

A clearer picture emerges if we look at the ratio of West Bengal's NSDP per capita to that of the rest of India and how it has changed over time.

From the early 1960s till the early 1990s, there was a steady decline in West Bengal's NSDP per capita relative to the rest of India. From then to circa 2005, there was a steady improvement with West Bengal managing to catch up with the rest of India briefly in the early 2000s. Since 2005, there has again been a steady deterioration in its relative position that has continued to the present period.

Still, whether one uses nominal or real values and irrespective of West Bengal being above or below the rest of India, throughout this entire period, even at its worst, the gap has not exceeded 25%.

If, instead, we compare West Bengal with the best performing states since the early 1990s, which have consistently included Gujarat, Haryana, and Maharashtra, a starker picture emerges.

Here, the gap has been gradually increasing since the 1960s, with a slight recovery from the late-1990s to the early-2000s and has increased steeply since then and is more than double at present—West Bengal's per capita real NSDP is 47% of these high-performing states.

If we compare West Bengal with the low-performing states, which have consistently included Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, a symmetric but reverse picture emerges.

Until the early 1990s the gap between West Bengal and these states was positive, but relatively small (within 15%). Since then, West Bengal grew relatively faster and the gap has increased steeply. For the latest year, West Bengal was ahead by 77%.

This is the main story—West Bengal's position vis-a-vis the rest of the country has indeed deteriorated over the decades, except for a brief window from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s.

But the gap is not huge. It is when we compare West Bengal with the best-performing states since liberalisation that its underperformance becomes stark; this gap has kept on widening since the mid-2000s, with such acceleration in recent years.

The reason why West Bengal's performance relative to the whole is not bad is because of the worst-performing states,

who fell progressively behind West Bengal in the same way that West Bengal fell behind the best-performing states.

This is the aggregate picture that hides many complexities. But it makes three points that are worth keeping in mind.

First, real and nominal differences are important, because prices matter not just for standard of living or cost of production but also because they contain information about relative scarcity.

Second, a narrative of West Bengal's steady decline with respect to the rest of the country hides a much more nuanced story about the gap between states increasing after liberalisation. A state's absolute growth can be positive—even accelerating—and yet its relative standing can deteriorate if peer states are outpacing it; conversely, a weak performer may look respectable in comparative terms simply because other states are growing even slower. Liberalisation was equivalent to a track becoming faster so that the gap between the better performers and the rest increased.

Third, for all the criticism it receives, it was a brief period from the early 1990s to circa 2005 that West Bengal experienced a turnaround, largely due to improvements in agricultural productivity.

But that does not take away from the fact that there was a decline in manufacturing from the 1970s, and services did not provide the kind of acceleration that could have made West Bengal follow the path that some of the southern states were able to take.

Maitreesh Ghatak is professor of economics, London School of Economics, and Tanika Chakraborty is professor of economics, Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. The views expressed are personal

Mandal's legacy and path ahead for social justice

April 13 marks the death anniversary of Bimleshwar Prasad Mandal, who passed away in 1982. Mandal chaired the commission whose report laid the foundation for reservations for Other Backward Classes. The Mandal recommendations transformed the country's administrative framework as well as its social and political structures. The anniversary of this passing is, therefore, a moment to reflect on how far we have come, and how far we still need to go.

The idea of ensuring representation for backward communities is rooted in many pre-independence reform movements. In 1902, Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur introduced 50% reservation in administrative services, and in 1921, the Madras Presidency adopted similar measures. The Kaka Kalelkar Commission made the first national effort to identify socially and educationally backward classes in independent India. Though its recommendations were not fully implemented, they laid the intellectual groundwork for the Mandal Commission, which recommended 27% reservation for OBCs. When then Prime Minister VP Singh announced its implementation on August 7, 1990, it marked a watershed moment in India's democratic journey.

The past decade has seen an unprecedented institutional commitment to OBC welfare. The 102nd Constitutional Amendment granted constitutional status to the National Commission for Backward Classes, strengthening the institutional mechanism for addressing OBC-related issues. The implementation of 27% OBC reser-

vation in education has opened new doors for thousands of students and further reinforced the principle of equal opportunity. Expanded scholarship schemes, skill development initiatives, and improved access to entrepreneurship have collectively widened the horizon for OBC communities across the country.

However, within this broader framework, certain groups demand more focused attention. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) reveals that approximately 40.7% of Muslims fall within the OBC category—yet their conditions across education, employment, and income remain comparatively weaker.

Scholarly work has further illuminated this reality. Aji Anwar Ansari's *Masawat Ki Jung* highlights that despite a large section of the Muslim population belonging to socially backward groups, institutional leadership has largely remained concentrated among the elite. Masood Alam Falahi's *Hindustan Mein Zaat-Paat Aur Musalman* provides historical evidence of caste-like hierarchies within Muslim society. Together,

these studies make clear that the presence of backward communities within the Muslim population has not translated into proportionate representation or opportunity. In this context, leading institutions such as Aligarh Muslim University, Jamia Hamdard and Jamia Millia Islamia can play a vital role in advancing social justice. Ensuring 27% reservation for Muslim OBCs within these institutions would not only correct representational imbalances but also create real pathways for the socio-economic empowerment of Muslim OBC communities.

The post-Mandal quota transformation has been described by scholars as India's "second democratic upsurge". BP Mandal's legacy reminds us that inclusiveness is the true strength of democracy. His death anniversary is a reminder that the journey toward social justice remains unfinished. The empowerment of Muslim OBCs is an essential step toward building a resilient society.

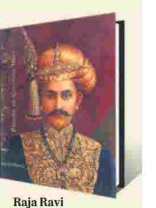
Ganesh Singh is chairperson of the Commission on Welfare of Other Backward Classes (2025-26) of Parliament. The views expressed are personal

{ EDITOR'S PICK }

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

THE AESTHETICS OF RAJA RAVI VARMA

Few Indian artists have been as influential as Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906). Born in the Travancore royal family, Ravi Varma was one of the earliest—and the most successful—artists in India to adopt the European medium of oil painting. Most of his celebrated paintings drew their subjects from Hindu epics and puranas. They remain popular to this day. Ravi Varma hit headlines most recently when one of his works (*Yashoda and Krishna*) fetched a record price at a recent auction. His best works are on view at public galleries in Thiruvananthapuram and Baroda.



Raja Ravi Varma: Painter of Colonial India
Rupika Chawla
2010

Rupika Chawla's *Raja Ravi Varma: Painter of Colonial India* is a fine introduction to this great artist, who travelled widely, resided in multiple princely states and colonial cities, and produced a large body of work that birthed Indian modernism. Drawing from archival material, this work uncovers the layered aesthetic of a pioneering painter.

Rubio to visit India in May, discusses trade with Misri

PHOTO: AP/WIDEWORLD

United States (US) Secretary of State Marco Rubio is set to visit New Delhi next month, it was announced here after his "productive meeting" with India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri on a range of issues, including trade and the Quad.



(From left) Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri during a meeting with the US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and US Ambassador to India Sergio Gor, in Washington DC. PHOTO: PTI

Misri, who is on a three-day visit in Washington, met Rubio at the White House on Thursday. The two leaders reviewed bilateral relationships, especially trade, critical minerals, defence and the Quad.

"Welcome to the White House," Misri said. "A productive meeting with @SecRubio that focused on our bilateral relationship, especially trade, critical minerals, defence and the Quad," US Ambassador to India, Sergio Gor, who was also present at the meeting, posted on X.

Earlier, Misri held separate meetings with US Deputy Secretary Christopher Landau and US Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Allison Hooker. "Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau met

Indian embassy, Misri and Landau discussed bilateral priorities and also exchanged assessments on regional and global developments of mutual concern.

Hooker said she and Misri discussed how India and the US can work closer together on security, defence, and the economy. "We have found practical ways to make both Americans and Indians safer and more prosperous, including through the Quad," she said.

The Indian embassy in the US said Hooker and Misri took stock of the India-US bilateral agenda since the Foreign Office Consultations held last December.

The two diplomats also shared assessments on recent developments in West Asia, as well as regional issues of mutual interest. US Vice President JD Vance is leading a delegation to Islamabad for talks with Iranian leaders after the warring sides agreed to a two-week Pakistan-brokered ceasefire.

Justice Yashwant Varma resigns amid impeachment process over cash row

BHAVINI MISHRA New Delhi, 10 April

Allahabad High Court judge Justice Yashwant Varma has submitted his resignation to President Droupadi Murmu with immediate effect.

"While I do not propose to burden your August office with the reasons which have constrained me to submit this resignation, it is with deep anguish that I tender my resignation from the office of Judge of the Hon'ble High Court of Judicature at Allahabad, with immediate effect. It has been an honour to serve in this office," Justice Varma said in

his letter to Murmu. Justice Varma, whose parent court was the Allahabad High Court, was transferred to the Delhi High Court, had been mired in controversy after a wad of cash was allegedly found at his official residence in Delhi by firemen who went there to extinguish a fire.



The discovery of burnt cash at Justice Yashwant Varma's house had led to corruption allegations

The fire started at an out-house of the official Delhi residence of the judge on March 14, 2025. Firefighters who had gone there to extinguish the fire discovered large amounts of burnt cash. A few videos showing the burnt room and wads of cash also started circulating soon.

Justice Varma denied. He maintained that he was being targeted under a conspiracy. An investigation was subsequently ordered by then Chief Justice of India Justice Sanjiv Khanna. A three-member panel, comprising Punjab and Haryana High Court Chief Justice Sheel Nagu, Himachal High Court Chief Justice GS Sandhawalia, and Karnataka High Court Justice Anu Shivraman, was constituted on March 22, 2025. The panel began proceedings on March 25 and submitted its findings in early May last year. After reviewing the report, the CJI asked Justice Varma to resign or face impeachment proceedings.

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BJP reaches out to women and govt employees in Bengal

ARCHIS MOHAN New Delhi, 10 April

In its manifesto for the West Bengal Assembly polls released on Friday, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sought to reach out to Bengal's 4 million state government employees and an estimated five million pensioners, its youth, and the crucial women electors, who have in the last decade emerged as a significant support base of the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress (TMC).

The manifesto, which Union Home Minister Amit Shah released on Friday in Kolkata, announced commitments that sought to consolidate the BJP's sway in North Bengal, where it outperformed the TMC in the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha and 2021 Assembly polls, as also among Bengal's Scheduled Tribes, which comprise 5.8 per cent of its population.

The BJP said its state government will recommend women to the 2021 Assembly polls. The TMC's support base among women is attributed to its women-centric welfare schemes such as Kanyashree, Rupashree, bicycles for girl students, and Lakshmi Bhandar.

FROM PAGE 1

RBI moots ₹1 trn asset threshold for NBFC upper layer

The proposed inclusion of government-owned NBFCs reflects what the central bank describes as an ownership-neutral regulatory approach. "In pursuance of the principle of ownership-neutral regulatory regime for NBFCs, it is now proposed to consider eligible government-owned NBFCs also for inclusion in the list of NBFC-UL based on the revised criteria," it said. The draft also allows all upper-layer NBFCs to use state government guarantees as a credit risk transfer instrument without limit.

A M Karthik, senior vice-president and co-group head for financial sector ratings at ICRA, said the shift to a size-based threshold brings clarity. "Further inclusion of government-owned entities, based on their size, indicates a more harmonised way of identifying NBFC-ULs. Based on the existing position, the number of NBFC-ULs would go up vis-a-vis 15 entities identified previously," he said. Some current upper-layer NBFCs fall short of the proposed ₹1 trillion threshold. However, under the RBI's framework, entities once classified as NBFC-UL remain under enhanced regulation for at least five years, regardless of subsequent changes in

size. As a result, those already in the category are likely to remain there for now.

"It does not materially change anything. The framework is essentially a governance measure, and rightly so. Being classified as an upper-layer NBFC did not offer any real operational advantage; it primarily required entities to adhere to higher standards such as maintaining adequate capital, listing requirements, and appointing key roles like chief compliance and risk officers. These are, in any case, good governance practices," said the MD & CEO of an upper-layer NBFC.

"The change may be more relevant for companies that were previously unlisted, as it could ease the compulsory listing requirement for some of them. Beyond that, the impact appears limited," he said. He added that a key question is what happens to NBFCs currently classified in the upper layer but below the ₹1 trillion threshold. While there is no clarity yet, under the earlier framework, even if an NBFC moved out of the upper layer, it was required to continue complying with upper-layer norms for a few years. There is little reason to expect that principle to be diluted, he said.

Another industry insider described the move as a simplification rather than a substantive shift. "Earlier, the RBI had a mix of quantitative and qualitative criteria and created a scorecard. Now, the reading is that they have simplified the whole thing and said size is what is more important. So, ₹1 trillion and above becomes the threshold, and every five years they will revisit that number.

Entities that were likely to become upper layer at lower thresholds will no longer qualify. However, for those already classified as upper layer, the earlier framework stated that once an entity enters the upper layer, it continues to remain there for five years even if it does not meet the criteria subsequently. The current draft does not explicitly revoke that clause, so the assumption is that it may continue. This means existing upper-layer entities may remain, and the overall number could increase with the inclusion of some state-backed NBFCs," he said.

The industry insider added that uncertainty persists around entities such as Tata Sons, structurally distinct as a core investment company, despite its earlier inclusion in the upper layer.

OPINION

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule: A light that still shows India the way



NARENDRA MODI

Today, 11th April, is a deeply special day for all of us. It is the birth anniversary of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, one of India's greatest social reformers and a guiding light for generations. This year, the occasion carries even greater significance, as it marks the beginning of his 200th birth anniversary celebrations.

Mahatma Phule was a great reformer. In addition to that, he was a life of moral courage, restless enquiry and unshakable commitment to social good. Mahatma Phule is remembered for the institutions he built and the movements he led. At the same time, his contribution to our civilisational journey lies in the hope he aroused, the faith he instilled and the strength his thoughts continue to give to millions of people across the nation.

Born in the great state of Maharashtra in 1827, Mahatma Phule emerged from modest beginnings. But his initial hardships never stood in the way of his learning, his courage or his commitment to society. This is a trait that remained with him forever: whatever the challenges may be, one must work hard, acquire knowledge and mitigate those challenges instead of doing nothing about it. From his school days, young Jyotirao was deeply curious and became a voracious reader, often reading books far beyond what children his age were expected to engage with. Years later, he said, "The more questions we generate, the more

knowledge emerges from them." Clearly, the spirit of enquiry he was blessed with since his childhood remained constant in his journey.

Throughout his life, learning and education became central to Mahatma Phule's mission. He recognised with rare clarity that knowledge is not a privilege to be guarded, but force to be shared. At a time when the joys of learning were denied to many, he opened pioneering schools for girls and for those kept out of formal education. He used to say, "Any improvement that comes in children through mothers is deeply valuable. Therefore, if schools are to be opened, they should first be created for girls." He worked to create a new social imagination in which the classroom became an instrument of justice and equality.

His vision for education inspires us greatly. Over the last decade, we have worked to make research and innovation a cornerstone for the youth of India. Efforts are being made to create an ecosystem where young minds are encouraged to question, explore and innovate. By investing in knowledge, skills and opportunity, India is empowering its youth to become problem-solvers and drivers of national progress.

Due to his knowledge and wisdom, Mahatma Phule developed a strong understanding of areas such as agriculture, healthcare and rural development. He often said that justice towards our farmers and workers weakens our society. He saw how social inequalities manifested themselves in daily life, be it in the farms or in villages. Hence, he immersed himself in ensuring dignity for the poor, the downtrodden and the marginalised. At the same time, he made every possible effort to ensure social harmony was maintained. Mahatma Phule inspired,

"Joparyant samajati sarvana samant adhikar milat naahet, taparyant khara swatryta milat naahi" ("True freedom cannot be achieved until everyone in society is granted equal rights). And for that, he built institutions that translated this vision into action, contributing to a just society. The Satyashodhak Samaj, founded by him, was one of the most important social reform movements in modern India. It was at the forefront of social reform, community service and furthering human dignity. It became an effective voice for women, youngsters and those living in villages. This movement reflected Mahatma Phule's intrinsic belief that society could be strengthened by placing at its core justice, respect for every person and a spirit of collective progress.

I FONDLY RECALL MY VISIT TO PUNE IN 2022, WHEN I HAD OFFERED TRIBUTES TO MAHATMA PHULE AT HIS GRAND STATUE IN THE CITY. AS WE MARK THE BEGINNING OF HIS BICENTENARY YEAR, THE MOST FITTING TRIBUTE TO MAHATMA JYOTIRAO PHULE IS ABOUT RENEWAL.

His personal life, too, carried lessons in courage. Always working and being among the people took toll on his health. But even the most serious health challenges did not dim his resolve. After suffering a debilitating stroke, he continued to work and fulfil his vision. Yes, his body had been tested, but his commitment to society had not yielded. For Mahatma Phule, it was those who draw courage from struggle, this remains one of the most powerful dimensions of his life.

No remembrance of Mahatma Phule can be complete without a respectful

mention of Savitribai Phule, who was herself one of the tallest reformers of our nation. As one of India's pioneering women teachers, she played a defining role in advancing education for girls, thus giving them the opportunity to pursue their dreams. After Mahatma Phule's passing, Savitribai carried forward the torch and, in 1897, during a plague outbreak, she served victims with such devotion that she herself contracted the disease and lost her own life.

Our land has been blessed, time and again, by great men and women who have strengthened society through thought, sacrifice and action. They did not wait for change to arrive from somewhere else. They became its source. For hundreds of years in our land, the clarion call for social betterment has often risen from within society itself, from those who could see suffering clearly and refused to accept it as fate. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule was one such voice.

I fondly recall my visit to Pune in 2022, when I had offered tributes to Mahatma Phule at his grand statue in the city. As we mark the beginning of his bicentenary year, the most fitting tribute to Mahatma Jyotirao Phule is about renewal. Renewal of our commitment to subjects close to his heart, such as education. Renewal of our sensitivity to injustice. Renewal of our faith that society can improve itself from within. His life tells us that the power of community can achieve miracles in India when joined with moral clarity and public purpose. That is why he still gives strength to millions. That is why his words and work still carry hope. And that is why, nearly two hundred years after his birth, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule remains not a figure of the past, but a guide for India's future.

The author is Prime Minister of India

Mkts log best weekly gain in over 5 years on Iran-US truce

Management commentary on the impact of the conflict on corporate profitability will be in focus.

"Oil prices keep falling, the relief rally in markets could continue because equities are almost one-to-one correlated with oil prices right now. However, given the ongoing hostilities in West Asia, it is unlikely that oil prices will keep declining significantly, which means the relief rally could prove short-lived," said Saurabh Mukherjea, founder and chief

investment officer, Marcellus Investment Managers.

Market breadth remained strong, with 3,325 stocks advancing and 986 declining. Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) during the day were net buyers of stocks, purchasing equities worth ₹672 crore, with Friday being the first net-positive day in terms of FPI flows since the war began. The last time FPIs were net buyers was on February 25 while domestic institutional investors bought equities worth ₹410 crore.

Management commentary on the impact of the conflict on corporate profitability will be in focus. "Oil prices keep falling, the relief rally in markets could continue because equities are almost one-to-one correlated with oil prices right now. However, given the ongoing hostilities in West Asia, it is unlikely that oil prices will keep declining significantly, which means the relief rally could prove short-lived," said Saurabh Mukherjea, founder and chief

Top gainers

NSE sectoral indices	1-week chg (%)
Nifty Realty	13.0
Nifty Financial Services	10.8
Nifty Auto	10.6
NSE Sectoral Indices	
BSE Realty	12.9
BSE Auto	10.3
BSE Consumer durables	9.2

Source: Bloomberg, exchanges

While the intensity of FPI selling has reduced over the past three sessions, they remain net sellers of ₹48,213 crore so far this month. "The conflict has created supply-side challenges in gas and fertilisers. India's energy transition is also likely to accelerate... the debate on India's exposure to artificial intelligence (AI) will resurface. The lack of direct AI play across participants. At present, India has an insurance pool for high-cost risks like incidents of terrorism and nuclear disasters managed by GIC Re.

\$100 mn marine insurance pool on cards for vessels sailing through war zones



The insurance pool would act as a shock absorber as well, spreading bigger losses across participants. At present, India has an insurance pool for high-cost risks like incidents of terrorism and nuclear disasters managed by GIC Re. Marine insurance premiums continued to be elevated owing to the West Asia conflict. Consequently, several reinsurers have issued notice of cancellation for vessels passing through the route, including GIC Re. Several shipping companies have either stopped travelling through the route and exploring alternate routes or have stopped sailing entirely. Experts also said that vessels and cargo transiting the region, which used to purchase additional war

cover of around 0.25 per cent before the conflict, have seen premiums rise to 0.5-1 per cent. Despite available capacity, war covers are currently offered only at elevated rates and on a highly restricted basis due to prevailing uncertainty. The conflict has disrupted shipments of about one-fifth of the world's oil liquefied natural gas (LNG) through the strait, affecting the movement of oil and other key goods. Despite, the two-week ceasefire, the premiums continue to be on the higher side due to heightened uncertainty. Stephen Rudman, head of marine, Asia, Aon said, "From an insurance perspective, a two-week ceasefire is insufficient in materially changing risk pricing or an underwriting stance. Addi-

tional war-risk premiums are driven by forward-looking threat assessments rather than short-term political developments." While the announcement may help stabilise sentiment and reduce some near-term volatility, underwriters are likely to treat this as a temporary

BEE plans to slash 'super credits' for strong hybrid cars in CAFE-3

It reasoned that the latter continue to rely on fossil fuels and emit tailpipe pollutants. The draft guidelines, headed by BJP Rajya Sabha MP Bhupaneswar Kalita, had said incentives such as subsidies and tax benefits should be "strategically" focused on accelerating adoption of zero-emission vehicles like battery EVs and fuel-cell EVs, while treating technologies such as plug-in hybrids as transitional. The issue of strong hybrids versus EVs has also exposed a divide within the auto industry. Companies such as Toyota Kirloskar Motor and Maruti Suzuki India have argued in favour of incentives for strong hybrids, positioning them as a practical bridge amid high EV

costs and limited charging infrastructure. This has been opposed by Tata Motors and Mahindra & Mahindra, which maintain that extending benefits to strong hybrids could slow EV adoption and dilute investments in electric platforms and charging networks. A strong hybrid's battery is typically 1-2 kilowatt-hour (kWh) in capacity, enough to allow electric-only driving for 1-3 km at one stretch. The battery mainly assists the petrol engine during acceleration, powers the vehicle at very low speeds, and captures energy through regenerative braking, but it is too small to support long-distance electric driving like plug-in hybrids or full EVs.

SP Group calls for Tata Sons listing in open letter to RBI

He said it would open a more defined and robust dividend stream for the Tata Trusts, the group's philanthropic arm. "To date, no clear, evidence-based case has been presented to explain how a public listing would materially damage the interests of the trusts or reduce their ability to serve beneficiaries," Mistry said in the statement. In 2022, the RBI designated Tata Sons as an "upper-layer" non-banking financial institution, a category that requires firms to go public within three years of the classification. While a public float has long been opposed by Tata Trusts, the majority holder of

Tata Sons, due to concerns around dilution of its control over the group's listed companies, Shapoorji's latest demand is aimed at amping up pressure on the central bank to enforce a public listing. An delay in an initial public offering would effectively close a potential liquidity window for the debt-laden conglomerate, which has struggled with financial stress exacerbated by the pandemic. The group has previously tapped private credit markets by pledging part of the holding. It stake in Tata Sons, however, remains illiquid, making a resolution critical to its debt-reduction plans.

New AI tools as WMD: Why India must be paranoid

In just three and a half years since ChatGPT, AI has reached a critical juncture. It is close to empowering those who want to destroy our world

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



BEYOND IDEOLOGY
R JAGANNATHAN

Artificial intelligence (AI) made headlines as a deployable tool in November 2022, when OpenAI released ChatGPT. In less than five days it had over one million users. Today, it has just under 900 million users, including those using Microsoft's Copilot, which is powered by ChatGPT. In January 2026, another AI giant, Anthropic, launched Claude Cowork, an AI tool that allows teams to collaborate in a shared workspace, threatening the labour-arbitrage-based software services business that India thrives on.

Earlier this month, Anthropic, after trying another AI tool, Claude Myths, decided that it was too dangerous to release to the public. Reason: Myths could remotely identify and exploit cybersecurity vulnerabilities, and could thus be used by dangerous criminals to hold vulnerable entities to ransom. Anthropic said it is sharing the tool with large corporations so they can identify their vulnerabilities before similar tools are developed by others.

One should think of April 2026 as a moment similar to J Robert Oppenheimer's testing of the atomic bomb under the Manhattan Project in 1945, which reminded him of Sri Krishna's dark message in the Gita. When Arjuna asks him who he really is, Sri Krishna replies in Chapter 11, Verse 32: "I am mighty Time, the source of destruction that comes forth to annihilate the worlds. Even without your participation, the warriors arrayed in the opposing army shall cease to exist."



Myths does not care for dissent if it stands in the way of its power. In the current context, the US Department of War (formerly Defense, has labelled Anthropic a "supply-side risk" and new reporters are eager to fill the gap. A Reuters report says that small AI startups are eager to gain from Anthropic's exit. Uncle Sam has the ability to make any supplier of AI tools for defence rich.

Call for India: It cannot afford to remain merely a supplier of tech labour for American corporations building their platforms. We have to build our own platforms. It will take a lot of money and effort to get this done, but if we do not incentivise this process, it will never happen. We must remember we are more cyber vulnerable than many other countries.

First, it is not about companies lacking the money; it is about misallocating the money. Take one example. Between 2014 and today, according to a Crisil report, nearly ₹1.2 trillion of the profits of listed companies has gone towards funding CSR (corporate social responsibility) projects. This is stupidity disguised as go-goodism. Not only do individuals and corporations pay taxes to

enable social welfare projects, expecting them to fund more welfare directly is folly. Second, India's tech companies pay out thousands of crores to investors as dividends and for buybacks. In 2024-25, the top three software services companies, TCS, Infosys and HCL Tech, had more than ₹1 trillion of free cash flows. Even if half the money were to be paid out to investors, what is to stop the government from giving tax benefits to use the bulk of the balance for building sovereign platforms and products? The problem is not a lack of funding for building Indian intellectual property. It is a lack of appetite for taking real risks to create something larger than quarterly profits. The hegemony of the West will use its huge lead in AI tech to increase its share of global power and reduce us to tech colonies. If India really wants to change the world order to make it less one-sided, it has to put its money where its mouth is. To be at the high table, you have to be able to show what you bring to the table, not just that you have an appetite. If we are only bringing cheap labour to the table, we will be treated as such. The lesson to learn from the frans-US war is this: It takes will power, and not just money and high-tech, to win a war. Also, note the late Intel boss Andy Grove's advice: Only the Paranoid Survive. By merely surviving, you get back in the game. It has shown what national will can accomplish. It has demonstrated clarity of vision on what it wants to accomplish: Be its own master. This is what India must aspire for.

US, Pakistan & West Asia



PLAIN POLITICS
ADITI PHADNIS

Although it is becoming harder and harder to get accurate real-time information from Pakistan, some channels still work. To the question "who is the real force in Pakistan powering United States-Iran talks?" — to a Pakistani colleague, the reply was: "The army, of course!" This is as if to say this should be patently obvious to everyone!

guessing why it is a five-year reset in India, something that the Saudis have been reluctant to do. It is another matter that Riyadh is feeling a bit cheated. When it asked Pakistan for air-defence systems to protect it against Iranian missile attacks, Islamabad was unwilling and unable to help. For years, Saudi Arabia has been sending Pakistan to deploy soldiers against its war against insurgent Houthis in Yemen. Pakistan has been a non-committal now as it was in the past.

to take sides should Pakistan attack India, something that the Saudis have been reluctant to do. It is another matter that Riyadh is feeling a bit cheated. When it asked Pakistan for air-defence systems to protect it against Iranian missile attacks, Islamabad was unwilling and unable to help. For years, Saudi Arabia has been sending Pakistan to deploy soldiers against its war against insurgent Houthis in Yemen. Pakistan has been a non-committal now as it was in the past.

India's 5-year opportunity

We now live in a world order that will keep shifting. India must use this window. This also means we remain disciplined enough not to be knee-jerked into reacting to what Pakistan sees as its moment in the sun

That the world is so distracted with multiple wars, shifting and fraying alliances, and the return of hard power is only a greater reason for India to refocus within. It's another crisis not to be wasted. Because these big power and hostile neighbour preoccupations bring the gift India would've prayed for. A gift of time to address some critical vulnerabilities, build deterrence and prepare ourselves for the inevitable next crisis.

India won't be their priority now. This should account for our adversaries. With the friends, near-allies and adversaries all preoccupied, India is entering another of those interregnums when it can build its strength in peace. I would riskerring on the side of optimism.

Since Independence, we have faced a major security threat or warlike situation every five years on average. We began with a two-season war over Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), had the Goa project hanging with the Portuguese hiding under the NATO Article 5 protection, its liberation in 1961, wars with China, and Pakistan in 1962, 1965 and 1971, a sizeable skirmish in Nathulai in 1967. Five in 24 years makes it a military challenge every five years.

when then creating a warlike situation with India, we haven't seen it as yet. That's why we limit our optimism to five years on the outside. We could get lucky, but hope, as is said, is no plan. This is also the period the Chinese will now need, as they see Mr Trump enfeebling America, burning its alliances, and the successor finding his way around in a still-divided America. China will also need about five years until it feels strong enough to move on to the Philippines, Taiwan, South China Sea islands and, who knows, the Himalayas. If this optimistic reading turns out right, and India gets these five years, what does it do with these? What do we mean when we said refocus within? Mr Trump's bullying on trade, defence modernisation gaps in Op Sindoor, and the war in the Gulf have underscored five critical vulnerabilities for India. These are, in no particular order, military modernisation, energy dependency, space intelligence gaps (last two PSUs with important satellites having failed and the NavIC project mostly over), fertilisers, and critical minerals. It isn't possible to address all of these in five years, but you can do much to bridge the gaps to be in a much better position when the next crisis arises.

FIFA Lego lessons for IPL advertisers



YES, BUT... SANDEEP GOYAL

IPL ads are nice, but just nice. Brands seem more focused most times on the media exposure that their money can buy (sponsorships, properties, spots, impressions and more visibility) or on choosing high-priced celebrity to rope in, rather than on the product that could leverage the IPL

hysteria, or creatives that would stand out and be long remembered by the consumer. Which is where the new Lego campaign leading up to the FIFA World Cup should be a big masterclass for all brand marketers — both for the focus on product, and how the FIFA event would be a world-class brand sales. And for how celebrity quotient in the creatives can be leveraged for exponential gains.

world — because "everyone wants a piece" of the game! Intensive work went into creating a brand-new lineup of Lego Editions sets, featuring these four pitch legends. The new sets invite fans to build, display and celebrate their passion for the sport at home while paying tribute to the club's history, unique flair and signature style.

gram post. All four stars competing to assemble a Lego World Cup trophy, turning their real-life rivalry into a controlled, creative contest. And then the creative twist. A young fan steps in to complete the trophy and places his own custom figure on top, shifting the moment away from star power to fan ownership — making football culture into something interactive, where fans join in to build and interpret the game in their own way. Subtle. Simple.

The creative cost of featuring the four players is estimated to have touched \$8 million for the single 60-second production. Each player posted the video as part of the deal. Cristiano Ronaldo with more than 630 million followers, earned around \$3.4 million. Lionel Messi with 512 million followers pocketed an estimated \$2.59 million. Kylian Mbappé got \$852,000 for his following of over 120 million. Vinicius Jr with more than 50 million followers was paid \$325,000.

What are the marketing lessons for those advertising on IPL? ● Lego's collaboration with football legends works because it aligns creativity, collectability, and football

speactacle, creating a cohesive campaign narrative. No brand on IPL uses the league in quite the same way. By featuring multiple celebrities, Lego managed to create a network effect, increasing visibility and appeal. IPL team sponsors often get to use multiple players as part of their logo deal, but all such brand narratives have remained dull and insipid. ● The ad integrates the Lego sets into the overall campaign, making the overall campaign engaging, natural and fan-friendly. ● The campaign leverages the emotional connection that 1.3 billion fans of Ronaldo, Messi, Mbappé and Vinicius have with their heroes, making the product more desirable to them. ● IPL sponsors mostly buy ads for their massive media reach, not for its cultural content or creative possibilities. A serious rethink is advised.



The tongue-in-cheek world of India's early poets



PAST PARTICIPLE
MANU S PILLAI

Among the earliest records of women's voices in India is the *Padi Therigatha* from well over 2,000 years ago. It is an anthology of poetry by Buddhist nuns, covering a variety of topics. There is, for instance, some predictable content around destroying desire. There is writing on death and grief, as well as lessons of the type one gets in moral science lectures. One poet, thus, speaks of her sin of adultery in a previous life, resulting in rebirths as a monkey, goat (castrated), and calf (also castrated). Elsewhere an aspiring lover woos Subha by declaring how much her fawn-like eyes turn him on. She is not impressed. As she replies (in Charles Hallisey's translation): "Eyes are just little balls...and milky mucus comes out of it." Yet another nun, on hearing that dipping in water washes away sins, cheekily asks if this means frogs, turtles, and crocodiles are all destined for heaven. But my favourite is Mutta, who is "freed". Specifically, she declares herself liberated from "three crooked things": "Mortar, pestle, and husband with his own crooked thing."

It is a bit of a cliché to evoke the richness of Indian poetry, but the cliché exists for a reason. After all, in our many languages, these writings contain a whole spectrum of human thought, from metaphysical ideas to pointedly wicked humour. In his *Sivaratri Mahatmyam*, for example, the 15th-century poet Srinatha tells the story of a rakish chap, Sukumara. His sins are many—breaching caste, sleeping around, incest, consuming hashish, and even peeing standing up (a big no-no traditionally). In the end he is cleansed by serendipitously being at the right place on Sivaratri, the point being that devotion to Siva is all one needs. But the joy in reading Srinatha lies in Sukumara's journey. For he—like many of us—tries to rationalise his errors. A Brahmin who consumes alcohol, he learns, will be reborn as a worm. "So what?" he asks, in

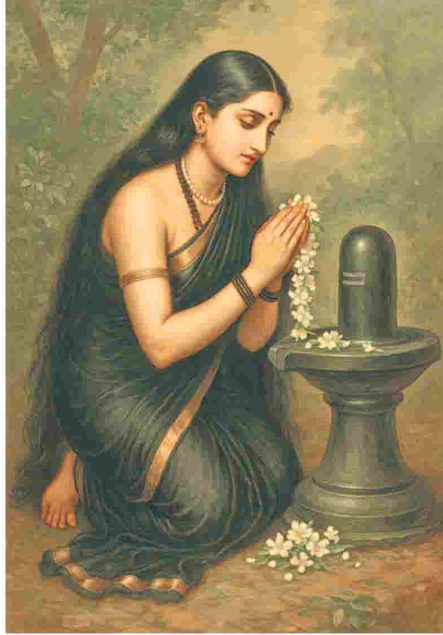
V.N. Rao and David Shulman's translation: "Don't all these creatures have their own ups and downs...?" Elsewhere before transgressing yet another rule, he states that having resoundingly smashed so many already, "why should I hesitate to break one more?"

Then there is a whole genre called *ninda stuti*. *Stuti* stands for praise, while *ninda* signifies insults. In other words, this is devotional poetry, but uses sarcasm and bitter language to get god to act or take notice of a *bhakta*. The 17th-century poet Bhadrachala Ramadasu is a case in point. A follower of Rama, this Brahmin was a bureaucrat in the Golconda sultanate. The story goes that seeing the broken-down temple in Bhadrachalam, he reconstructed it with state funds.

Imprisoned for embezzlement, he spent his time composing devotional poetry. But as the years in jail stretched on, his faith sometimes wavered. Once, listing out all the riches he had stocked in that temple for the deity, he reminds Rama acutely that these were not delivered to him by his (Rama's) father-in-law. No, it was Ramadasu who showered those riches and he hoped Rama would not forsake him. Tyagaraja in the 18th-19th centuries also wrote *ninda stutis*. In one, cross that god doesn't live up to all his promises, he asks what the point is then? Sita, for instance, wanted a happy life, but had to endure exile. Surpanakha came to Rama with desire only to lose a part of her face. God, sometimes, made no sense to even his staunchest votaries.

Female poets often highlighted resistance to and frustration with social pressures, but in sharp, laughter-inducing verses. Janabai, thus, wrote in 14th-century Maharashtra of her desire for freedom from domestic drudgery. In Arun Kolakar's masterful translation: "God, my darling, do me favour and kill my mother-in-law. I will feel lonely when she is gone. But you will be a good god won't you and kill my father-in-law [too]?" The sister-in-law is added to this list of targets next. And to what end? "I will be free," explains Janabai. And "we will be left alone, just you and me."

Two centuries earlier, Akka Mahadevi (as translated by Mukunda Rao) expressed similar views in Karnataka. "Husband inside, lover [i.e., god] outside, I can't manage them both. This



Akka Mahadevi, a poet-saint from Karnataka; and a statue of Telugu composer Annamacharya in Anakapalle, Andhra Pradesh.



conventional devotion, poets developed ever more creative forms of expression.

In Telugu *padams* of the early-modern period, the divine appears in the form of a lover, while the devotee plays the role of courtesan or even a madam. There is much romantic chiding: "I can see all the signs of what you have been doing till midnight, you playboy," goes one by Kshetraya. "Still you come rushing through the streets, sly as a thief to untie my blouse."

Annamacharya in the 15th century, also translated by Rao and Shulman, meanwhile assumes the role of a dismayed lover. "When I am done being angry, then I'll make love. Right now, you should be glad I'm listening. When you flash that big smile, I smile back," he continues. "It doesn't mean I'm not angry." Elsewhere he declares: "I get excited when we talk—and it's not enough. I keep staring at you—but it's not enough. We keep making love—and it's not enough. How did you make me fall for you?"

But lest we assume that our forebears only thought of love in terms of

the divine, it is important to throw into the mix poetry concerning fellow mortals. In a collection by Suhash Mahesh and Anusha Rao, we find some absolute gems. One from a 15th-century text is a request to the heavens. "God!" it begins. "Please don't create me again. If you must, then not as a human being. If you must, then no love, please. But if you must, then no long distance."

The *Gaha Sattasai*, a text that is well over 1,000 years old, is a bit more naughty. "I'm quite sure," goes one, "that the thick reeds by the river chucked with my ex-boyfriends on my wedding day, listening to the solemn recitation of hymns blessing the virgin bride." "Dear God," begins another, "make him hang out with other women more. He does not seem to realise what a catch I am." And to top it, perhaps the winning piece: "Ah, the strange ways of time. The young man I loved once...now recites scripture. I too leave for my husband's."

Manu S. Pillai is a historian and author, most recently, of *Gods, Guns and Missionaries*.

world and that other, cannot manage them both." Hadapada Lingamma, meanwhile, caricatures the tradition of a man tying a wedding locket around a woman's neck as she recalls her own escape from domesticity. "Born on earth in a man's world...I was immersed in darkness. My mother tied a husband to my neck" and that was her fate until she found her way to freedom via a spiritual path.

God, in much of this poetry, is a vehicle to express dissent. But even with

God, in much of this poetry, is a vehicle to express dissent. But even with conventional devotion, poets developed ever more creative forms of expression

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A war lesson: Think big, be bold, at home

THE FIRST wave of globalisation from the 1870s, after the opening of Suez Canal and laying of a permanent transatlantic cable connecting Europe and North America, resulted in the US becoming the world's economic superpower. It maintained that position even during the war and depression years (1914-45), when global trade collapsed and recovered gradually over the next three to four decades. The second wave, following the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc in 1989 and lasting till the 2010s, led to China's emergence as the "world's factory" and "mega-trader". This decade ought to have been India's, given its favourable youth demographics (like China's during the 1980s to the 2010s) and policy initiatives spurring digitisation (through Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile), formalisation (GST and demutualisation) and investments in physical infrastructure, from ports and airports to highways and renewable energy. Sadly, the demographic dividend from a labour force "bulge" hasn't materialised due to successive disruptions — Covid, wars in Ukraine and Iran, and US President Donald Trump's unilateral trade.

The basis of globalisation — founded on the free movement of goods, services, capital, people and ideas across borders — has been upended. Today, the assumption of wars being a near-impossibility in an age of hyper-economic interdependence between countries is in tatters. The current decade has seen two major episodes of migrant workers in big cities and industrial centres leaving for their villages and hometowns, the first exodus during the Covid lockdown and the second on account of cooking gas shortages triggered by the Iran war. In short, while China rode the second wave of globalisation to realise the economic growth potential from its high working age-to-dependent population ratio, India has been relatively unlucky on that score.

Whether these setbacks are temporary or not, Indian policymakers and firms will have to factor geopolitical risks into their growth strategies. It would mean diversifying energy and raw material supply chains, and building buffers (fiscal and physical) against unexpected shocks. No less important is staying the course on reforms and macroeconomic stability, which are the best possible insurance against market volatility and a guarantee of investors returning once the panic has subsided. The energy supply and price shocks from the war, reverberating across sectors, call for policy actions beyond picking low-hanging fruit. Reforming the fertiliser subsidy regime that promotes imbalanced nutrient use — especially over-application of urea — and fixing the losses of state discoms can wait no longer. The war has shrunk the economic and political space for easy solutions.

A new measure reframes heat crisis

THE ONSET of climate change has fundamentally transformed the understanding of heat stress on humans. People in most parts of the world are not only experiencing warmer weather, but the rise in temperatures is also accompanied by changing moisture patterns. Humans are resilient to high temperatures, provided sweat can evaporate. However, when the air is saturated with moisture, sweat lingers on the skin, and the body's thermoregulatory system is put under duress. The combined effect of the two variables on human health is not totally unknown to medical science. The wet-bulb approach, for instance, attempts to recalibrate temperatures by accounting for heat and humidity. A 35°C wet-bulb temperature is generally considered the theoretical upper limit of human endurance. A new study published in *Nature Communications* draws on recent episodes of intense heat and humidity to conclude that this safe limit could be much lower. A 33°C wet-bulb temperature can be unifying for the elderly and people who work outdoors.

The new understanding reframes India's climate challenge. Several cities routinely report heat indices that push human tolerance to its limits, even when wet-bulb temperatures remain below 35°C. The tragedy in Navi Mumbai, three years ago, when sunstroke claimed 13 lives even when the temperature, according to the Met department, was about 35°C, underlined the need to redraw the metrics of well-being during summer. However, planning has been slow to factor in the new imperatives. Concrete-dense neighbourhoods, sparse tree cover, and inadequate ventilation create "urban heat islands" where temperatures can be several degrees higher than surrounding rural areas. In such environments, nighttime offers little space to recover from the heat stress of the day. Heat thresholds are also shaped by social conditions. For construction workers, farm labourers, street vendors, and those who work in the gig economy, heat and humidity are occupational hazards.

In recent years, Indian cities have tried to draw up heat action plans. However, these plans are often based on dry-heat thresholds, and not the more dangerous combination of heat and humidity. Most of them are not acting on the local idiosyncrasies, protecting people from heat, humidity and rainfall requires granular knowledge. Dealing with a new form of heat will require joining several dots. India's cities do not have time to lose.

Last link with first Test victory has snapped

WITH THE death of C.D. Gopinath — the last member of the team that won India's first Test victory in Chennai against England in 1952 — the IPL milieu has lost its surviving link with cricket's amateur era. Behind India's rise as the dominant force in the game was the love and labour, sweat and tears, of men like Gopinath. The Test win Gopinath and his team engineered is a landmark in Indian cricket, the coming-of-age moment that instilled belief in a nation of 400 million.

He was a dashing batsman with a whip-like square cut. Affable and articulate, he made strong friendships with teammates and rivals. His Test career lasted eight games where he shone sporadically. But without his defiant 35 and 93-run stand with Polly Umrigar in the second innings, India's wait for the first Test win would have lasted longer. Three years later, he captained Tamil Nadu to their maiden Ranji Trophy title in 1955.

He regaled his audience with stories, and talked poignantly about the pre-independence era, when he was a cricketer in 1930, and the doctor, when prescribing medicine for the newborn, named him "Baby Gun". Even after calling time on his career, he didn't sever his ties with the game. He became a selector and spotted Gundappa Viswanath, one of the all-time greats. Even in his 80s, he would turn up for Test matches in Chennai and patiently sit through them. With his departure, Indian cricket has lost its last link with its first Test victory.

HERE is a wry joke that the jurist Edward S Corwin once told: A doctor, an engineer and a politician were debating which of their callings was the most ancient. The doctor claimed that the removal of the rib from Adam's side was clearly a surgical operation. The engineer replied that even before Adam, the world had to be created out of chaos, surely an engineering feat. "Very true," said the politician, "but who do you think created the chaos?" Today, one might plausibly rewrite the joke. What might be called the "judicial complex" — that peculiar combination of Supreme Court judges and lawyers — could give politicians a run for their money as originators of chaos. The latest salvo in this vein is the debate over the term "constitutional morality."

According to reports, the solicitor general, in submissions before the Supreme Court in the Sabarimala case, has expressed scepticism about the judicial use of the term in recent judgments. There is, to be sure, a legitimate criticism to be made of some of its uses. For many, including this columnist, the term is not a judicial standard of adjudication. In an earlier formulation ("What is Constitutional Morality", Seminar 615, November 2010), I had suggested that constitutional morality refers, instead, to the formal virtues of a constitutional system: self-restraint, respect for plurality, deference to processes, scepticism towards authoritative claims of popular sovereignty, and a commitment to an open culture of criticism that lies at the heart of constitutionalism. There is also a case, often

made in this column, against judicial overreach, against excessive deference to the judiciary, and for restoring greater space for parliamentary sovereignty.

But the context of the present attack matters. It should be clear that the critique of "constitutional morality" is not offered in service of the Constitution. It is, rather, part of a broader attempt to hollow it out.

There are at least two reasons to label it. One way of dismissing a term is to think it, what the philosopher J. Austin once called a "trouser term": A concept so indeterminate that it derives its meaning only in opposition to something else. The charge, then, is that "constitutional morality" is vague, defined merely against "societal morality". On this telling, it appears as a top-down, catch-all category. Its function is essentially to displace an organic, historically evolved, bottom-up set of norms. It becomes a judicial ruse, a means by which courts extend their authority against society.

But this is a critique of bad faith. "Societal morality" is more of a trouser term, indeed, arguably, an even more vacuous one. One may concede that "constitutional morality" is indeterminate and that it cannot, by itself, yield a standard of adjudication. Yet it has at least this virtue: It gestures towards the kinds of reasons that ought to be in play in adjudication. In a case like Sabarimala, it invites us to ask: How are liberty and equality to be reconciled with the autonomy of institutions? When does a practice so burden the standing of members that their civic equality is compro-



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

In a case like Sabarimala, it invites us to ask: How are liberty and equality to be reconciled with the autonomy of institutions? When does a practice so burden the standing of members that their civic equality is compromised?

mised? These are difficult questions, but they are the right questions.

By contrast, invoking "societal morality" in this context does not advance an argument; it forecloses one. It is less a reason than a refusal of reason, a device to insulate social practices from scrutiny. It is so because the objection to "constitutional morality" has been most strenuously voiced in cases like *Navigi Singh Johar v Union of India*, where entrenched social prohibitions were tested against the constitutional commitments to freedom and equality. Whatever its vagueness, "constitutional morality" at least orients us toward those values. It is their substance that matters, not the label. "Societal morality", in this usage, is an attempt to immobilise reason, and that, precisely, is what makes it attractive.

The second reason for scepticism is more troubling. Even if "constitutional morality" does not furnish a rule of decision, it does provide a standpoint from which to judge the Court itself. The anxiety it provokes is not about vagueness. It is, rather, that the term casts an unflattering light on the Court's own trajectory, its drift, at times, toward a kind of judicial nihilism. The moral substance, procedural discipline, and predictive stability of law appear increasingly eroded, replaced by arbitrariness in process and uncertainty in outcome. It is not that plaintiffs cannot get relief. But which ones do, and on what grounds, appears increasingly random and contingent.

No one who takes the Constitution seriously can now say, with

confidence, what it requires, or when the Court will choose to uphold its discipline. In recent weeks alone, several Rubicones seem to have been crossed. How, for instance, is one to assess the Court's prickly and disproportionate handling of a minor episode involving an NCERT textbook, an episode in which segments of the Bar seemed more eager to appease judicial sensitivities than to defend principle, turning the proceedings into a theatre of the absurd? More gravely, how is one to come to terms with a situation in which the Court appears untroubled by the disenfranchisement of lakhs of voters in West Bengal without full due process, suggesting, in effect, that no serious constitutional injury occurs even when eligible citizens are unable to vote because the Court has endorsed a flawed process?

"Constitutional morality" may not tell us what the right answer is in Sabarimala, how textbooks ought to be written, or which voters possess valid documentation. But it can still serve as a diagnostic. It alerts us to the presence of arbitrariness and unaccountable power; to moments when freedom and equality are treated with suspicion; to instances where a court ceases to enable reason and instead begins to immobilise it.

Question constitutional morality by all means. But a reactionary assault on constitutional morality is a misunderstanding of its character. It is, in effect, to sow the seeds of moral and judicial chaos, an outcome to which our judiciary now seems, regrettably, determined to contribute.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

LPG shock could impact nutrition outcomes



DIPA SINHA AND KALYANI RAGHUNATHAN

THE ONGOING war in West Asia has resulted in an LPG crisis in India. The disruption in supplies has led to higher prices, panic buying, long queues and black-marketing. Reports have also indicated a reduction in output of small industries reliant on LPG, and of migrant workers in cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Surat starting to return to their villages, reminiscent of the Covid lockdown. Sensibly, the government has prioritised domestic supply over industrial (and restaurant) use and has sought alternative imports.

What are the implications of this supply reduction on access to and preparation of a diet that meets India's nutritional guidelines? There are both direct and indirect effects. The rising cost of cooking fuel immediately raises the costs of preparing meals. This is not insignificant; according to the nationally representative Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) data from 2023-24, fuel and light constitute 6.1 per cent and 5.6 per cent of total monthly per capita expenditure in rural and urban areas respectively, close to the amount spent on medical expenses or education.

There are also several knock-on effects. India is heavily dependent on imports for both finished fertilisers and raw materials. The disruption to fertiliser supply chains — combined with rising costs of mechanisation and transportation — is likely to increase the costs of cultivation substantially, leading to the risk of food inflation.

These could erode access to a healthy diet. Even prior to this crisis, healthy diets were unaffordable for many. We use the HCES 2023-24 to estimate the Cost of a Healthy Diet (CoHD), which is the minimum daily rupee amount one would need to spend to meet the ICMR's food-based dietary guidelines. We estimate the national average CoHD for a non-vegetarian diet at Rs 73.1 per person per day in 2023-24, suggesting that between 25 to 49 per cent of the population could not afford the raw cost of the foods that would make up a healthy diet, depending on which threshold one used.

However, preparing a meal includes

other costs beyond the raw food costs, such as the cost of spices and, more importantly, of fuel. When these costs are accounted for, the CoHD increases by about Rs 9.5, of which Rs 6.5 comes from the cost of the fuel used to prepare the meal. This means that the proportion of the population who cannot afford a healthy diet increases from 32-62 per cent, depending on the affordability threshold used. With this war, the contribution of cooking fuel costs to the overall cost of meal preparation is likely to rise substantially; along with the possible rise in food prices, this will further reduce the affordability of a healthy diet.

What should be the way forward? Our research highlights the importance of expanding the focus to include dietary diversity as well as other accompanying factors, such as access to and costs of cooking fuel, the reach and coverage of social safety nets, and the division of labour within the home — all of which come together to determine what people ultimately eat. In the immediate term, expanding the scope of social safety net programmes to subsidise the cost of nutritious foods like pulses, vegetables, eggs and fresh foods, and nuts and seeds would help buffer rising food prices for these perishable and semi-perishable items, and raise consumption to the levels recommended by the ICMR. Continued support through schemes like the PMUJY is critical, as is the inclusion of migrant populations within its ambit, even if only temporarily. In the longer term, the availability of nutritious foods could be enhanced through agricultural policies.

The current situation of increasing fuel costs and the prospect of a global food price surge underscores the relevance of a food systems approach to food policy. In a country with a high and stubborn level of malnutrition, such shocks could have immediate effects on people's health and nutrition outcomes. We must not lose sight of the need for nutrition security if we are to weather this storm.

Sinha is at Centre for the Study of the Indian Economy, Azim Premji University and Raghunathan is an independent researcher. Views are personal

In a Chennai film festival, comeback of a Dalit actor



NEERAJ BUNKAR

A FILM festival named after P.K. Rosy, as part of the Vaanant Art Festival in Chennai, might seem like just another cultural event. It is not. It is a statement, about memory, caste, and who gets to be seen. Rosy's story sits at the uneasy beginning of Indian cinema. A Dalit woman from Kerala, she acted in *Vigathakumaran*, the first Malayalam feature film, in the late 1920s. Her role should have marked a breakthrough. Instead, it triggered outrage. Her "sanskrit" was playing an "upper-caste" woman. The news was attacked. Her house was burned. She disappeared from public life and lived the rest of her years under another name. The erasure reveals something fundamental about Indian cinema. It has never just been about storytelling. It has always been about who is allowed to appear, and under what conditions.

Nearly a century later, cinema has grown in scale and ambition. It occasionally engages with caste, even critiques it. But the Dalit woman is still largely absent, not just in numbers, but in perspective. She appears sporadically, often filtered through someone else's gaze, rarely as a subject who defines her own story.

This is why the P.K. Rosy Film Festival matters. Launched by filmmaker Pa Ranjith's Neelam Culture Centre, it is part of a larger effort to build cultural spaces that do not wait for mainstream validation. Naming it after Rosy is an act of correction, restoring her to the centre of a history that pushed her out. It brings together films that engage directly with caste, labour, land, gender, and resistance. It creates a space where Dalit lives are central narratives. Mainstream cinema often absorbs dissent slowly and selectively. It makes space, but within limits. Festivals like this allow stories to exist without being softened or made palatable.

Across the world, there is a shift towards centring Dalit and marginalised voices in cinema, not as subjects of study, but as creators. From New York to Nottingham to London, Dalit-Adivasi film festivals are forging a transnational network that places caste firmly within conversations on race and justice.

At the same time, this moment draws from a longer history of cultural assertion. The Women in Cinema Collective in Kerala, for instance, established the P.K. Rosy Film Festival in 2019 to foreground feminist and marginalised cinema. These efforts recognise something essential: Representation alone is not enough. There must be spaces that sustain and circulate these voices.

All of this makes the timing of the P.K. Rosy Film Festival especially significant. Held every April, it coincides with Dalit History Month and the birth month of B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule. And yet, the need for such spaces reveals a continuing failure. Nearly a century after Rosy's debut, mainstream institutions remain hesitant to fully acknowledge her legacy.

That gap, between acknowledgement and transformation, is where this festival intervenes. It refuses to let Rosy remain a footnote. It insists that her story is not just about the past, but about the future of cinema. And it asks a difficult question: What would Indian cinema look like if those once excluded were not just included, but centred? For a few days in Chennai, that answer begins to take shape.

Bunkar is a researcher specialising in caste and cinema

40 YEARS AGO

April 11, 1986



Terror attack in Punjab

TERRORISTS STRUCK at three places, killing two policemen of the Punjab Police and a police and one SI of the Punjab Police. The security forces retaliated by launching a "bullet-for-bullet" operation and gunned down three terrorists in Amritsar. The two GRP personnel were killed and one injured when they were attacked aboard a running train at Kotla Gujran railway station near Amritsar.

Benazir welcomed in Pakistan

BENAZIR BHUTTO received a welcome unprecedented in Pakistan's 39-year history and formally launched her political career with a warning to Gen Ziaul Haq to hand over

power to the people by holding elections. An estimated half a million people at her first political meeting in Pakistan joined Bhutto, chairperson of the Pakistan People's Party, in chanting "Zia jave, jave" (Zia is bound to leave). Wild scenes of street dancing and joy heralded her return from a two-year exile in Europe, and Bhutto took the opportunity to tell the people that her decision to enter politics was a fulfillment of her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's, wish.

Turkish PM in India

THE FIRST Turkish Prime Minister to pay an official visit to India, Turgut Ozal, said he was hopeful that his visit would launch a "new era of improved relations" between the two

countries. Ozal announced that it had been agreed to constitute a joint economic commission to promote bilateral cooperation. He admitted there had not been any high-level exchanges between the two countries since 1960, when Jawaharlal Nehru visited Turkey. India and Turkey, he disclosed, had signed an air services agreement earlier in the day.

Attack copters under Army

THE GOVERNMENT has decided that attack helicopters, which were previously owned and maintained by the Air Force, will now come under the Army's command and control. The decision, hinted at by the PM in his reply to the defence debate in the Lok Sabha, partly means a long-standing demand of the Army.



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The Ideas Page

SATURDAY, APRIL 11, 2026

The strait of high stakes, where law and leverage collide



ARUN PRAKASH

THE STRAIT of Hormuz is, today, the epicentre of a global economic and maritime crisis. Following the unprovoked US-Israeli attack on Iran on February 28, the waterway now has the status of a "war zone", placing severe restrictions on the passage of global shipping. Impacting nearly 20 per cent of the world's oil and 25 per cent of LNG trade, this is the most significant disruption to global energy supply since the 1970s.

Its navy may have been destroyed, but the threat posed by Iran's coastal missile batteries, drone swarms, and sea mines has been sufficient to deter all but the most desperate commercial shipping from attempting a passage through the Strait of Hormuz. Marine insurance premiums have jumped from 400 per cent to 600 per cent, and Iran is reportedly demanding tolls of up to \$1 per barrel of oil for transit, a measure seen as "extortionate". Yet this challenge defies an easy or swift resolution. It is essential to step back and grasp the full interplay of legal, strategic, and political factors at work.

An overwhelming majority of global trade travels by sea, and while the oceans may appear vast, the compulsions of safe and expeditious transit tend to funnel shipping traffic through a set of narrow waterways, termed "maritime choke points" — constricted channels that connect major seas. By controlling access to vital seas, these choke points have, historically, amplified naval power projection, turning geography into a force multiplier for maritime powers.

"Pax Britannica", which defined Britain's role as the global hegemon between 1815 and 1914, was built upon its control over strategic locations like Gibraltar, Malta, Aden, Oman, Singapore and Cape Town, which dominated choke points and sea lanes. In World War I, the Dardanelles Strait played a pivotal role in prolonging the survival of the Ottoman Empire, when suc-

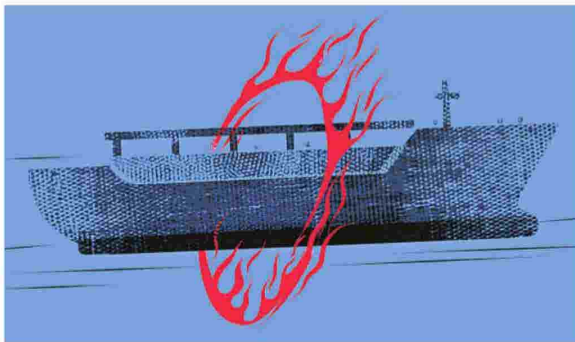


ILLUSTRATION: C. SAKSHI MAHAR

cessive Allied amphibious assaults were thwarted by the Turks.

In the current scenario, US President Donald Trump's obsession with acquiring Greenland, and regaining control of the Panama Canal Zone may arouse derision, but it is rooted in strategic concern regarding the control of choke points, particularly in the context of rising competition with China and Russia. Greenland happens to be the northern anchor of the strategic Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap, a narrow transit corridor that is the primary exit for Russia's Northern Fleet from its Arctic bases. As for China, with the melting of the Arctic ice, it is actively eyeing the Northern Sea Route via the GIUK Gap as a polar extension of its Maritime Silk Road.

The principle that the sea was international territory, and that all nations were free to use it for trade, has a hoary provenance, going back to the concept of *Mare Liberum*, or "free sea", proposed by Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius in 1609. Since nations had taken to arbitrary extensions of territorial waters, order and regulation were restored by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which fixed the limit of

Iran's closure of the Strait brings it into direct conflict with the UNCLOS regime of Transit Passage. But it also remains this beleaguered nation's final strategic lever

"territorial waters" at 12 miles. Maritime choke points have, however, created a hurdle to the established principle of freedom of navigation because they often fall within the territorial waters of one or more states.

To prevent global commerce from being held hostage by geography, two legal regimes were adopted by UNCLOS for shipping to negotiate territorial waters. One was the concept of "Innocent Passage" that allows a vessel to pass through the territorial waters of a state, subject to stringent restrictions on movement and activities, including suspension of passage. A similar right, termed "Transit Passage", was created, applicable only to international straits, granting freedom of navigation solely for the purpose of continuous and expeditious transit of global trade. Unlike in the case of innocent passage, the coastal state cannot suspend or hamper transit passage in any way, nor can it discriminate between flags.

The Strait of Hormuz, connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman, qualifies as a "strait used for international navigation" under UNCLOS. The entire navigable corridor of this strait falls within the territorial waters of Iran and Oman.

Iran signed the UNCLOS in 1982, but has not (like the US) ratified it so far. Having deliberately chosen to apply the restrictive Innocent Passage clause, Iran's closure of the Strait brings it into direct conflict with the UNCLOS regime of Transit Passage, designed precisely to prevent such a unilateral blockade of strategic straits.

Maritime choke points are the physical manifestations of global interdependence. While coastal states like Iran and Oman or those bordering the Malacca Strait have legitimate interests in protecting their waters from threats such as pollution and smuggling, international law, specifically the regime of Transit Passage, denies them the right to interfere with the flow of global shipping. Moreover, an attempt to exercise control by mining, or the threat of kinetic action, would be seen as an illegal and aggressive action under the UN Charter.

However, Iran faces stark choices against over-leaning military odds. With its political and military leadership brutally decapitated, its economy under a total embargo, and its infrastructure devastated by heavy bombardment, the Strait of Hormuz remains this beleaguered nation's final strategic lever. Tehran is likely to exploit this choke point to extract maximum concessions from its adversaries.

For India, the Strait of Hormuz is no mere waterway but a vital "jugular vein", whose closure or disruption poses a grave threat to national security, economic growth and domestic stability. The continuation of this conflict also evokes the unthinkable spectre of a "mushroom cloud" over the region.

Given its international standing and cordialties with the three primary actors — the US, Israel, and Iran — India's peremptory dismissal of a mediatory role, yielding centre stage to Pakistan, remains a puzzling diplomatic choice. Nevertheless, in keeping with its traditional strategic culture, India must continue to leverage quiet diplomacy to safeguard its own interests while urging all parties to comply with UN laws and mandates, not only for the sake of regional peace, but also to avoid widespread economic distress in the Global South.

The writer is a former Indian Navy chief

With Nitish exit, Bihar Sushasan must go beyond top-down



ASHMITA GUPTA, DANIEL BERLINER AND MARTIN HAUS

UNDER the leadership of Nitish Kumar, Bihar has undergone a remarkable transformation in good governance (*Sushasan*): Roads now allow fast travel even to remote districts, electricity has reached far-flung villages, and government schools have expanded both infrastructure and staffing. In March 2026, the Bihar Public Policy Days at the London School of Economics highlighted that the next generation of reforms, *Sushasan 2.0*, needs to move from expanding access to ensuring quality. This requires deeper reforms of how the bureaucracy functions.

A core insight from our survey, a joint project by LSE and the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI), highlights that earlier reforms were largely logistical (building roads, expanding electricity access) and therefore easier to monitor from above. However, *Sushasan 2.0* involves improving difficult-to-monitor public services such as elementary schools, health centres, anganwadis, and right-to-work schemes. These require reforms that cannot simply be ordered from the top and improving the utilisation of existing resources (like teachers and school buildings). Improving utilisation requires understanding the human side of service delivery. Across Bihar, frontline workers provide essential public services. How do they feel about their work? What hinders them? Our findings show that while frontline staff are generally motivated and find their work fulfilling, many feel burdened by repetitive tasks or rigid rules. At the managerial level, block and district officers overwhelmed by top-down enforcement as their primary responsibility. This aligns with earlier findings by Akshay Mangla that India's bureaucracy often emphasises narrow rule-following, hindering effective service delivery.

In our study, a large majority of managers expressed the belief that, unless closely monitored, subordinates will be lazy. This points to a deeper problem in how the system views its own frontline workers. Instead of being trusted to make decisions, teachers, nurses, and local officials are often given little autonomy. It reflects a broader pattern identified by Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Michael

Walton, who argue that there is a widespread lack of trust in India's government workforce by the country's elite. Frontline officials are often seen as inefficient or corrupt, which leads to more rules and stricter oversight. This creates a cycle: When workers are not trusted or empowered, they are less likely to take initiative, reinforcing the very perceptions that led to tight control in the first place. As Bihar prepares for new leadership, this presents an opportunity. Two key lessons from global evidence stand out for the next CM.

First, surveillance-based strategies have shown limited success in improving effort where performance is difficult to measure. Second, effective alternatives do exist. Approaches that combine trust, professional autonomy, and supportive supervision have shown better outcomes.

The central challenge for *Sushasan 2.0* is therefore: How can the system be redesigned to encourage greater effort from frontline workers? Our study offers an important clue as nearly two-thirds of frontline staff say they would be willing to work harder if their colleagues did the same. Effort is shaped not just by rules, but by shared norms and expectations. A sense of purpose, professional pride, and the satisfaction of serving others are especially critical in roles where effort is hard to observe, yet they remain largely overlooked in policy design. To make public services truly work for Bihar's citizens, reforms must be seen as part of a sustained, long-term process. As Martin J. Williams argues in *Reform as Process*, reforms that focus narrowly on formal rules and are implemented as discrete projects often fall short. More durable change comes from continuous reform efforts that create space for internal dialogue, learning, and adaptation within the bureaucracy. Over time, such processes can reshape norms, build trust, and enable the state to function more effectively.

Deep reform requires empowering those within the system, drawing on support from institutions within the public system such as BIPARD and JIM Bodo Goya rather than consultations with their shallow and generic reform suggestions, and prioritising intrinsic motivation and non-formal aspects of work. Nitish Kumar has already shown that sustained governance reforms can set a state on a different path. If Bihar's next chief minister can build on this foundation, there is a real opportunity to leave behind a legacy that reshapes the state's development trajectory for decades to come.

Gupta is associate professor and member secretary, ADRI. Berliner is professor of Political Science and Public Policy, LSE. Haus is PhD candidate, LSE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A new beginning

AHEAD OF the visit of Bangladesh Foreign Minister Khalibur Rahman to Delhi on Tuesday, PM Taruqa Rahman said that the discussions will focus on the "future of relations" between the two countries. ('Delhi, Dhaka must sidestep short-termism', *IE*, April 10). This time, Dhaka's confrontational animus towards India seems missing. The flexibility Bangladesh has chosen to display in promoting better ties with India is a good sign.

SS Paul, Nadia

IN TODAY'S uncertain global environment, peace and cooperation should be a priority. There is a need for stronger ties between neighbouring countries like India and Bangladesh. Differences rooted in politics or the past should not hinder progress, especially when the well-being of ordinary citizens is at stake. ('Delhi, Dhaka must sidestep short-termism', *IE*, April 10). Constructive dialogue, trust, and shared goals can pave the way for growth and long-term stability, while continued tensions only create insecurity and setbacks.

Parul Rana, Zirakpur

Needed, stability

ANOTHER MAJOR conflict is the last thing the world needs ("Trump should rein Netanyahu in", *IE*, April 10). The current situation involving the US, Iran, Israel, and Lebanon highlights how fragile peace has become, as attacks continue to rise and the ceasefire appears increasingly uncertain. It is innocent civilians who suffer the most in such crises, with lives being lost and countless families forced to leave their homes. If tensions continue to escalate, the conflict could grow into a wider war, affecting not only the region but also the global economy. This is the moment for world leaders, especially the US, to act responsibly, reduce hostilities, and work toward lasting peace. What the world needs is less aggression and more understanding.

Rachita, Chandigarh



RAM RAJYA BY RAM MADHAV

NEXT WEEK, Parliament will take up the Women's Reservation Bill in a special session, a historic step by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Despite efforts, we failed to provide proper representation to women in Indian legislatures in the past 75 years. At the time of our Constitution-making, there were suggestions that, just like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, women, too, should be given a quota in our legislatures.

Prominent women members of the Assembly said women should get genuine equality rather than protective discrimination. "We have never asked for privileges... To seek any form of reservation would be to admit that women are not equal to men." Hansa Mehta, a member from Bombay, argued. Renuka Ray from Bengal echoed the sentiment. Durgabai Deshmukh from Madras Province opposed special privileges, saying they might hinder rather than promote long-term equality.

Behind their rejection was the hope that, by looking at their contributions during the freedom movement, the Indian political system would naturally come forward to offer proper representation. Sadly, we betrayed their hopes and aspirations. Successful Western democracies like the US and UK have demonstrated the will and maturity to provide greater repre-

We began well, with nearly 5 per cent of members in the first Parliament being women. This has seen little improvement — in the 2004 Lok Sabha, 9 per cent of MPs were women; and just 14-15 per cent in 2024

sentation for women in their parliaments without any quota system. In the US, the representation of women in Congress was just 2 per cent in 1950. It stands at almost 30 per cent today. In the UK House of Commons, it grew from 3 per cent in the 1950s to 18 per cent in the early 2000s to a commendable 35 per cent today. In India, we began well, with nearly 5 per cent of members in the first Parliament in 1952 being women. This has seen little improvement — in the 2004 Lok Sabha, 9 per cent of MPs were women; this grew to just 14-15 per cent in 2024.

The first major success in providing greater representation to women in elected bodies happened through the 73rd and 74th amendments in 1992. Women were provided 33 per cent reservation in village panchayats and municipal bodies. That led to the demand for a similar provision in Parliament and state legislatures. The Deve Gowda-led government made a half-hearted attempt in 1996 to introduce the Women's Reservation Bill. Strong opposition from its own allies forced them to push it to a select committee and bury it there.

The Vajpayee government made several attempts during 1998-2004 to introduce the bill. But parties like the Samajwadi Party and the RJD put up resistance, insisting that a 33 per cent quota be earmarked for OBCs within the women's quota. This was a clear ex-

On women's representation, India's overdue correction

mechanism of exploitation that governed agrarian India. Equally central to Phule's thought was his understanding of patriarchy. Along with Savitribai Phule, he opened the doors of education to women at a time when society was deeply hostile to the idea. Today, patriarchy remains deeply entrenched. Violence against women, discrimination in workplaces, and restrictions on autonomy continue to shape everyday life. At the same time, there is a visible push to reassess so-called traditional values, often presented as cultural pride. The ideological framework associated with the RSS and BJP tends to valorise a conservative social order, where hierarchy is normalised and dissent is discouraged. In such a setting, the struggle for women's equality cannot be separated from the struggle against caste and class oppression. Phule's work also had a profound influence on B.R. Ambedkar who himself acknowledged Phule as one of his intellectual predecessors. The Constitution, with its commitment to equality, liberty and fraternity, bears the imprint of this intellectual lineage. When constitutional values are diluted, when inequality is normalised, and when dissent is delegitimised, we see a departure from the very principles that thinkers like Phule helped to shape.

We are witnessing a departure from the very principles that thinkers like Phule helped to shape

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



D RAJA

THE ENDURING relevance of Jyotirao Phule does not lie in ceremonial remembrance but in the clarity with which he understood Indian society. He saw, long before others, that inequality here is structured through the combined force of class exploitation, caste hierarchy and patriarchy. These are not separate problems. They are intertwined systems that sustain each other.

Phule began by attacking the ideological roots of caste. He refused to accept that hierarchy was divinely ordained. Instead, he located it in history, conquest, and the systematic subjugation of the majority by a minority that monopolised knowledge

Through Phule's eyes, connecting the inequality dots

and power. In *Gulamgiri*, he wrote with striking force: "The condition of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras is not very different from that of slaves in America." That insight remains disturbingly relevant. Even today, caste determines access to land, education, employment and dignity. Atrocities against Dalits continue with alarming regularity. Entire communities remain trapped in degrading occupations. Yet, there is a growing attempt to blur these realities under the language of cultural unity. The insistence on a homogenised Hindu identity often sidelines the lived experiences of caste oppression. Critique of inequality is recast as an attack on tradition.

Phule did not stop at caste. He extended his critique to the economic structure of society. In *Shetkarvacha Astad*, he turned his attention to the peasantry and exposed the

logical framework associated with the RSS and BJP tends to valorise a conservative social order, where hierarchy is normalised and dissent is discouraged. In such a setting, the struggle for women's equality cannot be separated from the struggle against caste and class oppression. Phule's work also had a profound influence on B.R. Ambedkar who himself acknowledged Phule as one of his intellectual predecessors. The Constitution, with its commitment to equality, liberty and fraternity, bears the imprint of this intellectual lineage. When constitutional values are diluted, when inequality is normalised, and when dissent is delegitimised, we see a departure from the very principles that thinkers like Phule helped to shape. The attempt to replace social justice with cultural nationalism, to privilege identity over equality, and

to silence critique poses a direct challenge to this legacy. Phule's words continue to resonate because they address the foundations of inequality. They do not offer easy comfort. They demand that we look at society as it is, not as we would like to imagine it. They compel us to recognise that class exploitation, caste discrimination and patriarchy are not relics of the past. They are active forces shaping our present.

To engage with Phule today is a political necessity. It is about reclaiming a tradition of thought that places the oppressed at the centre, that values equality over hierarchy, and that insists on justice as the basis of social life. Phule is a guide for the present, and perhaps more importantly, for the future.

The writer is general secretary, Communist Party of India

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How the war will hit India's growth, and your wallet

GRAPHS, DATA, PERSPECTIVES
BY UDIT MISRA

WEEKLY ECONOMIC AND POLICY INSIGHTS USING DATA

INDIA'S REAL economic growth rate is expected to dip below the crucial 7% mark in the current financial year thanks to the war in Iran, according to a new assessment by the World Bank. On February 27, the Indian government had updated the way it estimated its economic growth. The most significant change was the use of a new base year (2022-23). It was a long-pending update — the previous base year was 2011-12 — as a growing number of observers had raised questions about the quality of India's GDP data, especially many who claimed India's GDP was being overstated.

While the new gross domestic product or GDP was lower in the new data series, a silver lining was the fact that in each of the years in the new GDP data series, the growth rate of India's real GDP (that is, economic growth after taking away the effect of inflation) was above 7%.

The new series pegged India's real GDP growth rate at 7.2% for FY24, 7.1% in FY25 and 7.6% in FY26. Commenting on the data, India's Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran had underscored the importance of the 7% growth rate. "This is very important because these are the numbers when we talk about achieving Viksit Bharat by 2047. The numbers being talked about are between 7% and 8% in real growth rates." The very next day, however, the US and Israel attacked Iran — a war that continued for 39 days before reaching a fragile ceasefire agreement. Over the next few days, top negotiators from the US and Iran will meet in Islamabad and attempt to bring hostilities to an end. But even as things stand, India's GDP growth rate has been dented enough to dip below the 7% mark according to the World Bank's latest India Development Update (see table).

In the absence of the conflict, GDP growth was projected at 7.2 percent. Growth is now projected at 6.5 percent in FY27, reflecting headwinds from the Middle East conflict — assuming an extended disruption in global energy (oil and gas) supply till end-2026," states the World Bank. It has also provided a detailed breakdown about how different components of India's growth will be affected. Typically, the GDP of a country is generated by four main engines:

- Expenditures by private individuals for their consumption (C) — this includes everything from food to train tickets
 - Expenditures by companies towards their businesses (these are called investments or 'I' in the table)
 - Expenditures that the government makes for its daily functioning (for instance, salaries and fuel bills)
 - The net effect of exports (X) and imports (M): exports bring money in and add to GDP. Imports do the opposite.
- The equation is $GDP = C + I + G + NX$ (net exports)

The biggest deceleration in the overall GDP is likely to happen via the deceleration in the growth of private consumption, which is also the biggest engine of growth in any year, accounting for almost 55% to 60% of India's total GDP. In the past couple of years, the government has tried to boost private consumption by providing relief both in direct income tax as well as indirect (GST) tax. But the higher prices in the wake of this war is expected to hit "disposable" incomes.

The growth in "investments" by companies — the second biggest engine, contributing almost 30% of total GDP in a year — is likely to slow down due to market uncertainty. The government's own expenditure, too, is likely to be constrained because it is already over-stretched on its total borrowings and with oil prices staying elevated, the subsidy bill is likely to rise further.

Last, while exports are expected to continue to grow at the same rate, imports are likely to increase at a faster clip and the net effect is expected to drag down India's GDP further.

• DENT TO GROWTH PROJECTION

Growth rates (year-on-year)	2025-26	2026-27
Real GDP	7.6%	6.6%
Private Consumption (C)	7.7%	7%
Gross Fixed Capital Formation (I)	7.1%	6.7%
Government Expenditure (G)	6.6%	6.3%
Exports (X)	6.5%	6.5%
Imports (M)	6.4%	6.7%

SOURCE:CEIC, MOSPI, WORLD BANK STAFF CALCULATIONS.

• CLIMATE

Global concerns vs national interest: Why India lost interest in hosting COP33

Amitabh Sinha
New Delhi, April 10

IT WAS IN December 2023, during COP28 in Dubai, that Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered to host the 2028 edition of the annual climate summit in India.

A public and explicit offer to host a COP meeting, five years in advance, and that too from a head of state, was extremely rare. It was a clear indication that India was looking to play a more active and leading role in international climate affairs. The offer had come just a few months after a successful G20 meeting in New Delhi whose final outcome had important decisions on climate.

But events of the last few years, on the climate front and elsewhere, prompted a rethink. India soon realised that the objectives it had in mind while offering to host the event could not be achieved in this changed situation. India's own positions on climate issues evolved significantly during this time. It became increasingly evident that as host and president of a COP meeting, it would have to champion causes that

would come in conflict with its own stated positions and national interest. As a result, India has decided to drop this matter and not bid for COP33 when the process begins this year to pick the 2028 host.

India's sharpening positions

India has not spelt out the reasons for this change of mind, but its predicament is not difficult to comprehend. In the last few years, India has been taking unusually strong positions on climate-related matters. This was prompted by the evolution of global climate negotiations well as a recalibration of India's own perspective. There has been an growing acknowledgment of the fact that the international climate framework, represented by the Paris Agreement, remains heavily stacked against developing countries — particularly a country like India which has a large emission footprint but a compelling need for more carbon space to ensure prosperity to its people. Consequently, in matters of climate and energy, there has been a clear attempt by India in the last few years to prioritise long-term na-

tional interest over global climate concerns.

India even began questioning the very foundations of Paris pact, arguing that pursuing arbitrarily-defined temperature goals (1.5 or 2 degrees Celsius targets) was probably not the best way, and certainly not the only way, to deal with climate change. India has been arguing that rapid development was probably the best insurance against climate change as that would bring in greater resilience to withstand climate impacts.

This approach is at variance with the mainstream, 'progressive' position that frames climate change as an existential threat, and wants every country, regardless of their level of development, to prioritise climate action. India, on the other hand, had begun to argue for a development-first approach, hoping to get on a trajectory similar to that of China, which in the last three decades prioritised growth to reach a position from where it can make meaningful contributions on climate without hampering its interests. There is a reason why China, and for that matter US, has never shown any interest in hosting climate meetings.

In the last few years, India has been vocal in articulating its recalibrated positions. It had reacted with uncharacteristic anger at the disappointing outcome on climate finance negotiations at COP29 in 2024. It has been pressing for the full implementation of Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement, a largely overlooked provision that says developed nations "shall provide", not just "mobilise", financial resources for developing countries. On India's insistence, COP30 in Brazil last year was forced to establish a two-year work programme to discuss all pending matters on climate finance, including Article 9.1.

A difficult position

Having taken these positions, it would have been extremely difficult for India to steer the negotiations at COP33. The host and president of the COP meetings is expected to champion the effective implementation of the Paris Agreement, not question its foundations. It is supposed to ensure that COP discussions lead to outcomes that will speed up the rate of emission cuts, not raise doubts over their

usefulness. India feared that taking on that role for COP33 would have required it to prioritise global climate concerns over its own national interests.

This predicament would have been pronounced in COP33 because that meeting is due to carry out the second Global Stocktake (GST) to assess the progress being made on Paris Agreement targets. GSTs are an important exercise under the Paris Agreement, to be carried out at five-year intervals, to ensure that the world does not lose sight of its goal and adjusts the ambition of its climate actions to achieve these. Considering that the world is currently nowhere close to the pathway that will achieve the Paris targets, COP33 would need to deliver an outcome that would result in substantial increase in climate ambition, an unlikely scenario.

The IPCC AR7 angle

The under-preparation seventh assessment report (AR7) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) worsened India's predicament. Work on AR7 began last year and it is due to be published

in 2029. But there are demands from some countries to expedite the publication of the report by 2028 itself so that it can feed into the GST process. The assessment reports are the most comprehensive scientific view of the state of global climate and have served as the scientific basis for international climate negotiations from the start.

AR7 is likely to present a grim picture of the state of global climate, and if published ahead of the GST exercise, could lead to renewed calls for raising of climate ambition. India, along with countries including China, has been opposing the early publication, arguing that many developing countries would have less time to review it.

As host and president of the COP supervising the GST process, it would be difficult for India to oppose the early publication. Stepping aside would also be a missed opportunity for India to push forward the cause of Global South. But weighed against the prospect of getting boxed in, India thought it prudent to opt out.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

• U.S.-IRAN TALKS

'Difficult to replace the Gulf as a supply source'



EXPERT EXPLAINS

AJAY SINGH

ENERGY AND SHIPPING INDUSTRY EXECUTIVE

THE TWO-WEEK ceasefire between the US and Iran appears increasingly fragile as delegations from both countries meet in Islamabad today. Israel attacked Lebanon claiming it was not part of the ceasefire deal, Iran again closed the Strait of Hormuz over the alleged violation, and US President Donald Trump accused Tehran of breaching the deal with the fresh blockade.

The two-week period for talks between the US and Iran, therefore, becomes crucial to not just strike a lasting peace but also to ensure the flow of energy through the maritime chokepoint that accounts for a fifth of the world's oil demand during peacetime.

Ajay Singh, an energy and shipping executive based in Tokyo, tells **Anil Basi** that even if the ceasefire holds, restarting and stabilising production and exports from the Persian Gulf could possibly take weeks. Singh, who is a former Shell and Japan Petroleum Corporation executive with considerable experience of West Asia, also explains why the US and Venezuela cannot replace the Gulf as a supply source even in the long run. Edited excerpts:

With a ceasefire deal having been announced, what are the prospects for oil and gas exports to resume?

A ceasefire has been announced but it is still unclear whether all three warring countries are fully on board, and what they will fully take effect and hold. That is essential for substantial oil and gas exports through the Strait of Hormuz to resume. Disagreements have been reported among the parties concerned about the terms of the ceasefire. Meanwhile attacks have continued in Kuwait, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Lebanon including on oil and gas facilities. It is too early to say that oil and gas exports can substantially re-commence.

If the ceasefire actually takes effect and



holds, then exports could resume relatively quickly but they will initially be quite limited. Tankers are at hand in the Persian Gulf region, as are stocks of oil and gas at export terminals, but everything has been idle for weeks and it will take time for volumes to build up. Various problems will need to be sorted out, from fixing accumulated technical issues at export terminals and aboard ships, to seeing to essential supplies and relief for seafarers stuck on board, to coordination between exporters and buyers of oil and gas, shipping companies, insurers and the authorities exercising control over the Strait of Hormuz.

There are around 500 tankers and gas carrier ships stuck on either side of the Strait of Hormuz, which could make for a sort of maritime traffic jam. Moreover, production across various oil and gas fields, refineries and LNG plants has been reduced and even shut down in many cases. Restarting and stabilising production and exports will take several days, possibly weeks.

How significant is the two-week timeframe for energy markets?

The period is insufficient to make a major and reliable difference to global oil and gas supply. The main considerations behind that timeframe would be military and negotiation-related. During this, the

parties will remain positioned to resume combat. Meanwhile, whether merchant ships can be sent back into the Gulf will depend on what confidence can be gained from the progress of negotiations.

Maritime traffic jam

Around 500 tankers and gas carrier ships are stuck on either side of the Strait of Hormuz

Even if Iran reopens the Strait, their movement will be slowed down as they squeeze through the narrow passage

Until the parties agree to a settlement or at least stand down from combat readiness, supply out of the Gulf will remain limited. For consumer countries, the main relief lies in the partial cooling down of prices. Sourcing of supply will remain a challenge. It is important to continue preparations for a scenario of prolonged conflict, at a higher or lower level of intensity than thus far.

What role, in your view, did the oil price play in the push for a ceasefire?

It played a key role. Gasoline prices at the pump in America had risen by 35% since the start of the war and the stock markets had taken a beating, causing political concern on the US side. Second, although the military action against Iran has caused immense damage, there are doubts over its efficacy in ending the alleged nuclear weapons programme and missile capability. Meanwhile, further stoppage of oil and gas exports via the Strait, beyond the six weeks that have already elapsed, raises the prospect of much higher and prolonged rise in prices and a global recession. So, reopening the Strait rightly became the central issue.

'Full spectrum of peace agreement, strategic resolution unlikely'



EXPERT EXPLAINS

MAJ GEN G G DWIVEDI (RETD)

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LESS THAN 24 hours after the US-Iran ceasefire was greeted with relief, the agreement is tottering, with Israel bombing Lebanon and seemingly no consensus between Tehran and Washington. Both sides, however, are still headed to Islamabad to continue negotiations. In modern conflicts, a ceasefire is more like a pause button and rarely the end point. The current truce is more due to the constraints of both sides rather than any convergence of political objectives. Just like the war demonstrated both sides' differing capabilities and methods, the negotiations are likely to be far from linear.

The divergence

While the US and Israel, with a much

more conventionally powerful military, sought to overwhelm Iran with a rapid, high-intensity bombing campaign and killing of its top leaders, Iran's strategy of asymmetric warfare entailed redundancy, decentralised control and dispersal to engage in a protracted war. By establishing control over the Strait of Hormuz, it gained a major negotiating advantage. Its proxies — Hezbollah in South Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen and fringe 'façade' Shia elements in Iraq — established a perilous escalatory vector, opening multiple fronts and providing Iran strategic depth. Given the asymmetry, the ceasefire is going to be inherently fragile.

What now in ceasefire talks

For Washington, the pause is more tactical in nature, while Tehran seeks to make it into a structural settlement. As of now, Israel is not even a party to the ceasefire. The immediate focus will be on holding the ceasefire, maintaining its sanctity and expanding the scope to the proxies as well. Limited 'Confidence Building Measures' could also be instituted through the intermediaries.

The negotiations following the ceasefire are likely to proceed in a graduated, step-by-step manner, involving tough bargaining marked by deep distrust. The USA's 15 points and Iran's 10-point proposals will set the framework for the ne-

The divide

For Washington, the pause is more tactical in nature, while Tehran seeks to make it into a structural settlement

At best, there could be an interim deal encompassing capping of uranium enrichment, IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) enhanced monitoring, graduated sanctions relief, and an informal mechanism to restrain the proxies.

Geopolitical ramifications

The Iran War has deep geopolitical implications — both regional and global. The ceasefire itself underscores the emergence of a new architecture, driven by middle powers like Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey and Gulf states, instead of the traditional Western-dominated conflict resolution model.

With declining trust in the US as a security guarantor, Gulf states might enter 'mini-lateral coalitions' with increased defence spending. The Saudi-Pakistan 'Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement' could potentially expand to include Turkey and Egypt.

China has expanded its diplomatic and technological footprint, offering digital infrastructure as an alternative to the West-

ern system. Hence, US alliance structures in West Asia will come under serious scrutiny. The great power shock and the fragility of energy hubs like Qatar's Ras Laffan are bound to lead to the development of alternative supply routes to obviate vulnerabilities. In this transition process, India has substantial stakes, beyond energy security, diaspora interests and maritime trade. In fact, India needs to revisit its West Asia engagement strategy and position itself as a proactive voice, particularly as the representative of the global South. Islamabad's central role as an interlocutor, though possibly limited, signals a subtle shift in regional power dynamics — something Delhi cannot ignore.

The way ahead

The current ceasefire provides space for diplomacy, dialogue and de-escalation. The danger lies not in its failure but in over-optimising the expectations. The process of negotiations remains vulnerable to risks from spoilers, like the proxies, domestic political pressures and the Israeli security calculus.

A full spectrum of a peace agreement and strategic resolution of the conflict is unlikely even in the distant future. The probable end state may be that of 'managed rivalry and confrontation' — reconciliation being a delusion.

Opinion

SATURDAY, APRIL 11, 2026

Kalpakkam's next test

Beyond criticality, the challenge is to deliver safe, viable, and scalable power

O NAHUMID evening last Monday, deep inside a maze of concrete, steel, and sodium-filled pipes at Kalpakkam, a quiet but decisive moment unfolded. At precisely 8:25 pm, the Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR) achieved "criticality"—the point at which a nuclear reactor becomes self-sustaining, vindicating decades of scientific persistence. What has happened at Kalpakkam is not just the commissioning of another reactor; it is India entering a far more exclusive and strategic phase of nuclear capability. The PFBR embodies an ambition to move beyond conventional uranium-fuelled reactors and unlock the country's vast thorium reserves. Its progress, however, has been anything but linear.

The PFBR is designed to use plutonium-based mixed oxide fuel and breed more fissile material than it consumes. In theory, this closes the nuclear fuel cycle, reduces dependence on imported uranium, and creates a pathway to long-term energy security. In practice, the reactor's gestation, marked by cost overruns, technological hurdles, and repeated timeline slippages, raises hard questions about execution. To be fair, fast breeder reactors are complex, even by nuclear standards. Only a handful of countries have pursued them at scale, and fewer still have managed sustained commercial success. India's effort, therefore, sits at the frontier of indigenous nuclear engineering. The recent milestone validates the scientific and technical capabilities painstakingly built over decades. It also signals that India is unwilling to abandon a strategic programme despite global scepticism.

Yet, the policy context has shifted since the PFBR was first envisaged. Renewable energy has surged, battery storage is advancing, and the economics of nuclear power—especially capital-intensive, first-of-a-kind projects—are under scrutiny. Against this backdrop, the PFBR must justify itself not merely as a technological achievement but as a viable component of India's future energy mix. That viability hinges on three factors. First, cost discipline. Nuclear projects in India have a history of overruns that strain public finances and erode confidence. If the PFBR is to serve as a template for future breeder reactors, its transition from criticality to commercial operation must be tightly managed, with clear timelines and transparent reporting. Second, safety and regulation. Fast reactors use liquid sodium as a coolant, which introduces specific risks, including chemical reactivity. India's nuclear establishment has maintained a strong safety record, but public trust cannot be taken for granted. The Atomic Energy Regulatory Board must ensure rigorous oversight, independent audits, and proactive disclosure, particularly as the programme scales up. Third, integration with the broader energy strategy. The promise of breeder technology lies in its ability to extend fuel resources and eventually enable the thorium cycle. But this is a long game.

In the near to medium term, India must balance investments across nuclear, renewables, and grid infrastructure. The PFBR should complement more cost-effective, rapidly deployable energy sources. There is also a geopolitical dimension. As countries seek to diversify clean energy portfolios, advanced nuclear technologies could regain attention. India's progress at Kalpakkam positions it as a potential leader in a niche but strategically significant domain. However, leadership will depend on replicability. One successful reactor is not enough; a credible pipeline is essential. Ultimately, the PFBR's criticality is a milestone worth acknowledging, but not celebrating uncritically. It reflects scientific endurance, yet also underscores the gap between ambition and delivery. The next phase—moving from demonstration to dependable operation—will determine whether Kalpakkam becomes the cornerstone of India's nuclear future or a cautionary tale of technological overreach.

Air India: Reset without results

CAMPBELL WILSON'S DECISION to step down as CEO of Air India brings into focus not just a leadership transition but the state of a turnaround that has, so far, delivered more in intent than in outcome. Nearly four years after the Tata Group reacquired the airline, the contours of a strategy are visible. What remains less clear is whether execution has kept pace with ambition.

There is little doubt that Wilson's tenure was designed as a structural reset. The airline placed one of the largest aircraft orders in aviation history, now close to 600 planes, signalling long-term intent to reclaim global market share. It consolidated four airline entities into a single operating structure, an essential step in reducing fragmentation. It initiated a brand overhaul, invested in digital systems, and began upgrading legacy aircraft and onboard product. In institutional terms, this marked a shift from a state-run entity to a private-sector operating model, with changes in leadership, processes, and culture.

These are not trivial achievements. They address deep-rooted issues that had accumulated over years of underinvestment. They also explain why the turnaround was always going to be capital-intensive and front-loaded in terms of costs. Aviation, by nature, has long gestation cycles. Fleet renewal, network expansion, and infrastructure creation do not yield immediate returns. To that extent, continued losses in the initial years are not unexpected.

Yet, the numbers now being reported suggest the gap between plan and performance has widened. Air India's losses are estimated to rise sharply in FY26, to around ₹20,000 crore or more—well above earlier internal expectations—and place it among the largest loss-making entities within the Tata portfolio. At a group level, losses across new ventures, including aviation and digital businesses, are estimated to approach ₹29,000 crore, sharpening the focus on capital allocation and execution discipline.

This is where the context of Wilson's exit intersects with a broader governance conversation within the Tata Group. Noel Tata, chairman of Tata Trusts, which hold roughly 66% of Tata Sons, has reportedly raised concerns over mounting losses in new ventures. The issue is not simply the scale of investment but the pace at which the investments translate into operational stability and financial visibility. Air India, by virtue of its size and visibility, sits at the centre of that debate.

More importantly, the shortfall is not only financial. The more immediate and visible gap lies in customer experience. For all the structural changes underway, Air India has struggled to consistently improve service reliability and perception. Delays, inconsistent inflight experience, and uneven ground handling continue to surface with regularity. This matters because the Tata takeover had raised expectations of a sharp break from the airline's past under government ownership. That perception shift has, at best, been partial.

External factors have undoubtedly complicated execution. Supply-chain disruptions have delayed aircraft deliveries and retrofits. Fuel price volatility and airspace constraints have raised costs. The fatal crash of AI171 has added a layer of scrutiny that goes beyond routine operational challenges. But these headwinds do not fully explain the persistence of service inconsistencies, which are more closely tied to internal processes and execution bandwidth.

Wilson's own framing of his tenure—as a phase of building foundations—captures part of the reality. The airline today is structurally better positioned than it was in 2022. But so is a turnaround that rests indefinitely on foundations. The next phase must translate these investments into measurable gains in reliability, service, and financial performance. The question for Air India is no longer whether the strategy is sound. It is whether the organisation can deliver on it. Wilson leaves behind an airline with direction and scale, but one where outcomes remain contingent. The reset is visible. The turnaround is not yet.



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SINCE ITS ESTABLISHMENT in 1992, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has evolved into one of the most powerful financial regulators in India, exercising extensive quasi-legislative, executive, and quasi-judicial powers. This hybrid institutional design has been justified by the demands of investor protection, market integrity, and regulatory speed. The Securities Markets Code Bill, 2025 (SMC), now before Parliament, seeks to consolidate and extend this model. It, however, intensifies constitutional concerns about the limits of delegated legislation and the permissible concentration of regulatory power.

In a constitutional democracy, the primary responsibility for law-making rests with the legislature. This includes the articulation of policy, shaped through parliamentary deliberation and democratic accountability. Delegation to the executive is constitutionally permissible. But it is limited to filling in details and operationalising statutory policy, not determining its core content.

The line is especially fine when it comes to defining contraventions and prescribing punishment. These are core legislative functions: they delineate the boundaries of lawful conduct and directly affect liberty, property, and reputation, and must be determined by the legislature. When delegation extends to these matters, it risks crossing the line from permissible delegation into an abdication of core legislative responsibility. At its core, the issue is not regulatory power, but who defines its limits.

The history of securities regulation in India reflects this careful balance. When Sebi was first vested with the power to impose monetary penalties in the mid-1990s, the legislative framework retained primary control over the definition of wrongdoing, both criminal and civil, while permitting flexibility in enforcement. Contraventions were identified in the statute, adjudication was structured through rules framed by the central government, and appellate oversight lay with the Securities Appellate Tribunal.



DELIMITATION DEBATE

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge

This delimitation proposal will have serious consequences. Therefore, there is a need for very deep deliberation on delimitation

SECURITIES MARKETS RULES

REGULATIONS DEFINING OFFENCES AND ADJUDICATORY PROCESSES TEST THE LIMITS OF PERMISSIBLE DELEGATION

A constitutional question

MS SAHOO SUMIT AGRAWAL

The authors are legal practitioners and former officials of Sebi



The SMC departs from this discipline by allowing the regulatory authority to play a more active role in shaping contraventions and penalties. Clause 92 permits the addition of contraventions beyond those specified in the statute, thereby enabling their scope to evolve. Practices once regarded as legitimate may later be reclassified as violations, and vice versa. This regulatory flexibility, however, carries a deeper cost—it makes the boundary between lawful and unlawful conduct contingent on executive determination rather than legislative choice.

These concerns are acute in the realm of criminal liability, which entails stigma, coercion, and deprivation of liberty. Given the severity of these offences, including imprisonment of up to 10 years and fines up to ₹10 crore, constitutional discipline demands that the core content of such offences be defined by the legislature. Clause 93, however, enables the executive to create additional criminal contraventions and prosecute their breaches. The foundation of criminal liability thus shifts from parliamentary enactment to administrative fiat, militating against basic principles of legality. Courts, bound to give effect to valid subordinate legislation, may thus uphold convictions based on norms that have not undergone legislative scrutiny.

This shift of critical policy choices away from elected representatives undermines democratic accountability and unsettles the constitutional balance between the legislature and the executive. It also departs from the assurance in the memo-

randum of delegated legislation accompanying the SMC that subordinate law-making would be confined to procedural and administrative matters; empowering the executive to define contraventions goes well beyond that limit.

While the SMC seeks, in part, to rationalise and decriminalise securities law, it retains criminal liability for a category of conduct described as "market abuse." This appears to narrow criminal exposure and improve the ease of doing business. Yet it carries an inherent tension: even as Parliament signals restraint, it delegates to the regulator the authority to expand the scope of criminalisation. The result is not calibrated decriminalisation, but an open-ended architecture of criminal liability.

SMC departs from discipline by letting the regulatory authority to play a more active role in shaping contraventions and penalties

The SMC compounds these concerns by restructuring the adjudicatory framework. It empowers Sebi to prescribe, through regulations, the manner of conducting adjudication proceedings. This departs from the existing model, where such procedures are governed by the central government-framed rules. This shift collapses the distinction between rulemaking and enforcement: the same authority would define the norms, initiate proceedings, and design the process for their adjudication.

Under the proposed regime, Sebi would thus shape both substantive enforcement standards and the procedures governing adjudication, while also controlling the appointment of adjudicating officers. This concentration of functions may enhance regulatory efficiency, but it also blurs the lines between norm creation, enforce-

ment, and adjudication, lines that are central to preserving institutional balance.

The concern is not of institutional expertise or integrity. It is structural—such concentration can undermine the validity of enforcement itself. The consequences of failing to maintain institutional separation are real. In *Deloitte Haskins v. Union of India* (2025), Delhi High Court quashed multiple show-cause notices and final orders of the National Financial Reporting Authority on the ground that it failed to segregate audit quality review from disciplinary functions. The lesson is clear: structural safeguards aren't formalities; they are conditions of valid enforcement.

None of this suggests that securities regulation should be weakened or that regulatory agility is undesirable. Modern financial markets demand swift, expert-driven, and adaptive intervention. But constitutional design requires that such agility be anchored in accountability. When delegation extends into domains that shape the boundaries of liability and the process of adjudication, it begins to resemble not flexibility, but institutional substitution.

The SMC thus raises a deeper constitutional question: How far can regulatory consolidation go before it begins to erode the foundational distinction between legislature and executive? Modern markets demand a strong regulator, but that strength must rest on a clearly defined legislative foundation. The legitimacy of regulation rests not only on expertise and efficiency, but also on its grounding in democratically accountable law-making.

The SMC presents a constitutional inflection point for securities regulation. It offers an opportunity to modernise and streamline the law, but also carries a risk of unsettling first principles. When the power to define offences, expand criminal liability, and design adjudicatory processes migrates to the regulator, the issue ceases to be one of regulatory efficiency and becomes one of constitutional design. Without careful recalibration, the result may not be better regulation, but a gradual erosion of the constitutional boundaries that sustain the rule of law.

India poised to lead pharma innovation



NK GANGULY

Former Director General, Indian Council of Medical Research

WHEN HIV/AIDS THREATENED to become a generational catastrophe across the developing world in the early 2000s, it was India that broke the economic barrier producing antiretrovirals at a fraction of the prevailing cost and putting life-saving treatment within reach of millions. That moment captured something essential: India's ability to harness scientific capability and manufacturing scale in service of a larger human purpose. Supplying over 20% of global generic medicines by volume today, India's pharmaceutical industry is one of the most consequential of our era and that foundation is the launchpad for an even more ambitious chapter now beginning to take shape.

The economic logic is compelling. A patented first-in-class medicine commands significantly higher margins and longer market exclusivity than a generic equivalent. India's pharma exports are close to \$30 billion, a remarkable feat; yet its share of global new molecular entity approvals remains below 2%. The gap between contribution and credit is wide and closing. It represents both a strategic imperative and a substantial economic opportunity.

Nations that invested deliberately in their biopharma ecosystems, building clinical trial-friendly environments, robust IP frameworks, and targeted innovation incentives have demonstrated what focused ambition can achieve. India's structural advantages—a vast and diverse patient population, world-class

scientific talent, and significant cost efficiencies—represent a far stronger foundation to build upon.

India accounts for only 1-2% of global clinical trials, a figure that understates both its capacity and its potential. Recognising this, the 2026 Budget made a decisive intervention: the Biopharma SHAKTI scheme proposes a nationwide network of 1,000 accredited clinical trial sites, alongside strengthened and regulated regulatory capacity and expanded pharmaceutical education infrastructure. These are meaningful commitments, and whilst the full benefits will take time to materialise, the policy direction is clear and the foundations are being laid.

India's innovation ecosystem is more developed than it is often given credit for. Biotech clusters in Hyderabad, Pune, and Bengaluru have evolved into credible research hubs, and global capability centres conducting genuine drug discovery and data science work are a powerful testament to the global confidence being placed in India's scientific workforce.

Importantly, India's participation in advanced drug development is not nascent. Through open licensing frameworks, India has manufactured complex medicines including Hepatitis C antivirals and Covid-19 vaccine, making them accessi-

ble to scale. Indian industry has also demonstrated growing capability in biologics, producing biosimilar versions of blockbuster therapies such as trastuzumab, rituximab, nivolumab, and, more recently, semaglutide as well as critical medicines like tenecteplase, a clot-busting drug used in cardiac care. These are not peripheral achievements; they signal a sector already operating at the frontier of pharmaceutical complexity, and ready to take the next step towards global origin.

India accounts for only 1-2% of global clinical trials, a figure that understates both its capacity and its potential

drug discovery environments.

Sustaining this momentum requires focused attention in a few areas. Translational research, the bridge between lab discovery and clinical development, warrants deeper investment with stronger technology transfer capacity in academic institutions to ensure India's basic science converts more consistently into globally competitive drug candidates. Risk capital for late-stage innovation remains limited domestically; building a more mature biotech investment ecosystem with longer-

horizon institutional funding is essential to retain the value of Indian innovation within. And while industry-academia collaboration is growing, it has room to deepen further; sustained co-development partnerships and shared IP frameworks would amplify what already exists.

India's path forward is about building systematically on foundations that exist. Regulatory evolution and streamlined pathways for innovative molecules aligned with international standards will strengthen confidence among domestic and global innovators alike. AI and real-world evidence, underpinned by sound data governance, could position India as the world's most cost-effective drug discovery environment. And focusing innovation on therapeutic areas where India holds a genuine structural advantage (infectious diseases, metabolic disorders, oncology) will create a more durable global leadership than attempting to compete across all of pharma R&D simultaneously.

India's pharmaceutical journey has been defined by purpose, scale, and the ability to deliver what the world needs. The scientific talent is world-class, the ecosystem is maturing, and policy intent is translating into meaningful investment. The transition from pharmacy to pioneer is well underway and with sustained commitment from industry, academia, investors, and government, India has every reason to lead the next era of global pharma innovation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Supply security

"Averting supply shocks" (FE, April 10), incisively highlights India's structural exposure to geopolitical disruptions and import dependence. The recent shipping halt underscores how fragile energy, mineral, and logistics linkages remain despite incremental reforms. A pragmatic course now lies in diversifying sourcing through strategic overseas partnerships, accelerating dome-

stic exploration where viable, and building resilient last-mile and port ecosystems. Equally vital is nurturing a competitive shipping fleet and reducing single-country dependencies in critical sectors like pharma and clean energy minerals. Policy must shift from aspirational targets to grounded execution, prioritising efficiency, scale, and timelines. Supply security today is not merely economic prudence but a cornerstone of national resilience in an

increasingly uncertain global order.

—K Chidanand Kumar, Bangalore

Peace is hard to sell

Apropos "Why peace doesn't clear market" (FE, April 10), Amit Kapoor's argument is sobering: peace is structural, not conspiratorial. The problem is not that leaders prefer war but that the systems they operate within are organised to sustain conflict. That distinction shifts the conversation

from individual blame to institutional design. The 60% rise in oil prices since the Iran war began, and the economic cost of global violence make the case plain enough. Peace is not weak; it is simply harder to package and sell within existing systems. Reconciling this is the first step to building frameworks where peace actually pays.

—K Sakunthala, Coimbatore

Write to us at fletters@expressindia.com

You Need More Than Lifting the Corp Veil

Need to alter housing market structure

National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (NCDRC) has lifted the veil between housing developer Ansal Properties & Infrastructure (API) and its project-level subsidiary Ansal Hi-Tech Township for failing to comply with earlier rulings directing refund of homebuyers' money. API chairman Pranav Ansal was, however, not made personally liable, although the tribunal held that he controlled both companies that were inextricably linked. NCDRC took a view of a Supreme Court ruling in another case involving Ansal that he could not be held personally liable because he was not party to the original consumer complaint. But he was found to have wilfully not complied with the tribunal's orders on refunds and interest. It also said it would go deeper into the question of corporate layering.

Courts lift the corporate veil—that is, disregard a company's separate legal identity—when the corporate structure is used to commit fraud or illegal actions, or to evade taxes and legal obligations. They do this in exceptional circumstances when there is specific evidence of wrongdoing. Once the veil is lifted, there's a possibility that personal liability of a company's directors can be invoked, depending on the crime's magnitude. In this case, the question of invoking personal liability was settled by a Supreme Court verdict on a similar matter involving Ansal.

Housing development companies use the corporate parent and project-level subsidiary structure extensively because of the business agility it provides. Yet, the structure needs to be used within overall safeguards around corporate layering. Inadequate governance could invite greater legal scrutiny in sensitive markets like housing. New regulations for the real estate industry have curbed malpractice. Yet, homebuyers still need legal recourse on occasion. These cases could involve more transparency over corporate layering. The market has been made more legally secure from the consumer's side. But a solution must extend to altering the market structure that allows easy violations.



Molehill of Greed Out of a Mountain

MT Everest isn't just another peak to climb. Climbing it demands extreme convergence of physical endurance and psychological control, conditions only a small fraction of climbers can sustain at such an altitude that leads up to 29,031.7 ft. What makes Everest particularly compelling is also its historical entanglement with geopolitics. During the interwar period, institutions like Britain's Royal Geographical Society and Alpine Club framed expeditions as national endeavours, embedding them within a broader narrative of prestige and control. In doing so, the British empire effectively regulated who could attempt Everest, transforming it into a stage for imperial ambition rather than individual pursuit.

Today, Everest remains the ultimate aspiration for climbers. For Nepal's economy it also functions as a key revenue earner. Direct government earnings (permits) is \$4.5 million a year, and the total economic impact (tourism) is over \$100 million a year. This demand for adventure has fostered exploitative practices. Guides and operators have reportedly been adulterating food with substances like baking soda to induce symptoms resembling altitude sickness, thereby justifying unnecessary, expensive evacuations. These staged rescues are then used to inflate insurance claims, with operators billing each climber as though transported separately, even when flights are shared. Ambition and greed are slippery slopes.

This isn't something new. Nepal has faced concerns around sustainability of Everest tourism. A more disciplined regulatory approach is increasingly necessary, not only to preserve the fragile mountain ecosystem and ensure climber safety, but also to protect the long-term credibility of Everest as a global mountaineering destination.



JUST IN JEST

Mrs Trump gives Mr Trump what could be an off-ramp from a war loss

A Scandal to Cover a War to Hide a Scandal

You have to give juggler extraordinaire Donald Trump a thumbs up on his back for trying. First, he launches a war to shove the Epstein Files off the front page. Now, he's relaunched the Epstein Files to shove the US capitol in war off the front page. What else can explain Melania Trump, stepping onto the stage on Wednesday, making a courtroom speech that sounded like a cross between courtroom denial and improv theatre. 'I am not Epstein's victim,' she declared, while simultaneously calling for hearings for Epstein's survivors. She dismissed her polite 2002 email to Epstein accomplice Ghislaine Maxwell as trivial correspondence, as if forwarding recipes.

And, here, presto! Epstein's back—not as scandal but as camouflage. It's a dizzying carousel: war hides Epstein, Epstein hides war, repeat until the audience collapses in laughter. Or nausea. This is pure slapstick, a Groucho Marx routine where scandals pop up and disappear like moles in a carnival game. The mallet? Trump's Truth Social feed. The genius lies in the recycling bit. Why invent new distractions in this age of instant forgetting when you can reproduce old ones? Epstein becomes both curtain and stage, scandal and shield. In the end, the Trump era proves politics isn't about solving problems, but about 'keeping it moving'. Even if the popcorn's already spilled in the aisles.

America's gun laws, dehumanisation and double standards have been its ticket to virtue

Pax, Trump-Hegseth Remix



Indrajit Hazra

The US strike on Shajarah Tayyebah's elementary school building in Minab, Iran, on Feb 28 is what's called 'collateral'. It's also known as 'shit happens' when applied to places that don't look like Miami, and where people don't look like they'll be getting Mar-a-Lago Club membership anytime soon. 165-175 Iranians were killed, mostly girls aged 7-11. But for most of the world—and not just the Western world—that kind of 'shit happens' all the time in the top of the woods.

Just over the top of the collective hive mind, when on Dec 16, 2014, Taliban terrorists stormed Army Public School in Peshawar, Pakistan, killing at least 150 people, including over 130 schoolchildren, all you had to do after a cathartic shake'n'shig was use the conversion rate of that time and figure out how many dead Pakistanis would amount to, say, American or Israeli lives. Then, you can realise that it's just a blip in the ocean of time. Mass killings, we figure, happen in these places all the time, where the same kind of people are both perps and victims.

Just as the 300-plus death toll caused by a 10-min blitzkrieg across Lebanon on Wednesday underlined the fact that for Israel to agree to cease fire, it first needed to set fire to a place that's 'used' to being on fire. Surely, 'unexpected' horrors—like, say the Columbine High School massacre of 1999 in Colorado, which resulted in 16 deaths, including that of the two 12th-grade (White) student-shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold—can far more horrible worldwide when they happen in the peaceful climes of the US?

The only country to have actually dropped nuclear bombs on civilian populations—twice—has, over time, fashioned itself as the world's pacifism-by-force coach. The sermon is delivered with three notes: constitutional gun-love, cultural dehumanisation, and the fine art of double standards.

● **Lock & Load** The Second Amendment, that rousing illogic of the right to bear arms—in case baddies come bearing arms—has been scaled up to atomic proportions. If every citizen is incomplete without a firearm, then every nation worth being deemed a nation is naked without a nuclear arsenal. Ergo, Israel (with its Holocaust-and-effect Zionists) semi-secretly stockpiling is kosher. But Iran (with its mad mullahs) doing the same in response to Israel's stockpiling is haram.

The logic is pure cowboy-Crusader theology: 'good guy with gun' becomes 'the responsible democracy with nukes'. And just as the good guy often shoots first, the good democracy reserves the right for strategic deterrence—the AR-15 scaled up to megatons, with the safety catch permanently off for the right side.

● **Them/Those** Then comes dehumanisation. Pete



Crux of the matter

'No Quarter, No Mercy' Hegseth is the most vocal of the Trump regime's alchemists turning 'people' into 'expedient things'. Muslim West Asians are converted to 'enemy mass', their humanity dissolved to make their dissolution a fumigation.

● **Jews in Nazi territory** were not the only ones aware of this moral magic trick. In Rana Dasgupta's

The only country to have dropped nuclear bombs on civilians—twice—has fashioned itself as the world's pacifism-by-force coach



his main uses—manufacture of permanent magnets for electric motors—has seen extraordinary growth of late, with the rapid rise of electrification of transportation.

This has reached a point where many Western countries have started getting concerned—a bit late in the day perhaps—about the ultra-dominant position of China in this market, and the resulting geopolitical vulnerability for other countries, exacerbated by military uses of these rare earths.

China does, indeed, have the largest known reserves. But many other countries—like India, Russia, Brazil, the US (particularly California), Australia and, of course, Greenland—also possess significant quantities of rare earth minerals. The issue is that China is not only mining its own reserves but also those of others from which it imports for refining. As a result, it directly produces nearly 70% of the global supply of rare earths, and refines nearly 90% of the world's total.

Extraction and refinement of these elements are expensive. They can also be polluting activities. As in other cases, like end-of-life ship recycling, countries have preferred to outsource such activities where regulations are less strict and labour is poorly paid. This is the Nimby effect. Not In My Backyard. This remains the situation for most countries, especially in western Europe, despite rare earth elements being precisely the key to achieving ecological transition that many of these nations wish to accelerate.

China, with great foresight, seized the opportunity and is today reaping financial and geopolitical rewards. For the last 15-odd yrs, it has used its

rare earth near-monopoly to pressure certain countries that were especially desperate for the survival of their industries. It took Donald Trump's repeated threats to annex Greenland, and the subsequent election of a member Denmark, in defiance of alliance treaties as well as economic logic—in the words of Arctic Institute founder Malle Humpert, 'mixing up an Arctic climate-geopolitical challenge that even the US military would struggle to meet'—for others to pay heed to rare earths and critical minerals buried in the West.

Europe still has an opportunity to correct past apathy. Its environmentalism led to place it at the forefront of recycling technologies and related patents. One hopes it makes best use of this advantage to claim ownership in the supply of increasingly valuable critical minerals and rare earths, lowering, if not removing, dependency on China.

● **Refine value measurement** The spill-over effects of creativity—employment generation, brain equity soft power, cross-sector stimulation—are often undercounted. Yet, these are multipliers that strengthen a nation's competitive positioning over time.

For entrepreneurs, the lesson is subtle but clear: Meaning precedes margin. Projects rooted in cultural relevance tend to outlast those built purely on transactional logic. In an increasingly commoditised world, what differentiates is not product alone, but narrative and purpose.

India took a step in the right direction point. Manufacturing and traditional services will remain critical. But if we allow creativity to lead—not as an afterthought, but as a strategic driver—the orange economy could become one of the defining pillars of our next phase of growth.

In the end, imagination is not a luxury, it's a form of foresight. And foresight, when nurtured patiently, has a way of becoming economic destiny.

Indrajit Hazra is a writer, designer, narrative and expression, along-

magisterial new book, *After Nations: The Making and Unmaking of World Order*, he writes about an Elizabethan Colby, captain in the US army, who, in 1825, tried to define a set of principles for future American wars against 'savage tribes'.

● **Traumatic savage**, a bomb dropped out of the sky on the sacred temple of his omnipotent god is... an indication of the relentless energy and superior skill of the well-equipped civilised. 'The loss of life is probably far less than might have been sustained in prolonged operations of a more polite character. The inhuman act thus becomes actually humane, for it shortens the conflict and prevents the shedding of more excessive quantities of blood.'

● **This is Pax Trump-Hegseth.**

● **We're OK, You're Not OK.** Iran's command structure is manned by 'irrational' zealots. Apparently, the Mar-a-Lago lot aren't. North Koreans are comic-book villains. But, apparently, Trump should be counter-intuitively admired for a method deeply buried in his madness.

● **Trump and his ethno-strategically-allied elites** are virtuous for doing what others are villainous for doing or attempting. Stockpiling nuclear weapons? Wise deterrence if you're Jerusalem, reckless provocation if you're Tehran, but the kid is 'out of control'.

● **And so the curtain rises, again and again,** on the same performance: the usual gunslings of OK Corral recurred in horror to find a SMK & West. In the hands of an Apache.

● **But, then, the Civil Rights Act,** signed into law by Lyndon Johnson on July 2, 1964—that prohibited discrimination in public places, provided the hands of schools and other public facilities, and made employment discrimination illegal—needed a cathartic outlet. Exactly a month later, Johnson announced that he was not 'committing American boys to fighting a war that I think ought to be fought by the boys of Asia to help protect their own land.' It's another reminder that he didn't get off ramp—until Richard Nixon took over his war and job.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

Internal Inferno

SANDHYA VASUDEV

'The mind is its own place, and can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven. Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, quotes Satan, who says these words when he was expelled from heaven for rebelling against God. One can visualise one's mind as a garden where one can choose to plant beautiful plants or grow weeds. Have you noticed that your reaction to any situation determines whether you end up happy or sad? This reaction initially comes from emotions and later gets processed into thoughts that form a lasting impression. Man has the free will to overcome his reactions, consciously organise his thoughts around a situation, and maintain his balance. But this is easier said than done, as the mind is wayward and restless.

Arjun agonises over this and tells Krishna that it may perhaps be easier to control the wind than the turban. Krishna asks Arjun to overcome the mind and turn it into a friend through constant practice and use its power to rise above petty feelings. If not, it turns into an enemy within. We can liken it to the valiraaya (detachment from objects that trouble and entice the mind and focus it on the positive).



LOLLING ON SATURDAY

Pen Negotiation

A CEO, a lawyer and a consultant sit down with other members of the board as sticks in a boardroom for hours trying to negotiate who gets the last company pen.

● **CEO: I should get it. I sign multi-crore deals.**

● **Lawyer: I should get it. I draft contracts worth billions.**

● **The consultant smirks, takes the pen, and says, 'I'll rent it to both of you at ₹20,000 an hour.' The CEO and lawyer nod, 'Fair deal.'**

● **CEO: Corporate negotiations, the person who creates the problem usually profits the most.**

● **Going Away Getting Out** An election candidate promises: 'If elected, everyone will get free transportation anywhere and everywhere.' After winning, he mails citizens a pair of roller skates.

● **One man asks, 'How do I get to Bangkok with these?'** The official replies, 'Start skating east. Don't stop. Months later, highways are jammed with people in roller skates, waving passports, and eating samosas and sandwiches on the go.

● **The politician proudly announces: 'International travel has never been so up and smooth!'**

● **Confidence Trick** A student asks a professor: 'Why do central banks cut rates during crises?' Professor: 'To stimulate demand.'

● **Student:** 'But if everyone's broke, won't they just borrow cheap money to stay broke more comfortably?' Professor: 'Yes, but they'll do it with confidence. And confidence is priceless.'

● **Student:** 'So, basically, we're paying for optimism with debt?' Professor: 'Congratulations, you've understood modern economics.'

Chat Room

● **Hasves Bear the Responsibility** Apropos 'Care, From Beyond the Spectrum' by Mangita Kalra (Apr 10): India's long-term financial planning, India's autism response must move from care alone to practical inclusion. Greater integration into mainstream schools, with training teachers, resource rooms and simple assistive tools, can improve independence over time. Labour markets need to accept, with incentives for firms to hire neurodivergent individuals and redesign roles around specific strengths. Regrettably, a persistent lack of reliable data continues to limit effective policymaking.

Kijay Singh Panwar

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editor@timesofindia.com

Time to Make Rare Earths Common



Stéphanie Heng & Alban de la Soudière

Brussels: There's much talk about critical materials like lithium and cobalt. Rare earths like neodymium and cerium, these days, China has a near-monopoly on these minerals that are essential for high-technology manufacturing, as well as for climate transition, across the world. In such a situation, how can countries ensure a better access to supply chains?

For starters, 'rare earths', despite their name, are actually found almost everywhere, often combined in small quantities with other metals. They had been used for years, but usually for niche applications such as military electronics. However, one of

these elements are expensive. They can also be polluting activities. As in other cases, like end-of-life ship recycling, countries have preferred to outsource such activities where regulations are less strict and labour is poorly paid. This is the Nimby effect. Not In My Backyard. This remains the situation for most countries, especially in western Europe, despite rare earth elements being precisely the key to achieving ecological transition that many of these nations wish to accelerate.

China, with great foresight, seized the opportunity and is today reaping financial and geopolitical rewards. For the last 15-odd yrs, it has used its

rare earth near-monopoly to pressure certain countries that were especially desperate for the survival of their industries. It took Donald Trump's repeated threats to annex Greenland, and the subsequent election of a member Denmark, in defiance of alliance treaties as well as economic logic—in the words of Arctic Institute founder Malle Humpert, 'mixing up an Arctic climate-geopolitical challenge that even the US military would struggle to meet'—for others to pay heed to rare earths and critical minerals buried in the West.

Europe still has an opportunity to correct past apathy. Its environmentalism led to place it at the forefront of recycling technologies and related patents. One hopes it makes best use of this advantage to claim ownership in the supply of increasingly valuable critical minerals and rare earths, lowering, if not removing, dependency on China.

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Creative Inc, Imagination UnLtd



Harshvardhan Neotia

Durable enterprises rarely begin with financial projections alone. They begin with a point of view, imagination. With a certain sensitivity to people, place and time. Even in sectors like real estate, hospitality, healthcare and retail, the most enduring outcomes don't arise from chasing margins. They emerge from nurturing ideas that carry cultural meaning. Commercial value follows, often quietly but consistently.

Today this intuition is finding articulation in what is being described as India's 'orange economy'—the universe of creative industries spanning media, entertainment, design, gaming, live events, cultural programming and immersive experiences. Its inclusion in the latest Economic Survey signals a structural shift in how we understand growth.

Creativity is no longer a soft pursuit. It's economic infrastructure. Globally, the creative economy generates over \$2 trillion annually. In India, the media and entertainment industry has crossed \$30 billion in 2020 and is projected to approach \$47 billion by 2025, growing faster than global averages.

Industry bodies estimate that India's broader creative value chain could reach \$100 billion by 2030, generating over 5 million jobs. Creative serv-

ices exports, including animation, VFX and gaming, contribute more than \$1 billion in export earnings. But beyond numbers lies something more important. The 'orange economy' converts ideas into IP and IP into livelihoods. Unlike extractive sectors, it is regenerative. A story can travel across generations. A festival can become an annual economic engine. A digital creation can scale globally without proportionate capital deployment. It is growth that compounds without depletion.

What makes this moment significant is the way creativity intersects with other sectors. It animates tourism, hospitality, retail, technology and urban development. A cultural festival does not merely celebrate art—it activates supply chains, generates employment, fills hotels and creates energy demand and revitalises public spaces.

This can be witnessed first-hand in Kolkata, where Durga Puja—now recognised as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity—unleashes extraordinary creative energy each year. In 2025, its economic

impact has been estimated at more than \$7.2 billion. That is culture functioning as an economic catalyst. Hospitality has become deeply intertwined with this shift. Experiences now precede destinations. Films, exhibitions, concerts and cultural narratives shape where people travel, how long they stay, and how deeply they engage. The future visitor is not a passive observer—she sees that investment in a story.

Cities that invest in cultural infrastructure—performance spaces, museums, studios, design districts—are not indulging in aesthetics. They are building economic resilience. Creativity, in this sense, is not decorative. It is strategic. Policy is beginning to recognise this convergence. Initiatives around animation, gaming and immersive technologies, the easing of permissions for live events and films, and the emphasis on experiential tourism signal a widening of India's growth framework.

Yet, recognition must translate into ecosystem-building. Three transitions become essential:

● **Creative capability is a national asset** Talent flourishes in environments that value design, narrative and expression, along-

with other members of the board as sticks in a boardroom for hours trying to negotiate who gets the last company pen.

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The writer is chairman, Ambuja Neotia Group

A thought for today

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos

MARY SHELLEY

Black Magic

Smart use of coal can shield India from foreign crises

When Trump's blockade left Cuba without oil last month, 66-year-old Juan Carlos Pino modified his 1980 Fiat Polski to run on charcoal (bit.ly/41XQZg9). No, he didn't strap on a steam engine. Rather, the eighth-pass mechanic added a homemade gasifier—a alcohol tank for heating charcoal chips, to make combustible gas—at the back. Now imagine, what an army of PhDs might do with wood chips, or coal. You can look at China, which is sitting pretty amid a global crisis of oil, gas and urea. Only because it taught itself to make urea, methanol, and basic chemicals like ethylene and propylene—needed to make plastics, textiles, etc—from coal rather than petroleum.

China, like India, has many hundreds of billion tonnes of coal. And it makes 78% of its urea from coal, not gas. So, this year, its farmers aren't worried about higher fertiliser prices. They aren't reducing corn acreage, while US farmers are. Their chicken feed and ethanol prices won't rise. Speaking of ethanol, India's E20 programme will also feel the impact of higher urea prices. Whereas China, world's biggest producer of methanol—mostly derived from coal—will have no problem supplying "M15" or even "M85" fuel for cars. It's even started making massive oil tankers that can run on methanol, instead of oil.

China, however, is not a coal-to-liquid-fuels pioneer. Germany's 27 coal liquefaction plants made 30bn barrels of gasoline every year, during WW2. S Africa, in the 1990s, made 93.5bn barrels of gasoline a year from coal. With world's fourth largest deposits, India should also use its coal smartly. It has an old plan to gasify 100m tonnes of coal by 2030. It's also building a 1.2m tonne-per-annum coal-based urea plant at Talcher, Odisha. Deadline was 2023, and it would have served us well at this time. But it won't be ready until Dec 2027. We need better PhDs, of course, but also better project managers.

Haute Food, Fast Food

Why gastronomic puritanism doesn't work

Mon Dieu! France, the Mecca of haute cuisine, is undergoing a gastronomic counter-revolution—rise of fast food chains. The hottest food joint in elegant Paris today is a takeout that serves chicken tenders, over rice. Queues are long, and the buzz is on. Exit fine dining, pretty or elegant restaurants, celebrity chefs. Bring on Gen-Z, influencer-driven, no-nonsense eateries. Shocking fact: more than half of French restaurants' annual revenue is generated by fast food. *Naturellement*, gastronomic puritans in La France are exclaiming *sacré bleu!*

But can haute cuisine truly be fire-walled from fast food? It hasn't worked out like that anywhere. From Japan to Peru, China to Morocco, fine culinary arts have had to share space with cheap fast food. More so after the advent of industrialisation, when meal times—from preparation to consumption—shrank. And that's okay. India is a great example, where high and popular cuisines happily co-exist, sometimes inspiring each other. The *shahi tukda* went from royal kitchens where it was made with clotted cream, to its street avatar: bread fried in *ghee*. The popular *biryani* evolved from the royal Persian *pilaf*.

None of this diminished Indian culinary diversity & tradition. So, the humble *cada pau* is as sought after as the exquisite-but-labour-intensive *ker sangri*. True, slow food scores on nutritional value. But fast food is about convenience. There's no need for them to be mutually exclusive, just for the sake of gastronomic puritanism. *Bon Appétit!*

World According To Military Mapping

Why constant state of war seems the new normal

The *World According to Military Targeting* unsettles. *Erk Reichborn-Kjennerud* argues that military targeting (identifying, tracking, and striking targets) has been turned into a worldview, which sorts reality into targets and threats. It's a way of seeing the world—as a grid of threats, even before it takes form and shape.

In the process, war stops being an event. Military targeting becomes a permanent *organising logic* for expending the battlefield to the entire world. In doing so, it normalises endless war: "Violent operations" are now fundamental to "knowledge production of war and warfare". The book begins with former director of NSA and CIA, Michael Hayden, describing how "the American war-fighting machine was reorganised, redefined and revamped" as a global manhunt, in service of US's war on terror. It re-organised the way US military and its martial organisations (an ecosystem of intelligence-gathering) imagined, assembled, and ultimately, waged war.

The global manhunt inverted the Cold War paradigm of 'easy-to-find, hard-to-kill'—where Soviet Union was a monolithic threat—to 'hard-to-find but easy-to-kill', where networked individuals, targeted by the manhunt, were 'elusive, hidden, and mobile'. The book details the impact of tech advances on military apparatus—with each leap, targeting grew in space, time and depth. Insurgents exist in complex terrains, but in digital communication, they leave digital footprints—chatter, location, movement. So, intelligence apparatus could map actors and their movement, over time, and in real time. When threats were identified, they could be tracked.

But not all threats could be 'identified'. To be a threat, there has to be, what the military-security world calls, a signature. But not every

emerging threat left a signature. They went about their day in being normal things, like normal people. Then what? Bosses said, widen the net, collect every one's data everywhere, at all times, let anomalies show. But anomalies, without context or meaning, are not actionable intelligence. One has to know *how* machine learning (ML) arrived at its output. But ML doesn't give you context, or meaning—only accuracy. So, military targeting, the book argues, has become *data deciding the emergence of the enemy*.

The enemy doesn't have to exist. It could become the enemy in the future. In short, the book argues, the enemy can be imagined. *What's the enemy?* no longer defines an enemy. It can be produced by data tech.

mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS

When LLMs, and so-called AI, tagged "behavioural" operations, the logic behind war moved from "predict to preempt". From targeting "known unknowns", military intelligence and contractors have moved into "unknown unknowns"—the term for which Rumsfeld got fair flak. Turns to find needles in haystacks. Build haystacks. *What does data tell, call that a needle.*

Contemporary targeting seeks "future beginnings" of threats, even *facilitating* their occurrence. The goal, the book argues, is to experiment—observe response, encourage action, gather more data, and continue experimenting. Errors (like bombing a school) are part of that experimental "thinking"—internalised as learning. "Pre-emptive" is *disrupting* the system, to capture more feedback.

This transformation—in how targeting maps the world—"forecloses alternatives, limits horizons of possibilities, and narrows our understanding of potential futures". It should give us pause, says the book. And make us understand that it's essential we understand how militaries map the world, and create the enemy

Miller Time, Miller's Crossing

What a dramatic IPL match this week told us about cricket and life

Avijit Ghosh



IPL, in its very construct, is anti-memory. Few sporting moments survive the night. Only a blur of images remain until the following day, when the act repeats itself. It's like watching the same film on a loop, cricket's version of the 1993 Bill Murray film, *Groundhog Day*.

Wednesday night, though, was slightly different. The game's outcome spawned a furious debate, beyond usual social media farming. It was about a choice made by Delhi Capitals batter David Miller. Here's what transpired.

With two balls remaining, the home side needed one run to tie the score and two to win. Miller had the opportunity to take a single off the fifth ball. But he decided against it, unwilling to expose his partner Kuldip Yadav, a betting minnow. But Miller failed to connect the last ball, a disguised slow delivery bravely bowled by Gujarat Titans paceman Prasidh Krishna. The two batters set off for a bye but fell short. DC lost by one run.

Miller's refusal of the single— which at worst, would have sent the game into a Super Over thereafter—became a major talking point, and headlined most match reports. Many felt the move was a serious lapse of judgement; some even cruelly attributed it to a South African tendency: choking in key moments of white ball cricket.

But what transpired on the pitch demands a deeper reflection. Perhaps, Miller's choice was guided by instinct, but it is also a marker of larger principles, which underpin decision-making in life. 'Thousands suggested, with post-facto wisdom, that Miller should have opted for percentage play, which translates to taking the run, and leaving the batting minnow to finish the job.'

But, for a designated finisher, would that have been smart play, or just abandonment of responsibility? Remember, he had struck the last over's fourth delivery out of the stadium. That made an unlikely win look like a near-given. To add further perspective, Miller had hurt his hand, and had retired earlier. When he returned midway 17th over, 51 runs were needed off 20 balls. Without his late flurry of sixes, Delhi Capitals were in love with light alcohol. Miller Time is an American beer, sometimes seen on Indian liquor retail shelves. But to anyone who follows global franchise cricket, the term specifically indicates the Natal-born batter's arrival, in the

game's desperate overs.

The term also functions as a code—it carries the weight of crushing expectations. Irrespective of the situation and odds, Miller's big hitting is expected to swing the game in his team's favour.

The South African saw pressure as privilege, as tennis legend Billie Jean King once said. That motto enables this peripatetic cricketer to ply his trade in every country with a functional T20 league, for over a

decade and half. Miller, now 36, has played every IPL since 2011. That includes nine years for Punjab Kings, where his late, six-hitting charges at packed stadiums, during pre-teen years of cricket's ritziest carnival.

Most top cricketers win matches. Not many can turn around games that look lost. Miller can. He did it for Kings XI Punjab and for Gujarat Titans. In 2022, he plundered an unbeaten 94 off 51, for GT against CSK. Chasing 170, Titans were tottering 16/5, when Miller decisively intervened. The same year, his late hitting guided GT to a title triumph.

Like any long-time pro, Miller has also experienced heartbreak. Who would forget Suryakumar Yadav's unforgettable catch off Miller's aerial shot, in the 2024 T20 World Cup final. Another millimetre further, and it could have been South Africa, not India, celebrating after the game.

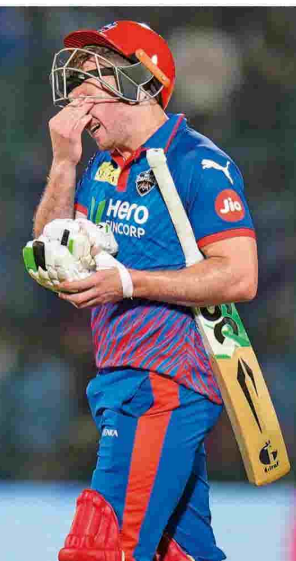
But he partially redeemed himself in the T20 World Cup this year. In the Super Eight game against India, the Proteas were at a troubled 20/3. Miller's 63 off 35 was fundamental to India's lone loss in a title-winning campaign. Performances like these ensure the left-hander remains in global demand. As per ipsalary.in, he has earned ₹77.5cr from IPL, in 16 seasons.

Before the final over's final delivery on Wednesday, Miller did the honest thing: betting on his own ability, rather than on a partner with far less batting skills. He was the odds-on favourite to finish the job. He failed. But that's cricket.

Sometimes the clock misses Miller Time. Thankfully DC captain, Axar Patel, among India's most underfeted cricketers, understood that. Sometimes life is closer to *Miller's Crossing*, the poetic 1990 gangster movie by the Coen brothers, which ends in melancholy for its protagonists.

We love heroes, but we also relish fail guys, best exemplified by the old tv show, *Match Ma Mujein*, where ex-cricketers zeroed in on the player, allegedly responsible for a defeat. Miller's choice creates an alternative template of what it means to win your conviction, and do what you believe is the right thing, even if the outcome doesn't go your way sometimes.

PS: On Thursday, Mukul Choudhary, a 21-year-old, from Jhunjhun district, north-eastern Rajasthan, became an overnight IPL sensation, producing an improbable match-winning performance for LSG. Like Miller, Mukul too was foxed by the "slower one", in the game's last delivery. But unlike in the previous match, the keeper's throw missed the mark. True, the situation was slightly different. But both say the same thing: there's a thin line between agony and ecstasy.



On Telling Your Partner The Worst Thing You Ever Did

It's a risky game. As a new movie, *The Drama*, shows, radical honesty can also be radically destabilising for your relationship. And do each of our darkest thoughts really need sharing?

Renuka.Bisht@timesofindia.com



Last year, it was *Materialists*. This year, it's *The Drama*. It's as if, after a long winter, spring's here for romcom. This is a genre built around the romantic liaison, with its fictions intimately kinking into actual relationships. In the movie, *Materialists*, viewers from Mumbai to Miami, exited theatres bickering over how money matters for love. Now, what *The Drama* has put the spotlight on, is how complicated is forgiveness.

In the movie, *Materialists*, conversation begins with a game. Now, 'relationship games', just like video games, can come in silly to serious variety. '36 Questions to Fall in Love', is a classic, but demanding. From what you feel about your mother, to your highest accomplishment, this quiz, if done in rapid-fire style, can get you to reveal a lot. Or get super droll. Ditto for, 'What Would Your Ex Say About You?'

But, the 'What's the Worst Thing You Ever Did?' game, can get beyond serious, to dangerous. To your relationship. Obviously, it's not a first-date activity. In *The Drama*, it's played the week of the wedding. Spoiler: this turns out to be terrible thing. But, really, it's not clear that there's any good time for this sort of thing.

Let's assume that both partners show the same radical honesty, instead of one making a knob of the other. If they are lucky, their confessions will be morally equivalent, in their judgement. Examples: I broke x's heart cruelly, cruelly; I stole y's promotion, or property; I secretly watch porn for 2 hours.

But what if, even though they promised not to judge each other's story, one of them, and only one of them, ends up feeling revolted? What the movie shows is that when the game moves from 'revelation' to 'red line' (one you hadn't even imagined drawing, so shocking is the revelation), the atmosphere in the room shifts instantly. Now, one partner's perception of the other, changes fundamentally.

Traditionally, forgiveness was the default option. In a society in which exit from marriage was costly or impossible, it got framed as duty. But as forgiveness

becomes a personal choice, people find themselves earnestly weighing, if any compromise hurts their own moral compass. After all, so much of modern love is premised on values-alignment.

The older model risked trapping people in bad relationships, the newer one risks discarding relationships that could grow through difficulty. In *The Drama*, the ending scene has the couple reconnecting at a diner, once again holding hands. But along with so much else, happy endings have also changed. It makes sense. Zendaya is not Margot Ryan, Robert Pattinson is not Billy Crystal, the enduringness of their characters' love cannot

Imaged by A1. From a Photograph



be that of *When Harry Met Sally* either.

Materialists director Céline Song has said, the romcom has gotten a more serious tone, because we're going through a more serious period now. There are lots of ways to interpret this. One is that, just because society no longer dictates our relationship choices in traditional ways, doesn't mean that voices of others have gotten less loud in our head.

When you decide to forgive a partner for something shocking, you're not just making a private emotional choice. You're making a loud declaration that your entire social circle will know, even on the internet. Your inner self is asking 'Can I live with this?' But it's also worrying, 'What will this say about me, to everyone else?'

Result: even as some people stay in a relationship longer than they should, to avoid the social fallout of leaving, others leave sooner than they might have, to satisfy the court of public opinion around them. It's also why the closing scene in *The Drama*, feels haunted. It's as if all the venomous fights the couple has had, since the big reveal, await just the slightest trigger, just one sarky comment from someone, anyone, to go full metal again. The distance between toxic and happily ever after, never seemed shorter.

Last year, there was a news story from Indore, about 150 couples having called off their weddings, over just 40 days. Most of the breakups were thanks to something spied on social media. But there will be things to be found after marriage too. Our desire to know our partner, inside out, is tireless these days. Don't ask, don't tell, is not an easy sell. Not equitably, anyway.

In *Materialists*, the Pedro Pascal character lowers himself six inches, to show what he was like before a leg lengthening, it's a visual shock to the audience. In those seconds, he loses so much 'relationship value'. A shocking reveal always does this. Will you have a happily ever after, with a partner who 'values' you much less than before? Maybe, don't take the risk. Keep your secret inside yourself.

Calvin & Hobbes

ONE OF MY BABY TEETH CAME OUT!



I HAVE TO SAY, I'M NOT ENTIRELY COMFORTABLE HOLDING A PIECE OF MY OWN HEAD.



Sacredspace

It is easy enough to be friendly to one's friends. But to befriend the one who regards himself as your enemy is the quintessence of true religion. The other is mere business.

MK Gandhi

Netas Need Compassion: Why We Must Oblige

Sonal Srivastava

While on a state visit to India in February, France's President Emmanuel Macron, the youngest president in the country's history, was seen jogging in navy blue shorts and a T-shirt on a dusty sidewalk in Mumbai. In a gazillion videos on social media that captured the health-conscious president keeping up with his fitness regimen, Macron, surrounded by his security team, seemed unbothered by honking cars and the attention that Mumbaiers bestowed on him. Most people in the suburb that he is unaccustomed to seeing their leaders exercising casually or cycling on the streets without a political campaign. For it is an unwritten rule that those in positions of power must display 'executive presence' that is, they must appear calm, composed, and confident to the public eye.

In the Netherlands, outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte rode away on a bicycle from his office in The Hague after handing over to Dick Schoof. Rutte spent 14 years as the PM, yet when it was time to vacate the office, he chose to leave on a cycle. In contrast, netas back home must have iron-clad security so that they do not face threats to their lives.

Power, while enabling leaders to transform lives, can also become an entrapment, binding them to the carefully curated public image, and denying the respect their individuality deserves. Public figures seem to drink from a poisoned chalice; while it propels them to the stratosphere of success; it takes something more subtle away: the capability to act on their own volition without constant scrutiny and criticism. 'Log kya kahenge,' — what

will people say, sticks to them like a chewing gum to a shoe sole. Even sartorial choices are calculated. Leaders dress to convey messages, bond with constituencies, and forge an identity that resonates with voters. However, this very bond places limits on something as simple as wardrobe choices. Men are often expected to wear white kurta-pyjamas, achkans, white shirts and trousers, or a dhoti, depending on where the campaign trail leads.

Women politicians must wear handloom saris representative of Induculture. They must always act in accordance with what is perceived as virtuous. Take swimming for instance, a woman politician in a bikini is political hara-kiri, a scandal and fodder for the opposition.

It is said that power corrupts, but what is not discussed is how it can be cruel to those who hold it, shrinking their personal space and liberty. Abraham Lincoln is believed to have said, 'Character is like a tree and reputation is its shadow. The shadow is what we think it is, and the tree is the real thing.'

Even those trees, so nurturing. Just like us, our leaders, too, need compassion. Only if they are allowed to be human will politics become more humane. 'If you want others to be happy, practise compassion. If you want to be happy, practise compassion.' — Only the development of compassion and understanding for others can bring us tranquility and happiness we all seek,' says The Dalai Lama, and we should pay heed.

THE SPEAKING TREE

with what is perceived as virtuous. Take swimming for instance, a woman politician in a bikini is political hara-kiri, a scandal and fodder for the opposition.



DECCAN HERALD

ESTABLISHED 1948

Amid war shocks, an essential rate pause

Caution forced by global headwinds has informed the decision of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)'s Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) to keep the repo rate unchanged at its April meeting. The domestic and international scenarios have changed considerably since the committee's previous meeting, with the war in West Asia looming over the country's economy. Higher oil prices, a shortage of cooking gas, and the rupee clocking sharply lower levels have all posed challenges. In the RBI's policy stance, there is a realistic acknowledgement of the prevalent risk factors, which is reflected in its decision to keep the rate unchanged at 5.25%. It has clearly stated its reasons: "The economy is confronted with a supply shock. It is prudent to wait and watch the changing circumstances and the evolving growth-inflation outlook."

Though the economy has shown relative macroeconomic strength, it has taken hits in recent weeks. It will be under strain with the return of migrant workers to their homes and the ongoing elections in some states. Supply chains remain disrupted by the war, and the outcome of the ongoing two-week ceasefire remains unclear. The markets have soared, and international crude prices have fallen, but the uncertainty is palpable. Even if the ceasefire lasts, it will take months for the supply chains to regain normalcy. A likely shortfall in fertiliser production threatens to affect agricultural output, reducing rural incomes and raising food prices. The MPC would have taken into consideration this instability and uncertainty while making its decision on the interest rate.

Amid these imponderables, the RBI has forecast a headline inflation at 4.6% in 2026-27. This is within its tolerance range, but a deviation from the recent trend of softening inflation. In spite of the moderation after the ceasefire, global fuel prices remain high. The RBI expects the economy to grow at 6.9% this year, down from the expected 7.6% in 2025-26. This could be taken only as an initial estimate, based on available information and the potential immediate impact of external factors on the economy. It could worsen as the situation unfolds. For example, the projection is based on the assumption of crude price at \$85 per barrel. The actual price is likely to be higher. The RBI has said that "further escalation and wider spread of the conflict, heightened volatility in global financial markets and weather-related events, however, weigh on the domestic growth outlook". Under the circumstances, the move to wait and watch is sensible and aligned with the larger stability agenda.

Global uncertainties and inflation risks necessitate the RBI's wait-and-watch move on the repo rate

A test of credibility for KSOU

The latest controversy at the Karnataka State Open University (KSOU) is less an aberration and more a continuation of a troubled institutional history. Established in 1996 to democratise higher education through distance learning, KSOU has lurched from one controversy to another, raising persistent questions about governance and credibility. Its most damaging phase came in 2015, when the University Grants Commission withdrew recognition, citing blatant violations of norms. Although recognition was restored in 2018 after corrective measures, the reputational damage endures. Subsequent missteps have only deepened scepticism. The decision to confer honorary doctorates on "questionable candidates" triggered dissent within the Board of Management. A one-man inquiry led by Justice B A Patil is now probing a range of alleged irregularities.

The immediate flashpoint, however, was the three-day convention on RSS ideologue Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya, co-hosted by the university, with Vice-Chancellor Sharanappa V Halase heading the reception committee.

In a state where the dispensation has deep differences with the RSS, the event embarrassed the government, with Congress legislators hauling Higher Education Minister M C Sudhakar over the coals. Worse, while the university had invited Vice President C P Radhakrishnan and Governor Thawarchand Gehlot, Sudhakar, who is the pro-chancellor, was kept in the dark. In a show-cause notice, the government has accused Halase of misusing the campus for private, ideological purposes. Beyond these failings, a larger question emerges: should publicly funded universities align themselves with political or religious organisations at all? Such precedents risk opening the floodgates to competing assertions, turning campuses into battlegrounds rather than centres of learning.

Further precipitating matters, the government has now frozen the university's bank accounts, citing *prima facie* evidence of financial irregularities flagged by the inquiry. This has stalled budget finalisation and threatens to disrupt academic functioning, leaving the students and faculty to bear the consequences of an avoidable standoff. The impasse is exacerbated by the fact that the incumbent VC continues on a six-month extension after the expiry of his term. A more prudent course would be to appoint an interim VC in accordance with the statute and restore administrative stability. Given the gravity of the allegations, the appointment of a senior bureaucrat as Registrar (Administration) can help cleanse the system. The Minister's proposal for a uniform university law is a step forward, but piecemeal reform will not suffice. What is needed is a comprehensive, expert-led overhaul to ensure that institutions like KSOU do not drift further from their founding purpose.

Controversies point to politicisation and governance gaps at the university, calling for urgent reform

In a country with unequal access to justice, the PIL is a lifeline. Fix its flaws, don't dismantle the system

PRIVYAMVADHA SHIVAJI

This week, a nine-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court has begun to hear a reference petition filed against the SC's 2018 decision upholding the right of menstruating women to enter the Sabarimala temple. As part of the submissions, an interesting question has been raised by Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, representing the Central government: is it time for the SC to re-examine its much-vaunted Public Interest Litigation (PIL) mechanism, a unique home-grown innovation which has for long been lauded as a hallmark of our judiciary's commitment to ensuring meaningful access to justice for all?

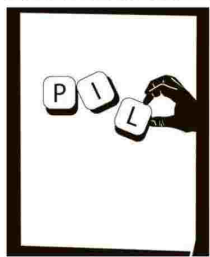
PILs are an extension of the court's ordinary writ jurisdiction, allowing persons and communities to bring the court's attention to matters of public importance even in instances where they may not be directly affected parties. As Mehta pointed out, one of the driving principles behind this expansive constitutional device was to ensure that the poor and the marginalised would not be at a disadvantage in being able to approach courts. Justices P N Bhagwati and V R Krishna Iyer, in landmark cases such as *Hussainara Khatun v. State of Bihar* (1979) and *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India* (1983), led the way in ensuring that narrow *locus standi* requirements did not obstruct the articulation of community-based public interests.

The PIL mechanism, however, has evolved to more than merely allowing cases to be brought before the court. Judicial activism through PILs has allowed for courts to take suffering seriously, even by initiating fact-finding commissions and monitoring the implementation of court orders (*PUCU v. Union of India* (2001)). PILs have also been invoked in multiple cases, widening the articulation of fundamental rights (*Justice (Retd.) K S Puttaswamy & Ors* (2017)).

Mehta argues that the PIL mechanism has outlived its usefulness, as the deficit initially identified in the 1980s of "vast sections of the population [being] structurally unable to access courts because of poverty, illiteracy, disability, de-

privation, social exclusion and the sheer absence of institutional legal support" has been sufficiently addressed. He cites improvements in legal aid mechanisms, including the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) and District LSAs, as well as the introduction of institutional support structures such as e-filing to argue that more citizens are now better placed to access justice than ever before.

The judiciary has seen significant improvements over the years in ensuring transparency and widening access to justice. Initiatives such as the National Judicial Data Grid and the eCourts project have gone a long way towards helping litigants and others access information. However, there remain



significant gaps. Studies show that most people still find the legal system complex and difficult to navigate. Gender, caste, and other identity markers play a role in influencing the perception of access to justice, with women, for instance, noting that their complaints in police stations may often be treated differently and their cases are more likely to be dismissed at the first hearing.

Although NALSA and the state and district LSAs have expanded their reach, the 2025 India Justice Report notes that the number of paralegal volunteers deployed across India to aid in last-mile legal awareness and support decreased by 38% from 2019 to 2025. Furthermore, initiatives such as Lok Adalats have seen uneven implementation, with very low clearance rates and some states/Union Territories not organising any at all in the last few years.

The adoption of e-filing has been, in theory, a significant push for democratising access to justice. However, with nearly twice as many rural households lacking Internet access as urban households in 2025, and only 3.3% of rural households having access to stable, high-speed Internet, which is crucial

for the high volume of documents to be uploaded on the e-filing platform, e-filing has not seen much uptake. e-Service Kendras in many courts are non-functional or not manned by adequately trained and sufficient staff.

In the court, there is continued asymmetry during the course of a case. Persons with greater access to resources can afford to hire more senior lawyers and bear the costs of prolonged litigation. Easily digestible information in local languages, regular updates about case progress, and access to documents, affidavits, and other government records are not universally available, despite ongoing digitising efforts. Free legal aid is severely underfunded, with the national per capita average being just Rs 6.

Refining the framework

There is, therefore, a strong case for PILs to continue as a mechanism to ensure that even one underprivileged litigant is not left in the cracks. However, PILs have also evolved over the years, with many petitions dismissed by the courts as being frivolous and motivated by personal gain rather than true public interest.

Mehta and Chief Justice of India Surya Kant rightly recognised that courts are being called upon more frequently to examine the cause of action in these "public interest" litigations. However, solutions in this regard already exist. In 2010, the SC called upon high courts to frame rules for discouraging PILs filed with oblique motives. To strengthen the enforcement of these rules, the PIL committees envisaged by them must be constituted, with the Registry being empowered to scrutinise the stated reasons for the PIL. The judges retain discretion in rejection/approval of the petition, and may choose to impose exemplary cost sanctions on those who waste the court's time through frivolous litigation.

However, to do away with PILs entirely may be a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. PILs have been a unique mechanism by which the court exercises its authority to ensure that meaningful justice is obtained, not just at the time of approaching the court but throughout the journey towards articulating their rights. By continuing to strengthen the mechanism and privileging genuine expressions of public interest in the courts, access to justice can be widened for all.

(The writer is Senior Resident Fellow, Justice Access and Lowering Delays in India [JALDI] Initiative at Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Life beyond the routine transactions

Civilisations endure not by power alone, but by shared norms

HARI ARAYAMMAKUL

Much of everyday life runs on quiet transactions. We smile, expecting a smile in return. We offer help, hoping it will be remembered. Even our digital lives operate on reciprocity—"likes" invite "likes", and silence feels like rejection. Life, at one level, is a series of transactions. And yet, something in us resists this reduction. Across the animal world, parents care for their young; it is instinctive. Care for the elderly, however, is uniquely human. It serves no immediate biological purpose. Civilisation begins where instinct is restrained by empathy.

Recently, I found myself hesitating before returning a call. The person on the other end had helped me in the past, and I sensed this conversation would come with an expectation. It was a small moment, almost trivial, but it stayed with me. When did simple human interactions begin to feel like pending obligations?

Growing up in Kerala in the 1970s and 1980s, life was not free of give-and-take. But it was rarely this calculated.

We shared space, food, and time without keeping accounts. Asking too much was considered poor manners; giving quietly was a virtue. Reciprocity existed, but it remained unspoken. Wealth was not meant to be displayed. In fact, there were almost theatrical attempts to conceal it. I remember an elderly, wealthy gentleman who used to visit our home, dressed in white cotton clothes, threads fraying at the edges.

What seems to be changing today is not the presence of transactions, but their tone. They are becoming harder, more explicit, and often more demanding. Entitlement replaces courtesy. Requests turn into expectations. What was once offered is now claimed.

I have spent years observing international relations, and the parallels are difficult to ignore. Nations, much like individuals, are driven by pride, anger, insecurity, rivalry, and memory, despite the presence of seasoned statesmen and diplomats. Diplomacy, once measured and discreet, is increasingly performative. Private conversations spill into the public domain. Strength is projected

through unpredictability, even rudeness.

I see this when the powerful engage the rest: assistance tied to conditions, partnerships reduced to leverage, moral language replaced by transactional logic. This is often described as realism. But realism without restraint is little more than instinct in formal attire. The danger is that when every interaction becomes a deal, trust begins to thin out. Relationships, whether personal or between nations, cannot endure on calculation alone.

Civilisations endure not by power alone, but by shared norms; restraint in victory, dignity in conduct, and empathy in strength. To feast while one's neighbour starves may signal wealth, but it reveals a deeper failure.

That missed call stayed with me because it revealed something uncomfortable, not about the other person, but about myself. How easily I had begun to measure, to anticipate, and to calculate.

Transactions may be inevitable. But they need not define us. When values accompany deals, and dignity tempers ambition, both individuals and nations move closer to something larger than success.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Will women's bill, delimitation strengthen India's democracy?

Appropos 'PM appeals for passage of quota bill' (Apr 10), it is heartening that PM Narendra Modi is keen on implementing 33% reservation for women in state assemblies and Parliament before the 2029 Lok Sabha elections. To avoid further delays, he personally saw to it the Cabinet passed the draft legislation, which will be introduced in a special session of Parliament to be convened from April 16. It is significant that the reservation

extends to SC and ST women as well. While it is a much-needed step forward for India, one hopes that this, along with the proposed delimitation exercise that will likely expand the Lok Sabha from 543 seats to 816—in which 273 seats are earmarked for women—strengthens the quality and inclusiveness of India's democracy. **M Basavaraj, Davanagere**

Ensure judicial wellbeing

I refer to "The hidden costs of judicial stress" (Apr 10). That there are nearly 5.5 crore cases pending in various courts is a matter of grave concern. In the general interest of the system, the chief justices and judicial academies must identify and acknowledge structural challenges and push for reforms. As the author rightly points out, a comprehensive framework for judicial wellbeing will also have a positive effect on reducing case backlogs and

restoring public confidence in the judiciary. **S Shashidhar, Bengaluru**

Voter revision is needed

Your editorial on the Bengal voter purge is worrisome—not for the purge itself, but for the way it has been presented. Electoral revisions are mandated by the Constitution, and such exercises have been conducted several times earlier without questions being raised. It is also well known that West Bengal

has faced issues of illegal entry from across the unfenced border. The present exercise is necessary to weed out those who have enrolled in the electoral rolls using forged documents. Moreover, ECI undertook this revision under the directions of the Supreme Court. **H S Gopal, Bengaluru**

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.com (only letters addressed—not handwritten—will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT



DMK is spreading lies that AIADMK is BJP's slave.

K Annamalai, BJP leader

There are a terrible lot of lies going about the world, and the worst of it is that half of them are true.

Winston Churchill

TO BE PRECISE

'TRUTH 'SOCIAL' AND 'OBLITERATE' NOW MEAN THE OPPOSITE. UPDATE?



IN PERSPECTIVE

Why wound a healing forest?

A stone quarry proposed for the Kaiga nuclear project threatens to derail the Kali's slow recovery

GIRDHAR KULKARNI

Streams flow silently through the forests of the Kali Valley, where wildlife—once pushed to the margins—is slowly reclaiming its space, and the roar of the tiger's howl heard once again. This recovery is not a one-day miracle, but the result of decades of sustained effort by the State Forest Department, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, the National Tiger Conservation Authority, local communities, and conservationists. The land is healing, patiently and quietly.

Yet, just as this fragile balance begins to return, a new disturbance is being proposed. The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) has sought diversion of forest land to restart a stone quarry and build an approach road to source construction material for the Kaiga project. At first glance, this may seem routine. But it is not. The proposed quarry lies within the eco-sensitive zone of the Kali Tiger Reserve, where quarrying is prohibited.

What makes the situation more unsettling is the position taken by the regional office of the MoEF&CC in Bengaluru. Its inspection report acknowledges the ecological sensitivity of the site and recognises the forest as a functioning ecosystem. It also makes a stark observation: quarrying would damage the entire ecology of the Western Ghats. Yet, the proposal has been recommended, citing the "strategic importance" of the project.

This contradiction raises a fundamental question about how such decisions are being weighed.

The forest proposed for diversion is part of a connected landscape that enables the free movement of large mammals like tigers. The 2022 All-India Tiger Monitoring Exercise has recorded unique tiger individuals here, underscoring its role as a corridor. Fragment this continuity, and the impact will be lasting.

These forests perform essential ecological functions. In a high-rainfall region, they stabilise slopes, prevent erosion, and regulate water flow. Disturbance through blasting and excavation weakens this system, increasing the risks of landslides and soil loss. Their hydrological role is equally critical. The forested catchment feeds water bodies such as the Kadra Reservoir nearby, where healthy forests help maintain water quality and reduce siltation. Quarrying in such areas risks sediment runoff and long-term degradation of these water systems.

It is also not an isolated activity—it brings roads, machinery, noise, and human presence, fragmenting habitats and disrupting wildlife movement.

The history of the site adds to the concern. The quarry lease dates back to 1994 and expired in 1999, yet the land was never restored.

The Ministry's headquarters has sought clarifications on several points: why the quarry and approach road have been proposed separately, whether an approach road has already been constructed on forest land without prior approval, and why the land was not resumed after the lease expired. The Ministry has also asked whether the site falls within ecologically sensitive areas of the Western Ghats, including the eco-sensitive zone of the Kali Tiger Reserve.

There is also a clear policy inconsistency. When the Kaiga Units 5 and 6 project was approved by the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife in 2019, it came with conditions, including a prohibition on sourcing construction material from adjoining forest land. The present proposal goes against that safeguard.

Risks from gains

It is difficult to ignore the irony that while the people of the Kali valley have long borne the cost of dams, reservoirs, and power projects, they continue to be denied basic facilities such as roads, electricity, bridges, and mobile connectivity, often on the grounds of protecting wildlife and complying with safeguards. If such laws can be enforced so strictly in denying basic rights, one can only hope they will be applied with equal sincerity to ecologically unsustainable activities like quarrying.

The importance of the Kaiga project—a key part of India's energy infrastructure—is not in question. But for that reason, the stability of its surrounding environment becomes more critical. This was recognised during the "Samaya Rekha 2025" disaster preparedness exercise at Kaiga, where experts examined risks such as landslides, extreme rainfall, and emergency scenarios.

NPCIL has, to its credit, supported wildlife conservation through CSR funding and wildlife mitigation plans in and around the project landscape, including the Kali Tiger Reserve and the Karwar and Yellapur forest divisions—efforts that are widely appreciated. In the same spirit, sourcing construction material from outside sensitive wildlife areas would better align with these efforts.

The real question is not development versus conservation, but whether we are willing to wound a healing forest for short-term gain and silence the tiger's roar just as it begins to return.

(The writer is a wildlife conservationist)

Draft tribal plan flags contradictions, legal gaps, relocation concerns as Great Nicobar project faces critique

Fiction of consent in Great Nicobar

Key events

- In the 2010s, the Union Government began exploring Great Nicobar's strategic and developmental potential, including tourism, power generation and defence
- In May 2019, a NITI Aayog report identified five islands of the Andaman & Nicobar archipelago with high potential for tourism, organic farming, seafood exports, deep-sea mining and other key economic sectors
- In 2021, the Government of India approved the Great Nicobar Island Development Project
- On November 11, 2022, the Ministry of Environment and Forests & Climate Change granted environment clearance for the project
- On March 12, 2025, Tribal Affairs Minister Jai Oram assured the Rajya Sabha that "Not even a single tribe is being displaced and there is no impact on the environment."
- On February 16, 2026, the NGT cleared the GNIDP, considering its "strategic importance" and found no "good reason to interfere" as "adequate safeguards" have been provided
- On March 13, 2026, the draft "Comprehensive Tribal Welfare Plan" was circulated for consultation, detailing tribal relocation
- On March 30, the Centre told the Calcutta HC Bench it needed a fortnight to demonstrate tribal consent for the project

SHAILENDRA YASHWANT

The problem with the Great Nicobar Island Development Project (GNIDP) is no longer missing information but willful disregard. Evidence that unsettles the project is set aside, processes that inconvenience it are compressed, and planning itself now appears to follow decisions already taken.

The draft "Comprehensive Tribal Welfare Plan", circulated for consultation on March 13, is a flawed proposal riddled with contradictions, vague assurances, inadequate clarity on critical processes, and fundamental legal and practical flaws. It reveals not just administrative confusion but systematic hollowing out of community rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA).



At its core lies a stark, and revealing, contradiction. For years, officials have insisted that the project will not displace tribes. "There will be no environmental impact and no tribal will be displaced due to the Great Nicobar project," Tribal Affairs Minister Jai Oram said in the Rajya Sabha on March 12, 2025. Yet the draft plan explicitly mentions "relocation of Nicobarese tribal communities from tsunami-affected and project-impacted areas." Why relocate if there is no displacement?

The draft plan attempts to soften this by invoking the 2004 tsunami. It notes that families in settlements such as Rajin Nagar and Ven Chingeng "have expressed their intention to continue living there" due to access to schools, jobs and amenities. Yet it simultaneously proposes new housing and infrastructure in ancestral locations, including "30 new houses... and 1 ha land per household," described as "uninhabitable and unsuitable for cultivation."

What is presented as voluntary return sits uneasily alongside project-driven relocation. Elsewhere, the draft plan offers only "an option" for future relocation "outside the GNI Project area," while framing movement in terms of "project-impacted areas."

Basic questions remain unanswered: Who exactly is to be relocated? From where, to where, and under what conditions? Population figures are "subject to change upon further enumeration," land availability "need[s] to be discussed," and even the plan's consultation status remains unsettled.

More troubling is the legal vacuum in which it operates. The tribal council alleges that the FRA

procedures were never initiated. In the draft plan, consent is asserted without evidence: no gram sabha records, no resolutions, no independent verification. Claims of "expressed interest in resettlement" substitute for due process, even as those communities contest the process.

The legal inconsistencies extend further. The draft plan gestures toward compliance with the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (RFTCLARR) Act, 2013, but sidesteps The Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation, 1956 — which is particularly significant given overlaps with Shompen territories. Proposals for infrastructure, including roads and other facilities, within forest and protected areas proceed without clarity on rights recognition or ecological safeguards. Even forest access is reduced to "where possible", turning a statutory right into administrative discretion.

Beyond law, the draft plan falters on its own terms. It proposes a return to fragile, tsunami-affected coastlines, despite rising sea levels and the submergence of Indra Point. Livelihoods are imagined through plantations and fishing, yet the draft plan itself acknowledges that many families prefer proximity to Campbell Bay for "employment opportunities." Infrastructure proposals — from desalination plants to roads — appear aspirational, lacking ecological assessments or feasibility studies.

The financial architecture is equally uncertain, as the projected outlay of Rs 42.52 crore rests on incomplete assumptions. Taken together, these contradictions point to a deeper problem. Planning here is not about evidence or community engagement, but about assembling a narrative that aligns with decisions already taken.

There is also a deeper philosophical question. Development, as articulated, seems to demand subjects who can be relocated, compensated, and "rehabilitated" within a framework designed elsewhere. But the Nicobarese ties to land are not merely economic units. They are part of a living cultural landscape. To reduce this relationship to housing units and infrastructure packages is to fundamentally misunderstand it.

Shailendra Yashwant is a senior advisor to Climate Action Network South Asia (CANSA). X: @shaibaba.

From gaps to wilful neglect

Conceived by the NITI Aayog, the Great Nicobar Island Development Project (GNIDP) is being executed by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Ltd

- Currently, around 75% of India's trans-shipped cargo is handled at foreign ports. The proposed International Container Transshipment Port is expected to boost forex savings, FDI, port activity, logistics infrastructure, employment and revenue
- Greater Nicobar is strategically vital because it is located near important sea lanes and GNIDP will help boost India's defence preparedness and presence in the Indo-Pacific

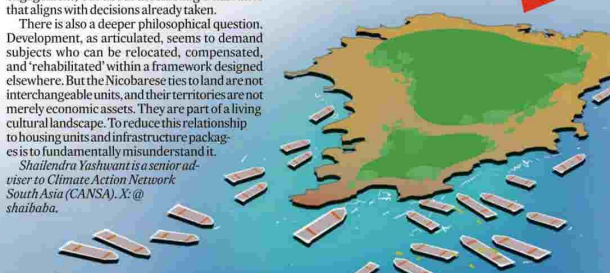
Main components of GNIDP

- 1 An International Container Transshipment Port at Galathea Bay
- 2 A greenfield dual-use airport with a 3,300-metre runway
- 3 Two new planned coastal townships
- 4 A 450-MVA hybrid gas-solar power plant

SOURCE: NITI AAYOG REPORT, PIB, A14, MEDIA REPORTS

Environmental risks

- Approximately 130 sq km of pristine rainforest including over a million trees, is set to be cleared for the GNIDP, raising alarm among environmentalists
- Extensive infrastructure development over the next two decades could cause irreversible damage to sensitive ecosystems and threaten endangered species



Mega infra push in biodiverse island

KALYAN RAY
DH NEWS SERVICE

Almost coinciding with the draft tribal welfare plan, the Andaman and Nicobar administration has released a draft master plan, *Great Nicobar Island Development Area - 2047*, outlining how the pristine island will be developed into a logistics, military and tourism hub over the next 25 years.

Over 166 sq km of land — roughly the size of the BBMP core area — will be required to develop infrastructure ranging from an international transshipment container port and airport to multiple power plants, four-lane roads, and luxury resorts and hotels, to be executed in four phases.

The plan says this has been envisaged as "economic opportunities are limited" on the island, despite its "great potential for well-rounded sustainable development based on economic drivers like ICT port, tourism and entertainment". It also identifies finance, knowledge and wellness hubs as potential drivers.

Covered with dense tropical evergreen forests, the Great Nicobar Island has a unique biodiversity, with a wide variety of flora and fauna, undulating terrain, perennial rivers and deep inlets and creeks. It hosts diverse forest systems, ranging from seasonal rainforests in the low hills to tropical mountain, riverine, orchid-rich and moist deciduous forests.

Such natural abundance is bound to attract tourists. Pristine sandy beaches, scenic hills, forest-covered mountains and coconut plantations along the coastline make it a unique seaside destination, ideal for relaxation in an unexplored environment.

Annual tourist arrivals are projected to grow from 98,000 in 2029 to 1.35 lakh by 2047, and exceed 10 lakh by 2055.

Great Nicobar's proximity to international tourist destinations such as the upcoming Senang City, the Phuket Island and Langkawi Island presents a great opportunity for tourism-oriented development, positioning the island on the global tourism map.

Alongside tourism, two other strategic infrastructure projects are central to the plan: an ICT port and a military airbase (with a civilian terminal), which are expected to significantly reduce India's response time to the Strait of Malacca, one of the most critical choke points in the Indian Ocean.

The proposed ICT port at Great Nicobar could potentially handle 40-60% of India's transshipment traffic, along with some third-country cargo, subject to competitive tariffs, reliable connectivity to Indian gateway ports and the absence of major geopolitical disruptions. Once operational, India aims to capture a significant share of global maritime trade.

However, to transform Great Nicobar Island into a global destination, it is imperative to improve its connectivity with the Indian mainland and international cities, which remains limited at present. There is also a need to develop better roads, ensure reliable power supply and build social infrastructure such as schools, colleges and hospitals to support a growing population.

The master plan promises to achieve all this while maintaining adequate safeguards to protect Galathea Bay and Campbell Bay National Parks, implementing Island Coastal Regulation Zone norms and executing conservation strategies for species such as the Nicobar megapode, long-tailed macaque, sea turtles and saltwater crocodile. Environmentalists, however, remain unconvinced.

The Public Works Department has sought suggestions and comments on the draft master plan, and has also issued a notice in the local press.

In a representation, Andaman and Nicobar islands parliament member Bishnu Pada Ray said he was not opposed to the island's development, but objected to the application of complex planning regulations to old revenue villages that have evolved organically over time.

"These villages are established habitations, with livelihoods rooted in agriculture, fisheries, trade and local services, and should not be treated as newly planned urban townships," he said.

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

The bird that flew 8,000 km

Russian scientists tagged a spoon-billed sandpiper in last July. Nine months later, it migrated to India. **Dhanupal Kondasamy** traces its history

On July 6, 2025, ornithologists N. Karlionova and D. Nizovtsev, from the Russian Academy of Sciences (Birds Russia Expedition) at Meinyulgyno, south-east Chukotka, tagged a wild chick of the Spoon-billed sandpiper (SBS). They hoped that the lime-green tag bearing the marking "2K" would be sighted along its migratory routes, providing useful information about this critically endangered species.

After nearly nine months, it was sighted by birdwatchers from the Kolkata Birding Society on 30 March 2026 at Patubunia beach, south of Kolkata. This was a notable sighting of the rare species along the West Bengal coast in recent years. The tagged bird made an approximately 8,000 km journey from its breeding grounds. With a global population estimated at roughly 150-450 breeding pairs, this sighting created excitement among the Indian birding community. Birders from across the country travelled to see this rare bird. I also flew from Bengaluru with my friends and saw it on April 3, 2026.

The Spoon-billed sandpiper is a small, charismatic wader, closely related to stints, and is distinguished by its unique spatulate (spoon-shaped) bill. It is endemic to the far north-east of Russia, where it breeds exclusively in coastal tundra—cold, treeless landscapes often underlain by permafrost—along a discontinuous stretch of roughly 4,500 km. Its principal breeding grounds lie in Chukotka and parts of northern Kamchatka.

Chicks typically hatch between June and July, and most birds begin leaving their breeding grounds by August. The earliest migrants are recorded in Japan and South Korea from early August, with peak passage occurring in September.

With a body roughly the length of a middle phone and weighing a little more than a light bulb, the Spoon-billed sandpiper undertakes an extraordinary migration each year. It travels across 12-14 countries, from its breeding grounds in Russia to wintering sites as far as India and Southeast Asia, covering around 8,000 km along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. This long-distance migration allows the species to escape the harsh Arctic tundra and reach warmer,



A spoon-billed sandpiper with a lime-green tag was seen on March 2 at Patubunia beach, Kolkata. PIC COURTESY: ALBIN ABRAHAM JACOB

food-rich tropical coastal habitats.

The history

The species has a fascinating scientific history. It was first described in 1758 by the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus. Despite its distinctive bill, it was only later—by the early 19th century—that it was recognised as sufficiently unique to be placed in its own genus, *Euryornithus*, among the waders. Its breeding grounds remained unknown to science until 1879, when the Vega Expedition, led by Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, explored the Arctic coast of Chukotka in Siberia.

At the time, the species appeared to be relatively common during spring migration. Historical accounts from the expedition noted that it was occasionally collected and even served at the expedition's table. However, the birds were not encountered later in the

season, indicating that they had already departed their breeding grounds to migrate southward in search of abundant food.

A century later, in 1978, the Spoon-billed sandpiper was listed in the official Red Data Book of the former Soviet Union as a species with restricted distribution and limited population. A rapid population decline was not recognised until around 2000, when Arctic expeditions by the Russian Academy of Sciences began regular surveys. The population was estimated at no more than 1,000 breeding pairs, far below the earlier figure of 2,000-2,800 pairs. Later estimates suggested fewer than 450 pairs. This led to its status changing from "Vulnerable" to "Endangered" in 2004, and to "Critically Endangered" in 2008.

The population has declined over the last 30 years to an estimated 150-450 breeding

pairs. The destruction of intertidal mudflats, particularly along migration routes through China, Japan, and South Korea, is a major cause. Habitat loss, hunting, and pollution directly contribute to the decline, with climate change acting indirectly.

To prevent extinction, the first Action Plan was developed in 2008 to address threats such as hunting and trapping. Key habitats covering about 630,000 ha across Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, South Korea, and Thailand have since been protected.

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper Recovery Team was formed in 2004 and became a Task Force under the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership in 2010. It promotes sustainable coastal management and advocates limiting coastal reclamation, especially along China's coast.

However, continued annual declines of about 5% led to a new Action Plan, the "International Single Species Action Plan" (2025-2035), adopted by EAAFP in November 2025. It is coordinated by BirdLife International with support from the Convention on Migratory Species.

The plan aims to ensure the long-term survival of the species and identifies 9 objectives, 18 results, and 75 priority actions. Hunting and habitat loss remain the most serious threats.

As a rare and charismatic bird from remote parts of Russia, the species has attracted collectors. In the mid-2000s, private collectors reportedly offered large sums, and about 17% of breeding sites have been affected. According to global waterbird assessments, around 40% of waterbird populations are declining worldwide, rising to about 59% in Asia. Coastal reclamation, aquaculture, tourism, pollution, and climate change continue to drive habitat loss.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site represents one of the highest levels of international recognition for biodiversity conservation. A chain of such sites along the Yellow Sea and Bohai Sea coasts is being expanded and would be important for protecting the species' habitat.

(The writer is a retired forest officer from Tamil Nadu, settled in Bengaluru. He is an ardent birdwatcher)

DID YOU KNOW?

Mysterious heart neurons regulate BP, prevent fainting

When you get up from a chair, your blood pressure instantly increases to compensate for the movement and prevent you from fainting. For decades, researchers thought neurons called baroreceptors in arteries controlled this process by signalling the sudden drop in blood pressure to the brain, which then issues orders to constrict blood vessels. Some experts suspected that other neurons might help maintain blood pressure during such shifts in posture, but they didn't know which ones.

In a study recently published in *Nature*, scientists took a close look at mysterious neurons in the heart that could be involved. "They have been known to exist, but we had no idea what they were sensing," says study senior author Stephen L. Liberles, a molecular neuroscientist at Harvard University.

Working with mice, his team focused on a protein called PIEZO2 that converts pressure on cell membranes into nerve signals. The researchers found PIEZO2-expressing neurons wrapping around all four chambers of the mouse heart in intricate, weblike structures. "There are such neurons in the human heart as well," Liberles says.

To understand the neurons' function, Liberles and his colleagues rotated mice from horizontal to upright while monitoring their vitals in real time. A healthy mouse instantly adjusts its heart rate to compensate for such a change in posture. When the researchers injected mice with a toxin that selectively destroyed PIEZO2 neurons in the heart, however, the mice's blood pressure plummeted, and they failed to recover. When the researchers induced haemorrhaging in the mice, the PIEZO2 neurons acted long before arterial sensors could have sounded the alarm—suggesting that they have a direct line on blood volume.

The team suspects that the brain most likely gets a general sense of blood pressure from the arteries but relies on these newly discovered heart sensors for high-fidelity updates on the volume of blood moving through the organ.

But the hunt for mysterious circulatory neurons is far from over. Liberles and his colleagues note in their study that there are at least six distinct neuron types in the cardiovascular system, and we still don't know the functions of three of them. "We want to know how they work," Liberles says. "There's a lot to do." **NT**



The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

PIL framework

Centre's hardline stance needs a relook

THE Centre's proposal to do away with the public interest litigation (PIL) framework risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Long celebrated as a powerful tool to democratise access to justice, PILs are being increasingly equated with agenda-driven litigation. The Supreme Court's cautious response — acknowledging misuse but not favouring outright abolition — reflects a balanced and pragmatic approach.

The PIL mechanism emerged in an era when structural barriers like poverty, illiteracy and lack of legal aid prevented large sections of society from approaching courts. It allowed public-spirited individuals and organisations to raise issues on behalf of the marginalised. Landmark verdicts on bonded labour, environmental protection and prison reforms owe much to this innovation. However, the Centre argues that the context has significantly changed. With technological advancements such as e-filing and the expansion of legal aid institutions, direct access to justice is no longer as prohibitive as it once was. While it is true that a large proportion of PILs are frivolous or motivated — the SC has trashed many such petitions in recent years — the solution lies in reform, not elimination. The judiciary itself has acknowledged this shift, noting that courts have become increasingly selective, subjecting petitions to stricter scrutiny before admitting them.

The deeper issue is not the existence of the PIL culture but its misuse. A blanket rollback could weaken an important constitutional safety valve, especially for those who still face invisible barriers — social stigma, fear of reprisal or lack of awareness. Moreover, PILs continue to serve as a vital mechanism to address systemic issues that may not have a single identifiable victim. In a country where glaring inequalities persist, access to justice must remain flexible and inclusive. PILs, though imperfect, still embody that ideal. The task ahead is to preserve their spirit while preventing their distortion.

Wheat woes

Align purchase rules with realities of weather

PUNJAB's wheat bowl is once again at the mercy of the weather — and the rigidity of policy. Unseasonal rains and strong winds have damaged crops across 1.3 lakh acres, while higher moisture and lustre loss threaten to push large quantities of wheat outside the fair average quality (FAQ) norms. In such a scenario, the state's demand for relaxation in procurement specifications is both justified and urgent. The anomaly lies in the Centre's response. Rajasthan, which faced similar disruptions earlier due to its advanced harvest cycle, has already been granted relaxations. Punjab, where harvesting has been delayed by continuing western disturbances, is still waiting for Central inspection teams. This staggered approach creates a perception of unequal treatment, even though the underlying agrarian distress is comparable.

The consequences of delay are immediate. Farmers bringing produce with moisture levels as high as 15% and visible lustre loss risk price cuts or rejection in mandis. With yields already expected to drop by 4-5 quintals per acre, procurement rigidity will translate into direct income loss. Rura state deeply dependent on MSP-backed procurement, such uncertainty can quickly spiral into distress sales. The anxiety was evident in the protest call by ahtiyas. Their decision to call off the strike after assurances from the state government has brought temporary relief, but this true depends on swift policy action. Any delay could reignite tensions and disrupt procurement operations.

This recurring crisis exposes a deeper flaw. The country's procurement system still relies on static, one-size-fits-all norms even as climate variability intensifies. Ad hoc relaxations are only a stopgap. What is needed is a responsive framework linking procurement norms to real-time crop conditions and allowing graded pricing. Punjab's plea is not merely for relief, but for reform.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, SUNDAY, APRIL 11, 1926

Habeas Corpus

IN a recent issue, the *Statesman* of Calcutta attempts a defence of the action of the Bengal Government in arresting and detaining a large number of prominent citizens under purely executive orders, on grounds which cannot bear a moment's serious examination. "It must be remembered," it writes, "that the right of personal freedom is an importation into India of a principle established only in relatively recent times in Great Britain. The first Habeas Corpus Act formed the subject of a bitter dispute between the Crown and the Commons in 1627 and it was not placed upon the Statute Book till 1640." The Habeas Corpus Act was definitely placed on the Statute Book not in 1640 but in 1679, though in 1640 Parliament did go a long way towards that consummation by reversing the unconstitutional decision of the judges in what was known as Darnell's case and abolishing the Court of High Commission, the Council of the North, the Star Chamber and prerogative Courts and releasing their victims. But what is the point? Is it meant that because England had her Habeas Corpus Act only in the latter half of the 17th century and that, too, after a bitter and desperate struggle, therefore India must wait for a few centuries more and must wage an equally bitter and desperate struggle before she can have a similar Act or have the right which is the basis of that Act recognised by her own government? The question has only to be put to be answered with an empathic and unhesitating No. As the *Statesman* itself admits, Habeas Corpus would have made its way into Indian usage in the course of time even if the British had never come to India.

India's obsession with Pakistan

Certainly, Pakistan punches above its emaciated weight, but why does India punch below its potential

THE GREAT GAME
JYOTI MALHOTRA

IN the bad, old days when ordinary Indians and ordinary Pakistanis were allowed to meet each other for lunch in Lahore, dinner in Patiala, weddings in Karachi and funerals in Qadian, you often heard — interspersed with tidbits about Omar Sheikh, the London School of Economics-educated terrorist released for the IC-814 hijacked passengers, and his favourite Islamabad bookstore — Pakistanis reflecting on the deep, strategic tie between Pakistan and China.

The "all-weather relationship" between the two countries, they said, "was higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the seas and sweeter than honey."

In today's mixed-up world, this could be a line straight out of *Dhruvadhara 3*, the sequel — make no mistake, Aditya Dhar is already making detailed notes about India's continuing obsession with Pakistan, despite the fact that we have zero official ties with our western neighbour. The fact remains that street talk often explains foreign affairs jargon much better than the jargon itself.

So while there will only be three countries represented today in Islamabad's Serena Hotel, the venue for the face-to-face peace talks between the US and Iran at the end of the 39-day-long war — the almighty Americans represented by US Vice-President JD Vance — the battered but undefeated Iranians led by Speaker Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf (most leaders are either dead, like Ali Larjani, or wounded, like the Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei) and the Pakistanis, likely led by



US-IRAN TALKS: Trump is allowing Pakistan its happy charade of being a "dalaal". REUTERS

Trump's "favourite Field Marshal" Asim Munir — there are a few other nations in the shadows who will play more than a supporting role in this movie. China, Russia, Israel, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the UAE. Look carefully at these names, dear Reader, and note how the global order is being shaken and stirred in a hotel managed by the Agh Khan Development Network — the first Agh Khan, only old-timers with a penchant for history will remember, was Indian.

The reason China is not in the room is because it is playing a powerful role outside — backing Pakistan. China has bailed out Pakistan for several decades, year after year, and built its roads and highways and ports and invested in its military, its air force, its nuclear and missile programme — the Pakistanis will admit, off-the-record over coffee in a P-6 restaurant in Islamabad, that they are a client state of their "all-weather friends." But even China would not have been able to play this key role in the peace negotiations if Pakistan did not already have relationships

India has learnt to swallow its China spit and look at the big picture — realising that others may see the same story differently.

with all the players.

That's why there are two clear lessons from the war in West Asia. The first, be humble, never arrogant. (Deng Xiaoping said it beautifully with his 24-character guideline, 'taoguang yanghui,' meaning, 'hide your strength, bide your time'.) Certainly, it's not just the US and Israelis who have been forced to eat humble pie by a far weaker Iran. Closer home, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's evocative characterization of Pakistan as a "dalaal," or broker, may come to haunt India, as the "dalaal" brokers the most important global

negotiations in decades.

Many colleagues in the media are tying themselves up in knots wondering how to describe the Pakistani role today — is it a powerful mediator, an irrelevant messenger, a backroom boy, or just a weak nation living on the edge, being pulled apart by famine, war and terrorism? Perhaps it's all these labels or none of them. As *Dhruvadhara 2* crosses Rs 1,000 crore at the box office in India, perhaps the real question is, why is India so obsessed with Pakistan when we are supposed to hate it so much?

The second lesson from the West Asia war is that Tier Two nations like India and Pakistan cannot afford to take sides. Now India already seems to have learnt that lesson on the West Asia crisis, as it tries to claw back to the centre after having swung early in the direction of Israel. That's why it boggles the mind why Jaishankar is in the UAE on the day Pakistan is brokering a truce between Iran and the US — the UAE was a favourite target of Iran in this war because they were seen to be allied with the US, and therefore Israel.

Significantly, India has learnt that lesson well with China. It

recognises the fact that China is a far more powerful enemy than Pakistan — back in 1998, Brajesh Mishra, national security advisor to then PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee named China as the reason India crossed the nuclear threshold — and despite the more recent Galwan face-off in 2020, when 20 Indian soldiers died, China has returned to being India's largest trading partner.

India has learnt to swallow its China spit and look at the big picture — realising that others may see the same story differently.

That's why the Pakistan-brokered talks in Islamabad today are so important. China is not in the room, but it is the most important player in the conversation. If it were not for China, Pakistan's ability to offer to mediate would have little value. Trump recognises that. And so it allows Pakistan its happy charade of being a "dalaal."

India also recognises that. But because the Ministry of External Affairs has tied itself up in knots over what to do with Pakistan — basically, no conversation until cross-border terrorism comes to an end, which essentially allows Pakistan's military establishment which controls the terrorists, to have a veto on the relationship, thereby reducing India's own leverage — the China puzzle will always remain unnecessarily elusive.

Certainly, Pakistan punches above its emaciated weight — it flatters the Americans, allies itself with the Chinese, sells itself to the Saudis and courts the Iranians — that's clear for all to see.

The bigger question is, why does India punch below its potential? Especially when its key rival China, it's also clear to see, is trying to use the Iran war and Pakistan's role in brokering peace to emerge as the pre-eminent power in the world.

Why is India's magnificent obsession with Pakistan limited to Pakistan, when China is the real power behind the throne of the Islamic Republic?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

It is a mistake of amateurs to believe you can gain the upper hand in a diplomatic negotiation. —Henry A. Kissinger

A close encounter with Yuri Gagarin

MAJ GEN AJS SANDHU (RETD)

AS the world awaits the return of Artemis II astronauts after their lunar flyby voyage, I am reminded of my chance encounter with Yuri Gagarin, the cosmonaut who became the first human to travel into space 65 years ago. I was then a student of The Lawrence School, Sanawar. It was our winter break and I was in Delhi, where my father was posted at the Army Headquarters. I learnt that an international exhibition was being held in the city and decided to visit it.

I travelled on a local bus to the "Exhibition Grounds", as they were then known (later renamed Pragati Maidan). It was a vast complex where many countries had set up pavilions to showcase their achievements. I spent the morning visiting several of them, notably those of the US, the UK and the USSR.

At the Soviet Pavilion, among other exhibits, was a full-scale model of the Vostok space capsule, which I found particularly fascinating. Earlier that year, on April 12, 1961, Gagarin had voyaged into space in Vostok 1.

As I was leaving the pavilion, I noticed a red carpet laid out outside. Somewhat intrigued — and, in hindsight, fortunately so — I enquired the reason for it. I was told that Gagarin, who was on a visit to India, was expected to arrive shortly. I was thrilled at the prospect of seeing him. After checking the likely time of his arrival, I wandered off to see other pavilions, including a hovercraft demonstration at the UK pavilion — my first glimpse of such a machine.

A few minutes before the expected time, I returned to the Soviet pavilion — and was taken aback by what I saw. Ward had clearly spread. People had gathered in large numbers. Standing in the last row, I could see nothing at all. It seemed certain that I would miss even a glimpse of the great man.

Provisionally, a small gap opened in the line ahead of me. I slipped through the opening and found myself almost unexpectedly right at the front.

Soon, there was a roar from the crowd. An open jeep came slowly into view. Gagarin stood in it, resplendent in his decorated uniform, smiling and waving. As the jeep moved along, he turned from side to side, acknowledging the crowd with folded hands. As he drew level with where I stood, I stretched out my hand and called out. He smiled and responded without hesitation by extending his hand in return. For an instant, our hands met in a quick handshake as the jeep rolled on. It took me a while to fully register what had just happened.

Decades later, during an official visit with an Army delegation to Moscow in 1995, I recounted the incident to my Russian hosts at a banquet. They were delighted, and the evening led to a series of enthusiastic vodka toasts!

The handshake with Gagarin was brief, but it has remained in my memory as a reminder of a historic moment.

The writer is former Additional Director General, Artillery

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Duty to defend public interest

With reference to 'Mamata is making Bengal battle personal'; what then do we say about PM Modi turning every Assembly election into his personal battle, with the full weight of the Union government, agencies and money power behind him? If that is leadership, then Mamata is justified in defending her voters. Is it a crime in a democracy to point out faulty and biased conduct of elections? Since when has seeking justice become anti-national? Then Chief Election Commissioner TN Seshan made politicians fear the election body, but today voters fear the commission itself.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Governance not personal

Apropos of 'Mamata is making the Bengal battle personal'; democracy demands accountability, not personality cult. Democracy weakens when leaders begin to treat public institutions as personal battle grounds rather than pillars of constitutional balance. Mamata Banerjee's increasingly confrontational posture reflects a tendency to place individual authority above the law, the Supreme Court, the Election Commission and other autonomous bodies that safeguard India's democratic framework. Instead of cooperative federalism and inclusive development, the state appears trapped in a cycle where political identity overrides governance priorities.

COL SS CHAUHAN (RETD), BY MAIL

Wrong impression on young minds

Refer to 'Unsavoury chapter'; in case the affected academicians are aggrieved by the SC's blanket ban, they can approach the apex court with a prayer to revisit the order. Removal of the controversial sub-chapter highlighting so-called corruption in the judiciary was necessary to maintain independence, sanctity and integrity of the hallowed institution. Had the chapter remained in the NCERT textbook, it would have risked lowering the image of the judiciary in the vulnerable minds of students as well as the public across the country. No educationist can be allowed to have a free run in the name of academic autonomy.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

Militarism dressed as strategy

Apropos of 'Op Epic Disaster: 5 weeks of chaos, no strategic gain'; the unfolding crisis reflects the futility of militarism dressed as strategy. While a ceasefire, however fragile, offers a glimmer of hope, its credibility remains questionable when shaped by volatile rhetoric, including statements attributed to Donald Trump that amplify fear rather than foster restraint. Durable peace cannot emerge from brinkmanship; it demands principled multilateral engagement, where the United Nations must reclaim a proactive and credible role. Equally, the implications of conflict must be rigorously examined by scholars — strategically, economically, and ethically — including an objective assessment of Iran's stance in self-defence.

MM GOEL, KURUKSHETRA

Retuning as per need of the hour

With reference to 'Solan DC to initiate action in Chester Hills land case'; it is important to realise that aberrations like these occur because of the antiquated laws, like Section 118 of the Himachal Pradesh Tenancy and Land Reforms Act, governing such transactions. It is high time political parties take a mature view and amend the law to attract much-needed investment in the state. Laws are enacted at particular points in time and it is imperative not to allow them to become fossilised, thereby impeding development. Organic changes can help retune the law to today's reality.

GURIYOT SINGH, SHIMLA

Smart power meters a hassle

Union Power Minister Manohar Lal Khattar has clarified in the Lok Sabha that smart electricity meters are not mandatory for consumers. They are subject to consumers' consent rather than forced installation, but in some districts of Punjab, when the old meter is replaced, the consumer has no option. The new meters are in the postpaid mode, but unlike ordinary meters, the billing is on a monthly basis. The meter sends the bill through a text message without consumption details. People have been protesting against installation of such meters, but the government hasn't given them a hearing.

SARTAL SINGH, KHANNA

India faces economic shock from war fallout



SUSHMA RAMACHANDRAN
SENIOR FINANCIAL JOURNALIST

THE ceasefire in the West Asia war is good news, but much damage has already been done to the global economy. Unless the pause in hostilities ends up in a sustained peace, the world is set for an economic slowdown in the near term, with the impact reflecting in many ways. Oil prices that were soaring above \$110 over the past month have now dipped to \$97 per barrel, which is still relatively high.

The extreme prices over the past month have been passed on to consumers in many countries, while the ramifications have extended to downstream products like fertilisers and petrochemicals. The danger here is not only of inflationary pressures but also the prospect of shortages in case the war does not end soon.

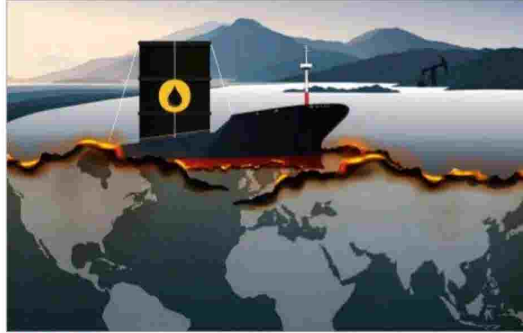
The pain will be felt by advanced and emerging economies alike. External headwinds will equally affect India even though prices of petroleum products like petrol and diesel have been

contained for the time being. The most visible impact of the US-Israel war on Iran has so far been in terms of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), commonly used as cooking fuel in this country. The initial shortage scenario has eased, with allocations to commercial users having been ramped up to 70% of the pre-war status. Domestic needs are being met, though with a slight delay.

Yet those buying in the open market, which includes small businesses and migrant labour, have seen cylinders becoming unaffordable. This has led to a gradual exodus of workers back to rural areas. The migration, though, is not at pandemic scale, but the situation will remain uncertain until prices normalise.

Other petroleum- and gas-based products are also affected by the war. A prime example is fertilisers. With global hydrocarbon prices at record highs in recent weeks, there is uncertainty over the availability of fertilisers like urea, which use natural gas as feedstock.

India imports about 10 million tonnes of fertilisers annually, including urea and di-ammonium phosphate (DAP), of which nearly 50% is imported from West Asia. Supplies of liquid natural gas (LNG) for domestic fertiliser producers have been enhanced, but there is need to diversify imports to



AFTEREFFECTS: The extreme prices over the past month have been passed on to consumers. LAUTMOHAN

ensure that sufficient stocks are in place for the upcoming kharif sowing season.

Petrochemicals is the other downstream sector that will affect a wide array of industrial and consumer goods. Products made from petrochemicals range from pharmaceuticals to textiles to plastics. Supply disruptions have added to the enhanced costs. The effect of higher oil and gas prices on petrochemicals will be passed down to large, medium- and small-scale industries.

It may take some time for the inflationary impact to be felt fully, though reports have already emerged about price hikes in several sectors. Supplies of sulphur ema-

Petrochemical and fertiliser sectors reflect cascading impacts, threatening both domestic production and agricultural supply chains.

nating largely from West Asia have also been disrupted, leading to higher costs for manufacturers of fertilisers and other products. Helium used in MRI machines is similarly in short supply. Active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) sourced from China are reported to have become more expensive.

With prices of polymers and plastics going up, the costs of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs) are set to rise, including electronic goods, air conditioners and televisions. Higher logistics costs owing to freight increases and rupee depreciation are other factors impacting retail prices.

Exports are also facing the

brunt of disruption to traditional trade routes through West Asia. An emergency war freight surcharge is being levied on cargo going towards the Gulf countries. This is a blow for exporters as the region is one of India's biggest markets. The UAE, for instance, is currently the third largest trading partner after the US and China.

Merchant vessels going beyond this area are constrained with the simultaneous blockade of the Strait of Hormuz and the Houthi attacks on the Red Sea route. This has forced west-bound cargo to move through the long and costly route via the Cape of Good Hope. Consequently, exports will become less competitive in key markets, like Europe and the US.

Like other countries, India is scrambling to assess the outcomes of the war on the economy. The Finance Ministry has conceded there is downside risk to the earlier projection of 7.74% growth in 2026-27 (FY27) from the conflict in West Asia.

International rating agencies and banks seem to agree and have downgraded growth projections for the year. Moody's Ratings has slashed its GDP growth projection from 6.8% to 6% for FY27 while Morgan Stanley has cut it from 6.5% to 6.2%.

With oil markets continuing to be volatile, few analysts are prepared to make projec-

tions about the extent of price increases in the coming days. In case the war continues for a few months, it has been predicted that oil prices could cross \$150 per barrel. Given the Reserve Bank's projection that a 10% rise in global oil prices will lead to a 15% decline in GDP growth, this would result in a significant economic slowdown.

Thus, it is clear that the impact of the war is gradually extending its tentacles to virtually all segments of the economy. This could be a lesser shock to the system if the two-week ceasefire translates into a lasting peace.

Given that there is no certainty on this score, emergency management is the need of the hour. This has been initiated to some extent as supply diversification has begun for a wide range of commodities, including oil and gas.

India is better prepared than many others to deal with the situation owing to its comfortable foreign exchange reserves and the momentum of high growth seen over the past few years. Even so, the economy is set to slow down primarily due to external factors. This is disappointing, coming as it does at a time when the engine of growth had been picking up.

The war may have been launched against Iran, but the rest of the world, including India, are bearing the brunt of the consequences.

AAP faces test of performance in Punjab



ASHUTOSH KUMAR
FACULTY, POLITICAL SCIENCE, PUNJAB UNIVERSITY

HAVING completed four years in office recently, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is gearing up for a tough Punjab Assembly election. Recent elections in the country have shown that anti-incumbency is not the only decisive electoral factor. Rather, it is the performance of the government that matters the most, apart from other factors, like organisation, leadership, resources and a social support base. Since the AAP in Punjab lags in the other factors as compared to its rivals, the Congress and BJP, it is performance that will be the crucial factor for the party.

One way to gauge the AAP's performance is to look at its pre-poll promises. The party, in its 2022 election manifesto, reiterated its promise to combat corruption, organised crime, drugs and unemployment and go for investment in education and health sectors in line with its Delhi model.

Full guarantees also included freebies like cash transfers to women and subsidised electricity to every household. To address the issue of the state's indebtedness, the party promised to bring in fiscal reforms and cut down public expenditure that had gone up due to the prevailing VIP culture.

With the farmers' protest against the three farm Bills ongoing at that time, the AAP promised that it would take measures to address agrarian distress and said that it would lead to an end to farmer suicides.

The party also promised to punish the perpetrators of the desecration of the Sikh holy scripture and the subsequent police firing incident in 2015, an emotive issue for the Sikhs.

In its latest report card, the Bhagwant Mann government claimed to have fulfilled all its poll promises, the latest being cash transfer to women above 18 years of age.

Among its achievements mentioned in the card are Aam Aadmi Mohalla Clinics providing free treatment (up to Rs 10 lakh) to the poor; an improvement in the conditions of government schools, providing uninterrupted supply of free electricity to farmers even during daytime, an extension of the canal irrigation facility and the creation of thousands of jobs. It also recently declared Anandpur Sahib and Amritsar as holy cities.

However, the party's electoral chance will be hit due to the government's lack of suc-

cess on some fronts. First, its inability to check the worrisome rise in gangsterism, ransom-seeking and daylight killings in the state. Mafias in sectors like transport, retail (bajri (sand), liquor and ceta — named in the party's past manifestos continue to flourish. The AAP government, in its enthusiasm to acquire farmland for colonisation, is alleged to be in collusion with the land mafia.

Second, farmers remain debt-ridden and suicides are still being reported, though the numbers have gone down.

Third, despite the setting up of many more integrated deaddiction and rehabilitation centres across the state and arrests of drug peddlers, the government's all-out war against the drug trade and menace has not met with



VOTERS' CONCERNS: Gangsterism, drugs and debt remain persistent concerns. FILE PHOTO

Recent elections show that anti-incumbency is no longer decisive. Performance now determines electoral fate.

much success, indicating an entrenched nexus.

Fourth, the government's record on combating corruption has not been up to the mark. Some senior party leaders, including legislators and ministers, have been forced to resign after facing corruption charges. The promised Jan Lokpal Bill never came about, nor was the existing office of Lokpal strengthened.

Fifth, the party's promise to end VIP culture remains hollow. Worse, state resources and assets are kept at the disposal of Delhi-based AAP leaders, a charge dating the rounds after the Raghav Chadha episode.

Sixth, incidents of terror attacks in recent years, including the grenade attacks on the intelligence

wing headquarters, a police station and the Punjab BJP headquarters in Chandigarh, have ignited fear among people.

Seventh, the state's growing indebtedness is being blamed on the government's reckless populist policies and financial imprudence. The party's promise to bring a turnaround in the economy has fallen flat as salaries and pensions are being delayed.

Unemployment levels remain high, the migration of youth continues and the promise of providing a guaranteed minimum support price (MSP) for every crop remains a non-starter. Aam Aadmi Canteens also remain non-starters.

Eighth, while schools have become better, higher education institutions are in a pretty bad situation due to the lack of government support.

Given the fact that the AAP landslide win was not merely due to anti-incumbency against the entrenched Congress and Akali Dal but also due to a faint hope of the voters for AAP's ability to revive the lost glory of the beleaguered state, the forthcoming elections would be a tough battle in view of the party's performance deficit.

This, despite the party winning bye-elections in Giddarbaha, Dera Baba Nanak, Chabbawal and Ludhiana West in the last two years.

However, these results indicate that the party remains in electoral contention. An incumbent party remains the favourite in bye-elections.

The BJP has the advantage of having resources, a committed cadre and a core constituency. Being in power at the Centre for the third term, it now has a firm grip over the institutions and apparatuses. Armed with turnover leaders, it would contest with full force in all Assembly seats, enthused by the 18% vote that it got in the 2024 elections.

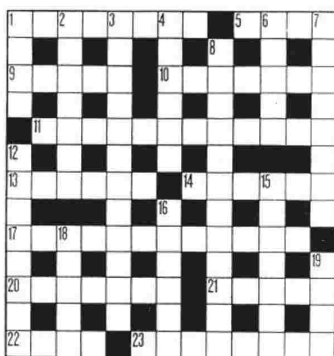
The Congress, though ridden with factionalism, continues to retain decent support among both Hindus and Sikhs in the state. At the same time, with a weak high command, factional fights in the party are likely to intensify.

The Akali Dal, having lost its core constituency, despite its encouraging performance in the recent local elections, and its attack on the AAP does not seem to have much of a chance. The upcoming Assembly election will be a three-party contest once again, but with a difference. The third party in the triangular contest will be the BJP, not the Akali Dal.

The electoral issues would be the same as the last time. They would figure in the manifestos of all parties. The tenor of campaign rhetoric will be as shrill as ever.

Views are personal

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- Member of a deputation (8)
 - Motion picture (4)
 - Reinquisish (5)
 - Parallelogram with equal sides (7)
 - In various places (4,3,5)
 - Engross attention of (6)
 - To lament (6)
 - Be very expensive (4,3,5)
 - Set in earnest (3,4)
 - Likeness (5)
 - Indecent (4)
 - A detached piece (8)
- DOWN**
- Dexterous (4)
 - Generosity (7)
 - Worldwide traveller (12)
 - Crowd of people (6)
 - Permeate (5)
 - Showing great skill (8)
 - There to be had (3,3,6)
 - Extravagantly imaginative (8)
 - Set in motion (7)
 - Tentative suggestion (6)
 - Scatter over a surface (5)
 - Immediately following (4)

Yesterday's Solution
Across: 1 On the ball, 8 Usage, 9 Abysmal, 10 Strict, 11 Fellow, 12 Inferior, 15 Clincher, 18 Tariff, 20 Friend, 21 Belgium, 22 Exude, 23 Rectitude.
Down: 2 Noble, 3 Hustle, 4 Bear with, 5 Lustre, 6 Pacific, 7 Better off, 11 Fancy-free, 13 Furthest, 14 Vicious, 16 Confer, 17 Bright, 19 Found.

SU DO KU

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

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR
 APRIL 11, 2026, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Chaitra Shaka 21
- Chaitra Purnashti 29
- Hijri 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 9, up to 12:38 am
- Sadhya Yoga up to 6:16 pm
- Ultrashadha Nakshatra up to 1:40 pm
- Moon in Capricorn sign

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	31	14
New Delhi	35	19
Amritsar	30	14
Bathinda	31	14
Jalandhar	27	14
Ludhiana	30	14
Bhivani	32	17
Hisar	32	15
Sirsa	31	14
Dharamsala	24	11
Manali	—	—
Shimla	18	09
Srinagar	21	06
Jammu	29	14
Kargil	14	03
Leh	10	-01
Dehradun	31	16
Mussoorie	17	07



INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Rammath Goenka

CERTAINTY OF PUNISHMENT MORE POTENT DETERRENT THAN HARSH SENTENCE

USTODIAL violence is a disturbingly common reality in India. Public sentiment, reflected in films, has come to normalise and even valorise police excesses—a slippery slope that can range from a few slaps to planned extrajudicial killings. Underpinning the brutality is the almost unchecked power bestowed by the assumption that uniformed personnel are acting for the greater good. But absolute power corrupts absolutely. This is how the father-son duo of Jeyaraj and Beniks came to be killed by 10 policemen in Tamil Nadu's Sathankulam in June 2020—about a month after the well-reported killing of George Floyd in the US.

Six years later, a trial court convicted and sentenced nine policemen in Sathankulam to death for torture and killing; a tenth cop died before the chargesheet was filed. The judgement, a rare case where uniformed personnel were held to account for custodial violence, comes less than a year after a temple guard was brutally beaten to death by police in Sivaganga district on the flimsy charge of theft. Between these two episodes of horror in Tamil Nadu are several other instances of alleged custodial torture and death—not only in Tamil Nadu, but across India. The government informed Parliament last month that custodial deaths increased from 140 in 2024-25 to 170 in 2025-26 (up to March 15).

Part of the corrupting power enjoyed by the police is the confidence of facing little or no consequence for their actions. In this case, it was facilitated by the dereliction of duty by other government servants—doctors and the magistrate. But notably, police constable S Revathy spoke up against her colleagues and appeared as a prosecution witness at grave personal risk.

The Sathankulam verdict, with references to Floyd's death and other instances of custodial violence, invokes the death penalty as a deterrent to check police impunity. However, it is not the death sentence—which has no place in a system of reformatory justice—but the certainty of punishment that is the true deterrent. Governments must ensure errant police are prosecuted for their crimes, without exception and regardless of the innocence or guilt of their victims. Alongside them, doctors, magistrates and other government workers, who facilitate police excesses by omission or commission, must also be held to account. Only the certainty of meaningful punishment will erode the absolute power enjoyed by those in khaki.

CONSIDER A SOUTHERN LANGUAGE AS THE THIRD

THE Karnataka government's decision to opt for a dual-language policy of Kannada and English in this year's Class 10 exam, and giving grades rather than marks for the third language, appears peculiar. The reasoning is that it would reduce language pressure on students and promote Kannada—students have to score out of 525 marks in five subjects instead of 625 in six. This downgrade of the third language is in keeping with the State Education Policy, which Karnataka adopted instead of the National Education Policy. Academicians have largely welcomed the move considering the consistently low pass percentages. In the 2024-25 boards, of the 1.64 million students who failed, 1.46 million did not pass the third-language paper.

However, the decision has set off a political brouhaha. Like other southern states, the Karnataka government has resisted the 'imposition' of Hindi, with the Chief Minister declaring it cannot be 'enforced'. Though the state's parties are turning it into a Hindi-versus-Kannada issue, the ground reality gives a different complexion to the debate. Of 8.12 lakh students this year, 7.52 lakh opted for Hindi as third language; 32,135 for English, 11,483 for Kannada, 5,544 for Urdu and 5,159 for Sanskrit. Some experts also argue that a dual-language preference could lead to a lack of interest in teaching and learning the third language. We must bear in mind that a third language may not only serve as a link to a broader world, but can also foster better cognitive skills.

The NEP has remained contentious in the southern states although it offers a flexible formula of three languages with at least two being Indian, and a compulsory third language from Class 6 starting 2026-27. Tamil Nadu's political opposition to the way it is imposed has flared up in this election season again. Kerala has a three-language policy, but is against Hindi. Andhra Pradesh has a Telugu-Urdu-English formula. The BJP-ruled Maharashtra was forced to repeal its directive making Hindi mandatory for Grades 1 to 5.

While linguistic pride remains political fodder in the South, perhaps adopting another southern language as the third option could be considered. Apart from mobility, it can improve regional harmony, too. State leaders should keep in mind the interests of young generations while promoting multilingual education—not only in the region, but across the nation and the world.

QUICK TAKE

NOT A CHAPTER TO OPEN

THE Rajasthan education department has opened an indigestible chapter by launching Sarthak Naam Abhiyan (Meaningful Name Campaign), under which a child given a name deemed awkward or inappropriate would be allowed to change it to one from among 1,500-odd names selected by the government. Education Minister Madan Dilwar explained: "As children grow older, such names sometimes lead to embarrassment and may even affect self-esteem." One of the names the minister offered as example is 'Sheru'—which, ironically, is proudly worn by well-known Rajasthan folk musician Sheru Khan. It's deeply problematic to suggest renaming children, especially in a state where more than 30 percent of the population is made up of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The move also dialls back to the contentious global religious history of insisting on 'approved' names. Let's keep this chapter shut.

THE 16th Finance Commission has initiated a paradigm shift in Indian fiscal federalism, pivoting toward a framework that incentivises states to deploy financial resources with greater strategic foresight. This shift is most evident in the introduction of a new parameter: contribution to GDP, assigned a weight of 10 percent. The demographic performance metric also underwent a critical recalibration.

These structural adjustments resulted in a redistribution of the divisible pool, bolstering the horizontal shares of southern states. Specifically, Kerala's share rose from 3.9 percent to 2.4 percent, while Karnataka's rose from 3.6 percent to 4.1 percent.

For Karnataka, which relies heavily on internal revenue to anchor its annual budget, this may represent a victory. However, for Kerala, the situation is far more nuanced. While the state's horizontal share was raised, it lost the revenue deficit grant of over ₹37,000 crore that was available during the 15th FC period. The new state government, scheduled to take office in May 2026, must navigate a fiscal landscape increasingly constrained by central dictates and global volatility.

Inequity begins with vertical devolution between the Centre and the states. While the central government distributes tax revenue based on Finance Commission recommendations, it has increasingly turned to the imposition of cesses and surcharges, which do not have to be shared with the states.

During the 15th FC, states should have received ₹12.2 lakh crore annually; in reality, they received only ₹9.5 lakh crore, reducing their share to less than 33 percent as against 41 percent recommended. The share of cesses surged from 11.4 percent in 2015-16 to 25 percent in 2020-21, with projections remaining near 17 percent for fiscal 2025-26. The Union finance minister stoutly defended this consolidation in March 2026.

The ethical and legal justification for such an expansion of non-divisible levies remains contentious. The Comptroller and Auditor General released a review in 2025 revealing that, since the mid-1970s, approximately ₹3.69 lakh crore collected via cesses had never been transferred to dedicated reserve funds.

In his paper, *'The Great India Gesspool: Funds and the Fiscal Deficit Shell Game'*, P Sesh Kumar, former director general of audit at the CAG, noted that the short transfer of these funds allows the Union to suppress its reported revenue deficit artificially. This practice prevents a sani-

The tax devolution formula is just one of the several ways Kerala's resources are being constrained. Success in navigating the tough times ahead would require the courage to take unpopular decisions

THE CHOPPY FISCAL WATERS THAT AWAIT NEW KERALA GOVT

K M CHANDRASEKHAR



Former Cabinet Secretary and author of *As Good as My Word: A Memoir*



SOURAV ROY

Centrally-sponsored schemes introduced further structural friction. Under the current regime, states are mandated to bear 40 percent of the costs of most schemes, yet they have little agency in designing them. Because central schemes are designed with a one-size-fits-all rigidity, states like Kerala often find them ill-suited to their unique demographics.

Further, the Centre's share is released through a digital just-in-time mechanism, meaning funds are disbursed only once existing balances are fully depleted. This lack of liquidity contributed to Kerala's share of total

central disbursements falling to 1.8 percent during 2024-25, even though the state's population share is 2.8 percent.

Adding to these pressures is the Finance Commission's adoption of the Union's stance on state borrowing. The commission has recommended a limit of 3 percent of the state's GDP, a ceiling that encompasses off-budget borrowings—a policy currently under litigation in the Supreme Court.

This restriction directly cripples the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board. Originally conceptualised as a self-sustaining vehicle for developmental borrowing, KIIFB transitioned to an entity that receives earmarked budgetary resources spent at the discretion of its board, often bypassing budget and plan provisions. While I do not advocate fiscal profligacy—Kerala's debt-to-GSDP ratio

AN EMERGING GRAMMAR OF CASTE

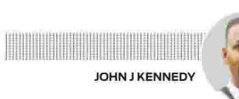
THE phrase "Not found suitable" sounds harmless enough. It carries no overt malice, no visible prejudice, just the dry neutrality of bureaucratic language. In fact, it is precisely the kind of phrase that passes unquestioned. And yet, in university recruitment rooms across India, it may be doing something deeply consequential: quietly keeping certain groups out.

To be clear, this concern is not speculative. Over the past few years, multiple media reports drawing on findings from the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education (2023-24) have pointed to a troubling pattern. Despite meeting eligibility criteria, candidates from Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities are increasingly being filtered out under the vague label of "Not found suitable". At the same time, the committee noted that thousands of reserved faculty positions in central universities remained vacant, with estimates indicating that over 60 percent of SC and more than 80 percent of ST professor-level posts unfilled. Seen together, these are not isolated gaps; they point to a structural problem.

If one looks more closely at faculty composition, the imbalance becomes even harder to ignore. Data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22 and submissions to the University Grants Commission show that central universities continue to be overwhelmingly dominated by general category candidates. SC and ST representation, especially at senior levels, remains in the low single-digit shares, far below the constitutionally mandated 15 percent and 7.5 percent.

The trend is not confined to one segment of higher education. In elite institutions such as the IITs, representation of SC and ST faculty is consistently reported to be extremely low, as highlighted in parliamentary discussions and RTI-based reports during 2022-24. Even at the entry level, where reservation policies are expected to work most effectively, representation improves only modestly before thinning out sharply as one moves up the hierarchy.

What explains this persistent gap? At first glance, universities tend to attribute it to a shortage of "suitable candidates". But this is precisely where the issue becomes more complex. Because what we are dealing with



JOHN J KENNEDY

Former Professor and Dean, Christ (Deemed) University, Bengaluru

here is not simply a question of availability, but of how "suitability" itself is defined and applied.

In the past, caste discrimination in education was often blunt and visible: denial of access, segregation, or outright exclusion. Today, it is embedded in processes that appear neutral: shortlisting, interviews and selection criteria framed in terms like "merit", "fitness" and "suitability". The problem is not that these criteria exist, but that they are rarely transparent or standardised. As the Parliamentary Standing Committee noted, the repeated use



More and more candidates for higher education faculty positions from Scheduled Caste and Tribe communities are being rejected with the opaque reason, "Not found suitable". At the same time, a parliamentary panel is flagging high vacancy in such reserved posts. We need clear, standardised criteria to judge suitability

of suitability labels risks functioning as a structural barrier, allowing institutions to bypass reservation norms without formally violating them.

This is why the issue cannot be dismissed as an administrative anomaly. Because it reflects something deeper about how institutional systems work. In a society already shaped by entrenched inequalities, discretion is seldom neutral. When criteria remain undefined, and decisions are not subject to scrutiny, the system creates room for exclusion—quietly, consistently and

without accountability. Universities often defend themselves by citing due process and academic criteria. But this misses the point. Discrimination today does not occur despite procedure; it operates through it. The system is not being broken; it is being used to reproduce existing hierarchies.

This concern becomes sharper when placed within the broader climate of higher education. UGC data indicates that complaints of caste-based discrimination in higher education have risen significantly in recent years. From 173 cases in 2019-20 to 378 in 2023-24. This rise may partly reflect greater awareness and reporting, but it also signals that the problem is far from resolved.

There is also a cultural dimension that cannot be ignored. When caste-insensitive remarks surface in institutions, they do more than offend. They normalise indifference and trivialise caste concerns. Discrimination does not always require intent; it often thrives in such environments.

What, then, is at stake? Not just about jobs or representation. Universities are spaces where knowledge is created and legitimised. Who occupies them shapes what is studied, whose voices matter, and what counts as knowledge. Exclusion, therefore, has consequences beyond access. This brings us to responsibility. If universities are to matter in a democracy, they must rest on fairness, transparency and accountability. Recruitment processes should be transparent, with clearly defined criteria for suitability. Decisions declaring candidates "Not found suitable" must be recorded, justified and open to independent review.

The question, therefore, is not whether caste discrimination exists. There is ample evidence it does. The real issue is whether we recognise its changing forms. "Not found suitable" may sound administrative, but in context it becomes something else: not a neutral judgement of merit, but a quiet tool of exclusion that allows inequality to persist under the guise of fairness.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Democratic outreach

Ref: Reading high turnout (Apr 10). The analysis strikes a timely note. First-time voters, in particular, need greater awareness about how roll revisions affect genuine participation figures. The Election Commission could run targeted campaigns in schools and colleges. Simple, fact-based outreach would go a long way.
SM Jeeva, Chennai

Nuclear transition

Ref: Kalpakkam a milestone (Apr 10). This strategic statement signals that the country is done playing small in the energy game. At a time when power demand is exploding and fossil fuels are choking both the economy and the environment, nuclear energy offers scale, stability and sovereignty. But let's be clear this isn't something to celebrate blindly. Nuclear power demands absolute discipline: zero tolerance for safety lapses or cost overruns. Better management planning.
Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Unmasking obsession

Ref: What's in a name? (April 10, 2026). The chase for hidden identities often reveals our obsession than the artists themselves. Banksy or Satoshi may wear mysterious armour, yet Dweil and Dafi-Punk remind us that names are masks, not meaning. Fame's true pseudonym is ignorance, and perhaps anonymity is the loudest signature of all.
Babu Krishna, Bengaluru

Viewer's choice

Ref: Record outing (Apr 10). While the roll revisions have cut a deep swathe, those who are still retaining their franchise have proved that in a democracy like ours the voter is still king and that choice matters.
CV Aravind, email

Gopinath's innings

Ref: Last survivor (Apr 10). C D Gopinath was a prolific scorer in Ranji matches. He was a prominent member of the India team that for the first time won a Test against England in 1952 in what was then Madras. I had the privilege of watching that match. He also contributed with a ton in the first Ranji-winning Madras squad in 1955 in Indore.
M V Sundaraman, Chennai

Scientific temper

Ref: Access to temples (Apr 10). Entry should be either male or female-centric, but devotee-centric. The Union's arguments are full of Stone-Age superstitions. Scientific temperment needs to be promoted as an ideal for future generations.
A Sreeramano, Vijakhapatnam

India must expose Iran's illegality in choking Strait of Hormuz

ALL eyes are on the two-day diplomatic engagement involving the United States and Iran that Pakistan is hosting. The entire world, especially those who depend on imported crude like India, will hope that the issue is resolved peacefully and the ceasefire marks the end of the war. Apart from Tehran's relations with the US and behaviour in the region, its intransigence to choke the Strait of Hormuz will be on the agenda. Iran's behaviour violates international law. As per the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), states bordering straits can neither block them nor demand money simply for allowing ships to pass through. They have the

right to collect fees on ships for services such as piloting and tugging. The reason is that straits are natural waterways—unlike canals that are manmade. Egypt and Panama are allowed to charge fees to pass through the Suez Canal and the Panama Canal. Washington will be represented by a team led by Vice-President JD. Vance and comprise Donald Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff and senior adviser Jared Kushner. Parliament speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, a former commander of the hardline Revolutionary Guard, and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi are reportedly representing Iran. Pakistani Prime Minister Sharif will also hold separate preliminary meet-

ings with both sides. Incidentally, none of them is bothered about India's interests. While criticism of the Narendra Modi regime has been about Islamabad's ongoing New Delhi in peace talks, the real failure of our government has been its inability to highlight Iran's illegal hold of the Strait. India's marginalisation in these high-stakes discussions underscores a deeper and more structural failure in its foreign policy approach toward West Asia. Despite being one of the largest consumers of imported crude oil and heavily dependent on maritime energy routes, it has not effectively articulated or defended its strategic interests regarding the Strait of Hormuz. This silence is particularly

striking given the direct economic and security implications for India. A substantial portion of its oil imports passes through the Strait, making any threat to its free navigation an immediate concern. Iran's repeated signalling that it could restrict or choke this vital waterway during periods of heightened tensions is not merely rhetorical brinkmanship—it represents a tangible risk to global energy markets and, by extension, to India's economic stability. Yet, New Delhi has largely refrained from taking a firm and visible position on the legality of such threats under international law.

At a time when global supply chains are increasingly fragile and geopolitical tensions can have cascading economic effects, India must recalibrate its approach. It needs to move beyond passive observation and actively advocate for the principles that safeguard its interests—chief among them the freedom of navigation through international waterways. This would involve not only bilateral engagement with Iran but also coordinated efforts with other major energy-importing nations. In essence, the real test for India is not whether it can compete with Pakistan in the diplomatic theatre, but whether it can assert itself as a serious stakeholder in issues that directly impact its national interests. Until it does so, it will continue to find itself on the sidelines of conversations that shape outcomes critical to its future.

LETTERS

Colleges must revise curricula

A propos "Tepid campus hiring reflects changing contours of IT industry" (THI, April 10). The slowdown in campus recruitment is worrying, especially for fresh engineering graduates, who face uncertain job prospects in India's IT sector. While AI tools are transforming workflows and reducing demand for entry-level roles, this shift also highlights the need for our education system to adapt quickly. Colleges must update curricula to include practical AI skills, data analytics, and problem-solving abilities that complement technology rather than compete with it. Industry and academia should collaborate more closely on internships and apprenticeships. Government support for reskilling programmes could ease the transition.

M Banarthy, Bengaluru-560076

Need to focus on internship and applied research

WITH reference to your editorial "Tepid campus hiring reflects changing contours of IT industry", I wish to highlight the need for a pragmatic response to the slowdown in fresher recruitment. While automation and global headwinds have altered entry-level opportunities, universities and industry must collaborate to redesign training programmes so that graduates are equipped for emerging roles in AI, data governance, and product innovation. Strengthening internship pipelines, fostering applied research, and encouraging small and mid-sized firms to absorb talent can ease the transition.

Abharna Banarthy, Chennai-23

Academia and industry must act in concert

A propos "Tepid campus hiring reflects changing contours of IT industry", the slowdown in fresher intake is not suffering clearly and a structural shift. Hiring has plunged from six lakh in FY22 to barely 1.20 lakh in FY25, while projections for FY26 remain flat. This collapse signals more than weak demand; automation and AI are steadily eroding entry-level roles once considered safe gateways into the IT sector. The industry's contours are being redrawn, with routine coding and support tasks absorbed by machines. The pragmatic response is not in lamenting but adaptation. Universities must focus on problem-solving, data literacy, and interdisciplinary skills. Unless academia and industry act in concert, India risks producing graduates for jobs that no longer exist.

K Chidannand Kumar, Bengaluru

Jeevan Reddy's exit a blow to Jagan

THE departure of a senior leader like Jeevan Reddy, who has been in the Congress for over 40 years, to join BRS is undeniably a setback for the party, even if Congress leaders are not acknowledging it openly (THI April 10). A politician of his stature being humiliated in his home district of Jagtial and denied the importance and recognition he deserved speaks volumes about the internal handling of senior leadership. For someone who has invested four decades in building the party at the grassroots, such treatment makes his exit less surprising than it should be. That said, one wonders what meaningful position BRS can offer him. At best he may be accommodated as an MP or a State Minister, roles he has already held before. This comes at a time when KCR's daughter has walked out of BRS, floated a new party, and is even preparing to contest against her father and brother. In that context, how Jeevan Reddy's entry will shape BRS, or whether it will create more friction than benefit, remains the million-dollar question.

Ganti Venkata Sudhir, Secunderabad

Give impetus to nari shakti

THIS is with reference to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's column "Together, let us Empower our Nari Shakti". A special session of Parliament is being convened on April 16 to pass the Bill that advances women's reservation in democratic institutions like the Parliament and Legislative Assemblies. It must be noted that women have made great strides in fields like education, medicine, space and technology, sports, music, arts and literature, among others. It is time women are given more opportunities in national politics and value their opinions and suggestions on matters related to administration and governance of the nation. A society progresses only when women don't hesitate to voice their thoughts. Members of Parliament should cut across party lines and vote in favour of the historic amended women's reservation bill. Let us empower our nari shakti for the nation's growth, success and prosperity.

Parimala G Tadas, Hyderabad-50

Heavy turnout good for democracy

A propos "Heavy turnout marks high-stakes voting day in Assam, Kerala and Puducherry" (THI, Apr 10). This turnout is a good sign for democracy. Assam and Puducherry (where enthusiastic youth tuned up in impressive numbers) surpassed their highest-ever poll participation while Kerala registered 78.25 per cent. There may be various reasons for the higher turnout like deletion of names in Special Intensive Revision (SIR) and the anti-incumbency factor. May 4, the counting day, will throw light on this.

S Sankaranarayanan, Chennai-40

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

PIL on SSLC grading dismissed; Rs 1 lakh fine imposed

BENGALURU: The Karnataka High Court has dismissed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) challenging the state government's decision to award grades instead of marks for the SSLC third language examination, imposing a fine of Rs 1 lakh on the petitioners. The petition was filed by H N Chandana and S Venkatesh, who argued that the sudden decision during the examination period had created confusion among lakhs of students. They contended that the move violated Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution, which guarantee equality and the right to education. However, the High Court came down heavily on the petitioners for failing to provide official documents supporting their claims.

Read more at
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule: A light that still shows India the way



NARENDRA MODI

April 11 (Saturday) is a deeply special day for all of us. It is the birth anniversary of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, one of India's greatest social reformers and a guiding light for generations. This year, the occasion carries even greater significance, as it marks the beginning of his 200th birth anniversary celebrations. Mahatma Phule was a great reformer. In addition to that, he was a life of moral courage, restless enquiry and unshakable commitment to social good. Mahatma Phule is remembered for the institutions he built and the movements that he led. At the same time, his contribution to our civilisational journey lies in the hope he raised, the confidence he instilled, while his thoughts continue to give strength to millions of people across the nation. Born in the great state of Maharashtra in 1827, Mahatma Phule emerged from modest beginnings. But his initial hardships never stood in the way of his learning, his courage or his commitment to society. This is a trait that remained with him all

through: whatever the challenges may be, one must work hard, acquire knowledge and mitigate those challenges instead of doing nothing about it. From his school days, young Jyotirao was deeply curious and became a voracious reader, often reading books far beyond what children of his age were expected to engage in. Years later, he said, "The more questions we generate, the more knowledge emerges from them." Clearly, the spirit of enquiry he was blessed with since his childhood remained constant in his journey.

Throughout his life, learning and education became central to Mahatma Phule's mission. He recognised with rare clarity that knowledge is not a privilege to be guarded, but a force to be shared. At a time when the joys of learning were denied to many, he opened pioneering schools for girls and for those kept out of formal education. He used to say, "Any improvement that comes in children through mothers is deeply valuable. Therefore, if schools are to be opened, they should first be opened for girls." He worked to create a new social imagination in which the classroom became an instrument of justice and equality.

His vision for education inspires us greatly. Over the last decade, we have worked to make research and innovation a cornerstone for the youth of India. Efforts are being made to create an ecosystem where young minds are encouraged to question, explore and innovate. By investing in knowl-



ज्योतिबा फुले स्मृती मंदिर, मुंबई

edge, skills and opportunity, India is empowering its youth to become problem-solvers and drivers of national progress. Due to his knowledge and wisdom, Mahatma Phule developed a strong understanding of areas such as agriculture, healthcare and rural development. He often said that injustice towards our farmers and workers weakens our society. He saw how social inequalities manifested themselves in daily life, be it in the farms or in villages. Hence, he immersed himself in ensuring dignity for the poor, the downtrodden and the marginalised. At the same time, he made every possible effort to ensure social harmony was maintained. Mahatma Phule, indeed, carried lessons in courage. Always working and being among the people took a toll on his health. But even the most serious health challenges did not dim his resolve.

The Satyashodhak Samaj, founded by him, was one of the most important social reform movements in modern India. It was at the forefront of social reform, community service and furthering human dignity. It became an effective voice for women, youngsters and those living in villages. This movement reflected Mahatma Phule's intrinsic belief that society could be strengthened by placing at its core justice, respect for every person and a spirit of collective progress.

After suffering a debilitating stroke, he continued to work and fulfil his vision. Yes, his body had been tested, but his commitment to society had not yielded. For millions today, especially those who draw courage from struggle, this remains one of the most powerful dimensions of their life. No remembrance of Mahatma Phule can be complete without respectful mention of Savitribai Phule, who was herself one of the tallest reformers of our nation. As one of India's pioneering women teachers, she played a defining role in advancing education for girls, thus giving them the opportunity to pursue their dreams. After Mahatma Phule's passing, Savitribai carried forward that torch and, in 1897, during a plague outbreak, she served victims with such devotion that she herself contracted the disease and lost her life.

Our land has been blessed, time and again, by great men and women who have strengthened society through thought, sacrifice and action. They did not wait for change to come from somewhere else. They became their source. For hundreds of years in our land, the clarion call for social betterment has often risen from within society itself, from those who could see suffering clearly and refused to accept it as fate. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule was one such voice. I fondly recall my visit to Pune in 2022, where I had offered tributes to Mahatma Phule at his grand statue in the city. As we mark the beginning of his bicentenary year, the most fitting tribute to Mahatma Jyotirao Phule is about renewal. Renewal of our commitment to subjects close to his heart, such as education. Renewal of our sensitivity to injustice. Renewal of our faith that society can improve itself from within. His life tells us that the power of community can achieve miracles in India when joined with moral clarity and public purpose. That is why he still gives strength to millions. That is why his words and work still carry hope. And that is why, nearly two centuries after his passing, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule remains not a figure of the past, but a guide for India's future.

(The writer is the Prime Minister of India)

From Assam to Kerala: A vote against noise, a push for clarity



V RAMU SARMA

VOTING for the Assembly elections in Kerala, Assam and Puducherry concluded smoothly under heightened security, with the fate of candidates now sealed in EVMs. While political parties must wait until May 4 for the verdict, early ground assessments suggest that the high voter turnout—about 86 per cent in Assam, 79 per cent in Kerala and an impressive 90 per cent in Puducherry—may hold crucial clues. Initial indications point to an advantage for the BJP in Assam and Puducherry, while the UDF appears to have an edge in Kerala. Assam, historically, rarely produces "confused verdicts" when turnout surges. A high turnout typically signals a decisive mandate. In this context, the Congress appears to have committed a serious self-goal. Its alleged misuse of technology—circulating AI-generated fake documents, including purported passports, to discredit the government of Himanta Biswa Sarma—has not only backfired but may have alienated voters. What was perhaps intended as a tactical strike now risks becoming a strategic blunder. The episode involving fabricated allegations against the Chief Minister's wife, Rinki Biswas Sarma, has further compounded troubles of the Congress. A criminal defamation case against party media-in-charge Pavan Khery followed, exposing the party to

Record turnout across States offers early clues to evolving political alignments

embarrassment. Notably, instead of firmly standing by its claims, the Congress appeared to retreat. Khery sought anticipatory bail from the Hyderabad High Court, arguing that arrest was unnecessary—yet without convincingly defending the authenticity of the allegations. This retreat has raised serious questions about credibility. Such incidents underscore a worrying trend: the growing misuse of social media and artificial intelligence as political weapons. While these tools can amplify narratives, their reckless deployment risks eroding public trust. In Assam, rather than weakening the incumbent, these tactics seem to have allowed Himanta Sarma to turn the narrative in his favour by highlighting governance and development. Despite the inevitable undercurrents of anti-incumbency, the high turnout does not appear to reflect a consolidated anti-BJP sentiment. More broadly, the opposition's political strategy continues to suffer from a lack of coherence and originality. Driven largely by an intense opposition to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, many parties appear to rely more on rhetoric than on substantive policy alternatives. The attempt to treat voters as monolithic "vote banks" has repeatedly failed. Indian voters are far more discerning; they evaluate performance, credibility and leadership rather than blindly adhering to identity-based appeals. In some instances, opposition parties have gone to the extent of excessive appeasement politics, particularly tar-

High voter participation across key states points to an assertive electorate shaping outcomes beyond campaign rhetoric. With indications of BJP advantage in Assam and Puducherry and UDF momentum in Kerala, the polls reflect a broader shift—where voters are increasingly rejecting misinformation and demanding accountability from political players.

getting minority communities. Such approaches not only risk alienating broader sections of the electorate but also undermine the diversity of opinion within communities themselves. Voters are increasingly resistant to simplistic narratives and demand more grounded, issue-based policies. In Puducherry, another interesting factor is the emergence of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), led by actor Vijay. By fielding candidates including two sitting MLAs—among them former minister Sai J Saravanan Kumar—the party could cut more into Congress votes than those of the BJP. This dynamic may tilt the balance further in favour of the BJP-led alliance. Kerala presents a different picture. The relatively high turnout suggests a possible undercurrent for change. The ruling LDF may find itself on the defensive, with the UDF seemingly benefiting from voter sentiment. There are also signs of increased polarisation. The BJP while not yet in a position to capture power, has made notable inroads. In West Bengal, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has once again demonstrated her instinct for political messaging, though not without controversy. In a recent speech, she appeared to warn of consequences if voters supported the BJP. Without naming any community explicitly, her remarks hinted at potential social tensions, creating an atmosphere of fear. Such rhetoric raises concerns about the quality of political discourse. Her comments—suggesting

that "if one community unites" it could overpower others—have been widely criticised as inflammatory and irresponsible. While she may have intended to position herself as a protector of social harmony, the language used risks deepening divisions. The BJP has interpreted her remarks as a veiled threat to the Hindu community, further sharpening political polarisation. Banerjee also invoked historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad and B R Ambedkar in defence of her party's stance on migration and citizenship issues, particularly in the context of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise, which the Trinamool Congress has termed a precursor to the National Register of Citizens (NRC). However, critics argue that her statements reflect a distortion of historical realities, especially given the long-standing presence of Muslim communities in Bengal's social fabric. Meanwhile, the BJP appears to have recalibrated its strategy in the State. Moving away from direct personal attacks on Banerjee, it is focusing more on development promises and welfare initiatives. While there is visible anti-incumbency against the ruling Trinamool Congress, it would be premature to conclude that Banerjee is on the verge of losing power. Despite age and health concerns, her energetic campaigning—often through padayatra—continues to resonate with her core base. A critical factor in West Bengal remains the role of the Election Commission of India.





Editor's TAKE

Will the ceasefire hold as Israel strikes Lebanon?

As strikes resume and mistrust deepens, the central question looms large: was this ever a ceasefire meant to hold, or merely a pause before the next escalation?

The world breathed a sigh of relief when a two-week ceasefire was announced in the US-Iran-Israel conflict. The West Asia crisis has been going on for over a month now and has caused heavy casualties on both sides, killing innocents and causing enormous loss to the environment and property.

However, as it was, the ceasefire, a momentary pause, was fragile, as Israel, one of the key players, has said that it was kept in the dark by the US. As if to sabotage the ceasefire, Israel launched a massive 100-missile strike on Lebanon, killing over 250 people. Iran, on its part, closed the Strait of Hormuz. This impasse has again put a question mark on the validity of the ceasefire, as both sides exploited the structural flaws in the truce. Israel maintains that Lebanon was not part of the deal while Iran includes Lebanon as integral part of the deal framework. To show its displeasure with Lebanon strikes Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz which in itself a big proof that reescalation is not ruled out in near future even before the 14-day ceasefire ends.

The biggest drawback in the ceasefire is the structural flaw in the framework. While Iran has consistently insisted that any meaningful de-escalation must include Israeli operations in Lebanon, the United States and Israel have treated it as a separate entity. Israel's strike has been interpreted in Tehran as a violation of the spirit of the ceasefire. Iran's missile response signals that it is unwilling to compartmentalise the conflict. If the ceasefire collapses it would be a big embarrassment for the US President Donald Trump personally, who positioned the ceasefire as a diplomatic victory. It would also mean that Israel's partner in the war is not in sync with its decisions. He faces three difficult choices: resume hostilities, intensify diplomatic efforts, or pressure Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to halt military operations in Lebanon. And there is little hope that any of these choices would bring lasting peace in the region. Thus, there is an imminent danger of hostilities breaking out. Resuming the war risks unleashing a wider regional conflagration. Iran has already demonstrated its willingness to escalate, and any renewed US military action could trigger coordinated responses from allied militias across the region. Then there is also the risk of China and Russia also getting involved directly or indirectly making it a world conflict. The consequences would not be confined to West Asia.

Politically, it would also undermine Trump's credibility, especially as he had touted the ceasefire as a major achievement. The diplomatic route is more appealing but fraught with challenges. Vice-President JD Vance's outreach to Iran through talks in Pakistan offers a pathway, but it depends on Israeli restraint. Without halting operations in Lebanon, Iran is unlikely to engage meaningfully. Tehran's distrust runs deep. The US-Israel relationship is deeply entrenched, and reining in Benjamin Netanyahu could have domestic and strategic costs. Yet without addressing Israeli actions, the ceasefire remains unstable. Ultimately, the issue is not just whether the ceasefire will last, but whether it was ever meant to.

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule: A light that still shows the way

Mahatma Phule was a great reformer. In addition to that, his was a life of moral courage, restless enquiry and unshakable commitment to social good. Mahatma Phule is remembered for the institutions he built and the movements he led



NARENDRA MODI

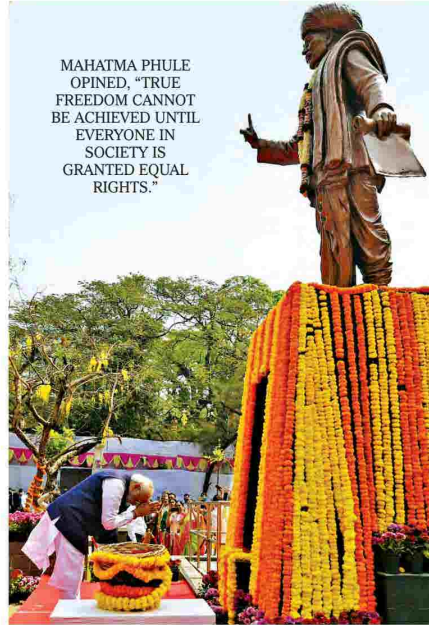
Today, 11th April, is a deeply special day for all of us. It is the birth anniversary of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, one of India's greatest social reformers and a guiding light for generations. This year, the occasion carries even greater significance, as it marks the beginning of his 200th birth anniversary celebrations.

Mahatma Phule was a great reformer. In addition to that, his was a life of moral courage, restless enquiry and unshakable commitment to social good. Mahatma Phule is remembered for the institutions he built and the movements he led. At the same time, his contribution to our civilisational journey lies in the hope he aroused, the confidence he instilled and the strength his thoughts continue to give to millions of people across the nation.

Born in the great state of Maharashtra in 1827, Mahatma Phule emerged from modest beginnings. But his initial hardships never stood in the way of his learning, his courage or his commitment to society. This is a trait that remained with him forever; whatever the challenges may be, one must work hard, acquire knowledge and mitigate those challenges instead of doing nothing about it. From his school days, young Jyotirao was deeply curious and became a voracious reader, often reading books far beyond what children his age were expected to engage with. Years later, he said, "The more questions we generate, the more knowledge emerges from them." Clearly, the spirit of enquiry he was blessed with since his childhood remained constant in his journey.

Throughout his life, learning and education became central to Mahatma Phule's mission. He recognised with rare clarity that knowledge is not a privilege to be guarded, but a force to be shared. At a time when the joys of learning were denied to many, he opened pioneering schools for girls and for those kept out of formal education. He used to say, "Any improvement that comes in children through mothers is deeply valuable. Therefore, if schools are to be opened, they should first be opened for girls." He worked to create a new social imagination in which the classroom became an instrument of justice and equality.

His vision for education inspires us greatly. Over the last decade, we have worked to make research and innovation a cornerstone for the youth of India. Efforts are being made to create an ecosystem where young minds are encouraged to question, explore and innovate. By investing in knowledge, skills and opportunity,



MAHATMA PHULE OPINED, "TRUE FREEDOM CANNOT BE ACHIEVED UNTIL EVERYONE IN SOCIETY IS GRANTED EQUAL RIGHTS."

India is empowering its youth to become problem-solvers and drivers of national progress. Due to his knowledge and wisdom, Mahatma Phule developed a strong understanding of areas such as agriculture, healthcare and rural development. He often said that injustice towards our farmers and workers weakens our society. He saw how social inequalities manifested themselves in daily life, be it in the farms or in villages. Hence, he immersed himself in ensuring dignity for the poor, the downtrodden and the marginalised. At the same time, he made every possible effort to ensure social harmony was maintained.

Mahatma Phule opined, "True freedom cannot be achieved until everyone in society is granted equal rights." And for that, he built institutions that translated this vision into

action, contributing to a just society. The Satyashodhak Samaj, founded by him, was one of the most important social reform movements in modern India. It was at the forefront of social reform, community service and furthering human dignity. It became an effective voice for women, youngsters and those living in villages. This movement reflected Mahatma Phule's intrinsic belief that society could be strengthened by placing at its core justice, respect for every person and a spirit of collective progress. His personal life, too, carried lessons in courage. Always working and being among the people took a toll on his health. But even the most serious health challenges did not dim his resolve. After suffering a debilitating stroke, he continued to work and fulfil his vision. Yes, his body had been tested, but his commitment to society had not yielded. For millions today, especially those who draw courage from struggle, this remains one of the most powerful dimensions of his life.

No remembrance of Mahatma Phule can be complete without a respectful mention of Savitribai Phule, who was herself one of the tallest reformers of our nation. As one of India's pioneering women teachers, she played a defining role in advancing education for girls, thus giving them the opportunity to pursue their dreams. After Mahatma Phule's passing, Savitribai carried forward that torch and, in 1897, during a plague outbreak, she served victims with such devotion that she herself contracted the disease and lost her own life.

Our land has been blessed, time and again, by great men and women who have strengthened society through thought, sacrifice and action. They did not wait for change to arrive from somewhere else. They became its source. For hundreds of years in our land, the clarion call for social betterment has often risen from within society itself, from those who could see suffering clearly and refused to accept it as fate. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule was one such voice.

I fondly recall my visit to Pune in 2022, when I had offered tributes to Mahatma Phule at his grand statue in the city. As we mark the beginning of his bicentenary year, the most fitting tribute to Mahatma Jyotirao Phule is about

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

renewal. Renewal of our commitment to subjects close to his heart, such as education. Renewal of our sensitivity to injustice. Renewal of our faith that society can improve itself from within. His life tells us that the power of community can achieve miracles in India when joined with moral clarity and public purpose. That is why he still gives strength to millions. That is why his words and work still carry hope. And that is why, nearly two hundred years after his birth, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule remains not a figure of the past, but a guide for India's future.

The writer is the Prime Minister of India
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PICTALK



A yellow-footed green pigeon, centre, with its chicks perches on a tree branch. PHOTO: PFI

Fee upon fee upon fee: The middle-class monsoon



RACHNA LAKHPATRI

2ND OPINION

There is a screenshot doing the rounds on social media. A food delivery order. A break-up of charges. And buried somewhere between the restaurant GST and the platform fee sits a quietly audacious little line item — Rain Fee ₹25.00. And then, because apparently the universe has a sense of humour, right below it — GST on Rain Fee: ₹4.50.

Let that sink in for a moment. We are now paying tax on weather. This is a watershed moment — not because of the ₹4.50, which is frankly the least of our worries — but because of what it represents. The complete and creative normalisation of extracting money from the paying class for absolutely everything, including the sky deciding to do what the sky has done for four billion years.



The logic, presumably, is that delivery partners need support during rains. Fair enough. Nobody is arguing against protecting workers in difficult conditions. But here is where things get philosophically uncomfortable — if a company chooses to implement a weather surcharge, who authorised the government's cut of that surcharge? Rain is not a service. It is not infrastructure. It did not file returns. Yet here we are, paying GST on the inconvenience of precipitation.

And this opens a door that, once cracked, is very hard to shut. If there is a Rain Fee today, tomorrow brings no surprises. A Summer Surge Fee for the heat. A Winter Comfort Fee for the cold. A Spring Freshness Levy, perhaps,

for the pleasant weather that clearly someone must be taxed on. Every season becomes a billing opportunity. Every act of nature becomes a line item. The Indian middle class — already a masterpiece in absorbing financial shocks with a deep breath and a resigned scroll — will simply add these to the growing list of things they silently pay for.

And that silence is precisely the problem. The middle class in this country is, functionally, the most reliable ATM in the national economy. Taxes deducted before the salary even lands. GST on everything from biscuits to broadband. Fuel prices that somehow remain immune to global oil drops but sprint ahead of every global rise. And now, GST on a rain surcharge on a food delivery app.

What is striking, and worth saying plainly, is that a demographic that contributes this consistently, this obediently, and this extensively to the national exchequer receives remarkably little in return. No meaningful healthcare subsidy. No housing cushion. Education costs that climb faster than salaries. And certainly no rebate for the rain.

There is an old social contract at the heart of taxation: you pay, and the state provides. When the providing becomes invisible and the paying becomes inventive, the contract starts to feel less like governance and more like a subscription nobody agreed to. The monsoon will pass. The fees, one suspects, will not.

The writer is a freelance and writes on development, social and gender issue

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AFFORDABLE ECO-FRIENDLY COOKING ALTERNATIVES FOR INDIAN HOUSEHOLDS

For decades, Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) has been the backbone of cooking in Indian households. It is convenient, efficient, and relatively clean compared with traditional fuels. However, rising prices, supply concerns, and growing environmental awareness have led many Indian households to explore viable alternatives. Fortunately, India today offers several practical, affordable, and eco-friendly cooking options that can reduce dependence on LPG without compromising on life needs.

One of the most accessible alternatives is the electric induction cooktop. Widely available and easy to use, induction stoves heat vessels directly using electromagnetic energy, making them highly efficient and often faster than LPG. They are particularly useful in urban homes with a stable

electricity supply. Another promising option is the electric pressure cooker and rice cooker. These appliances simplify cooking while saving energy and time, handling a wide range of Indian recipes.

In rural and semi-urban areas, biogas plants offer a sustainable and cost-effective solution. Solar cookers also provide a useful option in sunny regions, reducing fuel costs over time. Improved biomass cookstoves further offer cleaner traditional cooking methods.

Additionally, piped natural gas (PNG) is expanding in cities, offering convenience and affordability. In conclusion, combining these alternatives can ensure flexibility, savings, and a more sustainable future.

JUBEL D'CRUZ | MUMBAI

Security first in digital payments

The RBI has proposed a one-hour delay for certain Unified Payments Interface (UPI) transactions above ₹1,000. While this move may initially appear inconvenient to people, it is a well-thought-out step towards enhancing user security. With daily 650 million transactions worth more than ₹91,000 crore and such rapid growth of digital payments in India, incidents of fraud, phishing, and mistaken transfers have also increased. It has opened doors for scammers, as they are employing new tricks to defraud individuals, such as fake UPI transaction images seeking refunds of money.

The proposed delay would provide users with a crucial window to verify transaction details or report unauthorised activity before the money is irreversibly transferred. This added layer of protection is especially beneficial for new users and those less familiar with digital platforms.

Moreover, such a safeguard can help reduce financial losses due to human errors, such as entering incorrect UPI IDs or transferring funds to the wrong recipient. It also acts as a deterrent against cybercriminals who rely on the immediacy of transactions to exploit victims.

BAL GOVIND | NOIDA

Resignation ends judicial controversy

Justice Yashwant Varma of the Allahabad High Court has tendered his resignation with immediate effect to President Droupadi Murmu, bringing an abrupt end to his tenure amid ongoing impeachment proceedings. Justice Varma has been at the centre of controversy since burnt cash was allegedly discovered on March 14, 2025 in an outhouse at the official residence allotted to him during his tenure as a judge of the Delhi High Court.

Notices of impeachment, backed by 145 Lok Sabha members and 63 Rajya Sabha members, were moved in both Houses of Parliament in July 2025. Subsequently, the Lok Sabha Speaker constituted a three-member enquiry committee under the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968, to examine the charges. Earlier this year, the Supreme Court rejected a plea filed by Justice Varma challenging the Speaker's decision.

The apex court held that the petitioner was not entitled to relief. The in-house enquiry was found fair and just.

This episode underscores the importance of accountability and transparency within the judiciary. Upholding public trust must remain paramount in preserving the integrity of democratic institutions.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

Peace needs more than truce

Despite the ceasefire between Iran and the USA coming at the cost of heavy terms and conditions, the wincing part is that at least the ceasefire has been inked between the conflicting parties, serving the greater global good. However, the attitude of Donald Trump remains unpredictable. Immediately after the signing of the ceasefire, he made caveat remarks stating that the cessation of hostilities and reopening of the Strait of Hormuz does not mean everything has returned to the status quo.

Unfortunately, the USA must clarify what it actually intends to do. Are they truly interested in ending hostilities and settling the peace process with Iran or not? Even JD Vance described the ceasefire as a mere "fragile truce". If peace initiatives are merely fragile truces, then there is little sense in offering temporary agenda to the world.

Iran's relief and America's ceasefire efforts must deliver lasting peace. The world needs peaceful coexistence. Iran and the USA must initiate dialogue and negotiate a balanced, win-win outcome to ensure long-term stability and prevent further escalation in the region.

KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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14-day reprieve: Ceasefire and new global strategic challenges

This ceasefire, brokered through Pakistan, marks a turning point in 21st-century geopolitics. While the US used Pakistan as a credible "neutral" mouthpiece to deliver an ultimatum, Sharif-a favorite of Trump-and Field Marshal Asim Munir provided Iran with a dignified exit strategy, likely at Washington's suggestion

FIRST COLUMN



BHASKAR JYOTI MAHANTA

On the morning of April 7, 2026, the world stood at a precipice that US President Donald Trump described as "the death of a civilisation." Twelve hours before his self-imposed 8:00 PM deadline, the shadow of full-scale war loomed over the entire Middle East. With the destruction of bridges in Kashan, Iran's key oil export hub on Kharg Island, and the rising humanitarian toll-including the deaths of 18 civilians in Alborz province-Trump had provided a grim preview of this "civilisational destruction." As the clock ticked toward a catastrophic conflict, an unexpected mediator and a 10-point proposal, termed a "Document of Self-Respect," emerged to pull the world back from the brink.

This ceasefire, brokered through Pakistan, marks a turning point in 21st-century geopolitics. To understand its significance, one must observe the roles of the primary parties involved and the massive economic and structural implications of the demands currently on the table.

The path to the April 7 ceasefire was paved by the "Maximum Pressure 2.0" strategy. President Trump's approach was uniquely aggressive, eschewing traditional diplomatic nuances in favor of a "might is right" policy. By targeting critical infrastructure like power plants, railways, and bridges, the US presented Tehran with two choices: surrender or face total annihilation. During this period, President Trump and Vice President JD Vance played a "bad cop-good cop" routine, alternating between aggressive posturing and messages of peace.

In this crisis, an unexpected "hero" emerged. Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, despite struggling with his own country's economic fragility, filled the vacuum. According to analysts like Olivia Reed, Pakistan's role was a well-planned US maneuver. While the US used Pakistan as a credible "neutral" mouthpiece to deliver an ultimatum, Sharif-a favorite of Trump-and Field Marshal Asim Munir provided Iran with a dignified exit strategy, likely at Washington's suggestion. By requesting a two-week window to "give diplomacy a



A US MILITARY WITHDRAWAL (IRAN'S 4TH DEMAND) WOULD LEAVE ALLIES LIKE SAUDI ARABIA, JORDAN, AND THE UAE VULNERABLE, POTENTIALLY TRIGGERING A REGIONAL NUCLEAR ARMS RACE

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chance," Pakistan allowed Trump to appear magnanimous and helped the Iranian government frame the move not as a surrender to Western powers, but as a response to a brotherly Islamic nation.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi and the High-Level National Security Council immediately pivoted, presenting the 10-point proposal as a "functional basis" for victory rather than a surrender. This narrative was crucial for domestic stability, facing pressure from ordinary citizens forming human chains around power plants and the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard). This ceasefire is not a permanent solution but a strategic pause that exposes three significant loopholes:

Trump's announcement conditioned the ceasefire on the "complete, immediate, and secure reopening" of the Strait. Conversely, Iranian state media claims the agreement mentions "continued Iranian control" over the waterway. It is difficult to see how these contradictory positions can coexist. If Iran attempts to collect "transit fees" during these two

weeks, Trump's promise of a "secure opening" to his supporters will be proven false. While Prime Minister Sharif announced a ceasefire "everywhere," including Lebanon, Benjamin Netanyahu's office promptly issued a warning stating that Lebanon is not included. This is a major strategic discrepancy. If Israel continues operations against Hezbollah, Iran may feel compelled to respond, potentially collapsing the Islamabad talks before they begin on April 10.

Iran's call for human chains around civilian infrastructure was a calculated move to gain global sympathy. By agreeing to the ceasefire, Trump mitigated international PR damage but maintained the threat of "destructive force" if a deal isn't signed within 14 days.

The economic reaction was instantaneous. Within 30 minutes of Trump's Truth Social post, WTI Crude fell from \$114 to \$96 per barrel. This 9% drop provided much-needed relief after 38 days of uncertainty.

However, if Iran's primary demands-

specifically the imposition of permanent "fees" in the Strait of Hormuz-are accepted in the final Islamabad agreement, it would signal a structural shift in the global economy. A fee of \$2 million per ship would drive global inflation.

The Pioneer SINCE 1866

Furthermore, Iran's demand to trade in "sovereign currencies" strikes at the heart of petrodollar dominance. If the US agrees to this to ensure oil flow, it signals a multipolar financial world, benefiting the Chinese Yuan and weakening Washington's ability to use the global financial system as a weapon.

If the demands of Iran's 10-point plan are met, the Middle East will be transformed for the next half-century.

A US military withdrawal (Iran's 4th demand) would leave allies like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the UAE vulnerable, potentially triggering a regional nuclear arms race.

AFTER 14 DAYS, SOMEONE WILL HAVE TO BACK DOWN. IF NO ONE DOES, THE "CIVILISATION-DESTROYING" FORCE TRUMP THREATENED REMAINS POISED IN THE PERSIAN GULF

"superpower" to the table. Pakistan's ascent; Pakistan's transition from seeking IMF loans to hosting the decade's most significant peace talks is nothing short of extraordinary. Chinese interests, seeking a stable and dollar-free energy route, likely lurk behind this development. For now, the bombing has stopped.

For the families in Alborz and the traders in New York, this 14-day reprieve is a blessing. But when delegates meet in Islamabad on Friday, April 10, the core disagreements will remain. The US views this as a "window for surrender" to reopen the waterways.

Iran views it as a "moment of victory" where they forced the US to acknowledge their dominance and lift sanctions. One side is bound to be proven wrong. In the words of Olivia Reed: "This is not peace; it is a time to re-arm." After 14 days, someone will have to back down. If no one does, the "civilization-destroying" force Trump threatened remains poised in the Persian Gulf. For now, the world breathes-but with one eye fixed firmly on the clock.

What the IPL spectacle really feeds



ACHARYA PRASHANT

There is something in the human being that cannot sit quietly with itself. Not restlessness in the ordinary sense, not boredom that a good night's sleep would fix, but a structural dissatisfaction, a felt sense of incompleteness that persists regardless of what is acquired or achieved. The person who appears to have everything still reaches for something more. At rest, there is still a low hum of insufficiency beneath the rest, one that cannot quite be named or located.

This dissatisfaction is not a mystery. It is the ego's own structure: a false centre claiming to be the whole, unable to sit with itself because sitting with itself would expose the claim. What the ego will not face, it must run from. And running requires a destination.

To keep that condition below the threshold of conscious discomfort, one reaches for objects: achievement, approval, belief, tribe. And of all the objects available, a borrowed collective identity is among the most efficient: it delivers belonging, definition, and a ready-made opposition in a single transaction, with no inner work required. You simply absorb the group, and the group begins doing what you needed done.

This is what makes IPL cricket, now in its nineteenth season and carrying a total business value that has crossed eighteen billion dollars, something more interesting than just a cricket tournament. The economics have been analysed, the spectacle often criticised, and the cricket endlessly debated. But the real question worth asking is a different one, and it concerns the man watching rather than the man playing. Why does he need it so badly that none of the rest of it seems to matter? What is the franchise actually doing for him? What would he have to sit with if it were not there?

The franchise you never joined

Every season, millions of people across the country develop a fierce, protective attachment to a franchise they do not own, whose players they have never met, and whose victories produce in them a warmth they would struggle to explain. The first thing to notice about this attachment is that it is borrowed, and borrowed from nothing the spectator chose with any real attention. The team was absorbed, usually through geography, peer pressure, or proximity to a single player whose face appeared on enough billboards. And yet the resulting loyalty behaves in every way like something earned: fierce, tribal, capable of genuine aggression

towards those who hold the rival affiliation. Outside a home stadium after a closely contested match, one often sees the winning side's supporters turning on those who came for the other team. People with no personal history with each other, no competing interests, no actual grievance, treating each other as opponents because of the colours on someone else's shirt. This is not fan enthusiasm exceeding itself but a precise illustration of what borrowed identity does to a person when it operates without examination.

The ego, by its nature, requires objects to feel real. It cannot sustain itself on nothing; it must attach, claim, identify. And the franchise is a remarkably convenient object for this purpose. It is stable, highly visible, emotionally intense, and, crucially, it requires no inner work whatsoever. You do not need to understand anything, question anything, or risk anything to absorb a franchise as your own. You simply take on the identity, and it begins immediately doing what all borrowed identities do: sorting the world into those who share it and those who threaten it.

What should disturb a thoughtful person is not that this mechanism exists, but that it is so transparent in this context and yet so invisible to those inside it. A man who would bristle at being called communally tribal will spend two months a year in an emotional state psychologically closer to tribalism than he would like to admit, organised around the beating average of a paid athlete who lives in a different country and would not even recognise him on the street.

The formula of inner poverty

There is a principle worth stating as plainly as possible, because it is the key to everything else. The poorer the inner life, the cheaper the entertainment will need to be. When the actual life fails to provide genuine engagement, genuine love, work of any real depth, the evening's match ceases to be a pleasure and becomes an anaesthetic, something the person takes not to feel good but to feel less. The kind of entertainment one repeatedly reaches for can reveal more about inner condition than income, education, or stated aspiration ever will.

There is a quality of watching that does not leave the person where it found him. Not excitement, for excitement passes without depositing anything. Something that went deeper than excitement, an inner movement that left a residue, so that the person who attended carefully to a passage of real beauty walked out of the ground carrying something he did not have when he walked in.

What has replaced that deeper inner movement is something that asks nothing of the watcher and leaves nothing behind. One kind of engagement left the person altered; the other leaves only the demand for another unit of the same, because nothing has been satisfied, only temporarily suppressed. This is why the dose must keep rising. A six was once sufficient. Then the six needed the fireworks burst to register as real. Then

it needed the cheerleaders. Then came the fantasy sports apps that allowed the viewer to carry a financial stake in every delivery. The deeper enjoyment has left; agitation has filled its place; and these are not equivalent conditions, whatever the roar of the crowd might suggest.

The economy of distraction

That redistribution did not happen passively. The ego chose it, every evening, every weekend, over several seasons compounding into years. The franchise received that time instead. And here the irony deserves to be looked at plainly: the theft is the spectator's own, committed against his own life, and the proceeds are collected by someone else entirely.

The player whose jersey the spectator wears does not know his name. He does not know whether his child is unwell, whether his savings are stretched, whether the month has been hard or easy. The spectator's loyalty, his evenings, his emotional energy, his willingness to defend a stranger online against other strangers: all of this flows in one direction, and nothing of comparable weight returns. Yet when someone criticises the player, it is the spectator who reaches for his phone, as though an insult to the franchise were an insult to his own family. This is the furthest reach of borrowed identity: a person spending his real life protecting the reputation of someone who does not know he exists.

Political theatre, religious spectacle, franchise cricket: the products differ but the mechanism is identical in every case, each offering the ego a ready-made emotional world to inhabit so that it need not examine the actual world it lives in. The spectacle has not grown because the human capacity for joy has grown; it has grown because the ego's willingness to bear reality has declined, and the ego must administer a progressively larger dose to itself to maintain the numbness.

The match ends every night. The emptiness that sent the spectator to the screen is exactly where he left it when he sat down. Sometimes the result has gone badly and there is the additional weight of frustration; sometimes it has gone well and there is a warmth that persists for an hour. But the franchise cannot replace a self, and a borrowed loyalty cannot substitute for the loyalty a person owes to his own life, his own questions, the things in himself that have been accumulating, season after season, while the matches played on. These do not disappear because the IPL is live; they compound.

What the crowd is running from was there before the first ball of this season was bowled, and it will be there after the last wicket falls. That, not the scoreboard, is the fact that has been waiting, patiently, without fanfare, for someone to sit with it.

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China in India's FDI policy shifts

ABHISHEK PRATAP SINGH AND PRACHI

Despite the push for Atmanirbhar Bharat, India's 2026 decision to relax Press Note 3 specifically for investments from China has sparked debate about whether the country is rearranging its economic priorities. What appears at first glance to be a softening in policy is, in reality, a more nuanced shift. Rather than abandoning caution, India seems to be redefining how it manages economic engagement with a country that is both a key trade partner and a strategic competitor.

Unlike other foreign investors, Chinese firms have often been viewed through a dual lens: contributors to economic growth on one hand and potential strategic risks on the other. This is because Chinese investments are not limited to passive capital flows; they are frequently linked to supply chains, technology ecosystems, and, in some cases, state-backed enterprises. Sectors such as electronics, pharmaceuticals, and renewable energy in India have deep linkages with Chinese inputs and, historically, Chinese capital.

The 2026 relaxation does not dismantle this cautious approach. Instead, it introduces a calibrated opening, allowing up to a 10 per cent stake without prior approval, provided there is no transfer of control. This distinction is critical. It ensures that while capital inflows are facilitated, decision-making authority within Indian firms remains protected. In this sense, China continues to be treated as a special case within India's FDI regime, reflecting the complexity of the relationship.

Security economics and strategic interdependence

The evolving policy highlights a broader shift towards what can be described as "security economics". In today's global environment, economic decisions are increasingly influenced by national security considerations. For India, this means carefully managing dependencies without completely disengaging from global networks, especially when it comes to China.

India's manufacturing ambitions, particularly under initiatives to boost domestic production, rely heavily on imported components. Chinese firms dominate several upstream segments, from semiconductor components to solar modules. A complete exclusion of Chinese capital and inputs would not only disrupt supply chains but also increase costs for Indian industries, potentially making them less competitive globally.

At the same time, unrestricted access could create vulnerabilities. Concerns about data security, critical infrastructure, and long-term market influence have made policymakers wary. This is why the current approach seeks to strike a balance, limiting control while allowing partici-

pation. It reflects an understanding that economic decoupling is neither feasible nor desirable in the short term, but unmanaged integration carries its own risks. Global trends also influence this balancing act. Many countries are adopting similar strategies, tightening observation over foreign investments in sensitive sectors while remaining open to capital that supports growth. India's policy shift can be seen as part of this broader realignment.

Drivers of policy shift

The decision to ease restrictions is rooted in practical economic considerations. One of the primary drivers is the need for capital. As India aims to position itself as a global manufacturing hub, it requires significant investment in infrastructure, technology, and production capacity. Domestic resources alone are insufficient to meet these demands, making foreign investment essential.

Additionally, the global "China plus one" strategy offers India an opportunity as companies diversify supply chains beyond China. To attract such investment, India must remain business-friendly, as overly restrictive policies could deter global investors.

The 2026 change may boost investor confidence, increase capital inflows, support industrial growth, and help firms access technology and integrate into global value chains. However, the concerns are equally significant. Even minority stakes can translate into influence over time, especially in sectors where technology and data play a critical role. There is also the risk of gradual market penetration, where cumulative small investments lead to a larger strategic presence. These risks underline the importance of strong regulatory oversight and continuous policy evaluation.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the shift does not signal a departure from the principles of Atmanirbhar Bharat. Instead, it reflects a more mature interpretation of self-reliance: one that recognises the importance of engaging with global capital while safeguarding national interests. Self-reliance, in this context, is not about isolation but about building resilience within an interconnected world.

India's approach to Chinese FDI in 2026 is best understood as a form of tactical balancing. This strategy suggests that India is moving beyond binary choices of openness versus protectionism. Instead, it is crafting a middle path that allows global opportunities while maintaining control over its economic trajectory. If managed carefully, this approach can help India navigate the complexities of its relationship with China and strengthen its position in an increasingly competitive global economy.

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INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



Globalization needs new model

System's future in multipolar world depends on dialogue, compromise and inclusive growth

By HAN HAN and CHEN YUFENG

Two or three decades ago, globalization was a word full of promise — a “best solution” voluntarily chosen by nations. The spread of information technology helped push global productivity to new heights. Developed countries outsourced high-cost manufacturing overseas, creating jobs, investment and technological know-how for less-developed regions, while their rising profits sustained generous social welfare at home.

It was a win-win world: Specialization fueled rapid growth, the global “pie” expanded, and though friction existed, the gains from cooperation outweighed the costs.

But this system was never as sturdy as it looked. It rested on three pillars. The first pillar was sustained productivity growth. Cooperation is feasible if the global pie is larger than what each country could achieve alone. The second was a stable industrial hierarchy. Developed nations, perched atop the value chain, needed to stay at the technological frontier to preserve global profit distribution. The third was internal compensation.

The excess profits generated by globalization had to be redistributed to workers affected by globalization, keeping their living standards above pre-globalization levels. Only when all three pillars held firm could globalization be sustainable. But today, all three are wobbling.

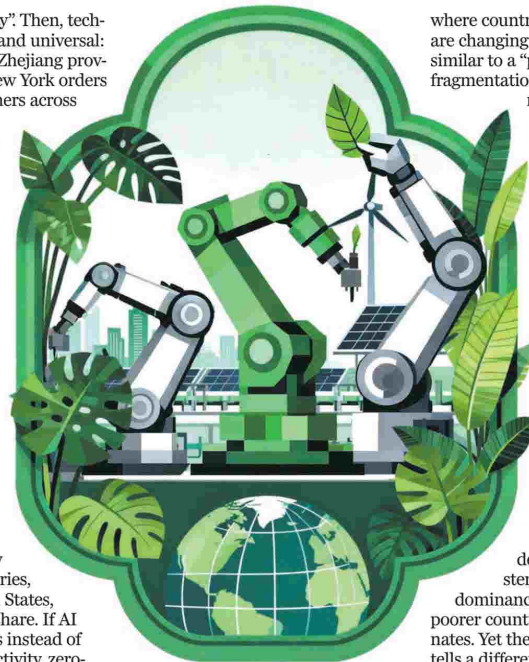
Productivity growth has slowed down. Over the past 20 years, we have not seen a leap like the “infor-

mation superhighway”. Then, technology was tangible and universal: Factories in Yiwu of Zhejiang province could receive New York orders in real time; researchers across oceans could share knowledge instantly.

Low-barrier connectivity lets both developed and developing nations share the benefits. Artificial intelligence offers hope for a new era of productivity, yet its impact is neither immediate nor intuitively visible. Will it trigger explosive growth comparable to the internet? That remains an open question.

More importantly, while technology once spilled freely across borders, today many Western countries, especially the United States, seem less willing to share. If AI widens national gaps instead of raising global productivity, zero-sum competition will dominate — and the “golden age” of globalization may remain behind us.

Meanwhile, developing countries are breaking through technological monopolies and catching up with the richer ones. Competitive multinationals have emerged in the Global South, moving up the value chain and challenging developed nations in key sectors. This has eroded monopolistic profits and shaken the foundation of universal



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

high welfare in developed countries.

Developed nations have largely failed to reform internal redistribution. As a result, many citizens see globalization not as an opportunity but as a relative loss. This fuels anti-globalization sentiment — not because trade is harmful, but because its gains are poorly shared.

The world is entering a stage

where countries' optimal strategies are changing. Under conditions similar to a “prisoner's dilemma”, fragmentation has become a

rational choice. As competition erodes profits, cooperation looks less attractive.

Developed nations, seeking to protect their monopolies, become impediments rather than serving as promoters of globalization.

Trust costs also rise sharply, even skyrocketing: If nations anticipate disruptions — tariffs, sanctions, supply chain breakages — non-cooperation becomes the safer choice.

The arrogance of developed nations stems from a history of

dominance over a world where poorer countries were subordinates. Yet the global population tells a different story: Roughly four-fifths of humanity lives in the South.

China has four times the population of the US. Its per capita GDP is about 15 percent of the US level. If China's per capita GDP reaches half of the US level, its total economic output would be roughly double that of the US. Even moderate growth in populous southern nations will eventually surpass the economic scale and influence of developed countries.

We are at a historic crossroads. If globalization has a future, it will require a new consensus and a new model.

First, negotiation is the only path. Developed nations must adapt to a truly multipolar world that includes rising southern powers representing the majority of humanity.

Second, we must rethink wealth distribution. The core conflict is often internal to developed nations: Historical exploitation has left stark global inequality, making growth for developing countries a moral and practical imperative.

Third, before debating “who gets the pie”, we must ask: Is the pie truly big enough?

At this point, global solidarity is essential for discovering new growth engines and to expand the pie together. Only by growing the global economy while balancing fairness can we prevent de-globalization from claiming globalization's legacy.

Globalization is at a turning point. Its future depends not on walls or unilateral measures, but on dialogue, compromise and inclusive growth. The question is no longer whether globalization can continue — it is whether we can redesign it for a world where cooperation truly benefits everyone.

Han Han is an associate professor at the School of Economics of Peking University, and Chen Yufeng is a PhD candidate at the same institute. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Focus: Nation's progress should not be seen as tool to beat it

>> FROM PAGE 1

China has also vowed not to be the first to use nuclear weapons. Why does Sweden not name the US as a threat, particularly given its record of frequently interfering in other countries' affairs and multiple incidents of instigating regime change?

Does Sweden fear the name of China's ruling party?

Historically, communism has been taken as calling for overturning the capitalist system through revolution and nationalization of private property.

But especially since its opening-up, China has transformed itself into a socialist market economy. It has even passed legislation protecting private property and laws protecting intellectual property.

Last year, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's top legislature, adopted the Law of the People's Republic of China on Promoting

the Private Economy, which took effect on May 20, 2025.

Sweden, along with other Nordic countries, has adopted many socialist principles and offers citizens benefits such as healthcare, pension support, unemployment insurance, and child daycare, to the extent that it is regarded as a welfare state. China offers similar benefits. It also follows free market principles and trades freely with the rest of the world. From this perspective, Swedish values and Chinese values are remarkably similar. Why should Sweden fear China?

China is noted as a fervent supporter of multilateralism and a pro-peace member of the United Nations Security Council. Of course, China needs to have a sufficiently strong military force for self-protection. If it did not have such a capability, it would have been bullied much like Panama and Venezuela. Today, China is one

of the most peaceful nations on Earth, thanks to its ability to safeguard its national security.

While China's political system is different from that of Sweden, there is nothing to fear. China's political system is a meritocracy: the leadership is selected rigorously against many criteria. It is open to all citizens based on the ability to serve the country and its people.

There are periodic peaceful power transitions. While the Communist Party of China maintains its leadership of the nation, nobody enjoys an automatic pathway to leadership. There are also multiple checks against power abuse, and China's courts have handled many cases against government establishments.

To many businesses, China may be considered a “threat” because it is indeed a formidable competitor. China has excelled on many fronts — shipbuilding, bridge building,

high-speed trains, robotics, electric cars, green energy, quantum computing, power generation, power storage, and power transmission. The list goes on. But China has achieved these advances through hard work.

China's success has not come easily. It has taken hard work, discipline, leadership, education, and, above all, learning from mistakes. The country used to suffer from serious air and water pollution. But today these are no longer serious problems.

On March 12, the NPC adopted the Ecological and Environmental Code, consolidating over 30 existing laws into a comprehensive framework to advance environmental protection and green development. It is China's second formal legal code, after the 2020 Civil Code.

Furthermore, the nation has been relentlessly improving its institutions and its governance.

China does not believe in mercantilism. In fact, it has been hosting the world's first national-level import-dedicated expo, the China International Import Expo, for years.

The 9th China International Import Expo, scheduled to be held from Nov 5 to 10, will welcome exporters from around the world to China to sell their products in the Chinese market. China believes in fair competition and fair play, and will never consider a strong, fair player as a threat.

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Ripples across the Global South

China's high-quality modernization offers nations new paths for cooperation, innovation

By RONNIE LINS

This year's two sessions — the annual meetings of China's top legislative and political advisory bodies — reinforced a trend that has become increasingly clear over the past decade: China has entered a new stage of economic development defined not only by quantitative expansion but by the structural quality of its growth.

The government's economic growth target of 4.5 to 5 percent for 2026 reflects a broader transformation that integrates technological innovation, strengthened domestic demand and continued institutional modernization. This transformation does not affect China alone. It also reshapes economic cooperation, innovation dynamics and development financing across the Global South.

A close reading of this year's Government Work Report reveals three internal engines that sustain this transformation.

The first engine of high-quality development is the growing strength of the domestic market.

In recent years, China has rebalanced its economic strategy. The country still participates deeply in global trade, but Chinese policymakers now also place emphasis on domestic demand as a key driver of sustainable growth.

Recent data from the National Bureau of Statistics illustrate this shift. In 2025, China's economy expanded by 5 percent, reaching a total GDP of 140.19 trillion yuan (\$20.33 trillion). During the same year, the country created 12.67 million new urban jobs, while total retail sales surpassed 50 trillion yuan.

These figures reflect the enormous scale of China's internal market. With a population of roughly 1.4 billion people, China now possesses one of the largest domestic demand bases in the world. The government continues to expand this potential through policies that increase household income and modernize consumption patterns.

The latest data from the Ministry of Commerce showed that programs that encourage consumers to replace old goods with newer products have already generated more than 2.6 trillion yuan in sales, supported by special long-term treasury bonds.

A stronger domestic market produces an important macroeconomic effect. It increases the resilience of the Chinese economy in a volatile global environment and reduces dependence on external cycles. For many developing economies, China's experience also demonstrates how governments can combine consumption stimulus with social inclusion and middle-income group expansion.

The second engine of China's high-quality development is technological innovation. Over the

past two decades, China has transformed its industrial structure. The country has moved beyond its earlier role as a manufacturing platform for low-cost production, investing heavily in science, technology and innovation.

According to the Ministry of Science and Technology, national spending on research and development reached 2.8 percent of China's GDP in 2025, while the value of technology contract transactions increased by 10.8 percent. High-tech manufacturing expanded by 9.4 percent, and industrial robot production grew by 28 percent.

New strategic industries have also expanded rapidly. According to the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers, China produced more than 16 million new energy vehicles in 2025, while the number of electric vehicle charging stations nationwide has exceeded 20 million.

The digital economy has also grown quickly. As per the Government Work Report, core digital industries have already accounted for more than 10.5 percent of China's GDP in 2025. Policymakers aim to further enhance the sector over the coming five years, according to the outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30).

These developments illustrate the rise of what Chinese policymakers describe as new quality productive forces. This concept combines digitization, artificial intelligence, industrial automation and green technologies.

Programs such as the "AI+" initiative promote large-scale applications of AI across sectors that range from manufacturing to public services. At the same time,

China is directing major investments toward frontier technologies including quantum computing, biotechnology, satellite systems and next-generation communications networks.

These technological advances increasingly influence the global economy. As China strengthens its innovation capacity, it consolidates its position as one of the world's leading centers of technological development while creating new opportunities for cooperation in digital infrastructure, renewable energy and industrial modernization.

The third engine of high-quality development is the institutional capacity to coordinate economic transformation.

Over several decades, China has built a governance model that combines long-term strategic planning with market mechanisms. This institutional structure enables policymakers to rapidly mobilize public and private resources in sectors they identify as national priorities.

Recent macroeconomic policy illustrates this approach. In response to global economic challenges and growing trade tensions, the Chinese government adopted a more proactive fiscal policy and maintained a moderately accommodative monetary policy. The authorities have implemented measures to reduce financing costs, expand funding for strategic projects and support industrial technological upgrading.

Coordination among different levels of government also plays a crucial role. Policymakers have directed significant investments toward modern infrastructure,

technological innovation and rural vitalization.

Meanwhile, policymakers continue to deepen institutional reforms to form a unified national market, reduce regional barriers and expand private-sector participation in strategic projects. This capacity for coordinated policymaking enables China to allocate national resources to sectors that drive long-term development.

As China enters the 15th Five-Year Plan period, the country's transition toward high-quality development carries significant implications for the Global South.

First, China's expanding domestic market creates new trade opportunities for emerging economies. As Chinese households increase their incomes and diversify their consumption patterns, demand grows for agricultural products, food supplies, natural resources and services from developing countries.

Second, China's leadership in green and digital technologies opens new paths for international cooperation. China now ranks among the world's largest producers of EVs, solar panels and energy-storage batteries. These technologies play a critical role in the global energy transition and can support sustainable development across many regions. Concrete examples already appear in infrastructure projects in Latin America and smart-city initiatives in several African countries, where Chinese technology has been adapted to local development needs.

Third, financial cooperation represents another important dimension. China mobilizes development funds, policy banks and long-term special bonds to support infrastruc-

ture and innovation in the Global South. Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as cooperation mechanisms such as BRICS and the China-CELAC Forum, demonstrate how these instruments can strengthen economic cooperation among developing countries.

At the same time, this cooperation also presents challenges. Technological asymmetries and concerns about debt sustainability require transparent dialogue and financing structures that reflect the specific conditions of each partner country. Technology transfer must also include local capacity building so that other Global South economies can develop their own productive capabilities rather than simply import external solutions. For regions such as Latin America, this evolving landscape creates opportunities to build partnerships that extend beyond traditional trade into industrial cooperation, technological innovation and infrastructure development.

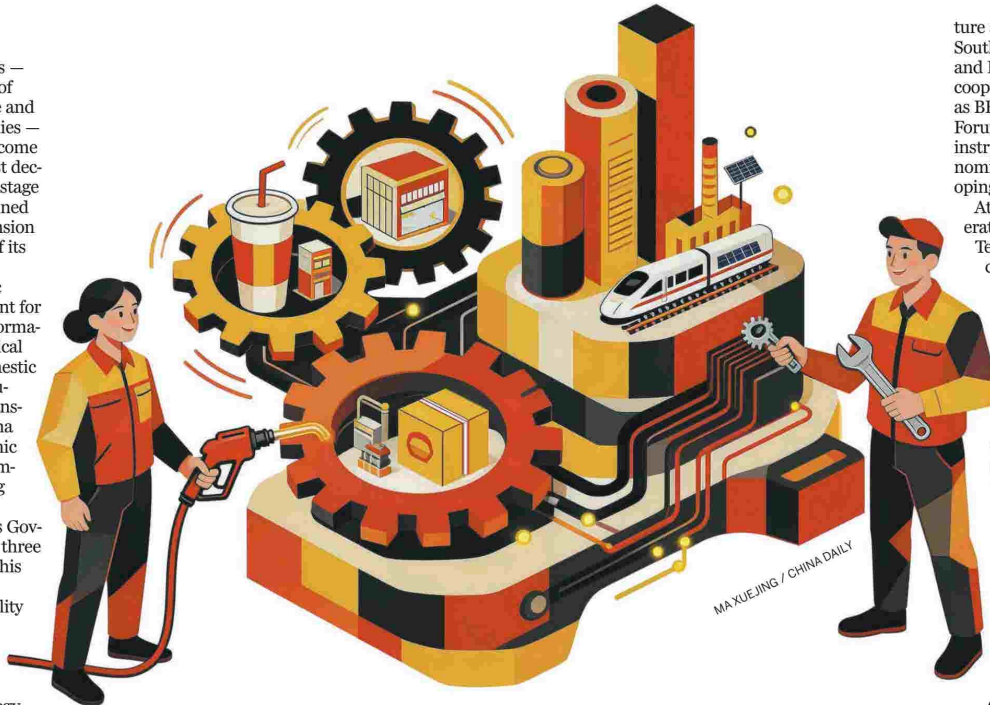
China's recent experience demonstrates that economic growth and structural transformation can advance simultaneously. By combining technological innovation, domestic market expansion and strong institutional coordination, China continues to build a development model that emphasizes resilience and long-term sustainability. This process highlights the importance of public policies that integrate economic growth, social inclusion and productive modernization.

For the Global South as a whole, China's trajectory offers not only new opportunities for cooperation but also valuable insights into development strategies in an increasingly complex international environment.

With R&D investment equal to 2.8 percent of GDP and a digital economy that already accounts for more than 10 percent of national output, China demonstrates that high-quality development represents far more than a political concept. It reflects a concrete process of economic transformation.

More importantly, this transformation extends beyond China's borders. It increasingly shapes global economic dynamics and opens new avenues for cooperation. The central challenge now lies in how emerging economies can build partnerships that translate these changes into shared prosperity and sustainable development.

The author is the director of the China-Brazil Center for Research and Business. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



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Enhancing supply chain resilience

Collaboration between Beijing, Seoul in advanced manufacturing serves mutual long-term interests

By MOON SUNG WOOK

The global economy is entering an era in which supply chains are judged not solely by efficiency but increasingly by resilience. Few sectors illustrate this shift more clearly than semiconductors, batteries, robotics and biotechnology — industries that now sit at the intersection of economic competitiveness and national security.

For countries deeply embedded in global manufacturing networks, the challenge is particularly acute. China and the Republic of Korea (ROK) occupy pivotal positions in the industrial ecosystem of East Asia. Their economies are tightly connected through production networks, intermediate goods trade and technological supply chains. At the same time, strategic rivalry and geopolitical pressures have complicated the environment for bilateral economic cooperation.

Yet precisely because of these pressures, pragmatic collaboration between the two countries in advanced manufacturing deserves renewed attention — along with the spirit of mutual openness that such collaboration calls for.

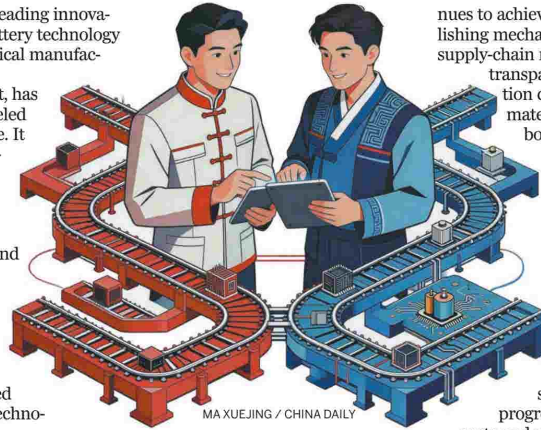
Over the past two decades, China and the ROK have built formidable capabilities in high-technology industries, though through different development paths. The ROK's strength lies in specialized technological leadership. Its firms dominate the global market for memory semiconductors and are

among the world's leading innovators in advanced battery technology and biopharmaceutical manufacturing.

China, by contrast, has developed unparalleled manufacturing scale. It has the world's largest industrial ecosystem, supported by vast domestic demand, extensive industrial clusters and strong government backing for strategic sectors. In areas ranging from battery materials to robotics, China has rapidly expanded both capacity and technological capability.

These differences often invite comparisons framed purely in terms of competition. But they also reveal important complementarities — ones best realized through a shared commitment to constructive and open engagement.

In semiconductors, the ROK leads in memory chips and advanced manufacturing processes while China rapidly expands its domestic ecosystem. In batteries, the ROK's innovation in high-performance cell technology complements China's comprehensive supply chain spanning materials, components and large-scale production. In robotics and biotechnology, the ROK's technological precision meets China's enormous market scale and grow-



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ing innovation capacity.

Such complementarities matter because supply-chain resilience rarely comes from isolation. It is more often the result of diversified networks, transparency and reliable partnerships — qualities that both countries have strong incentives to cultivate together.

For China and the ROK, strengthening cooperation in advanced manufacturing could help reduce systemic vulnerabilities while preserving the benefits of integrated regional production networks. This does not mean eliminating competition. Rather, it means recognizing that strategic industries can simultaneously involve rivalry and collaboration.

There are several practical ave-

nes to achieve this. One is establishing mechanisms to monitor supply-chain risks, where greater transparency on production capacity and critical materials would allow

both sides to respond more effectively to disruptions — and lay the foundations for mutual trust. Knowledge-sharing frameworks in next-generation semiconductors, advanced battery chemistry and biotechnology could create shared

stakes in technological progress while distributing costs and risks.

Closer collaboration in advanced manufacturing equipment and specialized materials could also reduce vulnerability to external disruptions. Equally important are structured exchanges among engineers, scientists and industrial experts.

Recent diplomatic developments suggest that the momentum for such cooperation is already building. The China-ROK summit on the sidelines of the 2025 APEC meeting in Gyeongju in the ROK produced tangible results: A \$49 billion currency swap agreement, a memorandum on a China-ROK Joint Economic Cooperation Plan for 2026-30, and pledges to deepen cooperation in areas spanning startups, agricultural trade and media exchange.

In January 2026, when ROK President Lee Jae-myung made a full state visit to Beijing, the two sides signed 15 cooperation documents covering areas such as technological innovation and ecology.

The 2026 APEC meetings, hosted by China, offer a further opportunity to build on this momentum. China and the ROK could jointly advance regional platforms for supply-chain cooperation, joint innovation funds for emerging technologies, or regular policy dialogues on industrial resilience — initiatives that would benefit not only both countries but the broader Asia-Pacific manufacturing system.

For China and the ROK — two of the region's most important manufacturing economies — pragmatic collaboration in advanced industry supply chains could help ensure that resilience does not come at the cost of fragmentation. The path forward lies in a shared commitment to open and reciprocal engagement — one that serves the long-term interests of both economies. In a world shaped by growing uncertainty, such cooperation may prove not only desirable but necessary.

The author is the former minister of trade, industry and energy of the Republic of Korea, a distinguished professor at the Graduate School of Economics in Yonsei University and a senior advisor at Vulchon LLC Law Firm. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Fostering partnerships for the long haul

Linkages between London and top Chinese business hubs vital for Sino-UK ties

By ZHAO BINGBING

Over the past 10 years, business relations between China and the United Kingdom have seen their fair share of fluctuations. From global socioeconomic impacts brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to, more recently, the new economic realities and changes in international politics, there have been profound transformations that have had an impact on Sino-British economic relations.

London, as a global business and tech hub, is open for business with Chinese companies. A key way of ensuring bilateral business ties and creating successful relationships comes through nurturing and bridging networks and ecosystems across Chinese business hubs like Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen to create growth outcomes for companies on both sides.

In terms of Chinese investment

in London, a lot has changed over the past 10 years.

The focus at the beginning of the last decade was on real estate and infrastructure. We have seen this evolve to embrace a more varied array of sectors, including high-growth tech and financial services, with real estate continuing to be a major area of interest.

There is also growing attention paid to creative industries, healthcare and green energy, all of which aligns strongly with unprecedented growth in the tech sector in recent years, as well as the emergence of new technologies.

This surge creates even more potential for cross-ecosystem growth between London and major Chinese business and tech hubs, particularly in high-growth areas.

As new and exciting technologies develop around the world, there are opportunities for collaboration across both ecosystems on how they can be used to address

some of the world's most pressing issues, from climate change and healthcare solutions to artificial intelligence and the impact it can have. One clear example of such collaboration is how Chinese electric vehicle maker BYD expanded in the UK.

The story began during the London 2012 Olympic Games, when senior executives of the Chinese automaker visited the city and met with Transport for London officials, launching initial talks to kick-start the firm's entry into the UK market.

Soon after, BYD partnered with ADL, a leading European bus manufacturer. In 2015, they launched London's first fully electric double-decker bus and began securing orders from Transport for London.

In 2023, BYD expanded further by launching its electric car range for UK consumers.

At present, 2,500 BYD electric

buses operate across the country, including 1,500 in London, giving BYD a 70 percent share of the British capital's electric bus market.

Reaching London's net-zero carbon goals will depend on global partnerships and companies like BYD, which shows just how powerful that collaboration can be.

In terms of foreign direct investment, there are now more Chinese-led projects in London, and they have brought in more than £7.5 billion (\$10.4 billion) since 2013, according to data from fDi Markets, a UK-based research firm.

Over the past few years, London has welcomed some major tech companies and institutions, including China's Tencent.

Tech companies aside, financial services have also been a huge draw in London, given its status as a major global financial hub.

In addition to traditional banks and financial institutions — such as the Bank of China, and Industrial

and Commercial Bank of China — we have seen Chinese financial technology companies grow in London, such as PingPong Payments and WooshPay.

London is a gateway for Chinese companies to go global. The city will continue to encourage more initiatives that will support networks across both places and help Chinese companies grow in London, as well as help London-grown companies expand into the Chinese market.

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer made an official visit to China from Jan 28 to 31. The trip attended to bilateral economic and business relations and created more opportunities for businesses of both countries to advance cooperation and forge more solid partnerships.

The author is chief representative of London & Partners Greater China. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

غَضَبُنَا مِنْ تَبَدُّلِ مَلَامِحِ الْحُبِّ لَيْسَ إِلَّا
أُنَانِيَّةً إِنْسَانِيَّةً مُغْلَقَةً بِالرَّأْيَةِ
(زكية بنت محمد العتيبي)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Our anger caused by the changing features of
love is only human selfishness covered by innocence!

Dr. Zakyah Al-Otalbi

(Saudi literary figure, academic and cultural consultant)

Opinion

Israel's buffer-zone fallacy

DAOUD KUTTAB



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populated areas in the world, the Israeli army is reportedly occupying more than 50 percent of the land.

In Lebanon, Israel is pursuing an indefinite occupation of between about 850 and 1,060 square kilometers, nearly 10 percent of the country's total territory. And in the West Bank, Israel has long insisted that it must keep the Jordan Valley west of the river as a buffer zone in any peace deal.

But with Iranian missiles and drones reaching Tel Aviv, Beit Shemesh, Haifa and Dimona — and Ukrainian drones penetrating deep into Russia — the justification for such demands has collapsed.

Moreover, by pushing for the occupation of even more land, Israel risks turning local civilians into front-line targets. Some critics even warn of a dynamic in which civilians will effectively serve as human shields, which would then provide a political/media bonanza for Israel's hasbarists (propagandists).

At the same time, by occupying land in southern Lebanon Israeli soldiers will be closer to Hezbollah fighters

and therefore in greater danger.

As the political scientist Dominic Tierney has shown, military power alone rarely wins wars, because modern conflicts are political, social and ideological struggles, not merely tactical battles.

Far from acknowledging these limitations, Israel has already declared that it will prohibit the return of Lebanese citizens who fled before its latest ground invasion began.

Such a policy is hardly new. Since 1948, Israel has denied the right of return to about 750,000 Palestinians and their descendants, despite numerous UN resolutions urging it to provide this option.

Rather than taking more land where opponents will always exist, the wiser strategy is to pursue a political settlement.

As the ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu pointed out long ago, harming an enemy or simply taking land does not necessarily constitute a victory. On the contrary, a displaced enemy might return with even greater resolve, or the cost of holding the new ground might prove unsustainable.

Territorial buffers rarely, if ever, deliver the peace and security their advocates promise. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, for example, Ukraine was seen as a neutral cordon between Russia and NATO. Instead, it became a zone of increasingly fierce geopolitical contention, followed by open war.

French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau made the same mistake when he assumed that the newly independent states of Central and Eastern Europe would serve as a buffer against encroachment by Bolshevik Russia. Instead, they were early targets of Hitler and ended up as part of the Warsaw Pact following his defeat.

In an era when ballistic missiles, drones and other projectiles can hit distant strategic targets with growing accuracy, the idea of a protective buffer zone is not just faulty, it is nonsense.

Yet the Israeli defense minister, Israel Katz, insists that the Israel Defense Forces must occupy a large part of southern

Lebanon to protect "displaced residents" in northern Israel. He recently boasted that Israeli troops had destroyed five bridges on the Litani River, about 30 kilometers from the border between Lebanon and Israel, thus creating a buffer zone that will be maintained "until northern Israel (is) safe."

But this occupation, an obvious violation of international law, is unlikely to achieve its stated goals. If anything, it will leave Israelis, especially Israeli soldiers, more vulnerable.

After the horrors of the Second World War, the international community agreed that no country was permitted to take land from another by force. The "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war" features prominently in the preamble of UN Security Council Resolution 242, which called for the "withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in June 1967."

Yet the entire world is watching as Israel deliberately acquires large swaths of land by force in Gaza and southern Lebanon.

In Gaza, one of the most densely

By pushing for the occupation of even more land, Israel risks turning local civilians into front-line targets



There will be no peace, truce or even the hope of a better tomorrow as long as Hezbollah keeps its arsenal

Lebanon must enforce plan to disarm Hezbollah immediately

KHALED ABOU ZAHR



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Hezbollah, and his wife. The building had been largely spared from previous fighting and the exact target of the strike is unclear. The Israeli military acknowledged it hit a "terror target" but said the civilians were not intended targets. This is not the only case, and several others have taken place. The reality is that most Lebanese do indeed believe that the targets were members of Hezbollah. Needless to say, on the intelligence level, the Iranian proxy is completely transparent to Israel, which also renders it obsolete and a liability to the country.

These attacks have hence raised sectarian tensions, as some fear displaced people arriving from Hezbollah-linked areas could draw further strikes. Lebanese authorities are investigating several incidents, but this does not reassure areas witnessing high arrivals. Some have also mentioned the need to vet new tenants, and politicians such as Beirut MP Fouad

Makhzoumi, a Sunni, are calling for registration of displaced individuals to prevent civilian harm. The reality is that on top of these strikes, there is a level of chaos and overcrowding of Lebanon's streets that invites clashes or even criminality and nobody has the capacity to manage the situation.

While a new breed of Western geopolitical analysts on Instagram are framing Hezbollah as a fabric of the Lebanese society and anyone stating the opposite as ignorant, the current situation proves Hezbollah is not part of the Lebanese society. This is a temporary page in Lebanese history, and soon the Shiite community will break free from this forced ideology. Those who want to make Hezbollah the representative of the Shiite community are doing the greatest disservice not only to this community, but also to the entire country.

If your country was in ruins and I asked you to take a stranger fleeing war into your home, knowing it might make your building a target for missiles, would you agree?

I guess if you are comfortably sitting in a safe place far away and it is a hypothetical question, you will say yes, maybe talk about being a humanitarian and how life is about taking a stand.

Yet, if it is not hypothetical and you are in Lebanon facing real risk, your instinct will be to refuse. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this. It is called survival. Today, we are seeing this situation unfold in real time in the country. And because it is mostly the Shiite community which is fleeing, on top of this you would be called racist.

As the US and Iran agree to a truce that does not seem to include Lebanon, it is time for the Shiite community in Lebanon

to ask itself: Why the suffering? Hezbollah joined a war to defend its master Iran, which subsequently slips out but leaves the entire country of Lebanon in the dirt. As US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth was listing the destruction of Iranian targets that led to the ceasefire, news feeds were reporting that Israel was bombing Lebanon. Let us see how this unfolds, but it is at a greater scale. The whole of Lebanon has been transformed into a target because of Hezbollah's actions for its masters in Tehran.

Yet there is no doubt that with a huge number of internal refugees, mostly from the Shiite community, we are witnessing an increase in sectarian tensions in Lebanon. Only a few days ago, an Israeli strike on a building in Ain Saadeh, a largely Christian area near Beirut, killed at least three people. These included Pierre Moawad, a Lebanese Forces official opposed to

Opinion

Use of AI is eclipsing social media and we should be worried

MOHAMED CHEBARO



Have you ever lost hours of time gazing absent-mindedly into your screen, starting with a meaningless link sent by a trusted friend as a joke, only to fall into an endless pit of aimless browsing, one platform after another?

As someone with an aversion to social media in general, I have never been an active user or consumer of it but even I do still get lured in sometimes, one way or another. I am increasingly not alone in my aversion, it seems, as growing numbers of people in the UK appear to be becoming less active on social media platforms.

Recent research by Ofcom, Britain's communications watchdog, suggests that 49 percent of adult social media users actively posted, shared or commented on social media last year, compared with more than 61 percent in 2024. The organization's annual survey of media use and attitudes found a key reason for the decline was fear that old posts might come back to haunt users.

Ironically, the report also found that the amount of time the average user spent online each day on personal devices in

2025 was 4 hours and 30 minutes, an increase of 10 minutes compared with 2024. This is a clear sign that we are all still glued to our screens, engaged in addictive scrolling and checking, often in a voyeuristic manner.

This is despite growing concerns, not only in Britain but worldwide, about the effects of social media on health, and researchers note that people are now also increasingly embracing the use of artificial intelligence tools. We might, it seems, be moving out of the frying pan and into the fire.

As is the case in the UK, the use of AI tools such as ChatGPT is on the rise worldwide. In Britain, surveys have found that more

than half of adults used AI tools, and the figure rises to more than 80 percent among 16-24-year-olds.

The cause for alarm is that many younger people — 20 percent of 25-to-34-year-olds — appear to be turning to AI for companionship. While older age groups seem to be reducing social media use as a result of mental health concerns or fear of excessive engagement, their younger counterparts are embracing new tools that are no less harmful, potentially.

Online shaming, according to the Ofcom report, is one reason for the recent decline in active social media use among adults from all walks of life. In a world of cancel culture and increasing polarization, old posts can resurface and prove contentious, as for many years we put our private lives and most personal thoughts on display for all to see on social media sites. All those posts were gathered and stored by the tech giants, ultimately used as data to help train AI models without our consent.

As AI tools continue to develop, the human appetite for them is on the increase. Some experts warn that human cognition and knowledge could fall victim to an over reliance on generative AI.

Despite much research on the issue, the jury is still out; some people believe the use of AI expands our knowledge greatly, others fear a growing reliance on the technology will lead to learning deficiencies and a reduction of our critical thinking abilities across the board.

Sooner or later, the world will have to face the question of whether faster and better scientific progress, and more informed decision-making aided by the vast crunching of data, is a complement

to or substitute for human learning and well-being.

It is certainly evidently true that AI is already playing a critical role in, for example, helping scientists to develop new medicines, improving decision-making by aiding in the aggregation of data, and speeding up logistics.

More worryingly, though, the use of AI is changing the very nature of modern warfare by, for example, sifting through colossal intelligence databases. Other

studies have warned that AI could negatively affect human learning and capabilities.

Social media is now firmly embedded in our lives, with nine out of 10 of us using it in some way. I am not sure, then, whether turning it off

completely would be completely good for me or you, and so the challenge of finding a healthy middle ground is perhaps the way forward.

Regardless of how we quantify and qualify society's use of social media, it is worrying to observe that while social media use might be in decline, the adoption of AI tools is increasing at a rate that could in time reveal that we jumped out of the frying pan and directly into the fire.

The cause for alarm is that younger people — 20 percent of 25-to-34-year-olds — appear to be turning to AI for companionship

Some people believe human cognition and knowledge could fall victim to an over reliance on generative AI

Global space race offers opportunities for the Middle East

DR. MAJID RAFIZADEH



The global space race, once dominated by the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, has undergone a profound transformation.

Where space exploration and technological development were previously concentrated in the hands of a few superpowers, the field has become increasingly multipolar, which offers strategic opportunities for Arab countries.

Recent developments, including the US return to the moon this week through its Artemis program, points to renewed interest in lunar exploration and interplanetary missions. This highlights the fact that space is once again a domain for strategic competition, as well as technological prestige.

The factors that lie behind the resurgence of interest in space include advancements in rocket and satellite technology, artificial intelligence and, more importantly, the participation of the private sector. These changes have opened the door for emerging economies, including those in the Middle East, to assert themselves in relation to global space activities.

The region should not view space as merely a scientific curiosity. Instead, it

represents a strategic frontier in which four pillars intersect: economic diversification, technological advancement, national security and international prestige. Arab countries have a unique opportunity to integrate with this field in ways that can secure both immediate and long-term benefits.

The shift from a superpower-dominated space environment to a multipolar landscape represents a critical opportunity for the Middle East. In the past, space programs were largely tools of geopolitical competition,

showcasing military and technological superiority.

Now, however, the global space sector can be viewed as interplay between the public and private sectors, as well as rapidly evolving commercial markets. For Middle Eastern states, this is a vital development because the region can no longer afford to rely solely on foreign partners for its satellite services and space-based communications systems.

Capitalizing on this opportunity will require investments in national space agencies, research and development, and partnerships with participants in the sector worldwide. Any country that follows

such a path will be positioning itself as a credible actor in the global space sector.

Economic diversification represents one of the most compelling motivations for regional engagement with the space race. Middle Eastern countries that fail to diversify will leave their economies vulnerable to fluctuations in global energy markets.

Investment in space technology offers another path toward sustainable economic growth, because it stimulates innovation across several sectors.

Firstly, space initiatives require advanced engineering, software development, robotics and artificial intelligence skills. Advancements in these areas strengthen domestic industrial capacity and create opportunities for high-skilled employment.

In addition, shaping a culture of innovation helps to improve the region's overall level of technological competitiveness.

It is not only a matter of the economic benefits on offer. Space-related activities have critical implications for national security and strategic autonomy. Satellites serve as essential instruments for communications, surveillance and navigation, which helps countries respond effectively to regional and global threats.

Secondly, space-based intelligence systems can provide data that is critical for defense and border control, as well as maritime monitoring.

Thirdly, participation in the space race carries profound implications for national prestige and soft power. Scientific achievements in space exploration are indicators of technological sophistication and the capacity of a country for innovation.

Finally, accomplishments in space serve as a source of national pride. Programs can also be catalysts for STEM education,

helping to inspire young people to pursue careers in science, research and innovation. This is particularly important in a region characterized by its rapidly growing youth population.

In a nutshell, the Middle East is at a pivotal moment in terms of the new, rapidly evolving global space race. Arab nations have an unprecedented opportunity to assert themselves in this domain, which will definitely help shape the future of global power.

It offers many benefits, ranging from economic diversification and technological development to enhanced national security and international prestige. This is therefore an essential strategic imperative for Arab nations.

The field has become increasingly multipolar, which offers strategic opportunities for Arab countries

Space is once again a domain for strategic competition, as well as technological prestige



Prince Ahmad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz

Jomana Rashid Alrahd

ARAB NEWS

is a daily international newspaper published by the SAUDI RESEARCH & PUBLISHING COMPANY

Founded in 1987 by Hisham & Muhammad Ali Hafiz

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EDITORIAL: general@arabnews.com MARKETING: marketing@arabnews.com

TOLL FREE NUMBER: 8002440076

PRINTED AT: HALLA PRINTING CO., RIYADH

Bahrain 200 Fils; Iran 200 R; Egypt LE 3; India 12 Rs; Indonesia 2000 R; Japan 250 Y; Jordan 250 Fils; Kuwait 200 Fils; Lebanon 1000

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The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

Musk's grip on the future of American space exploration

As SpaceX gears up for an IPO, the US should avoid becoming over-reliant

Last week, on the same day the Artemis II mission blasted off for the first human flight around the Moon in more than 50 years, it emerged that Elon Musk's SpaceX had filed for a record-breaking stock market listing to raise as much as \$75bn. The coincidence brought the past and the future of US space exploration into sharp relief: one involves an expensive government programme seeking to rekindle the awe of Apollo-era human space flight, the other an entrepreneur gearing up to tighten his grip on the commercial space economy.

The very different economics involved make it inevitable that the US will increasingly rely on companies like SpaceX as it seeks to build on Artemis to establish a permanent presence on the Moon and venture further into deep

space. Before that happens, it needs to fix what risks becoming an over-dependence on Musk's company.

Artemis II, whose four-person crew is due to return to Earth late tonight, is an impressive engineering feat founded on an old paradigm. It was built using the cost-plus method, so the main contractors face no penalties for cost overruns or repeated delays. Its rocket boosters aren't reusable, lifting the cost of each launch to \$4.1bn.

Contrast that with SpaceX, whose Falcon rockets have become the workhorse for reaching orbit. Musk's success was the product of a newer, commercial economic model: from the start, NASA paid a fixed cost per launch, leaving all the financial risk with the company. SpaceX has also dragged down costs by reusing its rockets.

Musk's critics like to claim that he built his company on the back of government largesse, but the benefits have flowed both ways. NASA estimated the Falcon rocket would have cost 10 times

as much to develop under a traditional government programme.

If SpaceX's breathtaking IPO goes off as planned, Musk will have the resources to entrench his company deeper into markets it already dominates. That includes seeing its giant Starship rocket through to full commercial operations, further increasing its launch cost advantage over rivals, and overlaying the Starlink communications network with a third generation of more powerful satellites.

A heavy reliance on SpaceX already makes the US – and some other governments – queasy. Musk himself underlined the danger during his falling out with US President Donald Trump last year by threatening to decommission his company's Dragon spacecraft, which the US relies on to get astronauts to the International Space Station. In a sign of Starlink's national security clout, in 2022 he denied Ukrainian forces access to the network where they sought to push into Russian-controlled territory.

Nasa and the Pentagon need to actively support newer competitors, even if they cannot match the established company's cost advantage in their early years

Competition in the launch market should soon be at hand, in the form of a new generation of powerful rockets from companies like Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin, Rocket Lab and Relativity Space. Nasa and the Pentagon need to actively support newer competitors, even if they cannot match SpaceX's cost advantage in their early years.

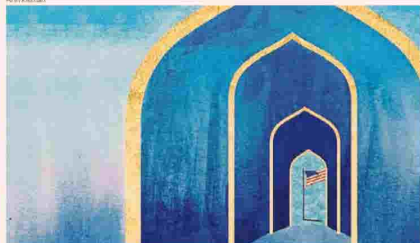
To promote more competition, they will also need to hire multiple suppliers to other space programmes. SpaceX would have had an exclusive contract to build the lander that Nasa hopes to use to put its astronauts back on the Moon, had intensive lobbying by Bezos and his allies not led to the commissioning of a second, competing vehicle. Duplication will add to costs but will be needed to increase resiliency and spur more competition and innovation.

As it looks ahead to a new era of deep space exploration, the US is fortunate to be able to tap the risk appetite of its space entrepreneurs. But it needs to avoid an over-dependence on SpaceX.

Opinion Foreign policy

Wanted: US ambassadors in the Middle East

Ann Klemm



Daniel Benaim

As a fragile ceasefire takes hold in the Middle East, countries are jockeying to shape the peace. But one group remains largely absent: US ambassadors.

Many Americans would be surprised to realise that in several of the Arab states that have been bombed by Iran – including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait and Iraq – there is no US ambassador present. Not one of these posts even has a nominee awaiting Senate confirmation.

It's not just in the Middle East either – 115 of 195 American ambassadorial posts worldwide currently sit vacant. Fewer than 20 even have a nominee in the pipeline. That is diplomatic malpractice on a global scale – but the consequences are sharpest where the stakes are highest.

Of 195 posts worldwide, 115 sit vacant. That is diplomatic malpractice on a global scale

Going forward, there will be Gulf partners who badly need reassuring, reconstruction efforts to support, business ties to revitalise and expat Americans to help. At a time when many question US leadership, there's an underrated value in simply showing up – and a cost for not doing so.

It is easy to tell ourselves this no longer matters. In a region dominated by royal courts and a US administration that few envoys rule the roost, the assumption is that the real business happens elsewhere. Heads of state and top aides can, should and do speak directly. But we lose a lot by not having empowered American representatives on the ground.

I saw this up close over four years as the State Department official responsible for the Gulf region. After two years with mostly acting chiefs of mission, we finally managed to send seven Senate-confirmed ambassadors to every Gulf state.

The difference was palpable. Communication was clearer and we were able to head off multiple misunderstandings that could have become bruising, time-consuming fights. I took comfort knowing that if something went sideways overnight, there was an ambassador on the ground to field the first call – often before Washington even woke up.

None of this is a substitute for a functioning policy process and sound leadership. This is a hard environment to be an effective ambassador in. But diplomats still serve a vital function. They fill the space between compressed high-level calls and the messier realities on the ground. They warn Washington officials before they step on diplomatic landmines and local partners before they make a bad situation worse.

Given that they focus on a single country, ambassadors can also take on issues below the level of Donald Trump's overtasked envoys and drive results when Washington isn't looking. In recent, practical terms, that could have meant pressing earlier on the risks of stranding tens of thousands of Americans in a deteriorating security environment, or focusing attention on missile interceptor shortfalls.

None of this is to slight our acting officials. Most are extraordinarily capable. Many are future ambassadors. But their job is needlessly harder without a senior American presence in-country.

Nor is this partisan. I criticised the first Trump administration for its failure to nominate ambassadors to key Middle Eastern capitals – only to find that the administration in which I served grappled with similar problems in its first two years.

But something different is happening now. In December, the Trump administration actually pulled nearly 30 career ambassadors from an already woefully thin field.

At moments like these, an American ambassador in post sends a powerful message of solidarity to partners who are watching missiles rain down on their cities. It also tells US diplomats in the region that their work matters.

Look at India, where President Trump sent Sergio Gor, one of his closest advisers, as US ambassador to heal badly damaged ties. On a recent visit, several Indians told me how important and stabilising a signal that was. Gor is now working to bring Trump to India.

This administration should move fast to nominate capable, trusted officials – whether diplomats, business leaders, retired officers or even political allies – to key regional capitals. In a few months, attention will shift to the midterms and an uncertain Senate majority. The window is closing.

Trump may not be wedded to conventional habits of foreign policy. Fair enough. But there's a reason countries since ancient times have appointed ambassadors abroad. It works.

The writer is a distinguished diplomatic fellow at the Middle East Institute and served as US deputy assistant secretary of state under the Biden administration

Letters

Easing oversight of audit firms is a capitulation by the regulator

We read with interest and concern that the UK Financial Reporting Council is easing supervision of audit firms ("Accountancy regulator eases supervision of UK audit firms", Report, March 25).

Your report highlights the FRC's shift towards firm-level supervision, framed as "proportionate" and "risk-based", but in practice this risks moving away from testing what matters most to investors.

Assessing a firm's system of quality management is important, but it is, at

best, a test of design. It considers whether controls exist and are structured appropriately; it does not demonstrate that they operate effectively at the audit engagement level.

The FRC's own inspection history makes this distinction critical. Recurring failures in areas such as revenue recognition, impairment and group audits have not arisen from a lack of firm-level policies, but from failures in execution. These issues have been identified only through inspection

of individual audit engagements.

A supervisory model that places greater weight on firm-wide systems risks missing where assurance is actually delivered. While firm-level controls matter, much can go wrong in execution – particularly in complex, judgmental areas. Reducing engagement-level inspection may also weaken the behavioural discipline and deterrence that such scrutiny creates.

This shift is particularly striking given that the existing inspection regime has begun to show results. After

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A 'resilient' global economy is not quite what it seems

Martin Wolf is right to highlight the unexpected resilience of the global economy ("Why the global economy is still resilient", Opinion, March 31). What is striking, however, is how persistently markets have failed to anticipate it.

Investors appear conditioned to expect fragility. As a result, downside scenarios are often priced prematurely, creating repeated cycles of breakdowns that do not materialise.

This is particularly visible in foreign exchanges, where anticipated weakness is frequently followed by sharp reversals as data contradicts positioning. Much of what is perceived as volatility is, in fact, the unwinding of misaligned expectations.

Resilience, therefore, is not just an economic outcome but a source of recurring market dislocation.

Francisco Villanueva-Giron

Seville, Spain

Plea for cooler heads

Rather than lamenting the shortage of fertilisers ("The other Strait of Hormuz shock", The FT View, March 26), the Financial Times should encourage the international community to look for ways to minimise their use and that of other agricultural inputs. Israel, with its reputation for high-tech agriculture, can help greatly in this regard.

Also, you might remind Iran of how Muhammad II of Khwarazm's verbal incitement of the Mongols brought down on his Persian empire nearly 40 years of destruction that culminated with the sacking of Baghdad in 1258. It is time for cooler heads on all sides!

Jim Blum

Baltimore, MD, US

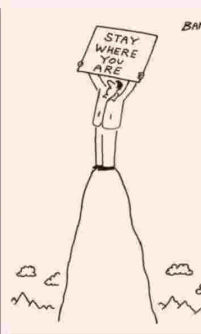
I'd be a million millionaire if I policed Japan's cycling rules

I have a deep personal interest in Leo Lewis' news story ("Japan slams brakes on pavement-riding cyclists", Report, FT Weekend, April 4) about the Japanese police crackdown on errant cyclists.

For more than half a century, I have regularly ridden bicycles in many world cities. The only place I have feared for my life is Japan, facing a daily dose of peril on the road, from lorries, buses, taxis, arrogant Lexus, Mercedes and Toyota Crown drivers whizzing faster than the speed limit, careless pedestrians preoccupied with their mobile phones, but above all from fellow cyclists.

So I was hopeful that Japan's police were going to crack down on bad behaviour by issuing blue ticket on the spot fines – or even red tickets in the case of dangerous riding. My hopes have faded.

The list of 113 cycling violations, many of them relatively minor rule



infractions, and their penalties is long and badly thought out. There is a basic contradiction that the new rules failed to address: whether bicycles are road vehicles or belong somewhere else. One example: bicycles are not allowed on the pavements, except where they are allowed on the pavements.

Japanese road rules say that cyclists are not supposed to turn right; instead they must go straight, turn the bike through 90 degrees and go straight. And when riding on the road, cyclists must obey pedestrian lights, so must stop at a green traffic light if the pedestrian light is red.

I take issue with Lewis when he claims that police rigorously apply traffic rules to motor vehicles. Police are rarely there to check, so you have to be unlucky to get caught, say, changing a red light or speeding.

On our local road the limit is 30kph, but it is extraordinary to find a car doing less than 45kph.

I fear the same will happen with the new cycle rules, left unpoliced unless you are unlucky enough to encounter a police officer.

I have just been out for a 30-minute ride around the local neighbourhood in suburban Osaka to check on the local sakura (cherry blossom).

I encountered 30 schoolboy cyclists in seven separate groups – more like gangs in the way they were riding at 25kph – two abreast on the pavement, and in one case three ranks of two abreast.

Three schoolboys were riding the wrong way down a one-way street. Four people were riding with earphones, two holding mobile phones, one holding an umbrella, another with an umbrella in a stand. Eight people were riding on the right-hand side of the road and one in the centre.

If the police appointed me as their agent to check bad behaviour for a percentage of the fines, I would be a very millionaire within a week.

Kevin Rafferty

Osaka, Japan

Oxfordshire landowner makes case for housing

My family owns the land at Kidlington referenced in the article "Fields in Oxfordshire greenbelt lie on front line of housebuilding battle" (Report, March 26), and in the follow-up letter from Daphne Hampson "Even Oxford is allowed to keep its Port Meadow" (April 6).

Unlike Port Meadow our land is not common land. It is private land, farmed in arable rotation. There are two public footpaths across the land, the only access that the public has of right. We do allow access in the field margins if people seek our permission, despite frequent vandalism of our fences, gates and signs, presumably by people who share campaigners' impression that this is common land. It is not.

The implication of the picture you used was that the land in the background, leading up to the church, was to be built upon. In fact this will form approximately half of a 4.4-hectare country park, which comes with the proposals for housing some 450 metres distant from the church. This new amenity, for the benefit of the entire local community, will indeed be like Oxford's Port Meadow.

The planning experts recommended this land for development based on substantial evidence uncontested by official bodies.

They did so in the knowledge that the area desperately needs new homes including, in this case, 50 per cent affordable housing with 60 per cent social rent in one of Oxfordshire's most sustainable but least affordable locations.

There is no room for blind faith in this matter. Together with misinformation, blind faith is the root cause of the Nimbysism that delays essential development.

Tom Bulford

Oxford, Oxfordshire, UK

Let's not sacrifice more English farmland for solar

At a time of war, volatile harvests and rising food prices, it is perverse to carpet productive farmland with solar panels when "industrial sheds" and warehouses offer a far better alternative ("Renewables contracts set record", Report, February 11).

Why sacrifice fields when industrial roofs by motorways and railheads could do the job, closer to where power is needed and without scarring the landscape or reducing food production? Planning policy should make solar-ready roofs mandatory on new logistics and industrial buildings, prioritise retrofitting existing stock, and fix grid bottlenecks before any more rural acres are turned into power stations.

Kim Thonger

Collyweston, Northamptonshire, UK

UK signs away its leverage over Mauritius in Chagos

Further to Jonathan Sumption's letter questioning the lawfulness of the Chagos Islands giveaway (March 7), one rationalisation for the deal recently articulated by Ben Judah – who worked on the agreement when at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office – is to spin it not as a humiliating surrender but a cunning piece of statecraft, which envisages that Mauritius will be turned into a western ally by becoming financially dependent on the UK's leasing payments.

However, this logic is faulty: the money can only exert influence on Mauritius if it has any fear of losing it, and the agreement's written terms make this impossible.

Article 15.1 of the agreement lets Mauritius unilaterally cancel the agreement and take full control over Diego Garcia if the UK misses a single payment – for any reason, regardless of circumstances.

This means the UK has signed away its own leverage – we cannot punish Mauritius for treaty violations by withholding money because then we lose the lease altogether. We are locking ourselves into giving Mauritius free money while it has liberty to behave as badly as it pleases.

The agreement is inadequate and, if it must go ahead, it needs complete rewriting with more rigorous security guarantees and proper compliance enforcement.

Robert Frazier

Salford, Lancashire, UK

A tie-maker's thank you

It was with great joy that I read Robert Armstrong's feature on "How to wear a tie" (HTSI, FT Weekend, March 14).

You gave me the great honour of publishing my defence of our trade in a letter in 2022 ("A tie manufacturer gives the FT a dressing-down").

I have continued to champion our industry and now represent my mentor, Robert Keyte, whose tie-making family's tradition began in the 1930s. His eponymous business continues to "hand slip" ties in England, to this day, for the best establishments in the world.

Armstrong's positive focus on neckwear is invaluable to us, working hard to keep the industry going.

Christopher Mundy

St Leonard's-on-Sea, East Sussex, UK

Correction

● A quote regarding legal fees charged by US law firm WilmerHale to Brazilian billionaire Alberto Saffra was wrongly attributed to the judge in the ruling. Saffra, rather than the judge, described the charges as "extremely high", which was incorrectly stated in an article on April 9.

Opinion

The case for trade, remade

ECONOMICS

Andy Haldane



The recent ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organization ended in ignominy with no agreement reached on e-commerce tariffs and a failure to discuss much-needed reform of the WTO itself. This was a fitting end to a disastrous decade for world trade.

That decade began with Brexit and the tariffs of Donald Trump's first presidency. World trade was then rocked by the acute supply chain disruptions of Covid-19 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It will end with US tariffs at their highest levels since the second world war and significant supply chain dislocation in the Middle East.

The post-war golden era of globalisation saw world trade outpace world

growth by a factor of three. That era has ended. For companies and nations, resilience rather than efficiency has now taken centre stage in trade decisions. Some fear the death of globalisation; others a rupture in the world order and an accompanying 1930s-style retreat in world trade.

Avoiding that outcome means first understanding the reason for this souring of trade sentiment. That lies in two catastrophic acts of willful blindness during the golden era: first to the adverse social consequences of free trade and second to the inherent fragility of global supply chains.

Tellingly, it was these same mistakes that caused the rupture in global finance during the global financial crisis. It was inequality that fuelled the accumulation of excessive (in particular, housing) debt. And it was the fragility of complex credit supply chains that razed this house of debt to the ground.

Yet less than two decades on, the global financial system has been rewired and rebooted. Credit has been reouted away from banking bottlenecks to improve system resilience. Ruptures in

credit supply — think private credit currently — rock the boat but no longer sink the ship. Contrary to concerns at the time, resilience has not presaged the stability of the global era.

There are good reasons to believe global trade is more likely to follow the path of global finance this century than that of global trade in the 1930s. Path dependencies matter. The cat's cradle of

Global supply chains are so embedded into business models that unravelling them would be disastrous

global supply chains is so deeply embedded into business models that unravelling it would be catastrophically costly.

It would also be unnecessary. Rapid-fire rerouting of trade is now muscle memory for companies and nations. This was exemplified following the imposition of Trump's tariffs a year ago, despite which trade volumes have continued to rise. The recent de facto

closure of the Strait of Hormuz is causing a similar rewriting.

The ability to reconfigure at speed, if at some cost, is the key to resilience. The solution to global supply chain fragilities lies in agile trading models and diversified trading partners. For the WTO, success may lie in recognising that these objectives are often easier to achieve through bilateral or plurilateral means.

A second reason for optimism on trade is the necessity of circumstance. The world faces acute twin challenges of depleted living standards and an elevated cost of living, both made worse by events in Iran. It lacks the fiscal space to tackle either. Yet, hiding in plain sight, is a fiscal-free way of killing both birds with a single stone: trade.

Studies suggest a 1 percentage point rise in trade intensity might raise national income by 0.5-1 per cent and lower the price level by 0.1-0.5 per cent permanently. If the UK had Scandinavian levels of trade-intensity, this would boost GDP by up to a fifth and lower prices by up to 10 per cent.

It is hard to think of many policies delivering such a double dividend at so

low a cost. And the penny is beginning to drop. Necessity of circumstance is the main reason we may have reached "peak tariff" in the US and why tariff retaliation, 1930s-style, has been disavowed. It is certainly why the UK is fast-tracking efforts to reset EU trade relationships.

Yes, trade deepening may come with inequality costs. But, scarred by experience, there is greater policymaker recognition now both of these costs and, crucially, that they may be better addressed through active industrial strategies than defensive trade policies.

All of which leads me to think obituaries for globalisation are premature. Any ruptures to the world order are to the Achilles, not the aorta — painful, not fatal. Perversely, today's challenges are helping remake the case for trade. Just as the GFC prompted a rewired, resilient new financial order, the "disastrous decade" may usher in the same for world trade.

The writer, an FT contributing editor, is a former chief economist at the Bank of England

Listen up: AI's communication blind spot

Haru Yamada

AI is often framed as a challenge to human intelligence. It builds on what we understand about how language is produced and recognised, performing these tasks with increasing speed and precision. What remains far less understood, however, is how our thinking is shaped by the way we listen.

While AI is seen to outperform humans in speed, pattern recognition and consistency, the strength of human intellect is often located in the more diffuse and harder-to-measure complexity of communication.

AI systems process information by identifying patterns and generating outputs based on data that has already been encoded with meaning. They operate on what is legible, stable and defined. A human listener, by contrast, does more than interpret and respond to what they understand. They also take in what is not yet known, exploring it before it settles into something recognisable. They listen for meaning that has not yet fully formed, drawing on culture and experience to attend to tone, hesitation, ambiguity and what remains unsaid. Rather than eliminate variability and ambiguity, human listening works within it.

This capacity to sit with uncertainty in listening remains largely unexplored, in part because it is difficult to measure, especially in comparison to speaking.

What can be measured becomes visible and optimised, which is why contemporary work environments tend to favour clarity, speed and resolution.

A human does more than interpret and respond. They also take in what is not yet known

Employees are trained to filter and extract what is relevant, actionable and clear. These habits shape what can be heard. When listening becomes a process of selecting from preconceived meanings, some of what does not immediately fit is excluded. The result can be miscommunication and a narrowing of the space in which understanding might emerge.

The growing discomfort with the language of "active listening" reflects some of this tension. The term now often refers to observable behaviours such as nodding, paraphrasing and maintaining eye contact. These behaviours have value, but they shift attention towards how listening appears. It becomes possible to perform attentiveness without actually discovering anything new.

Other languages make this more explicit. In Japanese, the verb "to listen" can be written in different ways. One form refers to hearing or asking as a functional intake of information. Another points to a mode of engagement that involves staying with what is not yet fully articulated. The distinction is subtle, but it highlights something that English tends to compress. Listening is not a single act but a shifting orientation. Rather than simply supporting thinking or mirroring speaking, it shapes the conditions under which both can occur.

AI is making this distinction more visible. It demonstrates how far information processing can be extended, while also revealing what is lost when communication is treated primarily as clearly coded input and output.

Systems can generate fluent responses without encountering uncertainty. But human communication takes place in fluid moments that resist rigid codification. Intelligence lies in a willingness to remain with what is still forming, allowing meaning to shift and develop.

Rather than compete with AI on speed and precision, we can use the technology to help clarify that the next shift in our understanding of communication does not lie in refining how efficiently we respond but in recognising what allows us to remain in conversation as meaning unfolds. The advantage of human intelligence is its ability to stay open, allowing understanding to emerge rather than forcing a resolution.

The writer is a sociolinguist and the author of 'Kiku: The Japanese Art of Good Listening'

Britain is in the grip of the fed-up-niks

POLITICS

Robert Shrimley



It was a vote that shook America. In 1968, the little-regarded liberal senator Eugene McCarthy created a wave of anti-Vietnam war sentiment to come within 5,000 votes of defeating the sitting President Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire Democratic primary. The result spurred a more formidable rival, Robert Kennedy, to join the presidential race and within two weeks Johnson had withdrawn. It was only later, when two polling experts analysed the contest, that they discovered that around three-fifths of McCarthy's backers were protesting that Johnson wasn't escalating the war fast enough. His vote was not so much peaceeniks, the pair concluded, as "fed-up-niks".

Britain is now experiencing its own "fed-up-nik" summer and it is reshaping the entire basis of party politics. Next month's local and devolved parliamentary elections look set to deliver huge gains for two parties of protest on opposite ends of the spectrum. Opinion polls in England suggest the big winners will be Nigel Farage's Reform UK and the Greens, newly resurgent as a party of the Corbynite left. (Scotland and Wales have the alternative avenue of the

nationalist parties.) The Greens in February enjoyed their first ever parliamentary by-election win.

Reform and the Greens' combined support is over 40 per cent in the polls and they are whittling away at the Labour and Tory vote. While the old parties are still trying to appeal to a wide and disparate coalition of voters, the challengers can target more coherent demographic groups.

Attempts by the two old parties to claw back support by aping their policies fall prey to the McCarthy misconception. For while the challengers both have an enthusiastic core that likes their major policies, be it the immigration focus of Reform or the eco-socialism and anti-Zionism of the Greens, their primary engine of growth is fed-up-niks who believe traditional politics is failing to deliver the change many have demanded since Brexit.

This feeling was captured by Hannah Spencer, the new Green MP, in her victory speech in February. "Working hard used to get you something... a nice house, a nice life, nice holidays. But now working hard, what does that get you?"

And people are right to be fed up. Two decades of largely stagnant real household incomes, stubborn inflation, higher taxes for poor public services, rising youth unemployment and a general sense that the main political parties have no answers have created a feeling of malaise not dissimilar to the late 1970s. One recent poll showed just 12 per cent of those questioned think the UK is heading in the right direction.

Conservatives remain untrusting. Labour has squandered goodwill in record time. Both appear to represent a failing status quo. Green and Reform voters share a belief that the system is rigged against them, in favour variously of the rich, the elites and immigrants.

Understanding all this is crucial for Labour in particular. Having spent the first year of his government tacking right to neutralise the Reform threat, Keir Starmer is now under pressure to shift left to staunch losses to the Greens. Yet both strategies are flawed.

What voters are really being drawn to is confident leadership that articulates their anger and appears to offer new solutions. Calls for Labour to be more bold are often seen as demands to move left. But the audacity demanded now is

Voters are being drawn to confident leadership that articulates their anger and appears to offer solutions

of a different order. The task is to articulate a clear course and pursue it with urgency and conviction.

The answer for Labour, if there is one, is giving voters reason to believe you have credible answers. There will be tactical tacks left and right on immigration or welfare or redistribution, but the only route to reclaiming the fed-up-niks is a vision of improved services and higher living standards.

This is why Starmer's time is running out. His government appears paralysed by the scale of the challenge. One senior Labour figure laments that at every political inflection point since the war, transformative leaders had an agenda that could credibly be reduced to a word. "With Atlee it was nationalisation; with Thatcher, privatisation or liberalisation; with Blair, modernisation. What is Starmer's one word?"

Reform, in particular, has its one word — restoration — a rolling back of the Blairite settlement of high immigration, liberal social policies, over-regulation, bloated bureaucracy and a loss of the entrepreneurial spirit.

For fed-up-niks the temptation to roll the dice is strong. Britain's previous economic model is faltering. They see no convincing answer to Spencer's question. After years of empty promises from the main parties, why not take a risk on someone else?

There is, in fact, a good reason. Brexit should serve as a warning about over-confident advocates for shock treatment. The Greens' economic outlook could impoverish the country, frighten off investment and sink the currency. Reform is working to reassure the country of its fiscal prudence, but the Trumpian instincts of the men who gave us Brexit should offer some pause.

The one hope for parties of the mainstream is that there is no single vehicle for discontent but two wildly polarised options. Yet the underlying point remains. Britain is in the grip of fed-up-niks and if the only parties that appear to offer transformation are the populist right and left then they will continue to set the pace of politics.

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The chips chokehold that could end the investment boom

TECHNOLOGY

John Thornhill



ran's effective blockade of the Strait of Hormuz has highlighted the alarming impact of tightening a trading chokehold. Yet there is an even bigger potential pain point in the global economy: Taiwan's control of more than 90 per cent of the world's leading-edge silicon chips, which run almost every western smartphone, data centre, AI model and smart weapons system.

The rise of Taiwan's chip industry is one of the most remarkable industrial stories of our century. But the island of 23m people lies on a geostategic — as well as a seismological — faultline, roughly 100 miles off the coast of China. Beijing has long trumpeted its "national rejuvenation" mission to incorporate the island. It has also signif-

icantly boosted its military capabilities to help achieve that end. Any serious disruption to the global supply of the world's most valuable semiconductors would surely bring the current AI investment boom in the US screeching to a halt. It would also rattle global stock markets that are heavily leveraged on Big Tech's colossal AI bet.

The over-reliance of the US on Taiwan's manufacturing output has been belatedly recognised by Washington, but overcoming that challenge is an altogether different proposition.

In January, the US Treasury secretary Scott Bessent warned that any disruption to Taiwanese chip production would pose the "single biggest threat to the world economy."

"If that island were blockaded, that capacity were destroyed, it would be an economic apocalypse," he said in Davos.

Last year, Sanae Takaichi, Japan's prime minister, said that any Chinese attack on Taiwan could constitute a "survival-threatening situation" for her country, too. The significance of that phrasing is that it would permit

the activation of Japan's self-defence forces under the terms of its 2015 security law. That points to the risks of a far wider conflict, especially if the US responded to any Chinese moves against Taiwan.

Recent administrations have been actively trying to reduce their dependence on Taiwanese chips. In 2022 President Joe Biden passed the Chips Act, which authorised \$52bn in subsidies to

Taiwan believes its dominant position in the market gives it a 'silicon shield' against attack

stimulate US semiconductor manufacturing. President Donald Trump seems to prefer the stick to the carrot. He has slapped tariffs on imports attempting to force foreign chipmakers into switching manufacturing to the US.

Investment in the American chip sector has surged as a result. According to a 2024 report from the US Semicon-

ductor Industry Association, US domestic chip manufacturing was on course to triple by 2032. More than 100 projects have now been announced in 28 states, totalling more than \$500bn of investment.

Even so, the US tech industry will remain critically dependent on Taiwan for the immediate future. Apple, Nvidia, AMD, Qualcomm and Broadcom have no viable alternative manufacturer of advanced chips at the scale they need. And even US-made chips have to be sent to Taiwan for the final delicate process of "packaging".

The Taiwanese believe their dominant position in the world's chip market gives them a "silicon shield" protecting them from attack. The Chinese would not want to jeopardise their own economic future by yanking such a critical block out of the global Jenga tower.

But just how far and how fast Beijing is prepared to go to take over Taiwan is impossible for any outsider to know. President Xi Jinping may reckon that time soon his side and keep plugging the argument that unification is inevitable one day. For what it's worth, the latest

unclassified assessment of the US intelligence community is that "Chinese leaders do not currently plan to execute an invasion of Taiwan in 2027, nor do they have a fixed timeline for achieving unification."

However, betting on the Polymarket prediction market puts the chance of China invading Taiwan by the end of 2027 at 20 per cent. That possibility is certainly not priced into the US stock market.

This betting is likely to oscillate in the coming weeks ahead of Trump's rescheduled visit to China on May 14, when the subject of Taiwan is certain to be discussed. For the moment, though, Trump is still desperately trying to extract his head from a Middle Eastern chokehold.

The irony is that US attempts to restrict exports of high-end chips to Beijing have not only stimulated the development of China's "red" chip supply chain. They may also — perversely — have cut the costs of messing with the US-focused "blue" one.

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OPINION

Trump's Perilous Straits



POTOMAC WATCH
By Kimberley A. Strassel

Those who wish Donald Trump success in his effort to rid the world of the Iranian threat spent this week warning the president of the security risks of quitting before the job is fully done. Weak-kneed Republicans might also consider the political risks.

GOP hand-wringers—inside the White House and out—are pushing the president hard to call it quits. The American people have limited tolerance for war, they note. The longer the Strait of Hormuz blockade lasts, the higher oil prices—and the cost of gas, diesel, jet fuel, heat and fertilizer—will climb, frustrating the public and potentially damaging the economy. Every day the president is focused on bombing and war messaging, they warn, is a day he isn't out making the case for his domestic achievements on energy, prices, deregulation, taxes. Look at the polls! See those Republican losses in those special elections! The midterm are coming!

All true, and all missing the obvious point: How this conflict ends matters more than when, both strategically and politically. Republicans need to emerge with an obvious, definable success. Anything less adds a huge new liability to a GOP that is already rolling into a midterm

election with a disadvantage. Give the president credit for deciding to strike Iran despite the politics. Having de-graded Iran's nuclear program last year, he might have put off further action until past the midterms, if ever. Congressional Republicans would have preferred that approach.

It's the course many presidents might have taken, knowing that Americans—focused on their own cost-of-living concerns—might be hard to convince, especially with Democrats and the media rooting for failure. Mr. Trump nonetheless decided the moment was now, midterms notwithstanding, and took bold action.

Yet the politics remain. And having chosen to invest so much time and focus, so many resources, on this war-time not spent on domestic cheerleading—it's all the more important Republicans come out of this with some political benefit. That can happen only with a clear-cut victory against Iran, one the critics can't credibly spin as defeat.

This week's messy "cease-fire" isn't clear-cut. It leaves Iran with leverage over the strait and access to enriched uranium. The headlines offer a glimpse of the political damage anti-Trump forces intend to inflict via any such ending. Good luck finding an in-depth story about Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Dan Gai's briefing this week, detailing how a mighty U.S. joint force, in 38 days, dis-

mantled one of the world's largest militaries.

After 13,000 strikes on targets, the U.S. has reduced to rubble Iran's air-defense systems, its ballistic-missile and attack-drone stockpiles, and 90% of its weapons factories. We've sunk 90% of Iran's regular naval fleet, sending more than 150 ships to the bottom of the sea. A year ago Iran

Americans hate losing wars, and he faces political trouble if he bugs out of Iran.

was a country sprinting toward a nuclear weapon and stockpiling a vast missile arsenal. Today its ability to threaten the U.S. and its allies has been reduced to a mere fraction of that, and it will be years and years before it can reconstitute. These are very real achievements.

But continued Iranian control of the strait and "nuclear dust" gave Democrats, the press and antiwar Republicans all the opening needed to declare the whole exercise a defeat. "Seems like losing," taunted a Politico headline. "Trump's central war objectives remain unmet," cheered the Washington Post. The New York Times smugly noted that this was all a "blow to American credibility," possibly its "Suez moment." The Democratic line, as voiced by Senate Minority Leader Chuck

Schumer: "This war has made us worse off than when it started." Antiwar Republicans joined in, also (oddly) claiming that Iran was now even more of a threat and proof that U.S. foreign engagement is always a costly mistake.

This is what American voters are hearing. It's only a preview of what they'll hear if Iran emerges from this as toll keeper of Strait oil, blaring its continued nuclear ambitions. And it's exactly what they will continue to hear—all the way to the election, to the exclusion of much else—unless Mr. Trump finishes the job. This may require escalation and more weeks of conflict—exactly what nervous Republicans fear. But it's the only fix. In for an inch, in for a mile.

Support for this war has somewhat followed party lines, but if there is one thing almost all Americans hate, it's losing (or seeming to lose) a war. An unambiguous victory against Iran would at the least neutralize the issue, allowing the administration to return to the case for its domestic achievements. A clear victory might even be a political boost, allowing the GOP to draw a stark contrast with weak Democratic foreign policy.

A messy "defeat"—as this cease-fire is being aptly defined—will be one more grievance for American voters to add to their frustrations with the current party in power—Republicans. It's in Mr. Trump's hands.

Write to kim@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By Richard Hershberger

He Delivered The Goods

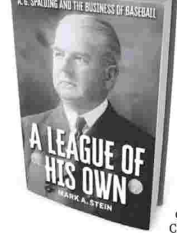
A League of His Own

By Mark A. Stein

Lyons, 352 pages, \$39.95

Spalding is a name familiar to modern sports fans as an equipment brand. The trademark is the namesake of Albert Goodwill Spalding, who in 1876 co-founded A.G. Spalding & Bro. to manufacture and retail sporting goods. He was already famous as the best pitcher in baseball. Spalding retired from play two years after the birth of his company but remained with the Chicago White Stockings (now the Cubs) organization. He ended up with a controlling stake in the club while building the business that would make him a millionaire.

Mark Stein's "A League of His Own" is the first full biography of Spalding since Peter Levine's "A.G. Spalding and the Rise of Baseball" (1985). Mr. Stein, a veteran journalist, makes good use of recent resources, including modern secondary research and digitized newspaper archives. With these he has produced the most complete account of Spalding's life available today. He avoids the pitfall of apologizing for his subject's moral shortcomings, such as his affair



with the woman who would become his second wife, begun well before his first wife's death; or his tacit endorsement of the efforts of Gai Anson, the star of the White Stockings, to impose a color line on baseball.

Spalding was born in 1850 in Byron, Ill. His widowed mother sent him at age 11 to live with his aunt and uncle in nearby Rockford, where he first played baseball. The boy proved to be a natural and eventually worked his way onto the Rockford Forest City Club. In 1867 the visiting Washington Nationals played Forest City in Chicago. The game was supposed to be a mere warm-up for the Nationals before facing serious competition. With Spalding pitching, Forest City contested the Nationals in a marathon affair. "After 3½ hours," Mr. Stein writes, "the twice-rain-delayed game was over; miraculously, Forest City had won, 29-23." (The high score was entirely reasonable for the time.)

Spalding would pitch in the National Association, founded as the first professional league in 1871, and the National League, which he helped White Stockings owner William Hulbert organize in 1876. Across both leagues, Spalding compiled a record of 251 wins against 65 losses. He took control of the White Stockings in 1882 following the death of Hulbert. The White Stockings were a powerhouse, and would go on to win the pennant five times in the 1880s. The team also had the finances to match its competitive dominance. This placed Spalding, for the better part of a decade, as the most powerful owner in baseball.

He used his position to good advantage, serving as an ambassador for National League baseball. He led the White Stockings and a team of all-stars on a world tour starting in 1889, publicizing the game and opening new markets for his sporting goods. Next he directed the National League's fight against the Players' League, a short-lived unionist outfit that arose in 1890 after a dispute over compensation. He then withdrew from active management and concentrated on his business before eventually retiring in San Diego. He died in 1915 at age 65.

The main problem with "A League of His Own" is Mr. Stein's willingness to take at face value Spalding's claims in his 1911 book, "America's National Game," which systematically inflates Spalding's role in events. The implicit claim in Mr. Stein's title is that the National League was somehow Spalding's own league in a way it wasn't anyone else's.

Albert Spalding was the most powerful owner in baseball and an ambassador for the newly established National League.

Mr. Stein recounts how Spalding hoped to induce star players in the Players' League to rejoin the National League. We are told that Spalding sent Anson to negotiate. Immediately following is an exchange that Spalding recalled between himself and Mike "King" Kelly, the biggest baseball star of the day, now with no sign of Anson. Next is a contemporary analysis of how the negotiation was doomed because Spalding sent Anson, a prickly personality, to do the talking. A more careful writer might have wondered about the reliability of Spalding's version and been open to the idea that he had inserted himself into the story.

More concerning is the pervasive sloppiness. There are errors, contradictions and claims that either don't match the citations intended to support them or lack citations entirely. Mr. Stein says that serious baseball fans in the 1860s were called cranks. This is indeed a 19th-century term, but the baseball usage dates from the early 1880s: The word rose in prominence with the trial of Charles Guiteau, the assassin of President James Garfield. The backdating is a tell. "Crank" is often adopted by modern writers as a colorful old-timey word.

Mr. Stein has the Brooklyn (the modern Dodgers) and Cleveland clubs jumping from the American Association (1882-91) to the National League following the 1889 season. It should be Cincinnati (the modern Reds), not Cleveland—a distinction Ohioans consider important—making this move. The author also dates the founding of the National Association two years before it actually happened, followed 12 pages later by another account of the event, this time dated correctly. "A League of His Own" is a valuable but flawed contribution. The book is a comprehensive narrative biography of Albert Spalding but fails to keep its stories straight or put its subject's life in context. Readers unfamiliar with 19th-century baseball will be misled while those familiar with early ball will be annoyed.

Mr. Hershberger is the author of "Strike Four: The Evolution of Baseball."

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Religion Belongs in American History Class

HOUSES OF WORSHIP
By Todd Weiler

Most schoolchildren in America still stand, place their hands over their hearts and pledge allegiance to "one nation under God." Yet too many of them graduate without ever learning what God meant to the Americans who founded and preserved the nation—or why religious language appears so many of the nation's defining moments.

U.S. history can't be taught accurately without acknowledging the role religion has played in the actions and ideas of the American people. Utah is taking the lead in addressing how to make this decision. But history more responsive to the reality of history. Under a new law the governor signed on March 25, K-12 civics education is required to incorporate the historical role of religion and religious liberty in American constitutional government and citizenship.

The bill doesn't promote any particular religious belief or devotional activity. It allows teachers to present the historical record fully and accurately, without fear of discipline from the ideological secularists who have spent the past several decades chastising religion from schools' accounts of American history. The law also allows students to express religious views in their schoolwork without fear of discrimination or academic penalty.

Students may learn that the Pilgrims arrived on the

Mayflower, that the First Amendment protects religious liberty, and that church and state are constitutionally distinct. But under practices that have prevailed for decades, they rarely learn that conscience, moral duty and religious conviction shaped the decisions that defined the American experiment.

Many students can place the Emancipation Proclamation on a timeline and explain its significance in the Civil War. Far fewer know that Abraham Lincoln told his cabinet that he had made a solemn promise to his "Maker" to issue the proclamation.

Students needn't share Lincoln's faith to understand that Court decisions prohibit religion to the civil-rights era, religion shaped pivotal moments in American history. Clergy preached independence from their pulpits, framing liberty and equality as moral obligations. Abolitionists condemned slavery as incompatible with the belief that all people are created in the image of God. The civil-rights movement was organized largely through churches, where ministers called for justice in both constitutional ideals and biblical teachings.

American presidents have also framed national events in their own moral language. During the D-Day invasion Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered one of the largest public prayers in history over the radio. He asked Americans to join him, not once but daily, to pray for American troops. Congress added "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 as a direct ideological counter to communism. These moments aren't theological exercises but historical facts.

Teachers tend to avoid the topic of faith. A new Utah law aims to remedy that problem.

After a series of Supreme Court decisions prohibited school-sponsored prayer and devotional activity, many schools grew cautious of discussing faith or religion. Rather than risk crossing a murky boundary, many educators avoided discussing religion altogether. The result was the teaching of an incomplete history. Students learned what happened, but often miss why the participants believed their actions carried moral weight.

An American history professor told me that his students were surprised by how frequently religious ideas appeared at our nation's turning points. One student wrote that he understood those events only in political or economic terms and never encountered the moral language that shaped them. Another, who identified herself as nonrel-

gious, said avoiding religion while studying historical events would be ridiculous because it was so central to the nation's participating in those historical events.

The Constitution requires government neutrality toward religion, not silence. The First Amendment doesn't forbid objective teaching about the role of faith in history, literature and civic life. To strip away content is a fundamentally incomplete version of history.

Utah is restoring this balance. The state's new law affirms that students may examine primary sources—including the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, the writings of early American leaders—to discuss the ideas they contain. Historical literacy requires engaging the ideas that shaped the people who made history.

Classrooms should reflect the richness of American history, not a simplified version shaped by uncertainty about constitutional boundaries. Students learn best when they encounter the past as it was—human beings grappling with the same questions of justice, liberty and responsibility we face today.

Civic education is more than memorizing dates. It is an exploration of the moral reasoning that shaped American history. Teaching the role of religion in that history isn't a religious project but an exercise in intellectual honesty.

Mr. Weiler, a Republican, is a Utah state senator.

New England Considers the Nuclear Option

By Andrew Fowler

A bipartisan coalition of all six New England governors has reached a conclusion that until recently would have been politically unthinkable: Renewable energy alone can't deliver the affordable, reliable power the region needs.

In a March 31 joint statement, the governors called for a "diverse energy strategy," identifying nuclear power as essential to meet growing demand and safeguard the region's "collective energy future." The shift reflects a broader trend: Energy policy is no longer only about emissions targets. It's increasingly about cost and reliability.

Electricity prices in the region today are among the highest in the country. Natural gas last year accounted for 55% of generation in the region and nuclear for 25%. New England has invested heavily in renewable energy, particularly

offshore wind and solar. Renewables last year accounted for 13% of total generation. By nature, they're intermittent and risk prolonged blackouts. Against this backdrop, nuclear energy is re-emerging as a practical solution. Nuclear power is consistent and is already a major source of clean energy in the U.S., preventing hundreds of millions of metric tons of emissions annually.

The region's governors acknowledge the limits of 'renewable' energy.

In New England, nuclear facilities at Connecticut's Millstone Power Station help maintain grid stability, powering roughly two million homes. Yet regulatory barriers have long limited the development of new nuclear capacity.

That is beginning to change. Public opinion is shifting, and

policymakers increasingly recognize that meeting climate goals without reliable baseload power is unrealistic. A 2026 analysis from regional think tanks, including my own, estimates that meeting the region's energy needs with nuclear power would cost roughly \$415 billion, about half the cost of a renewable-heavy system, while reducing emissions by 92% by 2050.

Other countries offer practical lessons. France generates about 70% of its electricity from nuclear power, maintaining low emissions while exporting energy to neighboring nations. By contrast, European systems that rely heavily on intermittent renewables have faced higher costs and reliability challenges.

The conclusion isn't that we should abandon renewables—it's that they can't stand alone. Energy policy requires balance. Wind and solar can help reduce emissions, but without complementary investments in

sources like nuclear, the region risks higher costs and greater instability.

As electricity demand rises, driven by data centers and advanced manufacturing, regions that can deliver reliable, affordable power will also have a competitive advantage. New England will fall behind if it can't meet demand.

If affordability is a priority, policymakers must focus on solving energy sources that work. Nuclear energy represents an area of alignment across political lines. Policymakers can reduce barriers to nuclear development, encourage investment and build an energy system that is cleaner, more reliable and affordable.

A region's energy policy will be judged by whether the lights stay on and whether people can afford the bill.

Mr. Fowler is a communications specialist at the Yankee Institute, based in Hartford, Conn.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Truth About Medicare Advantage

The Trump Administration is considering automatically enrolling Medicare beneficiaries in private insurance plans—aka Medicare Advantage—as a default. This may be the single most effective way to reduce Medicare waste, fraud and abuse. So why do Democrats oppose it?

Democrats are trying to flip the script by claiming that Medicare Advantage is wasting money. Insurers, Democratic Senators last week wrote to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), “are endangering the solvency of the Medicare Trust Funds.” This misinformation deserves a rebuttal.

Congress created Medicare Advantage in 1997 with the goal of using market competition to improve care for seniors and restrain spending. CMS makes payments to insurers based on what it estimates the traditional fee-for-service would spend to cover the same seniors.

Payments are adjusted for medical risk factors, so insurers are paid more to cover sicker beneficiaries. This is intended to prevent plans that discourage seniors with costly medical conditions from enrolling. Insurers use savings from reducing waste to lower patient costs and offer supplemental benefits like dental and vision care. Democrats claim insurers are reaping outsized profits, but their margins are capped by law. Insurers increase profits by offering better benefits and lower costs and expanding market share.

Most Advantage enrollees pay no premium besides their Part B outpatient requirement, compared to about \$3,000 for traditional Medicare with supplemental “gap” policies. Unlike traditional Medicare, Advantage plans also have out-of-pocket spending caps. All of this has made the plans popular, and more than half of beneficiaries are covered by Advantage.

Democrats also claim plans are overpaid by some \$1.2 trillion over 10 years. How can that be when Advantage’s share of spending is commensurate with its share of beneficiaries? Democrats claim the private plans draw healthier enrollees than traditional Medicare so they should be paid less than they are.

Yet Advantage enrollees are less likely to report themselves as in “excellent” or “very good” health than those in fee-for-service. They are also much more likely to be low-income, which Democrats say is a social determinant of health. Advantage plans cover a larger share of Medicare-Medicaid “dual eligibles” who have very low incomes or are disabled.

Democrats and their academic allies simply presume that Advantage enrolls healthier seniors because the plans are able to provide more benefits at less cost than traditional

Medicare. Well, that’s because insurers do a better job of managing costs.

Consider skin substitutes that treat severe burns or wounds. A Health and Human Services Department Inspector General report last fall found that fee-for-service spending on these treatments rose 640% between the third quarters of 2022 and 2024. Providers applied skin substitutes to minor scrapes and bruises—at an average cost of \$121,501 per patient and \$230,103 for those treated at home.

Advantage plans combined spent 93% less on substitutes than traditional Medicare, while the IG attributed to insurers using “reimbursement and utilization management tools” to limit abuse.

CMS has also flagged fraud in traditional Medicare hospice care and purchases of medical equipment like catheters. The agency this year launched a pilot program to require prior authorization in traditional Medicare for treatments that are especially vulnerable to fraud. Democrats oppose it.

They also want Advantage plans to stop prior authorization, which they falsely claim delays care. Only 7% of Advantage medical claims require prior authorization, and 98% of them are approved. Advantage insurers say they approve requests within a day on average and in only six hours for the most urgent.

Democrats also accuse insurers of “upcoding” beneficiaries to collect bigger Medicare payments. This no doubt happens. But the far bigger problem is overbilling by providers. A 2024 study in the journal Health Affairs found that hospital discharges with the highest Medicare severity billing coding rose 41% between 2011 and 2019.

The “payment system creates incentives for hospitals to upcode patients to a higher level of complexity,” the study said. Advantage plans reduce these incentives. A new peer-reviewed paper by researchers affiliated with Advantage insurer Elevance Health finds that a 10 percentage-point increase in Advantage enrollment in a county is associated with \$146 to \$194 less in Medicare spending per capita.

Insurers are a bipartisan scapegoat for rising Medicare spending. But it’s notable that overall Medicare spending last decade totaled \$431 billion less than the Congressional Budget Office projected in 2010, even as the share of beneficiaries in Advantage increased by half.

Democrats dislike Advantage because they prefer government-run healthcare, though the latter has higher costs. The opposition to Advantage is ideological, no matter the facts.

Sonia Sotomayor Profiles Brett Kavanaugh

President Obama pledged to nominate jurists with empathy, and his first pick for the Supreme Court, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, famously said in a 2001 speech she hoped “a wise Latina woman” would produce better judicial outcomes than “a white male who hasn’t lived that life.” This week we learned what she meant.

At the University of Kansas, Justice Sotomayor discussed a Court decision last year related to the “reasonable suspicion” that federal agents need to question someone they suspect might be in the country illegally. “I had a colleague in that case who wrote, you know, these are only temporary stops,” she said, referring to Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

“This is from a man whose parents were professionals,” Justice Sotomayor said. “And probably doesn’t really know any person who works by the hour.” Even if somebody stopped by immigration officers gets released, “those hours that they took you away, nobody’s paying that person,” she added, “and that makes a difference between a meal for him and his kids that night and maybe just cold supper.”

While that’s empathetic, what does it have to do with the law? In the case in question, a federal

judge ordered immigration agents not to form reasonable suspicion based on any combination of four factors: a person’s apparent race or ethnicity; speaking Spanish or accented English; presence at a particular place; or type of work. The Supreme Court stayed that injunction without comment in *Noem v. Vasquez Pardo*.

But Justice Kavanaugh explained his thinking. “Under this Court’s precedents, not to mention common sense, those circumstances taken together can constitute at least reasonable suspicion of illegal presence,” he said in a concurrence. “To be clear,” he added, “apparent ethnicity alone cannot furnish reasonable suspicion.”

Justice Sotomayor wrote a dissent joined by the other two liberals. She said those four factors cover too many innocent people to justify reasonable suspicion and fall short of the “individualized inquiry” demanded by the Fourth Amendment. “We should not have to live in a country,” she said, “where the Government can setze anyone who looks Latino, speaks Spanish, and appears to work a low wage job.”

That was overheated, and this week the Justice underscored how much her jurisprudence is based on identity and political results, not law and precedent.

Medicaid Rises 10%, Defense 4%

President Trump’s new budget proposal shrinks from serious entitlement reforms, which is no surprise. Maybe the White House worries Democrats would use the issue to attack Republicans in the midterms. But the Congressional Budget Office’s budget review for March is another reminder that a sustained defense buildup will require changes that slow the growth in entitlements.

The deficit during the first six months of this fiscal year totalled \$1.2 trillion, which is \$139 billion less than the same period last year. Credit for the smaller deficit goes to taxpayers and ebullient financial markets. Receipts have increased by \$223 billion, mainly from a \$101 billion or 9% increase in individual income taxes, \$42 billion more in payroll taxes and a 283% increase or \$123 billion more in customs duties (i.e., tariffs).

In other words, taxpayers continue to pay their “fair share” of income to fund the government. Non-withheld tax payments have grown by \$80 billion (28%) compared to last year as soaring stock prices lifted capital gains. The AI boom and the Administration’s deregulation may be offsetting economic damage from Mr. Trump’s tariffs, at least for now.

Although the Supreme Court struck down Mr. Trump’s emergency tariffs in February, CBO says customs duties last month were “nearly

three times the amount last March”—a period in which his emergency tariffs on Canada, Mexico and China were in effect. In other words, even though businesses no longer have to pay the emergency tariffs, they are still getting whacked by sundry other border taxes, including his national-security tariffs on steel, aluminum, autos, lumber and more.

The fiscal problem is, as always, the other side of the ledger, as outlays increased by \$84 billion during the first six months of this year to \$3.6 trillion. Spending on most nondefense discretionary programs fell, but these declines were more than offset by higher outlays on Social Security (a \$42 billion increase), Medicare (\$34 billion), Medicaid (\$33 billion) and net interest payments (\$33 billion). Defense rose by \$18 billion, or 4%.

Mr. Trump’s budget proposes cuts to nondefense discretionary spending, but these will be swamped over time by ballooning entitlement spending. Medicaid spending has increased 10% compared to the past year, despite the GOP tax bill’s modest reforms.

Republicans ought to use a second budget reconciliation bill to pass more significant Medicaid reforms like block grants. Democrats and their friends in the press will falsely accuse Republicans of gutting Medicaid no matter what they do. They might as well go big.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Can Any War Live Up to the Idea of Justice?

In “Pope Leo XIV Goes to War” (Main Street, April 7), William McGurn rightly concludes that pacifism “is both a terrible abdication of responsibility and a false application of principle that serves only the interests of the wicked.”

Another refreshing commentary on pacifistic views comes from a Quaker, Scott Simon, a National Public Radio talk show host and, at least earlier in life, a pacifist. In the early 2000s he wrote: “About half of all draft age Quakers enlisted in World War II, believing that whatever wisdom pacifism had to give the world, it could not defeat the murderous schemes of Adolf Hitler and his cohorts.”

The goal of the U.S. in Iran isn’t revenge, which some pacifists and liberals, including some misguided members of the clergy and others, insist it is. On the contrary, ours is self-defense, that is, taking steps to protect ourselves in the future from those who have already and ably demonstrated their desire to kill us and their efficacy in carrying out their murderous missions.

CHUCK MANSFIELD
Stuart, Fla.

In his criticism of the Pope’s plea for negotiations, Mr. McGurn implies a misreading of Catholic just-war principles. It seems, however, that Mr. McGurn may be overlooking a crucial point in the Catholic teaching on war.

Just-war principles include discrimination in targeting civilians and limiting civilian casualties as collateral damage. In the current war with Iran, threats have been made which beyond doubt will result in the deaths of many non-combatants. In an apparent effort to eliminate significant casualties to the American military, our country’s armed forces have already killed more than 100 children at an Iranian school. With good reason Pope Leo cries out for enhanced negotiation to end this war.

REV. GARMEN MELE
Irving, Texas

It should be noted that not every doctrine carries the same weight. War as a solution comes straight out of the culture of death, and, as such, just war theories occupy a low place in the hierarchy of teachings. A nation may resort to war only as the result of a dilemma where the only solutions are morally suspect. At times, it unfortunately needs to be done, but at what cost?

I suspect the Pope sees his role as an advocate who promotes transcendent values rather than as a gardener who tries to reserve a plot for weeds. That job belongs to our military chaplains who must help our troops cope with the ugly realities of war without succumbing to the culture of death.

REV. GERALD J. BEDNAR
Euclid, Ohio

Maine Shouldn’t Miss the Infrastructure Boom

Regarding your editorial on Maine’s proposed data center moratorium (“The Democratic Race to the Left,” April 8): The last thing the state needs is a policy that deters investment at a moment of economic fragility. A moratorium risks pushing long-term growth elsewhere.

The U.S. is in an AI-driven investment boom reshaping where capital and jobs flow. A moratorium signals uncertainty to companies deciding where to build, and in a fast-moving sector, even a temporary pause can redirect projects permanently. States that pause development forgo jobs, tax revenue, and a foothold in the AI

economy. Data centers offer a rare opportunity for states like Maine. They can repurpose underused industrial sites and support local employment.

States that welcome these facilities will attract investment, while those that hesitate will see projects shift to competitors such as New Hampshire. Maine faces a straightforward choice: compete for this investment or cede it to others. A moratorium would send the wrong signal at the wrong time.

ROSS CONNOLLY
Americans for Prosperity
Merrimack, N.H.

New Data Centers Won’t Be Draining Us Dry

Sen. Bernie Sanders proposes a federal moratorium on data center construction (“AI Is a Threat to Everything the American People Hold Dear,” op-ed, April 3). Trying to hit the “pause” button on innovation will simply drive investment to competitors like China, which is racing to build, not freeze.

Data centers consume water, like any other industrial building, but the magnitude isn’t as dire as Mr. Sanders implies. American data centers used 17 billion gallons of water for cooling in 2023 and

another 21 billion gallons indirectly through electricity generation, which applies to any buildings using electricity.

Even if direct cooling water use by data centers triples by 2030, it would amount to about a tenth of what the U.S. gold industry uses. The U.S. loses over two trillion gallons of water annually to leaky pipes, a far larger problem and a far better use of Congress’s attention.

Data centers do place significant demands on the grid, but new data center demand is only a problem when the grid can’t grow fast enough to support it. Large customers like data centers often cover the full cost of the infrastructure built to serve them, investments that remain part of the grid and benefit all ratepayers.

Instead of hitting pause on data centers, Congress should look to the DATA Act and state-level consumer-regulated electricity initiatives. These let data centers build their own power off-grid, insulating ratepayers while putting the investment risk where it belongs: on the private sector.

SARAH MONTALBANO
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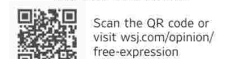
Mexico Makes Us the Villain

Regarding Mary O’Grady’s “Mexico’s Missing and the Morena Party” (Americas, April 6): On the one hand, Mexico’s President Claudia Sheinbaum tells us that the weapons Mexican cartels import from the U.S. used to slaughter each other and innocent civilians is a supply problem. On the other hand, the drugs cartels are exporting to the U.S. is a demand problem. In both cases, America is the villain, which lets Ms. Sheinbaum ignore the literally borderline failed state of Mexico.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



“We’ve switched to our new wireless stethoscopes.”

OPINION

How Trump Miscalculated in Iran

By Reuel Marc Gerecht
And Ray Takeyh

Donald Trump threatened to end Iranian civilization, then sued for peace. If the two-week cease-fire is extended, which seems likely, the extra time won't resolve the conflict's underlying causes.

The Islamic Republic is at war with its own history, to borrow from the former hostage and diplomat John Limbert. So much that is Persian, as well as the Western ideas that have poured into Iran for more than a century, eats away at the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. Mr. Trump's threats aside, he doesn't see where this regime gains strength among those Iranian men who still believe in the revolution: amid the corruption, cynicism and breakdown of governance they have caused, these believers still seek a defined struggle of good vs. evil.

The hardened men who rule Iran see this war in existential terms. Their planning appears more judicious than the U.S. initially assumed. They husband munitions for less intense but persistent barrages. The Islamic Republic's leaders have thus prolonged the war and rattled the

He followed his Venezuela model, not accounting for the ideological character of the regime in Tehran.

global economy. Western anxiety over this conflict and the start of negotiations between Tehran and Washington make it less likely that America—and by extension Israel—might come to the aid of another Iranian insurrection.

Survival has always been the clerical regime's primary objective. Its rulers truly believe that the country's vast internal dissent is in part fueled by foreign conspiracies. If they inflict enough pain on the U.S. and encourage it to disengage from the Middle East, that makes it less likely that the millions of Iranians who loathe the regime will



A funeral ceremony in Tehran, April 1.

rally successfully against it.

Compromising on anything fundamental through diplomacy with Washington threatens the regime at home. Too much of the Islamic Republic's aura has already been compromised. Too many iconic leaders have been killed, too much of Iran's defense degraded. Since the pro-democracy Green Movement in 2009, the regime has understood that more nationwide protests are always on the horizon. This perpetual instability likely led many Israelis, perhaps first and foremost Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, to believe that the regime was more brittle than it actually was. Hit it hard enough in the right spots—eliminate the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, and many of his minions—and the *nezam*, the system, might unravel.

After last June's 12-day war, the regime desperately needed some narrative of success. It can now claim, with some justification, that it stood up to America and Israel and beat the Great Satan in the Strait of Hormuz. The Persian Gulf—there is a reason why serious people have never called it the Arabian Gulf—has become Tehran's indispensable hostage. Abbas Araghchi, the smug Iranian foreign minister, captured well the leverage when he announced the cease-fire, noting "safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz will be possible via coordination with Iran's

armed forces and with due consideration for technical limitations."

From the beginning, the Israelis best understood the limits of power in the Middle East. They know that conclusive victories are unlikely. Laws one moved have to be trimmed. The Islamic Republic would need to be bombed even when there is no nuclear urgency or even a provocation. As long as Tehran had Russian and Chinese support, Jerusalem would need periodically to degrade Iran's missile force and air-defense networks. After the horror of Oct. 7, 2023, Mr. Netanyahu aspired for more than mowing. So too, it appears, did Mr. Trump—at least for a few weeks.

America was the most consequential and the least steady actor in this conflict. Mr. Trump assumed that the Venezuela model could apply in Iran, that the successors to the martyred supreme leader would be willing to make peace on the American president's terms. The cynicism that one often sees in "realist" analysis of the Islamic Republic—that the regime religiously had run out of gas and now survives on corruption and brute force—may well have made it into Mr. Trump's circle. He confused a Latin American kleptocracy for an ideological regime ruled by men who sincerely claim to know God's will. The president surely now knows what Barack Obama appears to have

learned after his presidency: that the Islamic Republic doesn't "evolve."

Mr. Trump was the first president to bomb Iran and may be the last. Given his fixation with the stock market, he may now turn his attention elsewhere. Containing determined adversaries requires building a domestic consensus and cajoling allies. Reclaiming the Gulf from Iran would need the concentration of considerable naval assets for a long time, likely months, even years. For a politician who lives in the moment and sees most U.S. allies as parasites, this seems too much to ask.

On the home front, the Democratic Party is solidly against Mr. Trump's war. The commentariat persists in its claim that this was a war that couldn't have been won and shouldn't have been fought. The Republican Party harbors its own powerful isolationist voices. And the American people never warmed up to a conflict whose objectives weren't clearly defined. "Mowing the lawn" just doesn't fit the American psyche. To many Americans, it seems immoral.

If the U.S. steps aside, it is hard to see Israel going it alone. The Iranians have learned that they possess leverage through the Gulf. To mow the Iranian lawn again, Jerusalem will need diplomatic cover, arms and logistical support from its superpower benefactor. All Israeli prime ministers, including Mr. Netanyahu, sought an American green light before proceeding against Tehran. When Washington refused, Jerusalem stood down.

Nuclear arms have never been more essential for the Islamic Republic. Ali Khamenei proved hesitant and didn't cross the threshold when everything changed after the Oct. 7 attacks. Twice bombed in eight months, his successors won't make that mistake if they can keep control of the country. Paradoxically, a war to disarm the Islamic Republic may pave the way for its ultimate rearmament.

Mr. Gerecht is a resident scholar at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Mr. Takeyh is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Digital Asset Rules Need Clarity

By Scott Bessent

The U.S. has long shaped financial markets. Clear rules, credible enforcement and a willingness to adapt to innovation have made the American approach to market regulation the world standard. But maintenance of this leadership is far from guaranteed. To preserve it and rise to the challenge before us, Congress must pass the Clarity Act. Senate floor time is scarce, and now is the time to act.

Over the past year, the global market capitalization of digital assets fluctuated between \$2 trillion and \$3 trillion. Nearly 1 in 6 Americans owns some form of digital asset. Major financial institutions have launched or sought approval for crypto-related products. Blockchain infrastructure has assumed a growing role in payments, settlements and the exchange of real-world assets. Crypto is no longer a niche experiment—it is a technology the world is adopting, regardless of which nation chooses to lead.

This government has endeavored to adapt. Last year President Trump signed the Genius Act—a landmark law that establishes a framework for dollar-backed stablecoins and effectively affirms the U.S. dollar's place on blockchain rails. It was a decisive step toward modernizing the financial system and reinforcing the dollar's global role.

U.S. financial regulation sets the standard for the world. Congress needs to act to keep it that way.

But apart from stablecoins, the regulatory framework for digital asset markets is unclear. Previous leadership at the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission has created overlapping and sometimes conflicting claims, leaving developers, exchanges and investors without firm guidance. Enforcement actions defined regulation, and goal posts shifted with political whims.

This uncertainty had predictable consequences. A growing share of crypto development relocated to places with clear rules, such as Abu Dhabi and Singapore. Abroad, firms knew when and how to register, what standards to meet, and who to operate. The benefits of domiciling in the U.S. rarely outweighed the risks.

Though industry nihilists may argue otherwise, there is one way to give developers and entrepreneurs the comfort to restore: durable law. Congress acted decisively with Genius, and the Clarity Act is the necessary next step. By delineating regulatory jurisdictions, Clarity establishes workable registration pathways for trading platforms and intermediaries. It defines when a digital asset is and isn't a security. It enacts investor protections through disclosure and custody rules. It offers new measures against illicit finance and new authorities to address misuse.

The promise of Genius can't be realized without Clarity's support. With stablecoins gaining a regulatory foothold, the next frontier is the financial infrastructure they power: tokenized assets, decentralized finance and new means of capital formation. Whether that ecosystem—and its associated jobs and tax revenue—will develop domestically or abroad depends on the durability of U.S. rules.

Economic security is national security, and it is a cornerstone of Clarity. Bringing digital-asset activity into a well-defined regulatory perimeter would strengthen oversight, improve compliance with anti-money-laundering standards and reduce user incentives to rely on opaque—and often vulnerable—offshore markets.

Similarly, the software-developer protections that Clarity incorporates would ensure that the technology powering digital finance remains open, secure and domestically developed. American corporations and entrepreneurs poised to engineer the industry's underlying infrastructure must understand their legal obligations. Clarity would deliver long-sought confidence and gives the next generation a green light to build.

The Genius Act proved that progress is possible and the efforts on the Clarity Act to date have put the end goal in sight. Congress needs only to finish the job.

The U.S. didn't become the world's financial center by hesitating in moments of technological change. It led by setting standards that others followed. By passing comprehensive digital-asset market-structure legislation, Congress will ensure that the next generation of financial innovation is built on American rails, backed by American institutions, and denominated in American dollars.

Budapest Isn't a Shining MAGA City on a Hill



POLITICAL ECONOMICS
By Joseph C. Sternberg

participant. Which suggests that reports of the death of Hungarian democracy were greatly exaggerated, as was Hungary's role as the vanguard of a movement to restore European civilization.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in office for 16 years, faces a tough re-election campaign that opinion polls suggest he could lose. Such a loss would befall Mr. Orbán despite notorious efforts to rig the system in favor of his Fidesz party. Those include direct changes to the electoral system to make it easier for Fidesz to rack up votes in important districts, which constitute the biggest reason to think he still could eke out a win.

More to the point, though, such procedural machinations would be necessary for an Orbán win only because his other attempts to dominate Hungarian politics appear to be failing. Those include moves to consolidate ownership of major media outlets in the hands of his political friends and allies, as well as vigorous efforts to restrict foreign funding of political activism, especially by Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros.

One shouldn't be cavalier about the effects such restrictions can have on a country's politics. Perhaps, however, one shouldn't overstate the benefits Mr. Orbán reaps. No amount of media rigging or anti-Soros inveighing alters the reality that Hungarians have grown exasperated with economic underperformance and ex-

hausted with such a long-tenured prime minister. It has to be said.

If Mr. Orbán may lose the election, it isn't obvious anyone else will win it. The front-runner is Péter Magyar, a former Fidesz member now leading a conventional center-right party. But expect complex electoral math to deprive Mr. Magyar of an outright majority in Parliament. No Brussels' regret, Hungary is unlikely to follow the lead of Poland, where in 2023 voters ditched a right-leaning administration loathed by the European Union and replaced it with a government led by center-left arch-European Donald Tusk.

Hungarians turn out to be pretty European, and Orbán is more opportunist than he is revolutionary.

Hungarians will remain more socially conservative than the norm farther west. Budapest may become less obstructive regarding European support for Ukraine—Mr. Orbán's tantrums here being the thing Brussels currently finds most irksome about him—but may not become entirely supportive, either.

Still, one starts to suspect a lot of people have gotten Hungary wrong, not least Mr. Vance and other MAGA hangers-on. The only reason Americans have heard so much about Hungarian politics is that America's own national-conservative right glommed onto Mr. Orbán as a tribune.

The theory, as implied by Mr. Vance while campaigning for Mr. Orbán in Budapest this week, is that the Hungarian politician shows how one can assemble a durable electoral coalition behind opposition to immigration, resistance to loony equity policies, isolationist foreign policy,

and strenuous resistance to cultural wokery. As an added bonus, Mr. Orbán built much of his career on his spats with Brussels, in which he claimed to be asserting Hungarian national sovereignty against a bumptious, antidemocratic multinational bureaucracy.

This interpretation got Mr. Orbán and Europe all wrong. Mr. Orbán was ahead of his European peers in recognizing the social and fiscal dangers of the wave of illegal migration that arrived from the Middle East in 2015. Otherwise, however, his method is more cynical than revolutionary. Brussels attempts to impose rule-of-law strictures that would impede, say, corruption. Mr. Orbán couches his opposition as an assertion of Hungarian national will, but then folds to rake in EU subsidy checks.

Conspicuously, Mr. Orbán has never proposed leaving the EU. The reason is that, after 16 years under his governance, Hungarians still appear to be just as "European" in outlook as the rest of the continent. At the latest edition of the EU's Eurobarometer poll, a comprehensive public-opinion exercise across the Continent, tells the story. Released

last autumn, the survey found Hungarians as entirely average. They're slightly less satisfied with their current lives than most Europeans, but far from the most dissatisfied (the latter are the Bulgarians, Greeks and Romanians). Hungarians' preoccupation with inflation, health and household budgeting tracks with the norm in most European countries. And Hungarians have a higher opinion of the EU (60% "tend to trust" that hated Brussels bureaucracy of the European Commission) than their own national government (41%), a pattern that repeats in many countries.

Posit that Hungary is like its immediate neighbors in another way, too: Countries in that neck of the woods find themselves in an extended transition from communist autocracy into capitalist democracy that grinds on under the surface decades after the rest of the world lost interest. This is a recipe for a degree of political volatility, but not conducive to any sort of durable movement of conservative civilizational restoration. If that's what Europe needs, Mr. Vance may well end up disappointed by this weekend's election result, but he shouldn't be surprised.

A Good Husband Walks

By Allan Ripp

Social media is full of scolds criticizing men who walk ahead of their partners. "It all comes down to . . . control, power, making you feel disregarded," one trauma-recovery expert explains on TikTok, diagnosing "walking ahead as a symptom of narcissism." The person in front signals, "I'm in charge, you follow me," while the one behind feels belittled. A popular dating influencer says such behavior demonstrates a lack of care, disrespect or attachment avoidance.

Ouch! My wife and I typically take two daily walks together. We're mostly side by side, but I tend to drift in front of her; especially if one of us is on the phone, or we're trying to beat a crosswalk red light. In an airport, the distance between us can stretch to many yards, usually because I'm scouting the restrooms.

Sarah would likely admit to some self-inflicted ball-behind. Although a wise companion in other respects, she occasionally heads that way when we're going this. When I walk with her and her friend Susan at the same time, I become their Australian shepherd, nudging them to stay on track lest they wind up at the end of a pier or down a dark alley.

walker's traits. With piles of snow at every intersection and pedestrians moving in slow motion, I regularly bolted ahead and mounted obstacles like a fullback rushing for glory, leaving Sarah somewhere behind. I believed I was forging a path for her, but she saw my varsity moves as inconsiderate and selfish.

Now when we approach kids crowding the sidewalk, a curbside puddle or a dog crouching to pee, I stop and extend my arm like Sir Walter Raleigh, offering Sarah the right of first passage. She may still go the other way, but at least she gets first dibs. We realign afterward, picking up where we left off. Sarah welcomes the gesture and I've noticed others admiring my gallantry. I may even bring up the rear for a few blocks, which relationship savants say shows my protective side.

I recently hurt my ankle, but we kept walking. On one outing I noticed Sarah starting to draw away from me with no impediment ahead. Her pace accelerated and I hustled to keep up—she wasn't looking back. Then I remembered it was her day to pick up our granddaughter from after-school ballet. Let her go on, I thought. It beats being married to a narcissist.

Mr. Ripp runs a press relations firm in New York.

Mr. Bessent is Treasury secretary.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

PUBLISHED SINCE 1888 BY DOW JONES & COMPANY

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Opinion

The New York Times

The Iran War Will Change Our Lives

Bill Saporito and David Stubbs

Mr. Saporito is a senior staff editor in Opinion, Mr. Stubbs is the chief investment strategist at AlphaCore Wealth Advisory.

WHEN will the conflict with Iran end? There's a shaky cease-fire in place, but President Trump's timeline, like his military strategy, is ephemeral. The war's knock-on effects, however, are already here. They are, in all likelihood, affecting your life — and will continue to for most of this year.

Let's start with your summer vacation planning. The airlines are responding to high jet fuel prices by raising fares while trimming their schedules — United has already announced a 5 percent flight cut. That means fewer seats will be available at peak travel season and flight crews will work fewer hours.

Heading to or from a city such as Presque Isle, Maine, or Butte, Mont., that is served exclusively by regional airlines? Those flights will be the first to be canceled, Mike Boyd, an airline industry consultant, has pointed out. Carriers can't run the small, 50-seat jets that serve those markets profitably when jet fuel has more than doubled, to more than \$4 a gallon.

The value carriers that serve popular destinations such as Orlando, Fla., and Las Vegas could be particularly hard hit. Florida-based Spirit Airlines, known for its yellow jets and unbundled fare structure, just emerged from its second bankruptcy; Frontier, its Western counterpart, delayed orders for new planes and canceled some leases on its current fleet to concentrate on filling the planes it has. And all this is on top of the airport chaos created by bad weather (hello, climate change), air traffic controller shortages and Transportation Security Administration staffing issues.

Road trippers won't have it much better. For recreational vehicle owners or renters, a trip to national parks such as Zion and Great Smoky Mountains — already suffering from DOGE budget cuts — will get more challenging with R.V.s that average six to 15 miles per gallon of gasoline. Motorboaters could be up a creek, too.

Expect to pay even more for food, too. Prices for meat, wheat, coffee and sugar are rising because the planting, harvesting, processing, storage and transportation of food are energy intensive. Farmers are struggling to get the fertilizers they've ordered from the Middle East. The price of anhydrous ammonia fertilizer, one of the most used, is up more than 20 percent this year. Farmers can buy potash-based fertilizers from Canada, but those are subject to a 10 percent tariff. The other big supplier? Russia.

If the current fertilizer disruption interrupts planting season, which is already un-

Expect to pay more for food, flights, gas and loans this year.



ALEXIS KONRATYEV FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

derway in many parts of the world, food prices will rise in the second half of the year. And that's not all.

In developed countries like ours, persistently high inflation increases the risk that the Fed and other central banks will feel compelled to raise interest rates. That lifts the price of borrowing money across the economy — not just credit card and auto loans, but also mortgage rates.

Although conventional wisdom says that central banks should look beyond an energy price shock and not change their rates, their capacity to remain steadfast is limited. Still contending with their pandemic-era inflation, Europe's central banks may soon have to consider raising rates to protect their inflation-fighting credentials — another economic brake when we hardly need one.

At a time when rising oil prices are pressuring family budgets, E.U. governments may be forced to cut their spending. Interest

rates on government bonds have risen sharply in Britain and France since the start of the war, meaning these nations will have to spend more to cover debt payments, leaving less money for price relief for the public.

The great build-out of the artificial intelligence infrastructure — which has been pumping billions into our economy — is also in jeopardy. Helium is a vital component in semiconductor production, and one-third of the world's supply is produced in Qatar, which has been targeted by Iranian strikes. Without a reliable supply, the semiconductor manufacturers that make chips won't be able to meet demand. So, too, is the level of financing for these projects, tied to a retrenching private credit sector and perhaps a pullback by sovereign funds in the Middle East that must now spend to repair war damage.

Most of America's problems, and they are not insignificant, still pale in comparison

with what's happening in the rest of the world. Developing nations are in a particularly dangerous bind. The United Nations reckons that more than 670 million people were living with hunger in 2024 and, across 68 countries where the U.N. World Food Program is active, 318 million people are projected to face acute hunger this year.

This is all assuming that everything in Iran remains as is. Things could get a lot worse in a hurry if the Houthis in Yemen decide to block the Strait of Bab al-Mandab at the mouth of the Red Sea, where ships must pass after transiting the Suez Canal. That is likely when \$100-a-barrel oil becomes \$200 a barrel.

The worst-case scenario is impossible to predict, of course, but what's becoming more certain is that if disruption from the Iran conflict is still significant on the day America celebrates its 250th birthday, the bill for the party is going to be enormous.

NASA Flew by the Moon, but Behind the Scenes, Its Science Is a Mess

Kate Marvel

A former research scientist at the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies.

ARTEMIS II'S journey around the moon, scheduled to conclude on Friday, has delivered stunning new images of our home world taken from space.

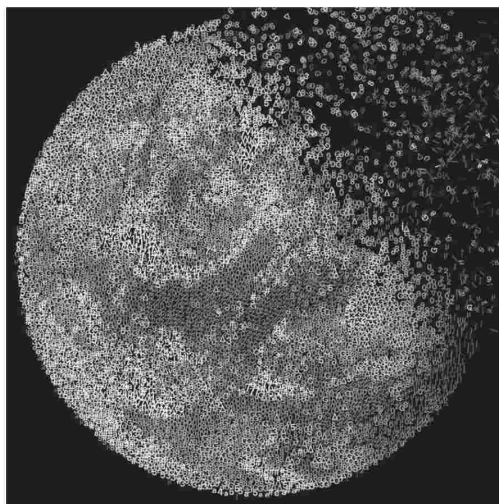
Those pictures remind us that Earth has changed immensely since the last time astronauts went near the moon in 1972. So has NASA. Budget cuts, chaos and political interference now threaten the very science that motivates and enables space exploration. President Trump's 2027 budget request calls for a nearly 50 percent cut to NASA's science division. We may still be able to shoot for the moon, but we're losing the ability to understand our own world.

When I was young, I always wanted to work for NASA, and after years of study, I was finally hired as a research physicist. But last month I quit my job, joining the over 10,000 STEM Ph.D.s who have left the federal government since Mr. Trump returned to office. Call it the great American nerd exodus, as scientists studying cancer, agriculture and weather prediction suddenly became the targets, or collateral damage, of political attacks.

I worked for the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies as a contractor and then civil servant for 10 years, studying the best planet of all: Earth. My job was to parse satellite data about rainfall and clouds, to model the present and the future state of our planet. Tracking the changes to Earth from space put me and my colleagues in the cross hairs of an administration particularly devoted to protecting the interests of the oil and gas industry. By this March, the chaos was a constant, and the attacks on our work were only intensifying. I knew then that it was time to go.

My team at NASA survived the initial Department of Government Efficiency purges only to be evicted from our office in New York City in May for no apparent reason. Resigned to office couch surfing, I continued writing grant proposals. Some of them were marked "selectable," meaning they would have been funded if the money had been available. Other proposals disappeared into a black hole. We didn't know where the money was.

A September report by Democrats on the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation gave credence to what my colleagues and I suspected: The agency was illegally putting into effect the



BOB FARMER

president's budget request, with its diminished funding for science, rather than waiting for Congress to approve funds. By January, Congress had passed a budget largely restoring NASA's science funding. But that didn't mean the money was readily available to many researchers like me.

There were rumors the situation might get better. There were rumors it might get much worse. No one knew what to expect. Which was ironic, given our jobs.

It wasn't just the funding uncertainty that bothered us. In March 2025, the agency eliminated the role of chief scientist, which most recently had been held by a climate researcher, signaling a bad omen for earth science research. In all-agency town halls, we heard a lot about the moon and Mars, and little about our own planet, as if the only habitable world in the solar system were an afterthought.

Researchers studying the sun, the stars and other planets and moons also faced disruption and cuts. The library at the NASA

Goddard Space Flight Center was shut down, as were dozens of labs, supposedly a "consolidation." The career scientific leaders we knew and trusted were struggling to guide us through the turbulence. Their bosses seemed more interested in making sure no one had pronouns in their email signatures than in protecting science.

The final straw for me was when the NASA administrator, Jared Isaacman, disparaged our work in the magazine Science in March. When asked about climate change, he argued that "for NASA to assemble scientists and put out papers on politically charged issues, whether or not this is an impending climate catastrophe, is not helpful to the broader NASA mission."

Now that no one can mistake my position for the official view of the U.S. government, I can speak freely. Climate science is not innately politically charged, whatever the administration says. No one I worked with had (or wanted) the power to make policy. It was our job to study the laws of physics, which

Budget cuts and politics threaten the research that enables space exploration.

remain true no matter who's in power.

Reasonable people can disagree on what should be done to limit the effects of climate change. But rather than debate policy, the administration has chosen to attack science itself. It has effectively canceled the National Climate Assessment, fired researchers at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and left NASA scientists in limbo. Now, it plans to dismantle the National Center for Atmospheric Research, a crown jewel of weather and climate science.

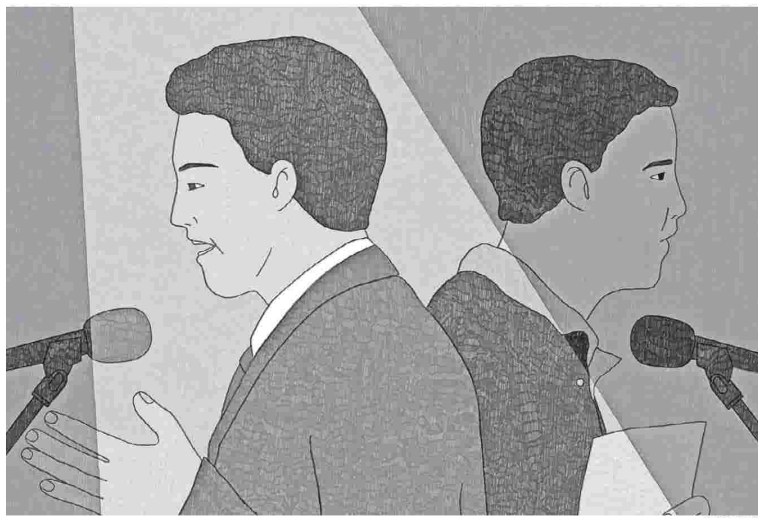
The truth is that we are already in the early stages of climate catastrophe. Spring temperatures in the Western United States have shattered records. In the Colorado River basin, an already severe drought is worsening thanks to record-low snow levels in the Rocky Mountains. High temperatures, dry vegetation and low rainfall may result in a terrifying fire season.

Without major reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, the impact of climate change will become only more severe. Homes and businesses will be destroyed, neighborhoods will become uninsurable or even uninhabitable, and shocks to food or supply chains will cause unrest. Eventually, even the NASA administrator may have to admit that the situation is catastrophic.

Even as the evidence mounts that the climate is growing increasingly unstable, NASA's study of Earth still offers plenty of wonder: satellites that see the ocean in glorious color, pieced-together records of past climates, high-resolution models that show smoke and pollution swirling through the atmosphere. I'm awed, dizzy and grateful to exist amid such otherworldly beauty. It's impossible not to want to know more.

Humans have access to all this knowledge free of charge because of NASA. That was always part of the promise of government-funded science: discovery for all, wonder as a pledge to be something better and greater than we are.

NASA is still trying to conjure the notion of inspiration. Perhaps if and when Artemis II returns safely to Earth, a generation of children will be inspired to see our world from above. But for now, NASA is throttling the scientific pipeline and diminishing our ability to see and understand our planet. Everyone deserves the benefits that climate science can bring — an understanding of the present, the ability to plan for the future and the sheer joy of learning about the world, even as it changes. Without science, the stunning images of Earth from space are only pretty pictures. We all deserve so much more.



CLAUDIA ZONTA

Jury Duty for Politics

Hélène Landemore

A political theorist at Yale and the author of "Politics Without Politicians: The Case for Citizen Rule."

AMERICAN democracy has a personality problem.

At its core, our political system is a popularity contest. Elections reward those who are comfortable performing in public and on social media, projecting confidence and dominating attention. This dynamic tends to select for so-called alpha types, the charismatic and the daring, but also the entitled, the arrogant and even the narcissistic.

This raises a basic but rarely asked question: Why are we filtering out the quiet voices? And at what cost?

Over the past two decades, my research on collective intelligence in politics, democratic theory and the design of our institutions shows that the system structurally excludes those I call in my new book "the shy." By the shy I mean not just the natural introverts, but all the people who have internalized the idea that they lack power, that politics is not built for them, and who could never imagine running for office. That is, potentially, most of us, though predictable groups — women, the young and many minorities — are overrepresented in that category.

The early-20th-century British writer G.K. Chesterton once offered a striking and unusual metaphor for what democracy should look like. He wrote, "All real democracy is an attempt (like that of a jolly hostess) to bring the shy people out." What would our democratic institutions look like if we took that metaphor seriously?

One answer — perhaps the most promising one we have at this time — can be found in citizens' assemblies.

Citizens' assemblies are large groups of ordinary people, selected by lottery, who come together to learn about a public issue, hear from experts and advocacy groups, deliberate with one another and make recommendations. Picture jury duty for politics. Through random selection, citizens' assemblies reach deep into the body politic to bring even the initially unwilling to the table. Once seated, participants are given time, structure and support to find their voices and contribute to forming a thoughtful collective judgment.

Citizens' assemblies are gaining traction around the world. As of 2023, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development documented 733 cases of lot-based deliberative assemblies around the world, most of them taking place over the last 20 years, in what the subtitle of an earlier report called a "deliberative wave."

Ireland conducted at least five of them at the national level, where they helped break political gridlock on issues ranging from same-sex marriage to abortion and climate policy. In recent years, France convened at least 19 at the regional level and three at the national level, including one on climate policy and one on end-of-life issues. (I sat on the Citizens' Convention for Climate as a researcher-observer and was later appointed by the French government to the governance committee of the Citizens' Convention on the End of Life.)

Citizens' assemblies are now also spreading across the United States at the local level — from Oregon's Citizens' Initiative Review model to Michigan's Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission to Washington State's climate assembly to Petaluma's Citizens' Assembly in California.

I now serve as the director of design and chairwoman of what will soon become one of the largest state-level citizens' assemblies in the United States. From July to September, the Connecticut Citizens' Assembly will bring together 100 randomly selected Connecticut residents for several weekends of deliberation about the question of property taxes and how to fund local public services.

SO FAR, MOST CITIZENS' assemblies worldwide remain single-issue, one-off events and are purely advisory. But the 2019-21 French climate convention was uniquely empowered by the government's mandate to initiate and formulate legislative measures, leading one of its chairmen to describe it as a "citizen parliament" with a pre-legislative function. It could even turn into a full-on, de facto citizen legislature. At the local level, the 80,000-person German-speaking region of Belgium has established a permanent citizens' council of 24 randomly selected citizens, whose task is not only to con-

vene one-off citizens' assemblies on specific issues but also to help set the parliamentary agenda.

The benefits of these assemblies are striking. Citizens' assemblies typically produce recommendations that are more nuanced, more pragmatic and more aligned with what the public actually wants than what currently emerges from elected legislatures. When their recommendations are put to voters in polls, as in France on climate, or referendums, as in Ireland on same-sex marriage and abortion, they usually receive overwhelming public support.

Because their members are randomly selected, citizens' assemblies reflect the underlying values and preferences of the larger population. But what is truly fascinating is that the depolarizing and educational effects of deliberation in this nonpartisan context will sometimes sway liberal majorities toward conservative conclusions and vice versa.

In the 2019 "America in One Room" deliberative poll (a cousin of citizens' assemblies, except bigger, shorter in duration and with the goal of generating informed policy preferences rather than actionable policy recommendations), deliberation led both Republicans and Democrats to revise their views — often substantially. Republicans shifted on immigration, with support for reducing admissions falling to 34 percent from 63 percent and backing for forcing undocumented immigrants to return to their home country before they can apply to work legally dropping to 40 percent from 79 percent. Democrats also changed their minds, in some cases moving away from traditionally progressive positions: Support for "bonded" (collapsed to 21 percent from 62 percent, backing for a \$15 minimum wage fell to 59 percent from 82 percent, and support for expanding Medicare dropped to 56 percent from 70 percent. These shifts show that deliberation does not push opinion in a

How might our institutions be different if we listened to the quietest voices?

single ideological direction but rather toward the conclusions supported by better evidence and what Jürgen Habermas used to call "the unforced force of the better argument."

Interestingly, it is also true that where a pre-existing underlying consensus in the assembly survives deliberation, as it did in France on end-of-life issues, the outcome is nevertheless much more acceptable to the minority.

This is so because in citizens' assemblies, minorities are given time and attention in a way that our competitive, winner-takes-all politics often does not afford. In the last plenary of the French convention on end-of-life issues, Soline Castel, a member of the ideological minority against assisted dying, made a point of saying: "I want to thank the 75 percent for giving us 50 percent of the final document and 50 percent of the speaking time."

Beyond their problem-solving and depolarizing dimensions, however, citizens' assemblies are also joyful and exciting processes that reconcile people with one another and with politics. Participants arrive as strangers; they leave as civic friends.

The main surprise to me from observing these assemblies was indeed the intense bond, often expressed in the vocabulary and gestures of love, that formed between participants over the course of many months of hard work, late-night discussions at the hotel bar and the occasional celebratory event. As Jean B., an older member of the French end-of-life convention, put it during the last weekend, "We have become the members of an improbable family born out of the works of chance and necessity."

When democracy feels this inviting, it transforms people.

CONSIDER HUGUES-OLIVIER BRILLOUIN, who began the process as a self-declared disgruntled citizen and climate-change skeptic. He spent the first day of the French climate convention with a frown of disgust on his face, taking his carry-on bag everywhere instead of checking it at the door because, as he explained, he was leaving any minute now. He ended up staying until the end of the nine-month process and voted in favor of the convention's proposals. After the convention was over, he went on to run

for election in his home region.

Or consider Harry A. (most of the participants did not use their full names) from France's end-of-life convention in 2022, who came to participate all the way from his native Guadeloupe, one of France's overseas departments. For a plenary at the end, he said that he had "to be eight hours on a plane every other weekend" but that he was coming out of the experience "a bigger man" with more self-esteem because "with this convention, at least once in your life, you feel useful."

Bringing out the shy also transforms the confiding. They learn to dial their energy back and take pride in others' accomplishments. During the climate convention, facilitators went around a working group of about 30 people and reached Arlette, a discreet older lady with silver hair. The whole room stood still, patiently waiting for her frail voice to make a few points. After she was done speaking, a man exclaimed, "You are speaking, Arlette, you are growing!" The room broke into applause and joyful whistles.

Bringing out the shy, finally, and perhaps most crucially, benefits the quality of the deliberation. When the group is made up of over 50 percent women, performative bravado tends to recede, uncertainty is allowed, and the discussion shifts toward problem-solving and collective purpose. Talking about housing reforms in a group that includes young people (the youngest person at the climate convention was 16), renters and people who have themselves been homeless more vividly brings up the risks of eviction. And no one in such assemblies would dream of calling poor people "the toothless ones," as one former Socialist French president did.

No one is saying that we don't also need assertive leaders — people whose personalities are so strong and charismatic that they can help persuade other people of something they would not necessarily consider otherwise. But do we need a Congress and a White House full of them?

And contrary to our intuitions, leadership need not be loud. In an experiment with student councils chosen by lottery in Bolivia, Adam Cronkright, a sortition activist with Democracy in Practice and the director of the forthcoming documentary "Goodbye Elections, Hello Democracy," showed that leadership skills reveal themselves among students who would never have run for elections. Freed from the need to campaign, these students focused less on popularity-enhancing promises (like a cool prom) and more on concrete improvements to student life (like creating a school library, securing computer donations and establishing a student-led system to gain access to half-price bus fares).

In citizens' assemblies, similarly, it is not necessarily the flamboyant and the know-it-alls who are the most influential or socially rewarded, though they, too, can be right and even appreciated! It's very often the quiet, serious people who do the real work, without claiming the credit or the limelight.

CRITICS SOMETIMES DISMISS citizens' assemblies as naïve or impractical, arguing that ordinary people lack the expertise to make complex decisions. But this objection misunderstands both expertise and democracy. Assemblies do not replace experts; they hear from them. Their proponents do not claim that everyone knows everything, only that when placed in the right conditions, everyone is capable of learning, deliberating and exercising judgment. Like voting, but in a more demanding form, citizens' assemblies institutionalize a fundamental democratic premise: political equality.

Most important, citizens' assemblies recognize that confidence should not be confused with expertise, nor shyness with ignorance. Our current system routinely entrusts complex decisions to elected officials, on the basis of their confidence, ambition and visibility. Citizens' assemblies create groups in which the shy are on par with the confident, and where the values of humility and listening are privileged. There are reasons to believe that this model is more effective.

If we actually want a democracy that reflects the thoughts of the country as a whole and delivers for everyone, we need to stop designing institutions around the "natural leaders." Real societies are made up of introverts, listeners, followers and caretakers, too. They have things to say and many contributions to make. Our politics, like a jolly hostess, should make room for — and bring out — all of them.

LETTERS

Ditch Digital Junk Food for a Healthier Mind

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Stop Filling Your Mind With Digital Doritos," by Cal Newport (Opinion guest essay, March 29):

As the Australian psychologist who coined the term "digital nutrition" in 2013 to move the conversation around our digital consumption habits beyond crude measures of screen time, I found Mr. Newport's argument both resonant and reductive.

Yes, some digital content we consume is A.I.-generated "workshop," with the equivalent of genetically modified ingredients, but it is wrong to imply, as Mr. Newport does, that all TikTok videos are "digital Doritos" or that social media can be understood only through the lens of harm. For many young people, these social media platforms also provide what I call virtual vitamins — connection, creativity, identity, information and support.

Mr. Newport also approvingly notes Australia's under-16 social media ban, but the ban will not, on its own, create healthier digital habits or stave off brain rot.

Removing digital junk food from the pantry without teaching discernment, self-regulation and digital literacy is like emptying the cupboards and hoping that young people will magically emerge at 16 with a sense of balance and moderation.

The real task is not abstinence until a birthday. Real digital nutrition involves helping children and adults alike understand persuasive design, algorithms, social dynamics and content quality so they can consume technology with intention and intelligence, not secrecy.

JOCELYN BREWER
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

TO THE EDITOR:

I plan to give Cal Newport's essay to my grandchildren to read — hopefully without distractions from their phones.

A Failure of Leadership

TO THE EDITOR:

President Trump doesn't understand that bravado is not strength; it is a liability.

When the American presidency trades seasoned diplomacy for midnight social media broadsides, the cost is measured in global geopolitical and economic fallout.

By prioritizing hyperbole over allied collaboration, we have managed a dangerous feat: isolating ourselves from our allies while handing our adversaries new leverage. Our erratic stance on global trade and territorial seizures has pushed traditional partners toward China and Russia.

The United States' lack of strategic coordination has handed Iran the greatest

weapon: the Strait of Hormuz, allowing it to monetize a global oil crisis to fund the very nuclear ambitions we were seeking to curb.

This poorly thought-out war has made Iran a sudden and unexpected global superpower.

Hyperbole and going it alone do not project strength. They signal a vacuum in leadership that leaves the world stage more fractured and the American position more vulnerable. Such leadership is reckless, and the consequences are expensive and enduring.

ADAM LIPSON
HILTON HEAD ISLAND, S.C.
The writer is the president and chief executive of Network + Security Technologies, a cybersecurity consulting firm.

'Moon Joy'

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Moon Joy" Overtakes a Crew in Wonderment" (news article, April 8):

We on Earth can't experience what the astronauts are experiencing as they behold the moon from their unique perspective. But to hear of their joy beyond words, to see these scientists and engineers in a state of inspiration, enables us to at least imagine it.

I hope that on a future journey NASA will send poets and composers who can convey their wonder to us through their arts.

RON MEYERS, NEW YORK

My mother was a psychiatrist and instilled in me an early fascination with the workings of the brain. I have worked hard to expand the frontiers of my brain in action, as well as my awareness of when it crosses into a zone of hyperclarity and, occasionally, creativity. To me, that is the one true natural high.

As an agricultural policy expert, I work across disciplines, with one half of my brain in science and the other half in law and policy. I am convinced that cognitive cross-communication has made me smarter.

One problem, though, I concentrate so deeply at the computer — sometimes for three or four hours — that my body locks up. When I stand, I am like the Tin Man, looking for the oil can.

CHUCK BENBROOK
LAKEVILLE, MAINE

TO THE EDITOR:

When I came upon Cal Newport's article about people's diminishing ability to concentrate for long periods, I wondered, "Is that true?" So I decided to read it.

I was well into the first paragraph when I noticed a robin on my bird feeder. Spring had arrived!

I started over on the essay and was locked in until the third paragraph, when I observed that the wind had really picked up and was wreaking havoc with the leaves in my front yard.

I returned to the essay and was riveted — until the sixth paragraph, when I realized that my coffee had gotten cold. So I took my cup of coffee to the microwave and warmed it up.

With a delicious hot cup of coffee in hand, I returned to the article and was amazed by Mr. Newport's insights until I came across his reference to Jane Fonda workout videos and wondered, "Is Peter Fonda still alive?" I looked it up. No. He died in 2019.

Returning to the essay, I realized, halfway through, that I needed a nap. All that concentrating had tired me out. But I vowed that when I got up from my nap, refreshed, I would read Mr. Newport's entire essay, no matter what. I suspect he knows what he's talking about.

Look! A vintage 1958 Chevy just drove by!

DOUG WILLIAMS, MINNEAPOLIS

TO THE EDITOR:

Can't concentrate? Am I the only one who remembers Luis Buñuel's 1972 movie "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie"?

The recurring gag in that movie was the telephone that began ringing anytime anyone started to say something meaningful.

GARY MCCLINTOCK
ROCK ISLAND, ILL.

Trump-Speak

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Trump Is Transforming the English Language One Verb at a Time," by Sarah L. Kaufman (Opinion guest essay, April 6):

While elucidating President Trump's idiosyncratic (mis-) use of verbs, Ms. Kaufman chooses to describe an aspect of his style as obtuseness as opposed to lying. I would suggest that when Mr. Trump says "we've won" the war with Iran, he's lying — and that it is more than generous, and potentially (however inadvertently) misleading, to describe this as obtuseness.

Contrary to Ms. Kaufman's claim, I do not think that Mr. Trump is capable of a sophisticated use of language. In fact, much of what comes out of his mouth can be understood from a psychological perspective whereby he accuses others of what he is doing (projection) or makes statements about reality as he wishes it existed rather than what it actually is (a kind of confabulation).

I am reassured to see how The New York Times has recently been calling out Mr. Trump's lies more openly. Doing so speaks directly to his lack of fitness and his dangerousness in the role of president.

LARRY S. SANDBERG
NEW YORK

The writer is a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College.

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EDITORIALS

Why must council kill mayoral opposition to a tipped minimum wage? We'll let our restaurant owners explain

Next Wednesday, Chicago's City Council should override Mayor Brandon Johnson's veto of legislation passed last month to ensure Chicago's restaurants, particularly those independently owned and operated, have a future in a city renowned for its eateries and bars. That measure passed with 30 votes, but now 34 will be needed to freeze the minimum wage paid to tipped employees where it is now rather than having it rise steadily over the next few years to the same level as other (untipped) workers in the city get, per current law.

In our view, assuming it makes it to the agenda, this would be council's most important action since late last year when it defied Johnson's frenzied, counterproductive push for a monthly tax on each job in Chicago generated by the city's largest private-sector employers.

Chicago has a problem because ending the tipped minimum wage is the pet project of a well-funded, out-of-state activist group called One Fair Wage that has mounted a national campaign to eliminate tipped minimum wages. That foolhardy change passed the council in 2023, early in Johnson's mayoralty when the freshly elected former Chicago Teachers Union organizer wasn't yet deeply underwritten in polls of Chicagoans.

It didn't take long for many of the aldermen who'd voted for ending the tipped minimum wage to have regrets.

And for good reason. The restaurant owners in their wards, just a few years after surviving the existential threat of COVID-19 and then navigating the highest inflation in the country in decades, warned that eateries couldn't survive a sharp increase in labor costs, too. To their credit, many of those aldermen, behind their restaurant owners.

But a handful of their peers representing wards with many restaurants strangely have continued to support Mayor Johnson in this folly, seemingly because they don't have the guts to do otherwise.

Among the City Council members who voted last month with the mayor and against the proposal to freeze the tipped minimum wage: Matt Martin, whose 47th Ward includes restaurant-rich neighborhoods like Ravenswood and Lincoln Square; Daniel La Spata, whose 1st Ward includes similar neighborhoods like Wicker Park;



TJ Callahan, owner of the Farm Bar restaurants, at a table inside his Ravenswood location on Thursday. JOSH BOLAND/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

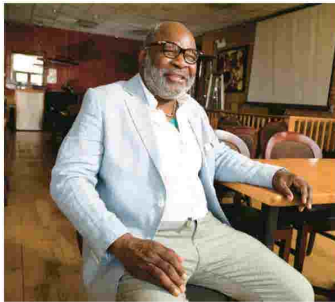
Lamont Robinson, whose 4th Ward includes the burgeoning restaurant strip on 53rd Street in Hyde Park as well as Black-owned restaurants in Bronzeville; and Angela Clay, whose 46th Ward includes the Vietnamese and other Asian restaurants along Argyle Street as well as many other bars and eateries.

Of course, Johnson's coterie of activist supporters implicitly have accused restaurateurs of lying both about their financial condition and about how much their tipped workers actually take home. But these alders should know that's nonsense.

If Chicago continues down the path of raising the minimum wage for tipped workers, more neighborhood restaurants will close and those that stay open will reduce their workforces and cut their hours.

And to make this issue all the more mind-boggling, there's no need for this change. After tips, servers and bartenders generally make far more than the \$16.60 hourly minimum that all other Chicago workers must receive, and under current law they must be made whole by their employers if for some reason they fall short on a given shift. This is a solution in search of a problem, but the loss for Chicago as a whole over time will be huge.

Independently owned neighborhood restaurants — the types of businesses brought to dramatic life in "The Bear" — will shrink



Norman Bolden at his restaurant, Norman's Bistro, in Chicago's Kenwood neighborhood on Thursday. TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

or die.

This isn't simply a story of a threat to jobs and economic vitality. This existing ordinance threatens to damage an essential part of Chicago's soul.

Don't believe us, aldermen? Hear your businesspeople in your wards. We spoke to many of them.

Listen to Gregg Weinstein, who owns the venerable O'Donovan's bar in North Center (Matt Martin's ward) and already has cut hours there. "We give less service," he says. "We run on more of a skeleton crew."

The owner of eight bars and restaurants throughout Chicago, Weinstein for more than two decades also has overseen beverage service at the Lollapalooza festival in Grant Park. This coming year, he says, he

will hire 500 fewer people for Lolla strictly due to the higher tipped minimum wage. In the past, he's put about 2,000 people to work serving drinks. On average, those Lolla workers made \$23 an hour last year after tips, he says.

Instead, there will be 500 fewer people making that kind of money over the long Lolla weekend this coming summer, thanks to the city's idiotic law.

Elsewhere in Martin's ward, TJ Callahan's Farm Bar, a farm-to-table restaurant in Ravenswood that seats about 90, isn't making money despite a 2% year-over-year increase in customers over the most recent 13-week period. "My partner and I, we haven't taken a dime from that restaurant since last spring," Callahan told us.

minimum wage. So he was surprised to learn that Robinson voted against the measure last month.

"People who are hanging on are doing so out of passion," Bolden said. His workers, Bolden said, "walk out with more than L... There's not much money in the restaurant/hospitality scene."

Or listen to Gina Barge, co-owner of Wax Vinyl Bar and Ramen Shop in Wicker Park, part of Ald. La Spata's ward. Wax spins vinyl records and serves up what Barge calls Japanese-adjacent food; it's been open one year and nine months and won't meet Barge's two-year time frame to reach profitability despite solid growth in patrons.

"We should be having another server or a runner," she tells us. "We could really run with another bartender when we're busy." Due to the rising minimum wage, she says, "Right now, we really can't."

As the minimum wage continues to climb, Barge says, she'll have to consider imposing a service charge. If that happens, she says, "No one is going to like it. What that's going to mean is (servers) will make less money, most likely."

Indeed, the specter of service charges — and an end to tipping as we know it in Chicago — is a refrain we heard from most restaurateurs we spoke with. Who wants that? Not most customers. And not most servers.

But ideologues from out of town think it's important, and our mayor has opted to listen to them rather than the businesspeople in his own city who lay out the obvious truth of the matter: It's beyond frustrating and City Council needs to call a halt.

Finally, listen to Bob Piper, owner of the popular Ten Cat Tavern in Lakeview, part of Ald. Clay's ward. He employs six tipped bartenders, who he says make well over \$30 an hour after tips. If their minimum wage keeps rising, he says, "I would definitely have to reduce hours. Instead of doing three bartenders, I'd have to do two."

And, he adds, "I'd have to increase my beer prices." This issue is about as straightforward as such things get. Chicagoans love their restaurants and bars, aldermen.

Isn't preserving them more important than pleasing a group of ideologues who either don't care to understand how this business works or willfully ignore its challenges?

ON THIS DAY 36 YEARS AGO
NEW AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT SPREADS

As the returns keep coming in from electoral precincts as far flung as Hungary, Yugoslavia, Greece and Peru, it's clear the political left is falling on hard times. With the ruling communists falling sick in Poland and East Germany, the infection's spread swiftly.

Already, the forces of right and light have moved to power in Lithuania and Estonia — not to mention the city councils of Moscow and Leningrad.

At the same time in Greece and Peru, accustomed to left-leaning governments in recent years, conservative candidates led the balloting.

In Slovenia... a reformed communist led in the presidential race, but faces a runoff... In parliamentary races, the conservative coalition has a sizable lead over the communists.

All in all, as democracy spreads, the world's becoming a better place.

rewarding to those in the West who have been convinced for years that the decades of perseverance against the false prophecies of Marx and Lenin would end in a new dawn of truth — the stunning emergence of this second Age of Enlightenment that has swept Eastern Europe in the last few months.

Of course, all has not been left to chance. In Hungary... the West German Christian Democrats gave a helping hand to the conservative coalition, which was led by the Democratic Forum and included the Smallholders and Christian Democratic parties.

In Slovenia... a reformed communist led in the presidential race, but faces a runoff... In parliamentary races, the conservative coalition has a sizable lead over the communists.

All in all, as democracy spreads, the world's becoming a better place.

Tribune editorial board,
April 10, 1990

EDITORIAL CARTOON

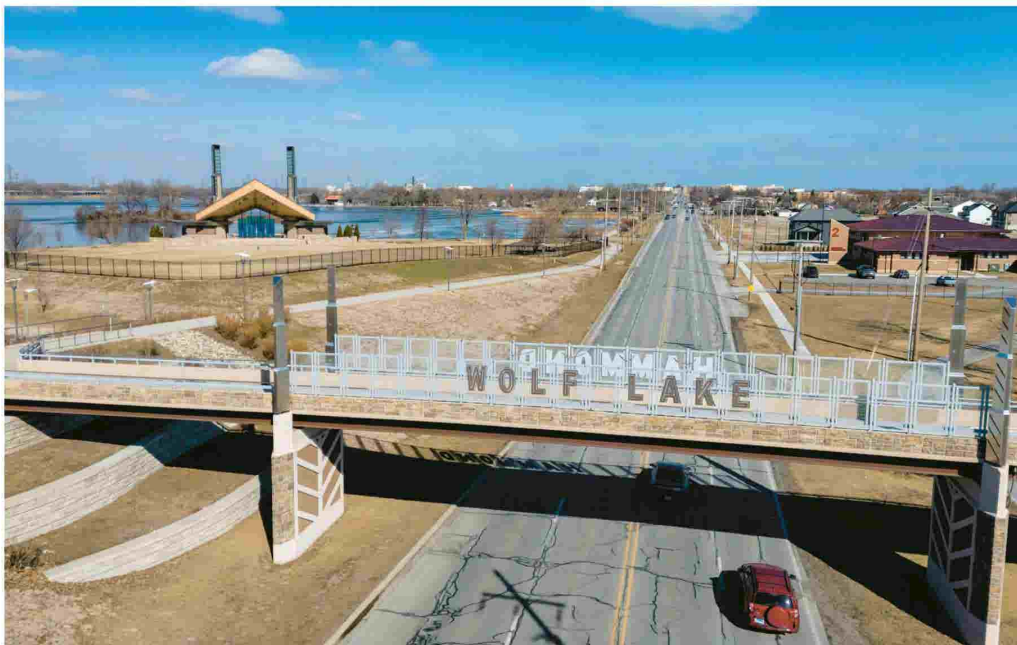
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Michael Ramirez editorial cartoon for Friday, April 10, 2026

OPINION



Calumet Avenue passes by the Pavilion at Wolf Lake Memorial Park in the general area of the Bears' proposed stadium location in Hammond on Feb. 25. BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Don't let Indiana steal the Bears and our meal ticket

By Juan Ochoa
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The clock is ticking. Bears President and CEO Kevin Warren confirmed this week that the franchise will decide between Arlington Heights and Hammond, Indiana, by late spring or early summer with the Illinois General Assembly's May 31 session deadline serving as a de facto finish line. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, speaking at the league's annual meetings, has been blunt. The Bears need to resolve this "relatively soon," and Soldier Field, the oldest stadium in the NFL, is no longer at the top of the list for fan experience.

Illinois must act. My understanding of what is at stake began far from Springfield. When I was a busboy at Connie's Pizza in high school, my paycheck rose and fell with the Bears' schedule. Game days filled the dining room, turned tables faster

and sent servers home with a little more security. I still remember when the Dodgers were in town, and Tommy Lasorda would eat alongside everyday Chicagoans. Proof that big league sports and neighborhood business are inseparable.

Then came 1985. As a freshman in high school, watching the Super Bowl with millions of viewers hearing "the Chicago Bears," I understood something that no marketing budget can fully replicate: Chicago's name, pride and identity beamed into living rooms across America.

The industry calls it "heads in beds." The Bears generate it on a scale that most attractions cannot match. Choose Chicago reports that the city welcomed 55.3 million visitors in 2024, who generated roughly \$20.6 billion in economic impact. NFL weekends are among the most reliable anchors in that calendar

restaurants from Bridgeport to the suburbs and supporting the livelihoods of thousands of cooks, housekeepers, bartenders and tradespeople. Lose the Bears, and a meaningful piece of that engine migrates across the state line.

I have seen this from the inside. As a member of the Illinois Sports Facilities Authority, I voted to redevelop Soldier Field and authorize \$400 million in municipal bonds backed by a 2% hotel tax surcharge, a structure that tied stadium financing to visitor spending, not homeowners' property tax bills. Later, as CEO of the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority, I watched McCormick Place and Navy Pier depend on Chicago's big-league identity to win conventions and tourist dollars. When corporate planners evaluate cities, they look at exhibit space and room count. Then they ask whether their attendees want to be there. The Bears are part of the answer.

Chicago is already fighting this battle with one hand tied behind its back. Las Vegas' convention authority operates on roughly \$457 million annually; Visit Orlando spends more than \$100 million. Choose Chicago, which works with approximately \$33 million, falls last among major convention cities. When you are outspent that badly on paid promotion, you cannot afford to surrender national primetime exposure that comes free every Sunday the Bears play.

Indiana understands this, which is why lawmakers there have already passed their own stadium bill, offering a stack of food-and-beverage, hotel and ticket taxes to finance a Bears facility in Hammond. The Bears' own chairman, George McCaskey, said plainly: "We're comfortable with either site." That is not a bluff, it is a business negotiation, and Illinois is running out of time. The answer is not a blank check.

HB0910, the "megaprojects" bill moving through Springfield, would let the Bears negotiate a payment in lieu of taxes directly with local governments for up to 40 years, without shifting the burden onto neighboring homeowners who already face some of the highest property taxes in the nation.

The Bears belong in Illinois. But belonging is not enough. Illinois leaders need to act before May 31 because Indiana already has. Done right, with private-sector investment leading and public dollars tied to measurable returns in jobs and visitor spending, this is not a giveaway. It is a competitive investment in the meal tickets of tens of thousands of Illinois workers.

Juan A. Ochoa is a former member of the Illinois Sports Facilities Authority and former CEO of the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority.

Privatizing security at our nation's airports is useful, necessary

By Sheldon H. Jacobson
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

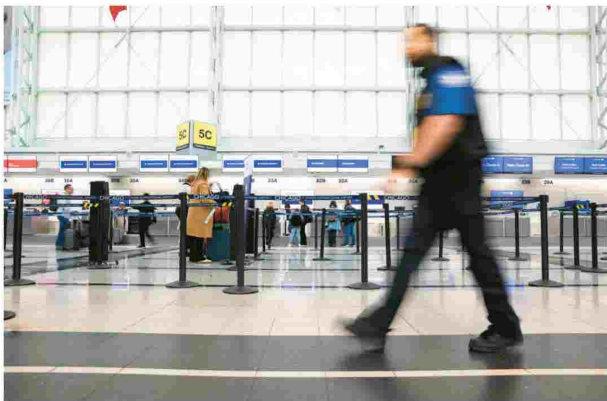
President Donald Trump has called for the privatization of airport security at smaller airports, a recommendation outlined in Project 2025. Though the president has a record of making specious statements and wild recommendations, in this case, he is spot-on and perhaps doesn't go far enough.

The Transportation Security Administration has had a program in place for over two decades that facilitates airport security screening by private contractors. The Screening Partnership Program, or SPP, permits airports to apply for private companies to provide airport security screening at their checkpoints. The contractors are vetted by the TSA, and once approved, the contractor's employees involved in airport screening go through the same training that TSA officers go through, including time at the TSA academy. The airport federal security director provides oversight for security screening operations. The only difference is that contractors, not government workers, are responsible for delivering the last mile of airport screening services.

From the perspective of air travel passengers, they will see nothing different. At airports, the screeners will perform the same tasks, use the same protocols and technologies, and meet the same standards of airport security screening by TSA officers. Their uniforms will be similar to those of TSA officers.

So what are the criticisms of privatizing airport security screening and why do they miss the mark?

The union that represents TSA



A worker walks through Terminal 5 at Chicago O'Hare International Airport on April 2. EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

officers, the American Federation of Government Employees, is unsurprisingly against this. It argues that private contractors were staffing airport security checkpoints on Sept. 11 and returning to such an environment would pose security risks. It also notes the high turnover rates of airport security screeners and how such rates have dropped precipitously in recent years. Yet all such arguments ring hollow today.

Contrary to the common perception, what failed on Sept. 11 was not airport security screening but aviation security policies. The airport screeners on Sept. 11 were following the accepted standards for what was considered benign

items permitted to pass through an airport security checkpoint. If 3-inch box cutters had been considered a banned item that day, then the screeners would have been in a position to detect and prevent such items from getting onto the airplanes.

As for turnover rates, contractors will be subject to supply-and-demand pressures like any company. The drop in TSA officer turnover rates can best be attributed to higher wages and a better work environment. The contractors understand this, and given how long it takes to train airport security screening personnel, they have a vested interest to retain their screeners.

Raising the issue of plac-

ing profits over security is also ill conceived and misguided. The TSA standards for airport security screening are set by the TSA, not by the contractors. If these standards cannot be met, the contractors risk losing their contract. Given that there are 20 airports that participate in the SPP, including large airports such as San Francisco International and Kansas City International, they provide a case study in airport security efficiency and effectiveness, and any concerns about a compromise in security are unfounded.

Calls for airport screening privatization may appear to be a knee-jerk reaction to the Department of Homeland Security

funding impasse in Congress. Yet moving airport security screening to private contractors does not mean that aviation security should be privatized. On the contrary, airport security is just one element of the many layers that constitute aviation security. A decision-making entity is needed that uses research and analysis to determine which technologies to purchase and deploy and which procedures to use at airport security checkpoints. A government entity such as the TSA is well suited for this.

The TSA's role as the overseer of aviation security is critical to keeping national airspace safe. On the other hand, pushing the last mile of delivery of airport screening to the private sector is reasonable. Estimated savings on the order of \$50 million annually at smaller airports is inconsequential, given that the cost of TSA officers is around \$120 million per week.

The president does not go far enough, however, in pushing for privatization at only smaller airports. If security at San Francisco International can be overseen by private contractors, then every other airport in the U.S. should be on the table for privatization. Such a radical shift would certainly draw scrutiny and criticism. Yet as long as the TSA continues to set the standards and oversee the training, there is no reason why such moves should be not put forward for discussion.

Sheldon H. Jacobson is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He has researched risk-based aviation security for over 25 years, which provided the technical justification for TSA PreCheck.

OPINION

Mayor Brandon Johnson pins his hopes on Open Meetings Act to oust CHA chief



David Greising

When it comes to good-government tools, the Freedom of Information Act has always been the sharpest, flashiest one in the kit.

Reporters and the public use FOIA to obtain records that help uncover corruption, waste and fraud. Records obtained using FOIA provide proof of government failings ranging from shocking police misconduct to billions wasted on construction projects.

The Open Meetings Act is the quieter, more subtle legislative cousin to FOIA. But that hardly means it's without power. In fact, we might consider it the strong, silent type: typically low-key, all business, but the public's powerful help in times of need.

Given that pedigree, it's unexpected and curious to see OMA turn up as the key tool Mayor Brandon Johnson is brandishing in his effort to nullify the Chicago Housing Authority's election of a new CEO. Johnson is seeking to exercise old-style political clout and place his crony Walter Burnett Jr., a former alderman, in the job instead.

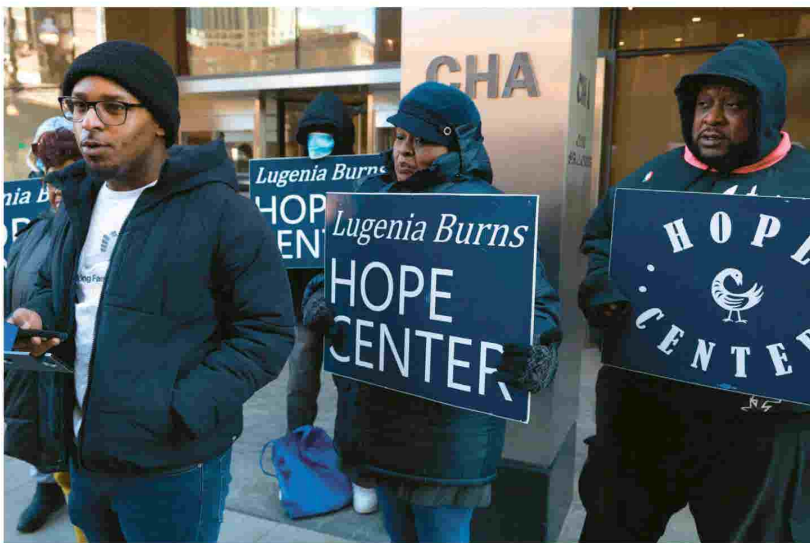
This is a power struggle on a higher order than just a CHA board that has rejected Johnson's hand-picked successor. It comes against a backdrop of resistance from other sister-agency boards and the City Council, plus high turnover in Johnson's administration, so a loss here would further cement a growing view of Johnson as a mayor with few allies and waning influence.

Evidently, Johnson has decided that a challenge to the CHA board's appointment of Keith Pettigrew — the head of Washington, D.C.'s public housing agency — as the CHA's next chief executive is his best bet to retain control over the CHA and score a political win.

And because he has few other tools of influence, a challenge based on the Open Meetings Act is the best he can do.

A group of public housing advocates, with Johnson's vocal support, decided to go to court this week with a lawsuit aimed at invalidating Pettigrew's appointment. They claim the CHA board failed to comply with the state's Open Meeting Act.

In Illinois, OMA requires a public body to provide 48 hours of notice prior to any meeting in which half



Kevin Johnson, left, of Working Family Solidarity, speaks outside the Chicago Housing Authority offices on Tuesday to announce that they are filing an Open Meetings Act lawsuit against the CHA. ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

of a quorum of members participate. Notice must include the time, place and subject matter of the meeting. The housing rights groups are claiming the CHA board failed to meet these requirements. While the agenda was posted on time, its vague reference only to personnel failed to inform the public of the consequential move at hand.

Johnson has made that assertion himself, though he is not party to the lawsuit. Promptly after the CHA vote in mid-March, he underscored his pique over the CHA board's action by moving to replace its chair, Matthew Brewer, and in an official statement Johnson accused Brewer of unethical conduct, in addition to alleged with OMA noncompliance.

OMA, a soft-power tool if ever there was one, can be surprisingly strong in the right circumstances. My organization, the Better Government Association, filed an OMA lawsuit after then-Mayor Lori Lightfoot held what she later described as "informational" Zoom meetings of the full City Council without public notice or participation. This came at the height

of the COVID-19 pandemic and disturbances following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. Lightfoot at first denied breaking the law — then promptly committed not to do so again.

In 2023, Johnson sought to cut off rancorous public demonstrations at City Council meetings by banishing unwelcomed visitors to the upstairs gallery, behind plate glass. A letter BGA sent to Johnson, delineating his OMA violations, prompted him to reverse course.

Against that backdrop, it's bitter-sweet to see Johnson invoking OMA as a clout tool in his unrelenting effort to place Burnett in the CEO's role at the CHA. Never mind that Burnett has never run anything close to the CHA's \$1.4 billion budget serving some 135,000 public housing residents. Never mind that Burnett is currently not legally eligible to serve, due to the conflicts created by his ownership of rental units where CHA tenants live — as the Chicago Tribune Editorial Board noted in its argument asserting Burnett's general unsuitability for

the post. The housing advocates' lawsuit, which Johnson exhorted, may in fact lack legal merit. After all, the CHA board did provide 48 hours' notice of its meeting, and OMA is vague on just how much information is required. Whether the intentionally vague wording violated OMA will be for a court to decide. That's what courts are for.

Regardless of where the courts do land, this much is clear: The OMA law may need repair.

Clearly, vague advance notice fails to meet the spirit of the law, and an OMA revision could specifically ensure that government bodies give the public the advance information needed to participate meaningfully in the debate and actions they take — from the deliberation of city councils to the election of sister-agency CEOs.

And if the CHA board did violate OMA in electing Pettigrew, does this mean the appointment is invalidated? Johnson says so, but the law's language could be clearer. Finally, the penalties written into OMA are not strong enough to disincentivize violations. Fines

for OMA violations cannot exceed \$1,000. And while a 30-day jail sentence is possible in cases of criminal negligence, no one ever has gone to jail, based on the collective memory of lawyers I spoke with and the best efforts of a powerful search engine.

In response to the introduction of remote and hybrid meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic, OMA was updated to ensure public participation. But additional steps could be taken to ensure voters have access to government officials, even if they are not in the same physical space.

FOIA is constantly updated. In fact, the BGA policy team spends considerable effort each legislative session thwarting efforts to erode our rights to public records.

The lower-profile OMA does not receive such scrutiny. Perhaps Johnson's effort to wield OMA as a political saber could serve as a signal that it's time to review and strengthen our open meetings law, too.

David Greising is president of the Better Government Association.

Voice of the People

Lessons of Tax Day

Every April, families across Illinois sit down at their tables to handle their taxes. Taxes are how we pay for the things our kids and neighbors need — such as our local schools, fixed roads and the health care that keeps our families going.

But this Tax Day is a tough reminder that the system is feeling more and more lopsided. While we're doing our part, a lot of the wealth is being pushed straight to the top.

Between the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" and other tax shifts, billionaires and massive corporations are getting huge breaks while the rest of us are left wondering where the support for our communities went. To give you an idea of the gap:

- The top 0.1% could see an average tax benefit of well over \$100,000.

- Permanent corporate tax cuts are expected to cost the public billions of dollars over the next 10 years.

- OBBA changes public health care for millions of people at risk and pull the plug on billions meant for local clean-energy projects.

It's hard to watch our resources get stretched thin while the wealthiest are handed these "beautiful" deals. When the biggest corporations pay less, our neighborhoods end up paying the price.

The good news is that we don't have to just accept this. Here in Illinois, we can push for a fairer way of doing things:

- Closing loopholes: We can make sure giant corporations aren't using offshore tricks to avoid paying what they owe.

- Taxing extreme wealth: We can ensure billionaires contribute fairly, just like any of us who earn a paycheck.

- Holding Big Tech accountable: We can make sure massive tech companies that profit off our information actually give back to our state.

We all play by the rules and pay our taxes every year because we care about our community. It's only fair to expect billionaires and multinational corporations to do the same. We deserve a system that invests in all of us, not just the people at the very top. —Dominique Robitson, Chicago

Mayor's focus on 'fair'

Mayor Brandon Johnson has a governing philosophy, and it can be summarized in one word: "fair." Fair share. Fair wage. Fair contract. Fair treatment. If fairness were a currency, our mayor would be the richest person in Illinois — which is ironic, given how much he'd like to tax the rich.

Even before taking office, the mayor pledged to "make the suburbs, airlines & ultra-rich pay their fair share." Once elected, that theme only intensified. Celebrating the minimum wage ordinance, the mayor declared that "everyone gets to earn a fair wage" in Chicago. He stood with health care workers fighting for a "fair contract."

Then there are our Bears. As the team flirts with Indiana and Arlington Heights, Johnson has insisted that the city won't take "a back seat" — framing the whole ordeal less as a complex economic negotiation and more as a slight that needs to be remedied. The underlying message: Chicago isn't being treated fairly. Somebody should do something.

The problem is that "fair" is the vocabulary of the aggrieved, not the visionary. If my kids when they were young didn't like what was happening to them, they immediately cried out about how unfair they were being treated. I expect more from our civic leaders.

Great mayors don't stomp their feet about fairness — they build coalitions, craft compelling deals and give people a reason to say yes. Johnson's instinct, time and again, is to frame every setback as an injustice rather than a problem

to be solved. Don't the citizens of Chicago deserve a mayor with a bigger word? —Dean Gerber, Chicago

Car-free life in Chicago

I recently attended the Wicker Park Committee meeting about the proposed redevelopment of a strip mall on Milwaukee Avenue near the Damen Blue Line that would add much-needed housing to the area. Many of my neighbors there weren't enthusiastic; they objected to the building's height — about seven stories — and to a recent design revision that replaced parking garage space with additional housing units.

Speaker after speaker lamented that the development would bring traffic, congestion, parking competition and misery to the neighborhood.

But beneath every objection to this development was the same mistaken assumption: that more housing automatically means more cars.

That development's location next to the Blue Line is not some accident. When we build housing near a train, with less parking and more homes, we encourage a different kind of resident to move in: someone who doesn't own a car or someone who's ready to finally get rid of the car they don't want anymore.

Living car-free isn't for everybody, but what my neighbors don't realize is that, increasingly, car ownership is a hassle many Chicagoans are sick of. And it's easy to see why. If you primarily walk, bike and ride the CTA, even if you spend \$1,000 a year on occasional car rentals and ride-shares, you still save thousands in car payments, gas, insurance, parking and repairs. You also get steps in, can bike or use the time on the bus or train to read (or nap).

Ironically, it's people who need to drive that should be the biggest supporters of transit-oriented developments like the one on Milwaukee: The more people

walking and riding the train, the fewer cars with one person in them clogging our streets.

What we build shapes behavior, a principle we understand perfectly well in other contexts. Right now for instance, the Cubs are lobbying the city to expand a parking lot they own in Wrigleyville from 579 to 947 spots. Multiply that by 81 home games, and that's an additional 29,808 cars that will be driving through Lakeview to and from games, every summer, just because we made that parking lot bigger.

The development on Milwaukee is about building housing in a way that gives more people the option to live without cars. The car-free life may not be for you, but it is a choice thousands of Chicagoans are ready to make — and when they do, all of us benefit. —Cyrus Dowlatabadi, Chicago

Foreign language classes

At the recent Shield of Americas Summit, President Donald Trump praised Secretary of State Marco Rubio's Spanish but declared, "I don't have time. I was OK with languages, but I'm not gonna spend time learning your language."

Learning languages does take time. Fortunately, beginning in 2028, all Illinois high school students will dedicate at least two years to studying a second language, precisely when they do have time for learning.

Unfortunately, some Illinois state representatives are sponsoring a bill to remove the two-year foreign language requirement that hasn't yet begun — and before students and our state can begin to reap the benefits.

In a language educator with more than 30 years of experience teaching Spanish at the university level. Arguments against the existing law do not reflect the realities

of language education, and they minimize our society's urgent need for multilingual skills of all levels.

One of the bill's sponsors, Rep. Travis Weaver, has argued that artificial intelligence eliminates the need for all Illinois students to learn another language. But foreign language education is more than just switching English words into another language. By examining other cultures, for example, students gain perspective by seeing the world through other viewpoints. This builds intercultural competence and readies them for Illinois' multicultural work world and beyond.

Online translation and AI interpretation in real time are promising but do not replace the need for human communication and judgment. AI erred 45% of the time in a recent study coordinated by the European Broadcasting Union, and AI contains harmful biases, partly due to its overreliance on data in English.

Both Weaver and Rep. Rick Ryan, who introduced the bill, argue that high school students should instead be able to study trades, such as electrician or plumber. Yes, but tradespeople also benefit from foreign language education; their tools don't have languages or cultures, but the people they work with and work for do.

To be sure, two years of high school foreign language classes will not produce fluent speakers across Illinois. They will lay a strong foundation and equip Illinoisians with cultural awareness that reflects our multilingual and multicultural state.

The president doesn't have time to learn another language, but for the young Illinoisians, it is time well invested.

—Annie Abbott, professor, University of Illinois, Urbana

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