

● **WEB EXCLUSIVE**
 A "just and noble revolt": The British rebel who backed the 1857 rebellion.
 — By Thinkal Hansan
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● **WORDLY WISE**
 If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading.
 — Lao Tzu

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RAMNATH GOENKA
 IN 1932
 BECAUSE THE TRUTH
 INVOLVES US ALL

Bengal CM's first task: Take everyone along



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
 BY ASHOK GULATI
 AND BIDISHA CHANDA

THE RECENT round of state elections in West Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Puduchery has clearly shown that Indian democracy is very much alive and kicking. It has redrawn India's political map with the BJP now staking a stronger claim from the west to the east. While the BJP has won a third term in Assam, its maiden victory in West Bengal (WB) is particularly noteworthy. Mamata Banerjee not gracefully resigning from the chief minister's post after having lost elections is unbecoming of the democratic traditions of India. As for how and why the Trinamool Congress (TMC) lost its 15-year hold on the state, there are as many explanations as there are experts. We will leave that crowded space aside and focus instead on the more pressing question of *revdi* vs development. The challenge before the new government in WB is straightforward: Can it move the state from its current 16th rank in per capita income to the levels of Haryana (third) and Gujarat (fifth), where it already has the advantage of longer governance experience?

During Banerjee's tenure from 2011-12 to 2025-26, WB recorded an average annual

GDP growth rate of just 5 per cent — the lowest amongst all major states and also lower than India's 6.1 per cent (at constant 2011-12 prices). But this is not merely a story of one government's tenure. Over the last 25 years (2000-01 to 2025-26), WB's GDP growth averaged 5.6 per cent, against the national average of 6.3 per cent. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the state's ranking in PCI terms has slid from 11th to 16th over this period.

That could well be one reason the BJP managed to win Bengal. But another factor widely discussed was the lack of good governance, which dissuades private-sector investments. Yet another factor could be the Special Intensive Revision (SIR). However, the debate has not focussed much on the issue of freebies (*revdis*), which we feel could have played a critical role in the BJP's victory in WB. Freebies have now become a standard electoral weapon; across states, competitive populist transfers are becoming the norm.

Take Tamil Nadu (TN). The state has pioneered two trends. First, it witnessed the rise of yet another film star entering politics — continuing its long tradition of cinema icons transitioning into mass political leaders, this time with actor Joseph Vijay. Second, and perhaps more consequentially, TN institutionalised the culture of freebies in Indian politics. What began as a developmental intervention through the mid-day meal scheme for school children eventually evolved into a broader electoral strategy: Give citizens freebies, and votes will follow. Is this a bribe for votes or welfarism? Vijay's promised welfare bill in TN, if implemented, would cost the

state exchequer roughly Rs 0.99 lakh crore, against a total budget of Rs 3.93 lakh crore. And this *revdi* culture exists even when TN recorded the sixth-highest GDP growth at 7.4 per cent between FY01 and FY26. One could argue that GDP growth bypasses the masses, who live more on welfare schemes. But there is more politics for votes in these freebies than true welfarism.

WB's case is no different. The BJP manifesto did not really introduce a new freebie model; it merely scaled up what the TMC had already put in place. The existing transfers of Rs 1,500 per month for general category women and Rs 1,700 for reserved category women were proposed to be doubled to Rs 3,000 per month for all women, irrespective of caste. Of the state's population of roughly 100 million, about 49.3 million are women, of whom nearly 35.8 million are above the age of 20 (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2019). Even if one takes this as a rough eligibility benchmark, the annual cost of such a scheme would be in the vicinity of Rs 1.29 lakh crore. Against a total state budget of Rs 3.96 lakh crore for 2026-27, this single promise could absorb almost one-third of total expenditure. If the government decides to go ahead with this bold scheme, the obvious question is: How does it plan to finance such a commitment without squeezing developmental expenditures? Will that not slow down the pace of development even further?

It must also be acknowledged that the BJP can build on some of WB's existing opportunities. WB's multidimensional poverty head-

count ratio declined sharply from 58 per cent in 2005-06 to just 9 per cent in 2022-23 (NITI Aayog, 2024). Despite this substantial reduction in poverty, the state's PCI ranking has remained persistently among the lower tier of states. This suggests that poverty reduction has been achieved more by *revdi* distribution than an accelerated growth model. This may not create ample jobs. No wonder the BJP promised Rs 3,000 per month to unemployed youth in its party manifesto. But such social security measures can only be meaningful in the short run. In due course, actual jobs need to be created. And that inevitably requires creating an environment where private investors are willing not just to enter, but also to stay. Before any government can seriously pursue such ambitions, however, it must first confront the condition of the state's finances. WB is currently the second-most indebted major state in India, with total outstanding liabilities estimated at 38.9 per cent of GSDP in 2026, second only to Punjab's 46.4 per cent, and well above the national average of 29.2 per cent (State Finances, 2025-26). This is where the new government's real challenge begins: Balancing welfare commitments with the developmental expenditures, to place the state on a higher growth trajectory.

The lotus has bloomed, no doubt, in the east. But if this victory is based on *revdi* promises rather than development, it may not be a real and sustainable change (*poriborton*). The test of that will begin now with the new government.

Gulati is distinguished professor and Chanda a research associate at ICRIER. Views are personal

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AI isn't disrupting education. It's diagnosing what's wrong



SUBHASHIS BANERJEE

THE ARRIVAL of powerful AI systems in higher education has triggered a familiar cycle of excitement and anxiety. Students can now generate essays, solve problem sets, write code, and even summarise entire bodies of literature in minutes. Predictably, concerns about plagiarism, assessment integrity, and the declining value of education have followed.

But this framing misses the deeper point. AI does not fundamentally threaten higher education. Instead, it exposes an uncomfortable truth: Much of what we have been measuring and rewarding in education was never central to it. At its core, higher education has never been about producing answers or imparting job skills. It has been about cultivating judgement — learning how to reason, justify claims, recognise the limits of one's knowledge, and decide what can be trusted. If AI appears to disrupt education, it is only because we have conflated learning with its proxies — outputs, surface-level coherence, and measurable performance.

Consider computer science. AI can generate moderately complex code with ease. However, this does not render the study of algorithms redundant. The central issue was never merely whether a program works, but understanding why it works, the assumptions under which it is valid, and whether one can provide a convincing proof of its correctness. A program without clearly specified preconditions and invariants is not just incomplete; it is untrustworthy. AI can produce code, but cannot certify its correctness through disciplined reasoning. As Edsger W Dijkstra famously observed, "Program testing can be used to show the presence of bugs, but never to show their absence."

The same distinction applies across disciplines. A student can produce an essay on history, but can they distinguish between competing explanations and defend their interpretation? A model can report "95 per cent accuracy", but does the student understand what that number means in context? These are not narrow skills; they are habits of mind — forms of intellectual discipline and epistemic rigour that cannot be outsourced.

AI systems are extremely good at producing the "artefacts" we treat as evidence of ability, such as coherent essays, functional code, and sophisticated-looking analyses. In

doing so, they destabilise the proxies we rely on. When outputs become cheap and abundant, they cease to be reliable indicators of understanding. The "assessment crisis" is not simply that students can cheat more easily. It is that our methods — take-home assignments and coding exercises without personal interaction — were always imperfect measures of learning. AI has simply made their limitations impossible to ignore.

AI tools can summarise large literatures and generate plausible syntheses, but can also fabricate citations and produce misleading conclusions. This raises a question of epistemic trust: If we cannot distinguish well-founded knowledge from plausible-sounding fabrication, the integrity of scholarly communication is at stake.

The appropriate response then is not to retreat from AI or increase surveillance, but to re-centre education on its original purpose. This has several implications: First, the shift from outputs to reasoning. It is no longer sufficient to ask for answers; we must ask for justification. Oral examinations and iterative problem-solving that probe understanding become essential.

Second, we must prioritise verification. Students must be trained to question claims, interrogate metrics, and identify assumptions. In an information-rich environment, the ability to decide what to trust is foundational. Third, intellectual maturity involves an awareness of uncertainty. A student who recognises the limits of an argument demonstrates deeper understanding than one who confidently presents a machine-generated answer. Finally, institutional leadership must resist framing AI as a mere technological upgrade. The challenge is aligning these tools with educational purpose rather than reinforcing failing proxies.

AI is not a disruption but a diagnostic. It reveals where we have substituted measurable outputs for meaningful learning and mistaken fluency for understanding. When answers are cheap, judgement is the scarce resource. Higher education must decide whether it is in the business of producing the former or cultivating the latter.

The writer is professor of Computer Science (also associated with the Centre for Digitalisation, AI, and Society) at Ashoka University. Views are personal

What to expect from our cities when you are expecting



EKTA CHAUHAN

AS SOON as I found out I was pregnant, my first instinct was to redesign my life. Should we move to a house with a bigger balcony? Rearrange furniture to make space for a crib? Install anti-slip mats in the bathroom?

As a faculty member in a design school, I am now trained to notice how design shapes behaviour. Pregnancy sharpened that instinct. Every corner of my home suddenly felt like a decision — about safety, comfort, care. But as I adjusted my interiors, a more unsettling question emerged: What about the city outside? Was it designed to accommodate pregnancy, or early childcare? Both experience and evidence suggested the answer is no.

The challenges begin each morning with my commute. Despite owning a car, I spend nearly 90 minutes navigating potholes, uneven roads, unplanned speed breakers, and frequent water-logging. Potholes, we are often told, are an inconvenience. But they are also deadly. Government data show that 9,438 lives were lost in pothole-related accidents between 2020 and 2024. Not just pregnant women, the national capital's roads are unsafe for all vulnerable bodies, including children, the elderly, the unwell.

And then comes the second challenge: On my route, there is not a single reliable, safe, and clean public toilet. The only options are at petrol pumps, often locked, poorly lit, or lacking water. As pregnancy progresses, so does the need for frequent urination — and with it, the risk of urinary tract infections. Even as the city ranks high on municipal cleanliness, data from Praja Foundation (2024) reveal the scale of the problem: One toilet seat for nearly 10,000 people in Indian cities. It is telling that the most practical solution suggested to me recently was a personal workaround — wearing adult diapers. This is how urban India manages — by pushing individuals to privately solve what are public failures.

If weekdays are consumed by navigating the city, weekends are spent planning the birth. I was delivered at home by a *da*, whose skilled hands brought most of the children in our neighbourhood into the world. Midwifery, once a trained and respected practice, has been steadily absorbed into institutional healthcare since the 1970s. Auxiliary nurse midwives have been redirected toward immunisation and family planning. India has made remarkable progress in maternal health. Over three decades, maternal deaths have declined by 86 per cent. These achievements conceal a complex shift: Childbirth has become increasingly medicalised. In 2008-09, caesarean births accounted for just 6.4 per cent of institutional births in India. By 2024-25, that number had crossed 27 per cent. The World Health Organisation recommends an optimal rate of 10-15 per cent. In private hospitals, the average now stands at 47.4 per cent.

Pregnancy, I am beginning to realise, is not just a personal journey. It is a way of reading the city differently — through vulnerability, dependence, and care. It makes visible what cities are designed to ignore. That care is treated as private, that vulnerability is seen as an inconvenience, and that survival often depends on personal *jugaad* rather than public systems.

The writer is assistant professor, Jindal School of Design and Architecture, OP Jindal Global University

As a faculty member in a design school, I am now trained to notice how design shapes behaviour. Pregnancy sharpened that instinct

Judicial reform shouldn't stop at SC

THE UNION Cabinet's decision to approve a Bill increasing the Supreme Court's strength from 34 to 38 judges (including the Chief Justice of India) is a welcome step towards easing the backlog of cases before the apex court. However, without structural reforms, the judicial hours that the four new judges may contribute could be absorbed by the ever-expanding docket. According to the National Judicial Data Grid, as of May 7, the Supreme Court is burdened with over 93,000 pending cases — more than a 50 per cent increase since 2019, when the number of SC judges was last raised.

Pendency before the SC accounts for only about 0.14 per cent of total case pendency across all courts. This is negligible compared to around 12 per cent in the high courts and 88 per cent in the district courts. The SC mostly functions at or close to its sanctioned strength. SC judges dispose of roughly 90 per cent of the cases instituted each year. Additional judges or better calendar management may marginally ease the pressure on individual benches, but they cannot address the underlying reasons for mounting pendency: The Court's expanding jurisdiction and the volume of litigation generated by the state, the country's biggest litigant. Last year, Supreme Court Justice BV Nagarathna underscored this concern. She stressed the need for the government to "litigate with restraint and be a model litigator".

Courts must keep pace with the rising volume of disputes accompanying population growth and expanding economic activity. At the apex court — the court of last resort — it is especially important to ensure that access to justice is given real meaning; prolonged incarceration of undertrials due to delays undermines this right. However, given the overwhelming volume of cases in district courts, a purely top-down approach to reform is unsustainable. Trial courts account for over 4.92 crore pending cases. Successive Law Commission reports have highlighted that India's judge-population ratio, at roughly 19 judges per million people, remains far below that of countries such as the US and China, where the figure is about 150 per million. The move to increase the number of SC judges must therefore form part of a comprehensive plan to reduce pendency across the judicial system.

It reveals where we have substituted measurable outputs for meaningful learning and mistaken fluency for understanding. When answers are cheap, judgement is the scarce resource

FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY



40 YEARS AGO

May 11, 1986



Maharashtra violence

SEVEN PERSONS were killed, five in police firing and two in stabbing incidents, and several others were injured, as three towns in Maharashtra came under curfew following arson and violence. Shiv Jayanti celebrations in the state concluded on a tense note, at least in the towns of Nashik, Nanded and Panvel where alleged stone-throwing at processions set the pace for violence to follow, state police control in Bombay said.

BJP's Gandhian Socialism

THE BJP adopted an 11-page economic policy statement formulated by its national executive. The second plenary session of the party

adopted some minor amendments to the policy, which is based on Gandhian Socialism and the Integral Humanism of former Jana Sangh president Deendayal Upadhyaya. The prime thrust of the economic programme is to provide full employment and removal of poverty by strengthening the agro-rural base and inculcating the spirit of Swadeshi.

Bangladesh vote count

THE BANGLADESH Election Commission at last resumed tallying the votes in its violent and chaotic parliamentary elections, breaking a deadlock created following the suspension of results in 116 seats. It now appears that the Jatiya Party will get a simple majority but not the two-thirds majority required to en-

dorse the actions of President Ershad's four-year-old military rule. Meanwhile, Khaleda Zia, who was put under house arrest two days before the results, was released.

NCF(MLAs) to quit en masse

PRESIDENT OF the National Conference and former chief minister Farooq Abdullah said he would seek the resignation of all 32 members of the assembly of his party and present them to state Governor Jagmohan. He did not disclose when he would submit these resignations. He indicated that he feared the Congress (I) would stake a claim for the formation of a government with the help of 14 Independent members of the assembly.



EVs in India have moved on subsidies. Delhi policy shows clearer path



AMITABH KANT

INDIA'S TRANSITION to clean mobility has reached a decisive moment. Within the span of a week, two critical policy developments unfolded. The Government of Delhi released its draft EV Policy 2.0 for public consultation, and the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE) circulated a revised draft of the CAFE-3 norms to industry stakeholders. Each of these is significant. The next few months will determine whether India can move from incremental progress to large-scale transformation.

Delhi has once again set the pace. Historically, the capital has often incubated urban transport innovation. Its early adoption of metro rail created a template for the country. Its transition to modern bus systems reshaped public transport expectations. In electric mobility, Delhi's first EV policy in 2020 became a benchmark for other states. The new draft builds on that legacy, but more importantly, it marks a shift in approach.

The most important element of the policy is the proposed phase-out of internal combustion engine vehicles in key segments. The plan to stop new registrations of ICE three-wheelers from January 2027 and two-wheelers from April 2027 is an ambitious and strategic intervention as the segment constitutes almost three-fourths of motor vehicle sales in Delhi. It moves beyond incentives and establishes a clear regulatory direction. This distinction is critical.

India's EV journey so far has relied heavily on subsidies. While these have played an important role in market creation, they have not delivered scale on their own. What drives sustained adoption is certainty. When the industry knows that a transition is inevitable, it invests accordingly in manufacturing, supply chains, and innovation. Consumers, in turn, respond to falling costs and improved availability. Global experience reinforces this. Jurisdictions that have achieved rapid EV adoption have done so by



ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

combining incentives with clear phase-out timelines. India has been cautious in embracing this approach. Delhi's draft policy signals a departure from that caution. It is a step in the right direction, and one that other states would do well to study closely.

At the national level, the revised CAFE-3 draft is equally important. Passenger cars are a weak link in India's electrification story, with EV penetration at only around 4 per cent. CAFE norms are the principal regulatory tool available to influence this segment.

The latest draft reflects some positive changes. The earlier provisions that disproportionately favoured small petrol vehicles have been tightened. The introduction of mechanisms such as credit pooling and the option to purchase compliance credits introduces flexibility while ensuring accountability. These are pragmatic features that can ease the transition for manufacturers while maintaining pressure to improve efficiency.

However, important concerns remain. The continued use of super-credit multipliers for hybrid technologies is one such issue. Strong hybrids, plug-in hybrids, and flex-fuel vehicles are not zero-emission solutions. While they may serve as transitional technologies, offering them generous com-

While subsidies have played an important role in EV market creation, they have not delivered scale on their own. India has been cautious in embracing policies that give incentives while clear phase out timelines

pliance credits risks diluting the signal to invest in full electrification. If we get locked into intermediate hybrid technology, we will lose two decades. We need to technologically pole vault as we did in digital public infrastructure and mobile telephony. If the objective is to accelerate the shift to zero-emission vehicles, the regulatory framework must reflect that priority clearly and consistently.

Equally important is the issue of timing. CAFE-3 has been under discussion for more than three years. Multiple drafts have been circulated, and extensive consultations have taken place. Yet, the standard remains unfinalised. This delay has tangible consequences. In the absence of regulatory clarity, manufacturers defer investment decisions, supply chains evolve more slowly, and the broader ecosystem remains uncertain.

Policy ambition must be matched by timely execution. Finalising CAFE-3 is no longer a matter of refinement. It is a matter of urgency. Trucks account for only 3 per cent of India's vehicle fleet, yet they contribute around 44 per cent of transport emissions. This imbalance makes freight one of the most critical sectors for decarbonisation. And yet, it remains largely outside the current policy focus. India's existing framework for

heavy-duty vehicles is based on model-specific fuel efficiency standards. While this represents a starting point, it does not create the kind of systemic pressure needed to drive transformation. There is no fleet-average mechanism and no meaningful incentive for manufacturers to introduce zero-emission trucks. As a result, the regulatory signal to invest in electric or hydrogen-based freight solutions remains weak. What is needed is a more comprehensive approach, a framework similar in spirit to CAFE but tailored to the realities of the commercial vehicle sector. This should be based on fleet-average performance, differentiated by payload categories, and designed to reward the adoption of zero-emission technologies. Without this, even well-intentioned schemes to promote electric trucks like the Ministry of Heavy Industries e-Truck initiative will struggle to achieve scale. The absence of a robust regulatory push in the freight sector is a gap India can ill afford.

India imports close to 90 per cent of its oil. The vulnerability is structural, and the answer, electrification of transport, is known. What has been missing is coordinated policy execution. Delhi has now shown what that looks like for two- and three-wheelers. The draft policy deserves strong public support during the 30-day comment period and should be strengthened, not diluted, before notification.

The BEE also needs to function more decisively as a regulator rather than a consultative agency. It has spent more than three years on CAFE and fuel efficiency regulations for medium- and heavy-duty trucks. This must come to an end. BEE must finalise CAFE-3, and set an ambitious EV trajectory for passenger cars. It must then move urgently on a fleet-average framework for trucks through fuel efficiency regulations.

We have a renewable energy revolution underway. We have the manufacturing base. We have the domestic market. What we need is for the Bureau of Energy Efficiency to match the ambition of the moment and finish the job it started three years ago.

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On hate speech, SC verdict narrows the law's scope



BRINDA KARAT

THE SUPREME COURT'S (SC) judgment holding that Anurag Thakur, then a Minister of State in the Finance Ministry, and Parvesh Sahib Singh Verma, MP, did not commit a cognisable offence of hate speech in January 2020 is both surprising and deeply disappointing. We often hear that the process itself becomes the punishment. This case raises the opposite concern: Can the process be such as to lead to no punishment at all — especially when those involved occupy positions of power?

On January 30, 2020, the Election Commission debarred Thakur and Verma from campaigning for violating the MCC and the Representation of the People Act. Thakur, attacking the anti-CAA protests, described the movement as anti-national and ended with the slogan: "Desh ke gaddaron ko, goli maaro saalon ko." Verma, referring to the same protest, warned that "they will abduct and rape your daughters". In criminal-law terms, the speeches fall squarely within the ambit of Sections 153A, 153B, 295A and 505 of the IPC.

Yet, the Delhi Police saw no offence. They took no action on the joint complaint filed by my late colleague KM Tewari and myself — even before the EC's order — forcing us to approach the trial court. The court sought an action taken report from the Delhi Police, which set up an inquiry under the Crime Branch. Its report was extraordinary: "The connotation/meaning of 'gaddar' is traitor and as such does not refer to any community. Thus, it does not amount to any cognisable offence." Further, "qua allegations regarding Mr Verma, it is stated that the speaker has only expressed his position on the ongoing protest in Shaheen Bagh and not targeted any specific community or its members".

This reasoning defies both logic and law. Speech cannot be divorced from context. This was a highly communalised campaign by the ruling party and its supporters against the anti-CAA protests that portrayed the protesters — centred at Shaheen Bagh and led largely by Muslim women — as anti-national and the participants as traitors. In such a charged environment, the identity of the "gaddar" or those "who will abduct and rape your daughters" was neither abstract nor ambiguous. A public call to "shoot traitors" carries a foreseeable risk of real-world harm, as subsequent violent events against protest sites demonstrated. For the police to argue that hate speech exists only when a community is explicitly named is to empty the law of meaning. It legitimises a form of coded incitement and opens up a new and dangerous path of legal sanction for the proponents of hate speech.

The trial court heard detailed submissions challenging the police report. After reserving judgment, it finally dismissed the petition on technical grounds: That prior sanction was required even to file an FIR. But if sanction was indeed the threshold issue, why not decide it at the outset? Why call for a police inquiry? Why hear arguments?

The High Court's judgment on appeal affirmed that prior sanction was necessary and insisted that the "only" issue before it was deciding on this technical requirement. Yet it went further, recording the police conclusion that no cognisable offence was made out — something even the trial court had not done. If the matter was confined to a technical question, why enter the merits at all? Notably, while the police report found place in the judgment, the submissions challenging it did not. Such a selective process raises a further set of questions.

And then finally the SC. The appeal was first heard in April 2023. The two-member bench issued notice to the Delhi Police. In the course of the hearing, Justice KM Joseph remarked, "gaddar means traitor, I believe? Certainly here 'goli maaro' was not in terms of a medical prescription," meaning thereby it is not a pill Thakur was referring to but a bullet. Justice Joseph retired in June that year, the case shifted to another bench, and the judgment came three years later.

The SC rejected as wrong the technical argument that prior sanction is required to file even an FIR. This welcome clarification untethers the hands of courts dealing with hate-speech complaints. But without following up on the notice issued earlier to the police, without hearing the petitioners' arguments, it pronounced judgment. Thus a process which stated categorically that it was not dealing with the merits of the case at various levels concludes with a judgment precisely on the merits of the substantive issue without hearing arguments. The exoneration of Thakur and Verma is on the basis of a flawed Delhi Police report. At no stage have the arguments challenging that report been answered. No court has set out why the speeches should not be treated as hate speech. For that absence, the conclusion and the process need reconsideration.

The writer is a senior CPI(M) leader

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Challenge for states

THE ELECTION outcomes in Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala highlight a shared economic concern that transcends politics ('Four states, one economic challenge', *IE*, May 9). While Assam shows promise, the other states struggle with sluggish growth and mounting debt. Borrowing to fund salaries and cash transfers instead of productive assets weakens long-term stability. Governments must redirect spending toward infrastructure, industry, and skill development. These mandates offer a chance to reset priorities — toward disciplined finances, innovation, and inclusive progress.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Eroding trust

THE RECURRING friction between elected mandates and gubernatorial discretion reflects a deeper constitutional imbalance in India's federal structure. ('Lok Bhavan needs to respect lok's mandate', *IE*, May 9). Offices meant to function as neutral constitutional safeguards are increasingly perceived through partisan lenses, weakening public trust in institutions. In Tamil Nadu, the hesitation over inviting the single-largest alliance revived concerns previously seen in Karnataka and Maharashtra. The Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld the floor test as the only democratic measure of majority.

Muskan Kumari, Patiala

Climate inaction

ASA Gen Z myself, the writer's analysis was thought-provoking ('For Gen Z, climate awareness isn't turning into action', *IE*, May 9). The main concern here is the lack of impactful action despite being fully aware of the situation. This ignorance exists among both decision-makers and citizens. Although environmental protection finds its place in the Constitution under Article 21 (Part III), its implementation remains limited. Leaders should be at the forefront of bringing change, accompanied by citizens, to create real impact.

Mayookha Manoj, Delhi



G S BAJPAI

THE UNION Home Ministry's decision to convene a multi-stakeholder conference to review the reforms required for the consistently failing system of plea bargaining in India is laudable. Plea bargaining is a pre-trial, negotiated agreement in which the accused admits to a lesser charge or accepts a reduced sentence. It applies to offences with penalties of less than seven years.

In several countries, this system is a major means of decongesting the criminal justice system. While India uses plea bargaining at very low levels, of less than 1 per cent, in the US, approximately 90-95 per cent of criminal cases are resolved through plea bargaining. In Canada, the figure is around 85-90 per cent. In Australia, about 80-90 per cent of cases end in such pleas.

Plea bargaining was introduced via the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2005, into the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC). But it was soon evident that parties were not inclined towards it.

Addressing the non-implementation of, and indifference, to plea bargaining is crucial, as the courts have almost exhausted their capacity — 58.8 million cases are in pendency. The move to identify reform areas is important, more so because the new criminal laws lost the opportunity to reform plea bargaining.

One reason for this failure pertains to the stigma of conviction. A successful plea bargain under Section 294 of the Bharatiya Na-

Plea bargaining, a reform new criminal laws missed

garik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) yields a formal conviction. As per NCRB data for 2023, of the 1.65 crore criminal cases tried, only 35,889 were resolved through plea bargaining, resulting in a disposal rate of 0.216 per cent. Plea bargaining does not result in a straight acquittal, as the accused must undergo a reduced sentence.

In contrast, BNSS's section 359 provides for the "compounding" of offences, allowing victims and accused parties to settle specific minor offences to avoid trial. Compounding acts as a formal settlement, resulting in the accused's acquittal. Compounding has, therefore, dealt a blow to the prospects of plea bargaining. Prosecutors have not done enough to actualise the idea of plea bargaining. Rather, their indifference and lack of training and expertise have significantly undermined the plea-bargaining system.

The proposed conference can make the applications of plea bargaining slightly more stringent by establishing compliance systems and accountability among the officials responsible. There is a need to reconcile the conflicting situation in cases of compounding and plea bargaining. There is a perception that plea bargaining is less attractive given that compounding results in acquittal. Guidelines must be developed in this respect. A guided process will ensure that the choices don't conflict.

A negotiating prosecutor, inter-

ested in effective and quality disposition of plea-bargaining cases — and not high conviction rates — is preferable. The Canadian model is a good example. Mandatory training for legal aid lawyers, who represent the majority of undertrials, must accompany this reform. All this requires complete judicial evaluation, even when parties have agreed on a disposition, with the judge monitoring the agreed charges, ensuring the relevant facts are proved, and imposing a sentence within the sentencing range.

A direction from a high court can ensure implementation of all this without a legislative amendment. A high court-mandated data dashboard requiring monthly district-level reporting, disaggregated by offence category, outcome, and time-to-resolution, would create the accountability mechanism currently absent in plea bargaining. Further, district courts require a standalone plea-bargaining mediation cell with a trained facilitator, legal aid officer, and victim liaison.

Plea bargaining can be made more attractive by two measures. One, the attached punishment in plea bargaining can be made stigma-free by removing any disqualification arising from the effects of imprisonment. Second, acquittal can be introduced as one of the outcomes of the negotiated plea. Prisoners coming through plea bargaining may be favourably considered for measures like parole, remission, and aftercare.

The writer is vice chancellor, National Law University Delhi. Views are personal

One reason for this failure pertains to the stigma of conviction. A successful plea bargain under Section 294 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) yields a formal conviction



VIVEK BHARADWAJ AND ANDREA M WOJNAR

PUSPANJALI BHUYAN, a woman sarpanch, had a plan. Before the gram sabha, the village assembly, met in Namanguda, a village of nearly 5,000 people in Odisha, she gathered the women together. In that earlier meeting of the mahila sabha, they discussed what concerned them most: Violence women faced behind closed doors and in public spaces that felt unsafe, girls who had stopped going to school, and women shut out of economic opportunity. By the time the larger village council convened, the women arrived with a unified voice and a deliberated agenda. The gram sabha passed a resolution

declaring zero tolerance for violence. A women's help desk was established. A village conversation became an act of governance.

Puspanjali is one of more than 1.4 million women serving as elected representatives across India's Panchayat Raj system. What she did in Namanguda is a glimpse of what becomes possible when women are empowered to shape outcomes.

This ambition is at the heart of the Women-Friendly Gram Panchayat initiative, developed by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj to localise the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 5 on gender equality, with technical support from UNFPA. The premise is simple: Global targets are only as meaningful as the village-level systems built to deliver them. Gender equality must be at the heart of governance, embedded in budgeting, planning, and every local service.

Piloted in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the model has expanded to one gram panchayat in every district. On International Women's Day 2025, 770 panchayats formally resolved to adopt it. The evidence is already striking. In Nongarh panchayat in Bihar's Lakhisarai district, child marriage has been eradicated. Cycle banks keep girls in school whose only barrier was distance. A peer-reviewed study across 163 villages in

The Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyaan is bringing structured training to women representatives. Mentorship structures formalise knowledge transfer between experienced and newer sarpanches

12 states found that women's political reservation increased participation in employment schemes by over 50 per cent and doubled the rate at which women opened bank accounts. These effects persisted long after the reservation period ended.

Sustaining this requires deliberate action. Gender-responsive budgeting must become a binding component of the gram panchayat. The Panchayat Advancement Index, a national scorecard tracking how well panchayats are delivering on development outcomes, must more rigorously measure progress on gender equality at the village level. Deeper devolution of functions and finances would further amplify what women leaders are already achieving.

The institutional architecture is taking shape. The Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyaan is bringing structured training to

newly elected women representatives nationwide. Mentorship structures formalise the transfer of knowledge between experienced and newer sarpanches. The Panchayat to Parliament initiative is building a corridor from village governance upward.

Through South-South cooperation, nations across Asia and Africa are taking note of how India's blueprint might be adapted to their own contexts. India is at a moment when Nari Shakti and Viksit Bharat carry real operational meaning. As India reflects on women's representation in Parliament, its panchayats offer a clear message: The foundation for inclusive leadership has been laid. Now is the time to scale up the model.

Bharadwaj is Secretary, Ministry of Panchayati Raj and Wojnar is UNFPA India Representative



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• ONE YEAR OF IWT IN ABEYANCE

India boosts its capacity, as Pak internationalises issue

India has focused on completing projects long delayed due to Pakistan's perverse use of Indus Waters Treaty provisions



AMITABH SINHA

IT'S BEEN more than a year since India, in response to the terrorist attack in Pahalgam last April, decided to keep the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) with Pakistan "in abeyance". That decision means India does not consider itself bound by the provisions of the 1960 Treaty that has, thus far, governed the sharing of waters of six major transboundary rivers — Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Sutlej, and Beas — flowing through the two countries.

India's decision has resulted in the disruption of normal flows reaching Pakistan. In the past year, this has been the most thorny issue in the already-troubled bilateral relationship.

Pakistan has spent the last year making efforts to build an international legal case against India on the IWT and seeking the intervention of the UN, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the World Bank, and other third-party agencies. Serving as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) since last January, Pakistan has made good use of this office to repeatedly raise this issue and direct international attention to the matter.

India, on the other hand, has focused its energies on completing the unfinished projects on these rivers that have long been delayed due to Pakistan's perverse use of treaty provisions. It has raised repeated objections to anything that India tried to build on its side of the rivers.

The issue is likely to escalate into a major legal or diplomatic confrontation at some point — even an armed conflict, as Pakistan has threatened. Last week, the Ministry of External Affairs reiterated that the IWT would continue to be held in abeyance till Pakistan "credibly and irrevocably abjures its support for cross-border terrorism".

Pakistan's attempts

Being the downstream state, Pakistan is badly affected by India's decision. The



(L-R) Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Pakistani President Mohammed Ayub Khan, and World Bank vice president William Liff during the signing of the Treaty on September 19, 1960. WORLD BANK

bulk of its irrigation requirements — more than 70% — is fulfilled by the Indus river system. Regular meetings of the countries' Indus Waters Commissioners and the data-sharing mechanisms have been disrupted, injecting uncertainties in the volumes of water flowing into Pakistan.

That has affected Pakistan's ability to plan for the usage of water and prepare for flood or drought risks.

Unable to unilaterally change the situation, Pakistan has been very active internationally to put pressure on India. Its core legal argument is that there is nothing in the treaty that allows either country to keep it "in abeyance". Only a dispute resolution mechanism can be invoked.

It has raised this issue at every available opportunity, including during discussions on entirely unrelated subjects.

For example, the UNSC last month held deliberations on energy, critical minerals, and international security. Pakistan said natural resources must aid economic development and shared prosperity, not coercion or conflict, then added the same

principle applied to water resources, thus bringing up the IWT.

Pakistan badly hit

Over 70% of Pakistan's irrigation requirements are fulfilled by the Indus river system

A lack of meetings and data sharing has led to uncertainties about the water flowing into Pakistan

Security framing

Pakistan has been framing the Indus Waters issue as a matter that threatens regional peace and security, something that is a direct concern of the UNSC. It is also framing it as a human rights issue and has got its NGOs and proxies to petition the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Its efforts bore some fruit when the UN Special Rapporteurs, operating under the UNHRC's Special Procedures system, sent a communication to India seeking clarifications on its decision.

India, which has maintained that the treaty was essentially a bilateral arrangement with only the World Bank (acting as the facilitator) as the third party in a procedural role, ignored the communication.

Pakistan claimed another victory when the Court of Arbitration, constituted under the IWT mechanism to resolve some disputes raised by Pakistan, ruled that India's decision did not deprive the court of its

competence to proceed with matters it was already seized with. Pakistan said this was evidence that India's decision was bad in international law.

India, of course, had objected to the very formation of this Court of Arbitration, arguing that a parallel dispute resolution mechanism, through a World Bank-appointed neutral expert, was already operational, and rejected its rulings.

Pakistan's larger objective is to get the UNSC to pass a resolution against India on this matter, or somehow get the issue referred to the ICJ. These are unlikely scenarios, but Pakistan's effort has been to create as many documentary references in UN records as possible.

Building infrastructure

While India has countered Pakistan at international forums, it has primarily focused on creating the infrastructure that will allow it to make full use of the waters it is entitled to under the treaty provisions.

India can make limited, non-consumptive use of even waters of the western rivers — Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab — awarded to Pakistan. For the three eastern rivers — Ravi, Sutlej, and Beas — the IWT allows India unrestricted access and usage.

But these provisions have not been efficiently utilised by India. Its efforts to create necessary infrastructure have always triggered objections from Pakistan, whose primary objective has been to delay these projects and raise their costs.

And, while Pahalgam was the immediate trigger, New Delhi has other reasons for arguing that the treaty needs to be renegotiated or replaced.

According to India, the situation on the ground has changed substantially over the last 65 years, and the treaty is unsuited for these new realities. The population has increased significantly, climate change has injected new uncertainties in water availability and river flows, the development and energy needs of the people of Jammu and Kashmir are now vastly different, and new technologies make some of the constraints in the provisions of the treaty redundant.

A committee of experts has been quietly working to strengthen India's techno-legal case with new data and evidence.

• POLICY

Who counts India's road accident deaths, why data see discrepancies

Dheeraj Mishra
New Delhi, May 10

INDIA HAS among the highest number of road accident deaths globally, but there is a mismatch in the fatality data being compiled by different agencies.

Data on road accidents and fatalities are released every year by two central agencies — the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) and the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). But there has been a mismatch in these figures for many years.

The MoRTH report for 2024 says that a total of 1.77 lakh people died in road accidents across the country. The NCRB's 'Accidental deaths & suicide in India' report, released online on Wednesday (May 6), says that 1.75 lakh people died during the period. 'Crime in India', another report by the NCRB, which records deaths due to negligence relating to road accidents, shows that 1.81 lakh people lost their lives in road crashes in 2024.

An analysis of the last five years of data shows that, barring 2023, the number of road fatalities varied across reports. This trend has continued even when the road transport ministry rolled out its ambitious Electronic Detailed Accident Report (e-DAR)/Integrated Road Accident Database (IRAD) system in 2021-22, with the intent of collecting real-time data entered by the police.

What are the data sources for accidents?

In an accident, the policeman, who is typically the first responder, is regarded as the best source of primary data. One may also rely on data from hospitals and state transport departments.

The Transport Research Wing (TRW), a division of MoRTH, collects accident data from the state police in formats provided by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. It collects 21 types of data, including accident identification, details of the road, the vehicle and its driver. This data is used in four important publications, including 'Road Accidents in India'. However, the report is often late due to delays in data sharing by the states, with the 2023 report being the latest available. Thus, the ministry has shifted to eDAR/IRAD data.

• eDAR SYSTEM

In the eDAR system, police personnel enter details about the accident and geotag them with photos in the app.

However, there is a possibility of under-reporting fatalities by the police if deaths take place after 30 days and go unreported.

The NCRB, on the other hand, collects data from State Crime Record Bureaus (SCRBs). The SCRBs collect data from District Crime Record Bureaus (DCRBs), which in turn get the data from police stations. The source of both departments' data, thus, is the same. In case of death by negligence due to an accident, the police FIR would register the crime under section 304-A of the Indian Penal Code, now under section 106 of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

According to the WHO's global status report, even internationally, around 50% of reporting countries rely on police data, 7% on health departments, and another 11% on transport departments.

What could explain the disparity?

A senior official of MoRTH explained the reason. "While the source of road accident data is the police, the difference is in the proactiveness in supplying the data. Since the police are under the Home Ministry, they have to give them (NCRB) the data in any case. We are a different authority; we have to reach them through multiple channels. Also, the data reported by the police is often limited to the questions asked by TRW," said the official.

The official further said that to resolve these issues, the iRAD/eDAR system was created, but some states continue not to report properly. "In every system, there will be some discrepancy. The difference has gone down by a lot, less than 5%. In eDAR, hospitals are also linked, but not all yet. Soon we will be able to match both the hospital and police data," said the official.

• DEFENCE

How new DRDO system helps air missiles fly longer, strike better

Sushant Kulkarni
Pune, May 10

THE DEFENCE Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and the Indian Air Force (IAF) last week successfully carried out the first flight trial of a system that can transform an unguided missile into a guided one.

The homegrown Tactical Advanced Range Augmentation (TARA) system is essentially a kit that can be attached to a conventional missile. This helps the missile glide over long distances, and accurately strike a target.

How it works

The TARA glide weapon system is primarily a modular kit that can be attached to a conventional unguided warhead. DRDO scientists say it can be fired from multiple fighter jets in the IAF's service.

Once released from an aircraft at a certain altitude and speed, foldable wings and aerodynamic surfaces come into play, allowing the weapon to glide over long distances instead of falling directly onto the target. An on-board navigation and guidance system corrects the missile's flight

path to improve its accuracy.

The speed at which the aircraft is moving at the time of the launch is a key factor in this system's operation. It uses a combination of inertial navigation and satellite-based positioning to steer the missile towards the target.

The TARA system glides, rather than relying on a rocket motor. This makes it lightweight and cost-effective while still extending the missile's range. Its modular design also means the kit can potentially be integrated with different classes of warheads depending on requirements.

Strategic and logistic significance

Strategically, TARA is significant because it enhances the IAF's stand-off strike capability. This means an aircraft can hit targets from a distance that puts it out of the reach of air defence systems.

In a battlespace, the capability to accurately strike a target from a distance can increase the chances of a fighter jet's survival and lend it greater flexibility.

Unguided bombs, which are referred to as gravity bombs or dumb bombs, can thus be upgraded to smart bombs, or precision-



TARA is India's first indigenous glide weapon system to convert unguided warheads into precision guided missiles. X/@DRDO_INDIA

'Smart' bombs

Using TARA, unguided bombs can be upgraded to precision-guided munitions with relatively low effort

This can lower costs by reducing the need to develop new missile systems

guided munitions, with relatively low effort. This can reduce the need to develop entirely new missile systems. This approach can substantially reduce costs while allowing rapid scaling of precision strike inventory. The use of indigenous low-cost systems and its production by Indian industry partners will also reduce import dependence.

It is learnt that three TARA versions, with different weight variants, are being produced, to be used with warheads of weights ranging from 250 to 500 kg.

Path to development

The TARA system was tested from an IAF fighter off the coast of Odisha.

TARA has been designed and developed by the Hyderabad-based DRDO facility Research Centre Imarat in collaboration with other DRDO laboratories and industry partners.

The successful flight trial is a critical milestone in the weapon's development. This will pave the way for a series of developmental, validation and user trials before induction into the service. All these trials will evaluate the system's guidance accuracy, range, reliability, performance from different platforms, and effectiveness under varied operational conditions.

"It is the first glide weapon to utilise state-of-the-art low-cost systems. The development of the kit has been undertaken with Development cum Production Partners (DCPPs) and other Indian industries, which have already started the production activity," the Defence Ministry said Friday.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh described the flight-trial as a significant development in advancing India's indigenous defence capabilities.

• POLITICS

'In West Bengal, political violence is structural... it is an everyday phenomenon'



EXPERT EXPLAINS
BISWANATH CHAKRABORTY

PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AT RABINDRA BHARATI UNIVERSITY, KOLKATA

THE KILLING of a close aide of new West Bengal Chief Minister and BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari near Kolkata last week was the latest chapter in the decades-long cycle of political violence in the state. Biswanath Chakraborty spoke to Abhinav Chakraborty about why West Bengal's brand of violence differs from other states.

Political violence is not unique to West Bengal. But what makes it different from other states?

In other states, we often notice that caste violence, religious violence, (and) identity involvement are there, and politics

comes later on. But here, it starts from political rivalry and nowadays, it has started turning into identity politics.

In West Bengal, political violence is structural and it is everyday violence, unlike other states. Political violence was basically ideological during the 1950s and 1960s. But during the Left regime of 34 years, political violence was used strategically to ensure party dominance against the opposition.

During Trinamool Congress (TMC) rule, it became a structural phenomenon, and secondly, it turned from ideological and political orientation to economic orientation. So, TMC uses political violence to control local resources.

How do you define political violence in West Bengal?

Whatever violence is related with politics, or when political leaders and cadres are involved in different forms of conflict, is called political violence. It has different forms and categories: sometimes, mental violence, physical torture, and political murder also comes under political violence.

Rape has also been allegedly used to

suppress the opposition. Verbal violence, too: if you attend any political rally in West Bengal, particularly during elections, you will find that political leaders use violent language directed against opponents.

What are its roots and how has it evolved over time?

During the colonial period in West Bengal, the Anushilan Samiti, Jugantar Samiti, and other organisations wanted to overthrow British rule through violence. Even Subhas Chandra Bose wanted to overthrow British rule using a counter-military organisation.

After independence, Congress was in power and the [undivided] Communist Party of India (CPI) was the principal opposition party. Up to 1955, the CPI believed in armed struggle and wanted to overthrow the government through armed struggle.

Even after they accepted parliamentary democracy, they still believed violence had a role in politics. The way they organised mass movements against the Congress government in the 1950s and 1960s involved violence. The Congress also used counter-violence through the police administration and party workers.

During the 1970s, there was the extreme Left group known as the Naxals. They started the Naxalite movement against landlords, intellectuals, and what they called bourgeois classes, and openly declared armed struggle. Mass killings started. As Chief Minister, [Congress leader] Siddhartha Shankar Ray also used police force against the Naxals.

But electoral political violence started during the 1972 Assembly elections, when rigged elections first began in the state. In 1977, there was a genuine election, but after five years of Left rule they also started using rigging and election violence.

TMC later expanded this violence to an unbelievable scale. If you look at the last three panchayat elections (2013, 2018, and 2023), a large number of people died. Opposition candidates were denied the right to file nominations. Voters' rights were denied. Even after the 2021 Assembly election, there was post-election violence.

How does it manifest in Bengal's everyday life?

In the form of extraction of money. Local politicians use their boys to extract money from shopkeepers, street vendors,

and rickshaw pullers. If the opposition organises any programme, immediately the ruling party disrupts it.

If there is any conflict between two families, political parties intervene and create a kind of kangaroo court to decide who is right or wrong. Through these, they earn money from both conflicting parties.

There are different forms: beating opponents, giving verbal threats, threatening to kill someone, throwing bombs. The administration often remains silent.

Whoever comes to power politicises the administration at a very high level. Politics and administration have become so mixed that it is very difficult for opponents or anyone outside the ruling party to get justice if they are victimised.

Even if you go to court, ruling party cadres may come to your home and threaten you.

Another reason is that execution of court orders is very weak in West Bengal. A large section of the media is not free to raise violence-related issues.

There is also social tolerance of violence. People often believe the ruling party has the right to exercise violence over the opposition.

What needs to change for this to end?

First, you have to establish the rule of law. This has been absent in West Bengal for a long period.

Second, depoliticisation of the administration is necessary. Politics and administration should work together at the upper level, but at the grassroots level — municipalities, wards, local governance — everything is determined by politics. Why should that be the case?

Third, we need jobs. Why are people getting involved in violence? Because many people have no work and depend on political leaders for livelihood.

You also need to build public trust that this vicious cycle of violence can end. So, the ruling party must show political commitment and that it is against violence.

Bengal has not seen mob lynching or bulldozing of houses as much as other states. Has it been successful in curbing another kind of violence?

For the time being. But not as a method to change the minds of people (in terms of social tolerance of violence).

'OUR FOREX RESERVES TODAY AROUND THREE TIMES COMPARED TO 2013'

Don't share sense of alarm on rupee, forex: MPC's Ram Singh

WHILE HIGHER crude oil prices are a vulnerability for India, the country does not face a crisis on the external front, according to **Ram Singh**, an external member on the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Monetary Policy Committee. "All considered, I don't share the sense of alarm on rupee and forex fronts," Singh, also the Director of Delhi School of Economics, told **Siddharth Upasani** in an interview.

On the monetary policy front, Singh is of the view that talk of interest rate hikes are "not justified" at the current juncture, with headline retail inflation seen "comfortably within" the central bank's 2-6% tolerance band in FY27. Edited excerpts:

The war is the latest in a series of shocks we have faced this decade. Are these repeated shocks impacting India's potential growth?

They are, but they also help us improve. If we respond to the current situation by making the transition towards renewable energy consumption, by reducing our asymmetric dependence on the rest of the world for energy and other key inputs such as critical minerals and metals, build on the use of digital infrastructure to improve penetration of institutional credit, and prepare our-

selves to adopt AI applications, we can expect significant productivity increases and a commensurate increase in our growth potential.

The high-growth phase of 2002-2012 saw high retail inflation of 5-11% and overleveraged corporate balance sheets, leading to the twin balance-sheet problem. This, in turn, induced the bad loan crisis. Today, we have slightly lower growth rates, but very low inflation and very healthy corporate balance sheets. This shows our potential growth rate is at least 8%, as 7%-plus is being achieved without heating the economy. And we know why that might be the case: infrastructure upgrades have brought down logistics costs, and the use of IT in governance and the private sector, for example, have led to improved productivity and growth potential. This shock can make us even stronger if we respond well to this by fixing some of the structural issues.

What do you make of the speculation about the need to raise capital from abroad?

The situation today is vastly different from 2013 when the RBI had introduced the special swap window for FCNR(B) deposits. In 2013, US interest rates were near 0% whereas today US yields are significantly higher at 4.4%, making it costly for us



RAM SINGH
EXTERNAL MEMBER, MPC;
DIRECTOR, DSE

to raise capital from abroad. As such, in my view, there is no need for such measures.

Our forex reserves today are around three times compared to 2013. We can look forward to reaping the benefits of FTAs that have been signed. There are indications that service sector exports will continue to do well. The conditions for foreign investment in corporate bonds and foreign exchange management regulations have been rationalised; we will see their impact on foreign portfolio inflows in the coming quarters. So, I do not see the need for a scheme like the FCNR(B) one of 2013.

There could have been a crisis if we insisted the rupee not cross 85 or 90-per-dollar. But yielding on that front in itself is shock absorber. The one weak point is our vulnerability to in-

As of now, it (rate hike talks) is over the top. Whether you look at the latest price data or the projected inflation trajectory, rate hike concerns are not justified, in my view

crease in crude oil prices. We saw this week on May 6 that a fall in crude oil prices led to rupee strengthening significantly by 60-70 paise. This suggests that post West-Asia conflict, we can expect the rupee to strengthen. All considered, I don't share the sense of alarm on rupee and forex fronts.

There are some predictions that the repo rate could be increased in 2026.

As of now, it (rate hike talks) is over the top. Whether you look at the latest price data or the projected inflation trajectory, rate hike concerns are not justified, in my view. CPI inflation is forecast at 4.6% for FY27, comfortably within the tolerance band. These concerns are also misplaced because of two sets of developments on the ex-

ternal front.

One: the West Asia conflict prolonging is not in the interest of any country, including the nations involved in the conflict. In the US, for instance, retail gasoline prices and airfares have gone up, 10-year bond yields have spiked to 4.4% from 3.97% on February 27.

These factors, along with political economy considerations, should encourage the countries involved to work out a deal sooner rather than later.

Two: even today, when our resilience is being stress-tested, forex reserves of \$691 billion are not far from the all-time high of \$728 billion. Moreover, pressure on the rupee will not be there absent this crisis because we have worked out FTAs with 37 countries whose benefits will accrue in the coming months through trade and investment channels.

Absent crude oil and its short-term consequences, we are in a good position.

How would you rate the economy if GDP growth in FY27 is, say 6.5%, and inflation averages under 5%?

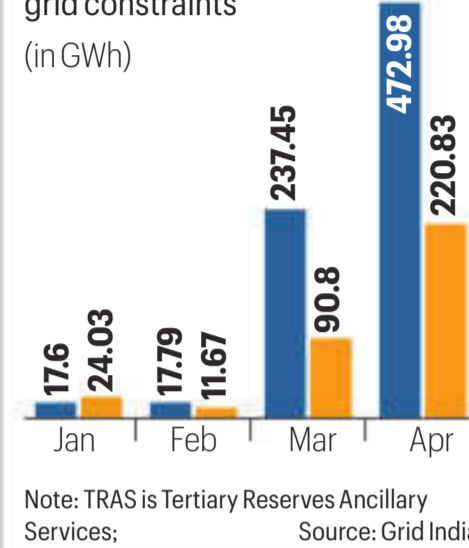
Given the supply-side shock, that's very much acceptable. We will still be the fastest growing major economy with limited increase in prices.

FULL INTERVIEW ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Electricity grid struggles to absorb surplus solar power despite record demand

POWER SYSTEM UNDER STRESS

● Emergency TRAS down
● Solar curtailment due to grid constraints (in GWh)



Note: TRAS is Tertiary Reserves Ancillary Services; Source: Grid India



April solar curtailment surged nearly 74% over the combined curtailment recorded in January-March.

REUTERS

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, May 10

EVEN AS the electricity demand touched record highs in April amid an early summer heatwave, the country's grid curtailed an average 23 gigawatt-hours (GWh) of solar power every day — enough to meet around one-fourth of New Delhi's needs for a day.

Curtailed refers to instances when grid operators ask renewable energy plants to reduce generation to maintain system stability. Data from Grid Controller of India (Grid India) shows April solar curtailment surged nearly 74% over the combined curtailment recorded during January-March, underscoring growing stress on the power system despite rising daytime demand.

At least 693.81 GWh of solar power was curtailed in April, compared to 399.34 GWh during the first three months of the year combined, according to Grid India data. Earlier, a report by think tank Ember also found that a total of 2,300 GWh of solar power curtailed under a mechanism called Emergency Tertiary Reserves Ancillary Services (TRAS) — down between late May, when reporting started and December 2025, with 900 GWh in October alone.

The curtailment came despite no reported shortages during daytime peak hours, underlining both the crucial role solar played in meeting daytime demand and the scale of surplus generation that still went unused. The glut of daytime solar generation was also reflected in power markets. Spot prices on the Indian Energy Exchange in April repeatedly hit the regula-

tory ceiling of Rs 10 per unit during night-time hours, before crashing to around Rs 1.5 per unit during the day — highlighting the widening gap between abundant daytime solar supply and tighter evening demand conditions.

Curtailed due to grid concerns

While renewable energy sources, like solar, enjoy "must-run" status in India, they can still be backed down on grounds of grid security and system safety. One such mechanism is Emergency TRAS, under which the National Load Dispatch Centre can direct inter-state transmission system (ISTS)-connected renewable energy projects to reduce generation during system-wide emergency conditions to maintain grid stability. It acts as the third layer of grid control after primary and secondary reserve responses. It is triggered when additional intervention is required to prevent instability.

Since renewable energy plants can rapidly reduce output, they are frequently used for down regulation under Emergency TRAS. Unlike other forms of curtailment, generators backed down under this mechanism get financial compensation for loss of generation. Analysis of Grid India data shows curtailment under Emergency TRAS averaged 15.76 GWh/day in April. On April 5 alone, solar curtailment under the mechanism touched 80.5 GWh — enough electricity to meet daily needs of hilly states like Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. Overall, curtailment in April was about 73.5% higher than the combined curtailment recorded January to

March, highlighting the growing stress on the grid amid rising renewable energy penetration.

Technical constraint

Apart from emergency TRAS-down events, data from Grid India also shows significant renewable energy curtailment in solar-rich states like Rajasthan and Gujarat due to technical and transmission constraints, including transmission overloading and heavy underdraw.

In April, an average of 7.36 GWh of solar power was curtailed every day due to such technical reasons, compared to a combined daily average of 1.4 GWh during January, February and March — an increase of nearly 75%. A major share of it was linked to heavy under-draw in Gujarat, as per Grid India.

In Rajasthan, the operator cited overloading of interconnecting transformers as a key factor behind the backing down of renewable energy generation. "The under-draw problem can happen due to a sudden dip in demand, which is generally seen during unseasonal rainfall events or when manufacturing activity slows. However, this is usually a short-term phenomenon unless such conditions persist for a longer duration," a senior official aware of the matter told *The Indian Express*.

The official also underlined the need to accelerate transmission infrastructure to minimise renewable energy curtailment. "The Ministry of Power and the Central Transmission Utility are working in this direction," the official said.

Queries sent to the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy remained unanswered till the time of filing this report.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

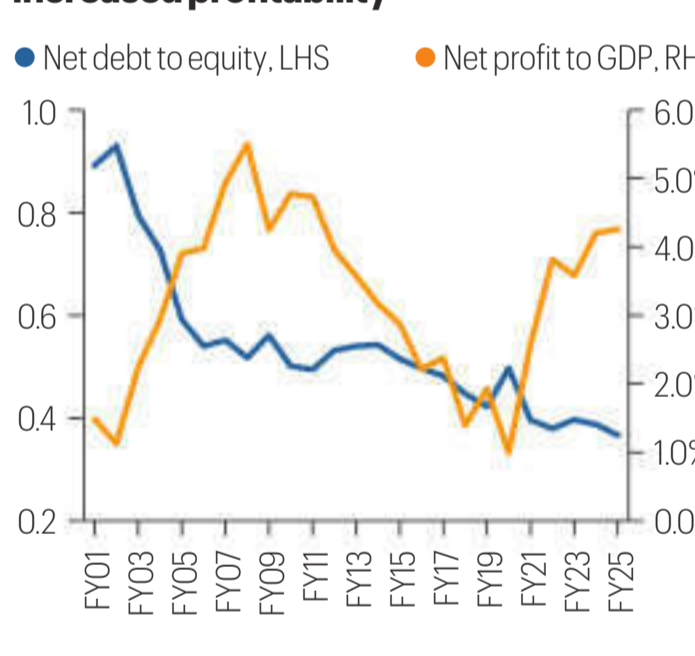
CORPORATE INDIA'S CAPEX RECOVERY REMAINS UNEVEN

Private sector capex, a key driver of the country's investment cycle, continues to lag. While listed corporate capex showed signs of recovery in the post pandemic period, the rebound has been concentrated within a narrow segment of corporate India.

● Private corporate capex is expected to remain muted in FY27, amid elevated geopolitical uncertainty, according to the report.

● Pressure from China's offloading of excess industrial capacity, which is weighing on pricing power and investment appetite will further dampen sentiment.

Corporates have deleveraged with increased profitability



Source: UBS India Economic Perspectives Report

China's rising export competitiveness could hinder India's capex cycle recovery



Pvt capex jumps 67% to Rs 7.7 lakh cr: CII

ENS Economic Bureau
New Delhi, May 10

INDIA'S PRIVATE capital expenditure surged 67% year-on-year to Rs 7.7 lakh crore in September 2025, signalling a decisive revival in the investment cycle, industry body Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) said, urging firms to step up support measures to help the economy navigate the ongoing West Asia crisis.

CII's analysis of nearly 1,200 companies from the CMIE Prowess database showed private sector investment — measured through annual changes in net fixed assets and capital work in progress — rising sharply from Rs 4.6 lakh crore in September 2024 to Rs 7.7 lakh

crore a year later.

Manufacturing accounted for nearly half the investment at Rs 3.8 lakh crore, led by metals, automobiles and chemicals, while services contributed Rs 3.1 lakh crore, driven by trading, communications and IT/ITeS sectors. "The 67% jump in private capex to Rs 7.7 lakh crore is the most important signal yet that India's investment cycle has decisively turned," said CII Director General Chandrajit Banerjee.

He said the scale and spread of investments across sectors were unlike anything seen in more than a decade.

Supporting indicators also pointed to strengthening corporate activity. FE

India, Oman to decide FTA timeline soon; both sides to meet in Delhi

Mukesh Jagota
New Delhi, May 10

INDIA AND Oman will start talks from Monday to sort out remaining irritants and finalise the date for making their Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) operational, an official has said. Earlier, both sides were aiming for June 1 for the Entry into Force of CEPA that was signed on 18th December last year.

Also on Monday, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Chile Francisco Perez Mackenna will hold talks in New Delhi on trade and related matters as both sides are actively working on concluding negotiations on a FTA.

In Chile, international trade negotiations are led by an office under the foreign ministry and Mackenna arrived in New Delhi on Sunday. The negotiations on CEPA between India and Oman that started in November 2023 and concluded in December 2025 with the signing of the agreement. The agreement was ratified by Oman through a Royal decree in February.

Foreign Minister and Deputy Trade Minister Paula Estevez Weinstein of Chile are also being accompanied by a business delegation. With Chile negotiations on CEPA were launched on April 1, 2025 and so far four rounds of negotiations have been held. The last round of talks were held

between December 1-5 2025. The CEPA opens up zero-duty access on 98.08% of the tariff lines, covering 99.38% of India's exports to Oman. In return, India will open up 77% of its tariff lines for Oman that will cover 94% of its total exports to India. While the tariffs on most products will straight away drop in zero, petrochemicals will see the reduction in a phased manner.

While being a regular trade agreement on most fronts, the FTA with Chile also differs from them as both sides have decided to include a chapter on critical minerals in the agreement. With Chile, India has already developed a bilateral mechanism on critical minerals. FE

RBI, ECB sign MoU on banking

George Mathew
Mumbai, May 10

THE RESERVE Bank of India (RBI) and the European Central Bank (ECB) on Sunday signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation in the field of central banking.

The MoU, which updates the previous MoU of 2015, provides a framework for a regular exchange of information, policy dialogue and technical cooperation between the two institutions in areas of mutual interest in the field of central banking.

It was signed by Sanjay Malhotra, RBI Governor and Christine Lagarde, President of the ECB. The signing took place on the margins of the Bank for In-



RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra and ECB President Christine Lagarde signed the MoU on Sunday.

RBI

ternational Settlements meetings in Basel. "It is important that we sustain global cooperation, and I am pleased to sign

this MoU together with Governor Malhotra as a sign of our continued dialogue with the RBI," Lagarde said.

Special tax drive launched as revenues slow

Prasanta Sahu
New Delhi, May 10

WITH FISCAL pressures mounting due to rising committed expenditure and a slowdown in revenue growth, the government has stepped up the tax recovery drive.

As per official sources, the Income Tax Department has directed field officers to intensify the recovery of confirmed and undisputed tax demands, strengthen monitoring of large non-compliant taxpayers and improve demand management.

Under the project termed the Central Action Plan for 2026-27, the department has specifically asked officers to

prioritise recovering Rs 2.57 lakh crore in demands upheld by the Commissioner of Income Tax (Appeals) in FY26. Special teams are being set up to pursue top arrear cases and analyse tax trends sectorally. The tax officers also have to ensure prompt refunds and better taxpayer outreach to improve compliance and minimise revenue leakages.

The Centre has set a direct tax collections target of Rs 26.97 lakh crore in FY27, an increase of more than 15% over the actual receipts of Rs 23.4 lakh crore in FY26. In FY26, direct tax receipts fell short of the revised estimates of Rs 24.21 lakh crore by Rs 80,594 crore. The West

Asia conflict has cast a shadow on fiscal maths, and weaker revenues could further complicate the situation in FY27. A major concern for the department is the weak pace of cash recovery despite a substantial reduction in outstanding arrears.

During 2025-26, the department achieved 150% of its target for reduction of arrear demand — Rs 12.33 lakh crore against a target of Rs 8.24 lakh crore — largely through rectifications and appellate orders. However, actual cash collection stood at only Rs 85,000 crore against a target of Rs 5.04 lakh crore, translating into an achievement of just 17%. To improve recoveries, the depart-

ment directed all assessing officers to classify the top 1,000 unclassified arrear demand entries into "Net Collectible Demand" and "Demand Difficult to Recover" by July 15.

The scale of pending unclassified demand remains massive. As of March 31, 2026, unclassified tax demands above Rs 50 lakh stood at Rs 7.88 lakh crore across 1.24 lakh demand entries, while smaller demand entries accounted for another Rs 1.33 lakh crore. Mumbai alone accounted for Rs 1.65 lakh crore of large unclassified demands, followed by Delhi at Rs 1.21 lakh crore. The action plan has also expanded monitoring of large defaulters. FE

Markets to track West Asia war; may remain volatile

New Delhi: Markets are expected to remain sensitive to geopolitical developments this week, with investor attention firmly focused on events surrounding the ongoing US-Iran situation and crude oil prices, analysts said.

Besides, the rupee-dollar trend and trading activity of foreign investors would influence trading in the markets, they noted. "Markets this week are expected to remain highly volatile and largely driven by geopolitical headlines, with investor attention firmly focused on developments surrounding the

ongoing US-Iran situation," Ponnudi R, CEO, Enrich Money, an online trading and wealth tech firm, said. Brent crude oil will remain a critical macro variable for market direction, he said.

Inflation data announcements during the week would also guide markets' movement, an expert said.

Siddhartha Khemka, Head of Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services, said, "Indian equities are expected to remain highly sensitive to geopolitical developments in the near term, with markets likely to trade within a broader range. PTI



No detours

A TVK government with aligned parties was the only viable post-poll outcome

The Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) and its leader C. Joseph Vijay, who was sworn in as Chief Minister along with nine Ministers from the party on Sunday, took the shortest and straightest route to power. Falling 10 seats short of the 118-seat majority mark, the TVK secured the support of four ideologically aligned parties – the Congress (five MLAs), CPI(M), CPI, and Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, or VCK (two each) – with the IUML's two MLAs taking the tally to 121. The TVK had, soon after its formation, sought to position the Congress and the VCK as ideological partners; that it has now drawn support from them and the Left and the IUML, even though they contested within the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam-led coalition, is therefore not out of place. The alternative mooted by AIADMK leaders, and endorsed by some DMK leaders – an AIADMK government propped up by the DMK – would have been an immoral exercise. In any case, outgoing Chief Minister M.K. Stalin was against such a farcical twist. Meanwhile, by demanding written proof of 118 MLAs' support before inviting the TVK, the single largest party, to form the government, Governor Rajendra Arlekar ignored the Sarkaria Commission framework – which prioritises the single largest party with outside support next only to a pre-poll alliance – and the Supreme Court's ruling in *Rameshwar Prasad* (2006) that only the floor of the House can test a Ministry's strength.

The Congress, for its part, jumped at the offer opportunistically, pledging support to the TVK and committing to an alliance for local, Assembly and parliamentary elections. That it would so casually jeopardise a decades-old alliance with the DMK is unsurprising. The party contested the 2026 elections half-heartedly, divided at the top, and that ambivalence showed in its returns: in the 28 seats it contested, it polled just 28% of the vote – the second-lowest share within the DMK-led coalition; only the late-entrant DMDK did worse. It was also short-sighted, given that this alliance helped the INDIA bloc win all 39 Lok Sabha seats in Tamil Nadu in 2024. The Left and VCK lent support to the TVK while citing the need for a stable government and reiterating their partnership with the DMK against communal forces. The elections produced Tamil Nadu's first hung verdict in decades, and the response to it was a test of constitutional propriety and political character. Despite an avoidable delay, a TVK-led government has eventually taken charge. It is now incumbent upon Mr. Vijay to build on the foundations laid by Dravidian governments, under whose stewardship Tamil Nadu has emerged as one of the front-runners of the Indian economy by prioritising industrial development and socio-economic equity.

Cost to access

The opportunity cost of accessing medical care remains high

The Union Labour Ministry has announced that it will provide a free annual health check-up to workers aged 40 years or more, following an existing provision in the new Labour Codes. The programme will be implemented through the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC). For workers in hazardous conditions, such as handling toxic chemicals or operating heavy machinery, check-ups are mandatory; if illness is detected, ESIC hospitals and dispensaries will provide free treatment. India already has a few workers' health obligations on paper, including under the Factories Act 1948 (only within factories), the ESIC Act 1948, and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSH) Code 2020. The new programme will be financed through the well-endowed ESIC fund, although the government is still shoring up the number of beds and doctors available via PMJAY-empanelled facilities. At this time, operational evidence suggests that insured workers will be the main beneficiaries.

Commendable though the initiative is, its success is not guaranteed. At present, only around 31 crore of 94 crore workers are on the e-Shram portal, whose integration with ESIC is still in its early stages in many States. Labour Minister Mansukh Mandaviya also failed to address how a woman working in a garment home unit or as a domestic worker could access the longer maternity leave if she has no 'employer'. Annual check-ups for women also warrant specific medical staff needs whereas many ESIC camps are crowded and dominated by men. As with many of its predecessors, the programme does not address the opportunity costs of accessing health care, forcing workers to continue contending with lost wages. An ESIC facility may also refer a worker to another centre if it lacks the resources for specific tests, leading to repeat visits and added time and cost. The new programme focuses predominantly on non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. Heat-related illnesses are not explicitly recognised as occupational diseases under the ESIC Act whereas construction and agriculture workers are most at risk of them. Waste-pickers and sanitation workers on the other hand face greater risk of infectious diseases such as hepatitis and leptospirosis. The scheme offers screening but does not mandate proactive vaccination. The government must meet workers where they are, through mobile occupational health units and – as the OSH Code 2020 stipulates for organised workers – at their places of work, and provide tokens to compensate them for time spent on check-ups. Otherwise, any scheme of this nature will not improve upon the already deficient system.

The Tamil Nadu Assembly election verdict of 2026 was decisive. The Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), contesting its first election, emerged as the single largest party with 108 seats in a House of 234. The ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was reduced to 59. The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) won 47. TVK founder, C. Joseph Vijay, had defeated the two Dravidian parties that had ruled Tamil Nadu uninterrupted for 59 years between them. The voter had spoken plainly. Lok Bhavan listened selectively.

Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar refused to invite the leader of the single largest party to form the government. Instead, he demanded signed letters from 118 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) before he would administer the oath. Mr. Vijay went to the Lok Bhavan three times, and each time he was sent back. Last-minute support from the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) and the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) eventually took the tally to 121. The Governor then graciously consented. The swearing-in was fixed for May 10 and the Governor has further directed the Chief Minister to seek a vote of confidence on or before May 13. Every step of this exercise is constitutionally wrong. The errors are not minor. They go to the foundation of parliamentary democracy in the States.

What the Governor is required to do

The Governor's function on the morrow of an election is narrow and well settled. He is to identify the person most likely to command the confidence of the House and invite that person to be sworn in. He is not a returning officer. He is not an arithmetic tutor. He has no business demanding that a Chief Minister-designate produce a signed muster roll before allowing him to take the oath.

The Sarkaria Commission of 1988, the Venkatchaliah Commission of 2002, and the Punchhi Commission of 2010 were unanimous on the order of preference. The single largest pre-poll alliance comes first. The single largest party that stakes a claim and can form a stable government comes next. Pre-poll combinations command priority because the voter knows what he is voting for. This sequence has been honoured in the breach in Goa, Manipur, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and now Tamil Nadu. The breaches have been remarkably one-sided.

In Goa in 2017, Governor Mridula Sinha invited the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had 13 seats in a House of 40, ahead of the Congress, which had 17. In the same year, in Manipur, the BJP with 21 seats was preferred over the Congress



Rajeev Dhavan

Senior Advocate of the Supreme Court of India



Sanjay Hegde

Senior Advocate of the Supreme Court of India

The Governor's actions during Tamil Nadu's post-election process raise concerns about violations of established democratic norms and conventions

The Governor who forgot his job

with 28. In 2018, in Karnataka (a House of 224), Governor Vajubhai Vala invited the BJP with 104 seats and gave it 15 days to assemble a majority, ignoring a written letter from a Congress-Janata Dal(S) post-poll alliance with 115.

In every one of those cases the BJP was the beneficiary of an expansive reading of gubernatorial discretion. In Tamil Nadu, where the BJP is not a contender and the Centre's preferred regional partner has been routed, the doctrine has suddenly contracted. The Governor now demands proof of an absolute majority before he will issue an invitation at all. This is not principle. It is partisanship dressed up as prudence.

There have been minority governments

The Governor seems to have forgotten that minority governments are a familiar feature of Indian parliamentary practice. On May 16, 1996, the BJP's Atal Bihari Vajpayee was sworn in by President Shankar Dayal Sharma and given 13 days to prove a majority he never possessed. He resigned on May 28 without facing a vote. Nobody suggested that he should not have been sworn in. P.V. Narasimha Rao governed for five years at the head of a minority Congress government and survived a no-confidence motion in July 1993 by a single vote. H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral led minority United Front governments at the Centre. In 2004, the first ministry of the Congress's Manmohan Singh was a minority arrangement that ran a full term with outside support.

The constitutional test has never been the production of signatures in advance at Rashtrapati Bhavan/Lok Bhavan. The only testing ground is the floor of the House. A government continues so long as it has not lost a motion of no confidence. That is the essence of Article 164(2) and the convention that flows from it.

The Governor's demand that Mr. Vijay produce signed letters from a majority before being sworn in is, therefore, an invention. No provision of the Constitution requires it. No commission has recommended it. No precedent supports it. Anyone who wished to challenge Mr. Vijay's claim was free to bring a motion of no confidence on the floor of the House. The MLAs would then have voted on the record, with their constituents watching. That is how parliamentary democracy is supposed to work.

Equally objectionable is the direction that a vote of confidence be taken on or before May 13. The convention is that a newly sworn-in Chief Minister addresses the House at its first session; the address is debated, and the government's majority is tested in the ordinary course. To compress this into 72 hours is to invite the conduct the anti-defection law was meant to

suppress. A three-day deadline signals to disgruntled legislators, and to those willing to do business with them, that the window for horse-trading is open but short. It is an invitation, written in the Governor's own hand, to the kind of resort politics this country has seen too often.

The Karnataka episode of 2018 made this point unambiguously. The Supreme Court of India, hearing the matter at midnight, held that a 15-day window to prove a majority was an invitation to engineered defections. The remedy then was to compress the timetable to a single day. That remedy was tailored to a Governor who had wrongly invited a party that did not have the numbers. It cannot be inverted into a doctrine that the single largest party, which has staked its claim and produced support letters, must prove its majority within 72 hours of taking office.

What the Supreme Court must now say

The Court has had many opportunities, in *S.R. Bommai* (1994), *Rameshwar Prasad* (2006) and the Karnataka order of 2018, to lay down the law on gubernatorial discretion in government formation. It has, on each occasion, gone part of the way. The time has come to go all the way.

Three propositions must be settled. First, the Governor's task is to identify the person most likely to command confidence. He must follow the order of preference set out by the Sarkaria, Venkatchaliah and Punchhi Commissions. He has no power to demand pre-swearing-in proof of an absolute majority. Second, a minority government, like any other, falls only on the floor of the House. Third, the convention that the first session of a new Assembly tests the government's majority in the ordinary course should be replaced by requiring the Opposition to bring in a motion of no confidence if they so desire. Ordering a confidence vote is anathema. Minority governments will die before they are born. The only democratic way is a no-confidence vote with debate on why a government needs to be thrown out.

A sworn-in government must be allowed to debate and defend its record on governance, on the floor of the House. In a fresh House, the threat of dissolution is the strongest discipline against defection. An MLA who has just won a five-year term is reluctant to risk a fresh election. If a government is allowed to settle, prove its majority on the floor in the normal course, and govern, the cost of pulling it down rises sharply.

The Governors of India are appointed at the pleasure of the President of India. They are not elected. The least the country can ask is that they remember at whose pleasure they hold office, and whose mandate they are bound to respect. It is the voter's. Not the Centre's.

Advancing India-South Korea defence innovation ties

Since establishing diplomatic relations in 1973, India and South Korea have maintained defence ties. Their first formal agreement, the 2005 MoU on Defence Industry and Logistics, promoted cooperation in production, research and development, and procurement. Subsequently, they signed separate five-year memoranda of understanding on defence cooperation and defence research and development (R&D) in 2010.

The first enabled exchanges of expertise, training, visits and joint exercises, while the second focused on emerging technologies such as marine, electronics, and intelligent systems through links between India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and the South Korean defence industry. In 2015, the partnership was elevated to a Special Strategic Partnership.

Furthermore, the 2020 Roadmap for Defence Industries Cooperation expanded engagements into key areas, such as land, naval, aero, and guided weapon systems, along with investments and technology transfer in India's defence industrial corridors. A notable outcome of this partnership is the K9 Vajra-T self-propelled artillery system, manufactured in India by Larsen & Toubro (L&T) and Hanwha Aerospace, South Korea under the 'Make in India' initiative, whose success led to a follow-on production contract.

The new platform

On April 20, 2026, at the India-South Korea Summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Lee Jae Myung, a new defence innovation platform called the Korea-India Defence Accelerator (KIND-X) was announced.

As part of the Joint Strategic Vision, KIND-X aims to connect businesses, incubators, investors, defence start-ups, and universities from both sides. KIND-X is not a new model of cooperation for India.

It mirrors similar defence industrial innovation bridges with the United States under INDUS-X (India-U.S. Defence Acceleration Ecosystem) and with France under FRIND-X (France-India Defence Startup Excellence). There have also



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KIND-X can help deepen bilateral defence research and development, co-production, and start-up collaboration

been suggestions to create an INDUS-X-like model with South Korea. Drawing on these existing models, KIND-X is expected to be led by South Korea's Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) and India's Defence Innovation Organisation (DIO). Both countries run defence innovation programmes to strengthen their defence start-up ecosystems, such as South Korea's specialised innovation enterprise system and India's Innovations for Defence Excellence (IDEX).

According to India's Ministry of External Affairs special briefing on April 20, 2024, KIND-X is expected to align with the 2020 Roadmap for Defence Industries Cooperation.

What can be unlocked

What can KIND-X unlock? KIND-X can emerge as the "defence innovation bridge", expanding defence R&D, innovation, co-development and co-production, involving startups, investors, universities, academia, and think tanks, essentially creating a joint defence innovation and industrial ecosystem from both countries. This may involve release of joint challenges and grants by DAPA and DIO for their respective startups to innovate defence technologies in the areas envisaged under the 2020 road map.

It may facilitate access to testing facilities through universities and laboratories in both countries, promote joint certification and standardisation processes, and support accelerator and incubator programmes connecting investors and innovators from both sides. It may also include workshops to help stakeholders navigate each other's markets and production systems. These workshops can address export control regimes, funding models for defence production, and intellectual property and licensing requirements related to technology transfer for co-production and co-development.

An annual summit, similar to the INDUS-X summit, could convene high-level representatives from defence ministries, industry, universities, think tanks, and academia in Seoul, New Delhi, and other industrial hubs. The KIND-X summit could also convene Track 1.5 dialogues to

emphasise the strategic rationale for bilateral defence cooperation, foster networking, and periodically assess progress on deliverables under the initiative.

The success of KIND-X will depend on leveraging existing co-production ventures such as the K9 Vajra-T howitzers by L&T and Hanwha Aerospace to create templates for future defence projects. It will connect South Korea's innovation clusters in Changwon, Daejeon, and Gumi with India's defence corridors in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, and with aerospace hubs in Bengaluru, Chennai, and Hyderabad. Involving major firms such as Hyundai, L&T, Tata Advanced Systems Limited, Mahindra, Bharat Forge, Hanwha, LIG, and Kangnam, alongside start-ups and R&D ecosystems, can further expand linkages.

As an innovation bridge

The launch of KIND-X as a defence innovation bridge signals both governments' keenness to unlock their respective deep-tech innovation ecosystems to develop dual-use technologies. With deepening ties across other strategic sectors such as shipbuilding, artificial intelligence, space, critical minerals, and semiconductors, KIND-X can complement and draw on convergences in these sectors for defence.

Aligning with India's Defence Forces Vision 2047 and South Korea's Defence Innovation 4.0 strategy, and co-investing in emerging and future technologies will be key to making this initiative forward-looking. Potential areas under KIND-X include Artificial Intelligence platforms for military applications, autonomous weapon systems and robotics, joint development of satellites for space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), Space Situational Awareness (SSA), communication and navigation, critical mineral supply chains, and defence semiconductor fabs. Given both countries' growing defence exports, KIND-X can emerge as an important facilitator.

The onus is now upon both defence ministries to curate tangible deliverables under KIND-X, clarifying its steering template, funding mechanisms and areas of joint innovation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Political platform

Mamata Banerjee's opinion that a new 'united platform against the BJP' is to be created appears untimely. Her wishful thinking can only be attributed to the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in West Bengal. When she speaks of the new 'united platform', she intentionally or otherwise

ignores the INDI Alliance formed by various Opposition parties solely to fight the BJP. It is for her to recollect her own role in the said alliance. One is also not quite sure if she wanted the new platform in Bengal and Delhi only.

P.R.V. Raja,
Pandalam, Kerala

In Tamil Nadu

After a long impasse, prolonged uncertainty, and a gruelling wait, actor-politician C. Joseph Vijay secured the required support of MLAs to attain a simple majority and was sworn in as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. There is both satisfaction and anxiety on his face as

he assumes the immense responsibility of governing a State that has made significant developmental strides while also confronting serious challenges ahead. His biggest challenge will be fulfilling the many promises made in his election manifesto. It remains to be seen how

he will deliver on them without imposing additional taxes or increasing debt, especially when the scope for reducing expenditure through austerity measures appears limited. People voted for him not only because of his contribution to Tamil cinema, but also because of the promises he made to

women, youth, and the wider public. The first year of his tenure will shed light on whether his performance is effective or disappointing.

M.Y. Shariff,
Chennai

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

The insidious return of separate electorates

Few communities would have a greater right to rue the ascendance of Hindutva politics on the national stage than the largest minority of the country. However, now it seems that all those who believe in a pluralistic polity too have grave cause for concern. It stems from the results of the Assam State Assembly elections. Of the 102 members in the ruling dispensation led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), none is a Muslim. While this is unsettling, it wasn't entirely unpredictable considering that, for the past five years, the Narendra Modi government has had the dubious distinction of not having a single Muslim Minister, or even an MP at the Centre. What is distressing now is the stark communal segregation in the State Assembly of Assam. While the ruling party has no space for the Muslims of the State, who comprise 34% of the population, the Opposition is going in the opposite direction. The leading Opposition party, the Congress, has 19 MLAs in the Assembly, 18 of whom are Muslims. Throw in another Muslim MLA of its ally, the Rajiv Dal, which has two members in the House, besides two legislators of the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and one from the Trinamool Congress, and you have a unique but disturbing spectacle of only Hindu MLAs on the treasury benches and the Opposition space being almost entirely occupied by Muslim legislators, all 22 of them. To even write about it seems ugly and distressing but that's the reality of new India, from religion-specific residential colonies in urban India and ghettos in other social spaces to now, watertight segregation on the lines of religion in a State Assembly.



Ziva Us Salam

For instance, in the general elections of 2024, most of the Muslim winning candidates of the Samajwadi party did so from seats with a sizeable Muslim population. Add to that the BJP's oft repeated emphasis on the 'winnability factor' for denying tickets to the largest minority. Now it seems we could be heading for the reverse. Hindus do be choosing only Hindu representatives. Worse, many are beginning to choose ones who are manifestly so. Hence, the victory of many BJP candidates riding to victory fuelled by hate speech, interspersed with visits to various temples. Hindus choosing Hindus. Muslim choosing Muslims. Parties giving tickets keeping the demographics in mind. These are the new roadblocks for a nation built on a common electorate transcending religion.

This takes one's mind back to the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 which introduced the concept of the communal electorate. As the British sought to quell the rising tide of nationalism and the demand for *Swaraj* (freedom), seats were reserved on the lines of religion for elections. While thousands of Indians protested, provincial elections based on separate electorates continued till the formation of the Constituent Assembly.

In fact, the provincial elections in 1946 were crucial as there were talks of the forming of a Constituent Assembly to frame the Constitution of a nation which was soon to be independent. At the same time, there was an increasingly vociferous demand for a separate state of Pakistan by the Muslim League.

Unsurprisingly but still disturbingly, Muslims were asked to vote for the Muslim League because "a vote for the League and Pakistan was a vote for Islam". The League's fight with the Congress was portrayed as a fight between Islam and *kufir* (non-belief). The lines of communal othering were never more distinct. Likewise, M.S.

Golwalkar attacked nationalist Indians for "hugging to our bosom our most inveterate enemies (Muslims) and thus endangering our very existence." To be a nationalist, you had to be anti-Muslim, such was the belief among a section of right-wing Hindus. Much like many right-wing Muslims who equated a vote for the Congress with a vote against Islam. In the elections, the Muslim League swept the Muslim seats, winning 87% of them. The Congress, supposedly a representative of non-Muslims, won 90% of the general non-Muslim seats. The die was cast. The League emerged as the loudest Muslim voice. The Congress of the others. Never mind that Jinnah called Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan "an adversary", and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the "showboy of the Congress". One knows what happened the next year.

Beyond one's own voice
The Assam Assembly results with only Hindus in the ruling alliance and almost only Muslims in the Opposition fill all those sworn to the idea of India with trepidation. One cannot allow separate electorates to be sneaked in in disguise, delimitation or otherwise. True, the BJP has almost made it a policy decision to marginalise Muslims in representative politics but for the Congress to be whittled down to the position of being the sole spokesperson of Muslims is both unfair and incomprehensible. The repeat drubbing of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen in Bengal and the extremely limited success of Badruddin Ajmal in Assam speaks of a community looking for voices beyond its own. Almost only Muslims in the Opposition amounts to the political ghettoisation of the community. Muslims need a voice, but the voice has to come from across the political spectrum, not confined to a single party.

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Dangerous precedent

For years we have heard, and experienced, that it is no longer possible, in most cases, for a Muslim to win from a largely Hindu-dominated constituency.

Muslims need a voice, but the voice has to come from across the political spectrum, not confined to a single party

Kerala's fiscal worries

Amid worries of an empty treasury, UDF has vowed efficient tax administration

STATE OF PLAY

Tiki Rajvi
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At his first press conference after the Congress-led United Democratic Front's (UDF) landslide victory in the 2026 Assembly elections, V.D. Satheesan, Kerala's Opposition Leader for the past five years, claimed that the UDF had "inherited" a virtually empty State treasury. A treasury so bare that, Mr. Satheesan quipped, a cat and her litter had made it their home. Humour aside, the state of Kerala's finances will be in sharp focus as the new UDF government takes office. The State's fiscal health and the Union's fiscal policies vis-a-vis Kerala have been a dominant theme that coursed through the 10-year-rule of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) in Kerala. It never strayed from the centre of LDF-UDF interactions, and has more often than not, shaped the discourse of Centre-State relations.

The tallest claims of the Pinarayi Vijayan government have been that it fast-forwarded development overcoming aggressively hostile Union government policies. Mr. Satheesan and the UDF have been vocal critics of the Left's fiscal policy, and what they called Mr. Vijayan's dismal failure in forcing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to cede the State's rightful share of financial resources. The UDF also bore down on the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB), a special purpose vehicle employed by the LDF government on coming to power in 2016 to mobilise funds for large-scale infrastructure projects. It questioned the LDF's

KIIFB model, asserting that off-budget borrowings made through the KIIFB would hurl the State into a debt crisis. The UDF drew its ammunition from multiple reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General which warned that uncontrolled off-budget borrowings would land Kerala in a serious debt trap. The Central government also frowned on borrowings through the KIIFB, treating them as the State government's direct debt. In January 2023, the Opposition UDF published a white paper on the State's finances. The document accused the LDF government of plunging Kerala into a financial crisis and "toxic debt" through mismanagement, unbridled spending and subpar tax collection.

Daunting challenge

K.N. Balagopal, the outgoing Finance Minister, has refuted Mr. Satheesan's claims about the UDF inheriting an empty treasury from the LDF. Kerala is now in a much better position financially, and multiple fiscal indicators, including the debt-to-Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) ratio, testify to this, according to him.

Nonetheless, reworking a fiscal landscape shaped on Left perspectives would be a daunting task for whoever takes charge as Kerala's new Finance Minister. The primary job would be to keep the treasury running smoothly. Kerala's financial model is marked

by high expenditures on salaries, pensions and interest payments and hefty spending on social welfare. The limited space for improving own-tax revenues, negotiating the dynamics of Union fiscal policies with respect to the State's curtailed borrowing space, and the implications of the 16th Finance Commission awards pose challenges. While Kerala's divisible tax pool share has risen from 1.92% to 2.382%, the 16th FC has not recommended revenue deficit grants, sector-specific grants or State-specific grants. The Medium Term Fiscal Policy document had noted that Kerala faces fiscal stress from the "cessation of the goods and services tax (GST) compensation, revenue deficit grants, reduction in central share of taxes and declining assistance from Centrally Sponsored Schemes." Needless to say, mobilising additional revenue would be a prime responsibility of the new government to take the development juggernaut forward and fulfill the five guarantees in its election manifesto. For instance, the UDF will be expected to make good on its promise that the monthly social welfare pensions would be hiked to ₹3,000. Currently at ₹2,000, these pensions are paid out to approximately 60 lakh people. In his May 4 press conference, Mr. Satheesan promised "results" – robust financial management, efficient tax administration and measures to fill the treasury. At this juncture, it will not be amiss to speculate whether the new government would choose to publish a white paper on the state of the State finances. Perhaps, one would not be untimely given the nature of the claims that the people of Kerala have been hearing on the subject.

Prevalence of fake currency still a reality post-demonetisation

Gujarat accounted for more than half the value of counterfeit currency seizures between 2017 and 2024

DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy

On November 8, 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the demonetisation of ₹1,000 and ₹500 notes with immediate effect, stating that the move would serve as a major assault on black money, counterfeit currencies, and corruption. The days that followed the announcement saw public panic with long queues at ATMs and widespread economic disruption, particularly in the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME). While the jury is still out on the exercise's impact on eradicating black money and corruption, the latest 'Crime in India' report of the National Crime Records Bureau for 2024 shows that almost a decade later, the problem of fake currency still persists.

According to the data, over ₹54.61 crore worth of fake currencies were seized from various States in India. Currencies seized included about six lakh ₹500 notes and more than one lakh ₹2,000 notes – which the Reserve Bank of India decided to withdraw from circulation in May 2023 although it continues to remain a legal tender.

Chart 1 shows the value of counterfeit Indian currency seized by authorities over the last decade. A total of ₹638 crore worth of fake currencies have been seized since 2017, the year after demonetisation. The value of counterfeit notes seized in 2024 was also the third highest since 2016. In the year 2020, when COVID-19 broke out, seizures of ₹92 crore were seen. In 2022, two years after the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, counterfeit currencies valued at a whopping ₹382.6 crore were seized.

Data also points to an increase in counterfeit currencies of ₹500 notes and ₹2,000 notes (**Chart 2**). The number of ₹500 notes seized by authorities in 2024 was almost

four times the notes seized in 2016. The number of counterfeit ₹2,000 notes, introduced after demonetisation, increased almost twice than what it was in 2017.

Besides the data recorded by the NCRB on seizures by law enforcement authorities, data from Parliament showed that more than 11 lakh counterfeit notes of varying denominations, valued at a total of ₹40.26 crore, were detected and reported after they entered the banking system in the five-year period between 2020-21 and 2024-25. That is, an average of roughly two lakh counterfeit notes have been detected each year by the banks (**Chart 3**).

A denomination-wise break up of these notes implies that new currencies like ₹200 and ₹500 which were reintroduced are also being counterfeited (**Chart 4**). More than four lakh ₹500 notes belonging to the new series printed after demonetisation made up about 37% of these notes. Close to three lakh ₹100 notes accounted for 26% of the counterfeits reported in banks.

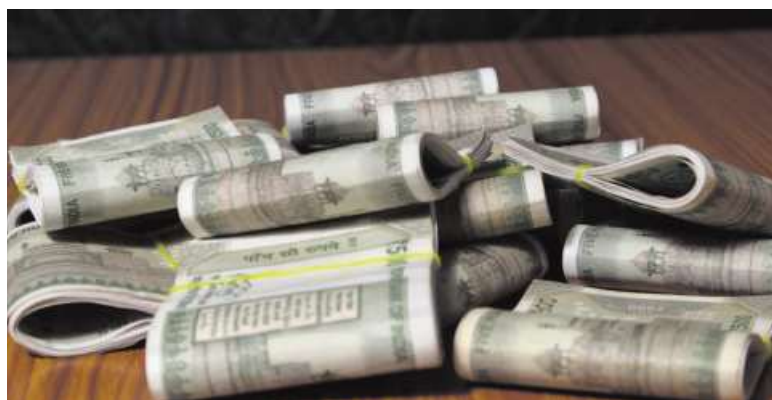
A State-wise breakup of counterfeit notes seized shows that Gujarat accounted for the highest value of fake money seized between 2017 and 2024 (**Chart 5**). The value of fake currency seized in the State valued at ₹355.72 crore, accounted for more than half of the value of all the seizures in the country during this period. Maharashtra and Karnataka followed Gujarat, accounting for seizures of counterfeit currencies worth ₹100 crore and ₹50 crore respectively.

Data from the RBI also showed that as of May this year, over 174 billion notes were in circulation valued at a total of more than ₹42.12 lakh crore, an increase of about 137% compared to November 2016, when currency in circulation was valued at ₹17.74 lakh crore.

This indicates that the demonetisation exercise's other objective of bringing down currency transactions has also not had the desired impact.

Counterfeits creep up

The data for the charts were sourced from National Crime Records Bureau and Parliament Questions and Answers



As shown in Chart 1, the value of fake currency notes seized was the highest in 2022. Gujarat alone accounted for over 85% of the value of money seized by authorities that year across the country. The value of fake currency seized in 2024 is the third-highest since 2016, as shown in the chart

Chart 2: Denomination-wise share of fake Indian currency seized by authorities every year. Figures in %

Chart 1: The value of fake Indian currencies seized every year. Figures in ₹ crore

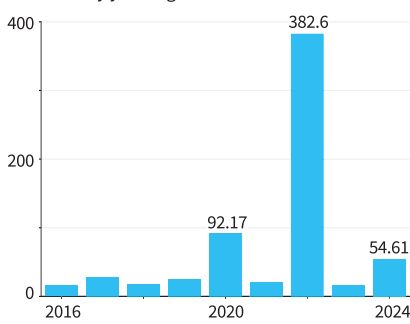


Chart 3: The value of counterfeit notes detected and reported in the banking system during the last five financial years. Figures in ₹ crore

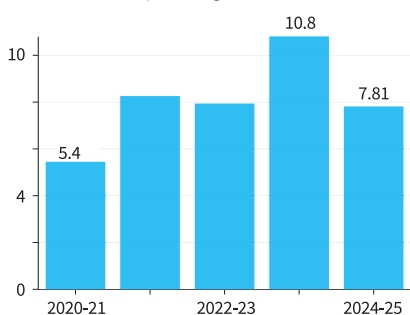
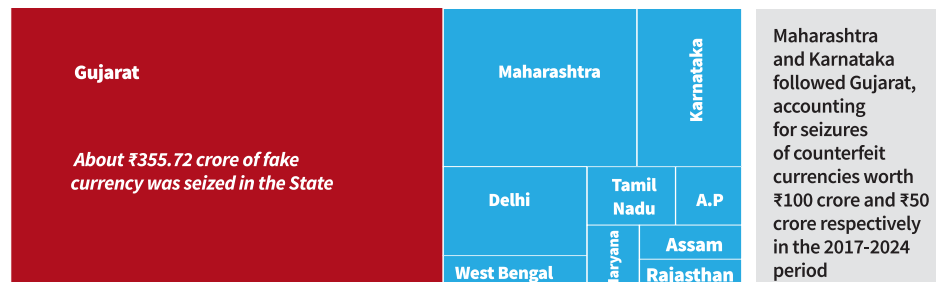


Chart 5: The Statewise share of the value of fake currencies seized by authorities in the 2017-2024 period
Only top 10 States which accounted for most seizures are displayed in the graph



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The *Hindu*

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 11, 1976

UGC proposal to give practical work to students

Madras, May 10: The University Grants Commission has proposed to reorient degree courses by combining two theoretical subjects with one practical subject. The subjects will be physics, chemistry, biology and public health or economics, commerce and Panchayati Raj or co-operative societies. Under this scheme, every student will have to undergo one year practical experience in the field or factory, said Dr. Malcolm S. Adiseshiah, Vice-Chancellor, University of Madras, here to-day.

The Vice-Chancellor, who inaugurated a two-week "Contact Seminar" for college teachers participating in a two-year correspondence course for diploma in higher education, said it was felt that the present system was too much urban oriented and needed to be given a rural bias. Madurai University had been selected as one of the universities in the south for introducing the new curriculum. The Board of Studies in Madras University, he said, was working out, a similar scheme to be tried in some of the colleges situated in rural areas. He wanted educators to study the function of evaluation system and combine various methods to judge the performance of students. At present 30 per cent of our students came from 20 per cent of our society and steps had to be taken to extend education on a wider basis. He wanted the organisers of correspondence courses to prepare a report so that similar courses could be organised for other college teachers.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 11, 1926

Water scarcity in Bangalore

Bangalore, May 11: To deal with the water scarcity due to the Besargatta tank failure, despite the expenditure of Rs. 2 lakhs on repairs, the Government have ordered immediate investigation by a board consisting of Messrs. V. Rangaswami Iyengar, Retired Director of Industries, J. Bhore, Chief Engineer, Seshachar, P.W.D., Secretary and S.R. Venkatasubbe Rao, Executive Engineer, Water-supply, the last as Secretary, and Sir M. Visveswarayya as President.

All the data and various schemes will be considered and report made. Water scarcity continues as before.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of people in Congo killed in militia attack

69 For more than 30 years, the mineral-rich eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has been a battleground between various armed groups, vying for control of its many mines. Armed men affiliated with the Codeco militia carried out attacks in several villages on April 28, local and security sources said. AFP

Number of small boat migrants to the U.K. since 2018

2 in lakh. The northern French coast is the main point of departure for migrants hoping to reach Britain, usually risking the journey in flimsy boats. At least 29 migrants died at sea attempting the crossing in 2025, according to an AFP tally based on official French and British sources. A further six people have died this year. AFP

People arrested in 'drug-free J-K campaign'

646 The ongoing 'Nasha Mukta J-K Abhiyan', one of the largest campaigns against drug abuse in the Union Territory, has also witnessed massive public participation, with 2,16,123 awareness events conducted across Jammu and Kashmir, involving more than one crore participants. PTI

Number of officials killed in Pakistan militant attack

15 The incident took place on Saturday in the northwest district of Bannu, where an explosive-laden vehicle approaching a police post was fired at by security personnel, leading to a blast, the police said. The impact of the explosion led to the collapse of the roofs of several houses in the vicinity. PTI

Average voter turnout in Haryana local body elections

25 in per cent. An average voter turnout of 25% was witnessed till 1 p.m. in the polling for the local body polls, including the municipal corporations of Ambala, Panchkula and Sonapat in Haryana on Sunday, officials said. The main contest is expected between the Congress and the BJP. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Governor's role in govt. formation

What does Article 164(1) say about the appointment of the Chief Minister? When does the Governor use discretionary powers? Which commissions recommended guidelines for government formation in a hung Assembly? Why has the conduct of Governors in hung Assemblies raised concerns?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R.

The story so far:

The Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) secured 108 seats, 10 short of a majority, in the recently concluded Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. After hectic parleys with smaller parties, letters of support from 120 members were provided to the Governor. The Governor then invited TVK chief C. Joseph Vijay to form the government, who was sworn in as Chief Minister.

What are constitutional provisions?

Article 164(1) of the Constitution provides that the Chief Minister of a State shall be appointed by the Governor, while other ministers shall be appointed by the Governor on the advice of the Chief Minister. When a single party secures a clear majority in the Assembly, the Governor invites the leader of that legislative party to form the government. If no party secures a majority, the Governor exercises his/her discretion in appointing the Chief Minister.

The Constitution does not prescribe any criteria for selecting the Chief Minister in the event of a hung Assembly. The Sarkaria Commission (1987), followed by the Punchhi Commission (2010), recommended the manner in which the Chief Minister may be appointed in case no party enjoys a majority in the Assembly. The order of preference indicated by these commissions is as follows – first a pre-poll alliance that enjoys majority; next the single largest party staking a claim to form the government with the support of others; then a post-electoral coalition of parties, with all partners in the coalition joining the government; and finally, a



Fresh start: Tamil Nadu Governor Rajendra Arlekar with Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay, on Sunday. PTI

post-electoral alliance with some parties joining the government and the remaining parties supporting the government from outside.

What are the issues?

The recommendations of the above commissions and conventions require Governors to act in a bipartisan manner while selecting the Chief Minister in a hung Assembly. However, Governors have, on numerous occasions, appointed Chief Ministers without following any particular order.

For instance, after the Assembly elections in Goa (2017) and Manipur (2017), the Governors invited BJP-led post-poll alliances to form the government, even though the Congress had emerged as the single largest party. These governments later proved their majority in the Assembly. On the contrary, in Karnataka (2018), the Governor invited the BJP, as the single

largest party, to form the government over a claim by the post-poll alliance of Congress and Janata Dal (Secular). In 2019, the Governor of Maharashtra appointed a BJP-led coalition government when there was uncertainty as to whether it enjoyed a majority. On both occasions, the Chief Ministers had to resign as they were unable to muster the required majority.

Under the Constitution, the Governor is the nominal head of the State executive and possesses certain discretionary powers in specific situations. The discretion vested in the Governor to select a Chief Minister in a hung Assembly is to enable him/her to appoint a government that would be stable and enjoy the majority in the Assembly. However, the conduct of Governors in several such situations has raised concerns that they often function more as agents of the Union government than as impartial constitutional heads of the States.

What can be the way forward?

In the current situation in Tamil Nadu, TVK was the only party to stake a claim to form the government. The Governor's office indicated that, since the claim was a post-poll alliance, it was essential to validate whether the formation enjoyed the majority support of 118 members. However, the constitutional requirement for a government is to have the support of the majority of members present and voting in the Assembly. The majority of 118 in the Tamil Nadu Assembly is based on the full strength of the 234-member Tamil Nadu Assembly and does not account for possible abstentions during the vote.

The Supreme Court in the *S. R. Bommai v. Union of India* (1994) had categorically held that the 'floor of the House' is the constitutionally ordained forum for testing the majority support enjoyed by a government. This was reiterated in the Rameshwar Prasad case (2006).

The use of discretionary powers by the Governors has been subject to various court pronouncements. Nevertheless, judicial differences in interpretation resulted in inconsistent application of these principles.

The recent Justice Kurian Joseph Committee report on Union-State relations, constituted by the earlier Tamil Nadu government, recommended incorporating a new schedule into the Constitution to codify the rules governing the Governor's use of discretionary powers. This may be considered to provide a constitutional basis for the use of such discretionary powers. It is imperative that the Governors exercise their discretionary powers in a bona fide manner.

(Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. He currently trains civil-service aspirants at 'Officers IAS Academy'. Views expressed are personal)

THE GIST

▼ The Constitution allows the Governor to exercise discretion in appointing a Chief Minister in a hung Assembly, but differing interpretations and past instances have raised concerns over the impartial use of these discretionary powers.

▼ The Supreme Court has held that the "floor of the House" is the constitutionally ordained forum to test majority support, while the Justice Kurian Joseph Committee recommended codifying rules relating to the Governor's discretionary powers.

What measures are needed to address Delhi's heat crisis?

What structural changes are required to reduce extreme heat? How can urban planning help?

Suksham Tanu
Amir Hyder Khan

The story so far:

Delhi and the NCR are facing longer and more intense heatwaves, with the city increasingly retaining heat even at night. Rapid urbanisation, concrete-heavy infrastructure, air conditioning, and shrinking green cover have turned the Urban Heat Island Effect into a deeper "heat re-trap".

Why is Delhi retaining heat?

This transformation is rooted in the city's material logic. Concrete, asphalt, steel, and glass dominate Delhi NCR's expansion. These materials absorb heat efficiently but release it slowly.

Roads, rooftops, and facades accumulate heat through the day and emit it at night, delaying cooling. Surface temperatures in dense areas reach 50-60°C on peak afternoons. These surfaces act as reservoirs, keeping the surrounding air warm well into the night. The city, in effect, stores the sun.

Glass-heavy architecture in areas such as Gurgaon and Noida worsens the problem by allowing solar radiation indoors, increasing reliance on air conditioning rather than reducing heat.

Vehicular activity adds constant thermal input. Corridors like NH-48 function as continuous heat sources, where engines and exhaust combine with heat-absorbing asphalt to create persistent hotspots. Over time, these form into thermal corridors that reshape the city's microclimate.

At the same time, Delhi struggles to release heat. High-density construction and narrow streets restrict airflow, while traditional cooling features – courtyards, shaded pathways, ventilation corridors – have largely disappeared. As a result, air stagnates and heat accumulates within the city's form.

How does cooling contribute to warming?

While interiors are cooled, heat is expelled outdoors. In dense neighbourhoods, this raises ambient temperatures by 1-2°C.

This produces a feedback loop: rising temperatures increase the demand for cooling, which in turn releases more heat outside. The city cools itself internally while warming externally.

The energy burden is also significant. Delhi's peak electricity demand has crossed 8,000 MW during the summer, with cooling accounting for a significant share. Nationally, cooling demand is projected to grow nearly eightfold by 2050, increasing pressure on power systems and raising the risk of outages during extreme heat.

How is heat affecting the economy and ecology?

Factories and warehouses operate within specific temperature limits; excessive heat reduces efficiency and affects machinery. Productivity declines by 2-3% for every degree rise above optimal levels, leading to delays and higher costs. Supply chains are also slowing as transport hours shrink and storage conditions deteriorate.

At a broader level, India loses over \$100 billion annually due to the decline in

heat-related productivity.

Ecologically, the city has lost natural cooling systems. Shrinking green cover, degraded wetlands, and the loss of the Yamuna floodplains have reduced evapotranspiration. Without vegetation and water bodies, Delhi's ability to regulate temperature has weakened.

What measures are needed to address the crisis?

Addressing this crisis requires structural change in how cities are built and managed. Materials must shift toward high-albedo surfaces, cool roofs, and reflective coatings. Buildings need insulation and passive design strategies like shading and cross-ventilation.

Urban planning must restore airflow through ventilation corridors and better street orientation. Green and blue infrastructure – including urban forests, parks, and water bodies – must expand as essential cooling systems.

Reducing heat generated by human activity is equally important. Sustainable transport, electric mobility, and improved public transit can lower vehicular emissions. Energy-efficient appliances and district cooling systems can reduce heat discharge.

Equally critical is social protection. Affordable housing upgrades, subsidised cooling, and community cooling centres are necessary to protect vulnerable populations during extreme heat. (Suksham Tanu is a sustainability and environmental studies enthusiast based in Dubai; Amir Hyder Khan is a final-year B.Arch student at Jamia Millia Islamia)

THE GIST

▼ Delhi and the NCR are increasingly retaining heat, with concrete, asphalt, steel, and glass turning the Urban Heat Island Effect into a deeper "heat re-trap".

▼ Addressing the heat crisis requires structural changes such as cool roofs, passive cooling strategies, ventilation corridors, green and blue infrastructure, and social protection measures.

CACHE

AI-enabled oversight layer for continuous electoral roll monitoring

SIR 2.0 exposed structural weaknesses in electoral roll revision processes; an AI-enabled oversight layer integrated with ECINet could continuously monitor electoral operations, detect anomalies and discriminatory patterns in real time, and strengthen transparency, neutrality, and accountability

Rajeev Kumar

Within 72 hours of the recently concluded Assembly elections, the Election Commission (EC) released detailed statistical reports and index cards showcasing the capabilities of ECINet, its digital electoral platform formally launched in its full-fledged professional version in January 2026. However, during the special intensive revision (SIR) for the same West Bengal elections, the EC neither disclosed the status of nearly 34 lakh appeals, including seven lakh deletion appeals, pending before the 19 Supreme Court-appointed tribunals, nor released comparable transparency reports, despite all relevant information being readily available within ECINet.

Reportedly, one tribunal headed by the former Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court disposed of 1,777 appeals, allowing all 1,717 citizen appeals for inclusion and rejecting all 60 EC appeals for deletion. Similar large-scale corrections may have occurred before the other 18 tribunals. In contrast, the EC reportedly included only about 1,607 voters before polling. Such selective disclosure and inconsistent transparency raise serious questions about the EC's functioning, neutrality, and suppression of equally significant information that could potentially influence electoral outcomes.

The absence of comparable transparency and status disclosures for SIR, despite reports of large-scale discrepancies and disenfranchisement, raises serious questions about selective disclosure and institutional double standards within the EC. As a constitutional authority, the EC commands the highest institutional dignity and trust. Equally, it must remain accountable, transparent, and open to objective scrutiny, especially when allegations of arbitrariness, bias, and large-scale exclusion of genuine voters emerge.

Against this backdrop, an independent AI-enabled oversight layer integrated with ECINet could continuously assess electoral roll revision processes, including neutrality, consistency, and procedural arbitrariness. The proposed AI watchdog framework is straightforward to implement, with a foundational operational model achievable within a few months and capable of continuous enhancement thereafter.

Failures in SIR 2.0

SIR 2.0 exposed unprecedented chaos driven by ad hoc, ever-changing, and subjective SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) that reportedly excluded millions of genuine voters from electoral rolls and, in several cases, denied candidature rights. What began as an exercise to improve electoral accuracy by removing ASDD (absentee, shifted, duplicate, dead) entries and adding new voters instead resulted in widespread uncertainty, repeated verifications, prolonged appeals, and allegations of arbitrariness, discrimination, and bias.

The exercise relied heavily on inaccurate, incomplete, and non-searchable legacy SIR 2002-04 databases. Instead of correcting defects at the source, the burden of proof was



Matter of concern: SIR 2.0 exposed unprecedented chaos driven by ad hoc, ever-changing, and subjective SOPs that reportedly excluded millions of genuine voters from electoral rolls. ANI

shifted onto voters, forcing genuine citizens to repeatedly establish their eligibility despite long voting histories and valid documents. The process was further marked by uneven application of the logical discrepancy criteria across regions and voter groups, resulting in non-uniform outcomes for similarly situated voters. Minor mismatches in names, ages, or family details often led to exclusions, while opaque decision-making and the absence of reasoned orders fuelled allegations of arbitrariness and algorithmic bias.

The consequences were most alarming in West Bengal, where only about 1,600 inclusion appeals and merely six deletion cases were reportedly disposed of before polling, out of nearly 3.4 million pending appeals, even though inclusion appeals reportedly had a success rate exceeding 99%. Those excluded reportedly included electoral officials and prospective candidates. Notably, one such excluded individual, later cleared for inclusion, went on to be elected as an MLA.

In an unprecedented situation, 49 Assembly constituencies reportedly recorded victory margins lower than the number of voters awaiting disposal of inclusion appeals. The apex court observed that relief for many may come only in future elections and that post-election scrutiny may be necessary in constituencies where victory margins fall below the scale of discrepancies and

pending appeals, raising serious concerns over electoral integrity and the possibility of post-election chaos. The situation reflects not merely administrative failure, but a deeper crisis of credibility in the electoral roll revision process itself.

These developments exposed deeper structural weaknesses in electoral roll management. They stood in sharp contrast to the EC's repeated commitment to "ensuring free, fair, transparent, accessible and peaceful elections" and its assurance that "no genuine voter is disenfranchised."

More significantly, this occurred despite ECINet reportedly being capable of handling three crore hits per minute and maintaining detailed operational data for every voter and transaction. Yet neutrality, consistency, and accountability continued to depend largely on opaque manual processes, administrative discretion, and post-facto correction. The SIR 2.0 experience, therefore, underscored the urgent need for a continuous, technology-driven oversight mechanism capable of monitoring processes, detecting anomalies, assessing institutional neutrality, and identifying discriminatory patterns in real time.

AI oversight for ECINet

As AI increasingly powers governance and large-scale public systems, electoral management too requires intelligent,

continuously auditable oversight. Embedding an AI-enabled watchdog within ECINet offers a practical pathway to build a neutrality-aware electoral roll management system capable of safeguarding democratic participation and public trust.

Integrated directly with ECINet, the proposed AI layer would function as a continuous oversight and analytics engine. It would monitor system usage, track decision patterns, analyse voter-official interactions, and generate real-time indicators of neutrality, consistency, efficiency, and citizen satisfaction at booth, constituency, district, and State levels. Unlike post-facto reviews, it could continuously audit electoral roll revision processes using transactional and procedural data already available within ECINet, enabling early detection of irregularities before they escalate into large-scale disenfranchisement or administrative crises.

The system could automatically flag anomalies and discriminatory patterns, including unusual spikes in deletions, inconsistent application of SOPs, repeated rejection trends linked to specific officials, excessive grievance delays, abrupt policy shifts, bias arising from logical discrepancy filters, disproportionate exclusions due to minor spelling or family-data mismatches, and concentrated deletions in specific regions, castes, or communities. It could also compare outcomes across regions to identify differential treatment of similarly placed voters and enforce consistency in institutional communication by tracking announcements, circulars, deadlines, SOP revisions, and field instructions.

Further, continuous analysis of bottlenecks, software glitches, verification failures, grievance trends, and operational inefficiencies could support evidence-based refinement of SOPs, replacing ad hoc administrative responses with measurable corrective action. A foundational operational version of such an AI watchdog could be implemented within a few months and continuously enhanced thereafter.

Way forward

An AI-enabled watchdog integrated with ECINet could continuously monitor electoral operations, assess institutional neutrality, detect anomalies and discriminatory patterns, and flag inconsistencies or shifting eligibility criteria.

It could also standardise announcements, deadlines, and procedural updates, reducing confusion and non-uniform implementation across regions.

With ECINet already fully operational, AI-driven oversight could make SIR processes more transparent, neutral, accountable, and citizen-centric. Importantly, such a system would strengthen – not replace – constitutional authority through transparent audit trails, fairness metrics, evidence-based oversight, and measurable accountability, while reducing arbitrariness, opacity, and public distrust.

(Rajeev Kumar is a former Professor of Computer Science at IIT Kharagpur, IIT Kanpur, BITS Pilani, and JNU, and a former scientist at DRDO and DST)



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Kailash is tied to his wife's apron strings

The director is looking for a marquee name to play the villain

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of 'tied to someone's apron strings'? (D Aditya, Bengaluru)

In the past, an apron was something that a woman generally wore over her clothes while cooking; this was done in order to protect the dress that she was wearing. The original idiom was 'tied to one's mother's/wife's apron strings', and this is something that no man wants to be told. When you say that Hari is tied to his mother's apron strings, what you are suggesting is that he is controlled or dominated by his mother. He does everything she says. Later, when he gets married and is under his wife's thumb, he is said to be tied to his wife's apron strings.

This article argues that most men are tied to their mothers' apron strings all their lives.

According to scholars, the idiom has been around for well over four hundred years. In the past, a mother who had a small child at home used to tie a rope around him, which she then tethered to her apron strings. This was to ensure the child did not get into trouble by wandering off somewhere while she was busy cooking. The child was under the control of the mother.

How is the word 'marquee' pronounced? (N Jayalakshmi, Secunderabad)

This word of French origin can be used as a noun and an adjective. No matter how you use the word, the pronunciation is the same. The first syllable, 'marq', is pronounced like the word 'mark'; the following 'ee' sounds like the 'ee' in 'fees', 'bees' and 'knees'. The word is pronounced 'mark-EE' with the stress on the second syllable. It comes from the French 'marquise', meaning 'a large tent'. Even today, when used as a noun, 'marquee' means a big tent where a relatively large number of people can get together for a particular purpose – dinner, wedding reception, etc.

They had their daughter's reception in a marquee in their garden.

When used as an adjective, it refers to individuals. When you refer to someone as the marquee player in your team, you are suggesting that he is the player that spectators come to see – someone whose name attracts a lot of attention. In the 1970s, film producers wanted the likes of Dev Anand, Sivaji Ganesan and NTR in their films because these individuals had a huge fan base.

The director is looking for a marquee name to play the villain.

Is it okay to say, 'This is how it looks like'? (P Seetha, Ongole)

Careful users of the language would argue that the sentence sounds odd. It would be considered grammatically acceptable without the word 'like' at the end of the sentence.

Here's a photograph of how my son looks.

It is also possible to replace the 'how' with 'what'. In this case, you can include the word 'like' at the end of the sentence.

Here's a photograph of what my son looks like.
upendrankye@gmail.com

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz to celebrate noted explorer, broadcaster Sir David Attenborough's 100th birthday

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

Sir David is known for the path-breaking 'Zoo Quest' in 1954, though he was not the original host and stepped in from the second episode. Where was that episode set in?

QUESTION 2

For which film set in India did he win the Best Narration/Voice Over honours at the 67th National Film Awards?

QUESTION 3

A legend known for his work with thousands of species around the world, the famed explorer has said he

has a phobia for a common animal. Which animal?

QUESTION 4

What is the most significant contribution of Sir David to the world of international tennis?

QUESTION 5

Which cult comedy series, starring an actor who was rejected by Sir David for a BBC role, did he commission in the late 1960s?

QUESTION 6

Which Attenborough documentary was released directly alongside the COP26 climate summit?



Visual Question:

Name the prestigious award Sir David is holding, and what unparalleled technological record does he have as far as that award is concerned? GETTY IMAGES

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

1. In which famous Vatican chapel is the conclave held? **Ans: The Sistine Chapel**
 2. What colour smoke signals that a new pope has been elected? **Ans: White smoke**
 3. What title is given to the period when the papal throne is vacant? **Ans: Sede Vacante**
 4. What famous Latin announcement declares the election of a new pope? **Ans: "Habemus Papam"**
 5. What is the official residence where cardinals stay during a conclave? **Ans: Casa Santa Marta**
- Visual: The present papal coat of arms bears the Latin motto "In Illo uno unum." What does this expression mean in English? **Ans: "In the One, we are one"**
- Early Birds: Tom Alan Faith | Piyali Tuli | Lalchand Bhutani | Tito Shiladitya | Prodosh Mitra

Word of the day

Truculent:

defiantly aggressive

Synonyms: assaultive, hostile, irritable

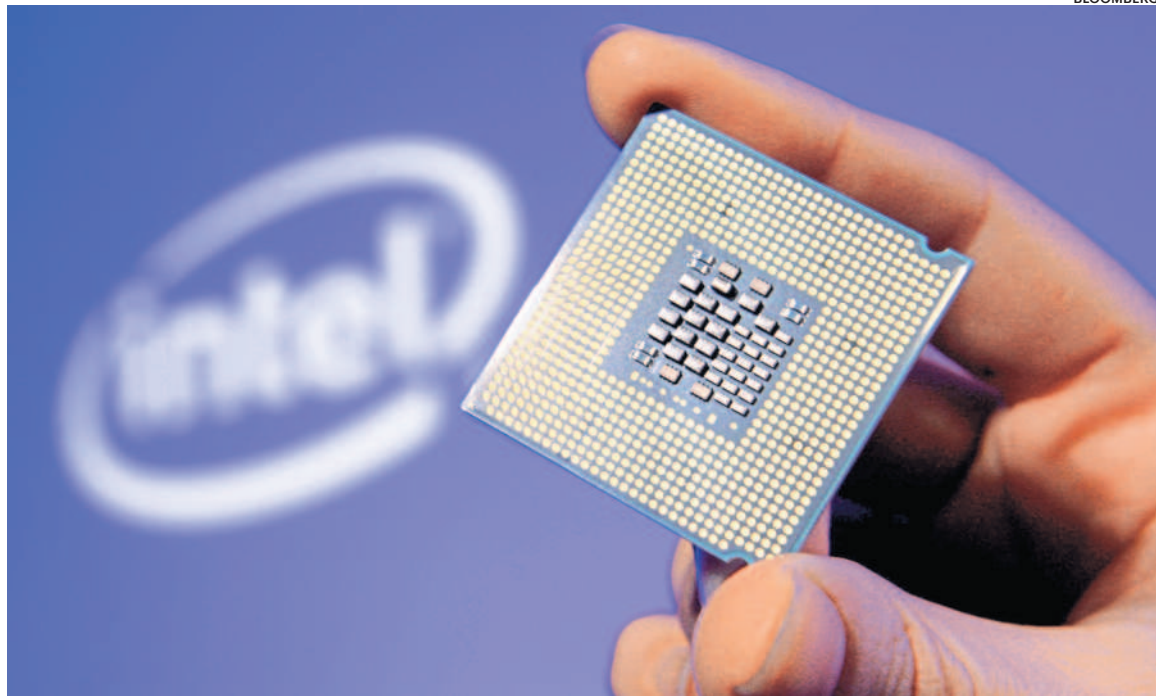
Usage: He gave a truculent reply instead of answering politely.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/truculent

International Phonetic Alphabet: /trʌkjuːlənt/

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

OUR VIEW



Global domination: will it pivot on silicon chips?

The US-China rivalry has digital supremacy at its core: one is ready to warp its free market for it while the other covets Taiwan. What counts as sound economic policy may be at stake

An American chipmaker forging a deal to make microchips for a US gadget-maker shouldn't make anybody sit up. But since this involves Intel and Apple, it should—for what it says about US capitalism. While the pact is preliminary, reports of it gave Intel's stock a far bigger boost than Apple's on Friday. A broker's role is said to have been played by the federal government, which owns a tenth of Intel's equity. Taken last August for \$8.9 billion, this stake was portrayed as a natural outcome of a subsidy granted to the chipmaker under a 'small yard, high fence' policy aimed at autarky in fields like semiconductors. Even so, it marked a closer embrace of what was once snubbed as statism and is now called industrial policy. Some onlookers suspect this statist turn was thrust upon America by China's designs on Taiwan, whose TSMC makes chips on contract for the tech world's who's who, ranging from Nvidia and AMD to Intel and Apple. A squeeze of rare-earth supply by Beijing is one thing; a chips embargo could be quite another. Likewise, a 'once inside' chipmaker grabbing a bailout raises no eyebrows, but what explains Apple's decision?

With its iPhones made in Asia, Apple has gained much from globalization, but it can hardly shrug off White House calls to onshore what it can. Last July, the company struck a supply deal with MP Materials, a rare-earth producer, soon after the US Defense Department invested \$400 million in it. A nudge from above was apparent in that move too. For Apple watchers, the irony of all this is how the brand first achieved fame—as a voice against central authority. Back in the 1980s, it positioned itself as a decentralizer of digital power, selling devi-

ces designed to resist any form of thought police. This, coupled with its rise from a garage as a private venture, went with America's self-image as a nation of individual agency. Apple's success was not just an ode to free enterprise, but also an oblique rebuke to the statist claim that centrally directed—rather than market determined—allocation of resources could yield a vibrant economy. By the 1990s, the Soviet Union's centralized model of the Cold War era had caved in, marking the triumph of free-market economics. China's export-led ascent, aided by investments from US firms like Apple, did not go unnoticed—but was broadly attributed to Beijing's adoption of market forces. In fact, the 'Chinese characteristics' of its socialism were widely viewed as a reference to capitalism. Yet, today, it is the US that labours under the shadow of Orwellian 'doublethink,' as seen in the state's heavy hand in business affairs, be it trade flows or factory nodes.

In 1991, we remixed India's economy in favour of market competition. What cues should we take from today's world? As China and the US prepare for a summit, the former wants the latter to quit backing Taiwan's autonomy, lift its import tariffs and ease chip-export curbs in lieu of access to Chinese rare earths, while America seeks a bilateral trade balance that evokes eyerolls from economists. It is true that Beijing deployed a statist catapult for exports, just as tech superiority based on AI advances and silicon heft could spell a strategic edge in various theatres of war. But White House envy of central planning is not evidence of it being the better economic model. While we watch this geo-rivalry play out, we must resist viewing it through the reductive prism of silicon wafers. Let's think different. Think economics.

BLOOMBERG

THEIR VIEW

Affluence creates jobs: the top of India's pyramid plays a vital role

The wealthy deserve recognition for their generation of economic demand in good times and bad



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is not just inflation-proof, but also largely unaffected by business cycles. Or even stock market upheavals. In recent years, most investor presentations by companies in industries like consumer durables, real estate, hospitality, readymade garments, travel and tourism, etc, have pointed to buoyant consumption of premium products and services. The common lament is that entry-level products have been selling weakly, with inflation pricing them out of the reach of new users. However, premium segments have kept business top-lines ticking.

The challenge for marketers of products and services aimed at the wealthy is one of saturation. Multiple cars, mobile phones and residences can become *passé*. This tends to happen in cycles every four or five years, when consumption plateaus out, requiring a new set of affluent spenders to set off a new cycle. Alternatively, or simultaneously, new products need to be introduced to sustain demand. Producers need to judge levels of affluence and its trajectory before they commit fresh capital to such projects.

The automobile industry exemplifies the need to keep new models rolling out. Marques like Mercedes, Audi, BMW and Porsche need offerings that range from ₹50 lakh to several crore to keep more than just first-time buyers interested. The SUV concept began as a household's second or third vehicle. Today, as with high-end watches, luxury marques need to sell an even wider range of vehicles to suit different occasions. In 2025-26, the luxury segment constituted just 1% of India's total 4.16 million passenger cars sold. Given that the average price of high-end cars would be about 10 times that of a non-luxury four-wheeler, manufacturers see a lucrative opportunity in running a high-margin, low-volume business.

Further, unlike entry-level vehicles, where discounts have to be given to draw customers, demand for premium cars tends to be price inelastic. This is so

of many products that signal prestige and thus have snob value.

The relevant issue from an economic perspective is one of maintaining the pace of demand. For this, it is essential that this class of luxury consumers has a sustained influx of new entrants. India's wealth bracket, in other words, needs to expand relentlessly.

Is it doing so? Individual tax returns data offers some clues. The number of tax returns filed for income above ₹1 crore rose from 44,078 in 2013-14 to 97,689 in 2018-19 and further to 227,315 in 2023-24. Not only is this a sharp increase, the number of returns filed for income above ₹10 crore has also grown several fold. Therefore, there is evidence that the number of rich has been increasing, helping support the production plans of companies aiming at luxury buyers. Bank data also gives us a sense of growth at the top of the pyramid. For home loans with more than ₹4 crore outstanding as of end-March 2025, there were almost 20,000 customers; for vehicle loans above ₹1 crore, there were nearly 38,000.

Often, the 'Veblen effect' comes into play, where a high price-tag in itself is taken as an indicator of value. This is common in categories where people from less privileged income groups purchase products mostly used by the elite. This is seen in the markets for mobile phones, clothing, perfumes, hospitality and so on. This is especially prominent in the fashion business, where value is often a matter of perception, labels act as status symbols and fast-changing trends mean old stock must be discarded and discount sales do the job.

The consumption of the affluent is important for the economy. Such spending sets templates for others who aspire to wealthy lifestyles and helps money circulate. What we must not lose sight of, however, is that aggregate demand in an economy is even more vital. For accelerated GDP growth, we need India's multitudes to spend.

These are the author's personal views.



JUST A THOUGHT

The free market is not only a more efficient decision maker than even the wisest central planning body, but even more important, the free market keeps economic power widely dispersed.

MILTON FRIEDMAN

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Why pride in a famous classmate does not make sense

MANU JOSEPH



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

I thought only I knew. The Tamil actor Vijay, whom people have suddenly taken to calling Joseph Vijay after his political rivals revealed his full name, and who now heads the largest party in Tamil Nadu's assembly, was my classmate in the third standard. It is a connection I made because I remember trivial things from childhood. Usually, people don't remember much of their past, so I thought that no one else in my class knew of their Vijay connection.

I have only three recollections of him. His head made quick bird-like movements on a long neck, and he could run very fast. He left school the next year, but I saw him in church one Sunday. I was surprised he was Christian, and also that he was rich. I was seeing him in something other than school uniform for the first time, and he was probably wearing a coat or something I only remember as too fancy for us, and he was with his mother who appeared distinguished. It was unusual for a woman to sit on the last bench in church because women usually didn't leave

mass midway, but there she was with her son. Maybe they wanted to be discreet because they were important. Vijay would say something to his mother and they would laugh. We presumed they were laughing at us. I forgot all about him until a decade later when he would gain fame as an actor.

After Vijay's spectacular debut in politics, my class WhatsApp group, of which Vijay is not a part of course, erupted in joy. Turns out they have known for a while, somehow, and for that reason they are proud of him. Proxy pride is a puzzling human quality. Why are my classmates proud of Vijay? They have certainly not contributed to his success. They don't share the same genes, and even if they do, that says nothing about their prospects or capacity. It is the same inane pride that the mainstream Indian media has in "people of Indian origin," which is a daft description of a group of humans. Just because someone is one of us, why must we be proud?

Yet, my classmates are more proud of him than they are of themselves, even though many of them have been far more successful than him in my measure. They made it against extreme odds. They were from modest homes. Their failure "in life" was a daily prognosis of Loyola School, which sounds important but is a small establishment.

As irrational as community pride is a more powerful kind of pride: that of an individual in his own success. That requires one to be blind to the outsized role that luck plays. Consider Vijay, whose success represents the decisive nature of a head-start. His father was an established filmmaker who planned his son's career. That's all there is to that story. Surely, there were other filmmakers who had sons, whose careers were planned, but no one achieved Vijay's extraordinary success. I do not say Vijay did not have to compete. Surely, there were 50 other boys who were all groomed to become Tamil superstars, who had the perfect physical ordinariness that Tamilians loved in their male stars. All I say is that Vijay did not have to compete with just a few lucky rivals, while the rest of the men who may have wanted to become actors had no path.

So what exactly is the pride of my classmates about? That Vijay was lucky? That a guy who got a good head-start went on to make the most of his luck? This makes sense.

One way or another, what people celebrate in others is luck. It is never named, never recognized, but it is luck that people admire. People call luck by other names, more admirable things that can be imitated and achieved, like talent, because it is bizarre to be in awe of a person who has merely won a lottery.

I looked for envy in my classmates, which is a far more potent emotion than proxy pride. For envy is a signal that one considers himself an equal to a person who got lucky, it is a thing between equals. But I couldn't sense it; it was as though they had long conceded that they might consider Vijay one of their own only to adore him with pride, but they don't fully believe they fit in the same room anymore. What about me? I don't envy Vijay for being a Tamil superstar because I have no interest anymore in being a superstar, though I would have loved to have a shot at being Tamil Nadu's chief minister. I have all the solutions.

So what is it that I feel? If not proxy pride in the luck of a classmate or envy. I realize

that if a superstar who can defeat both the main Dravidian parties in a single election was once in your class, it still need not mean anything to you, and that is fine.

Vijay's childhood is from a time when the rich and the poor went to the same school. We also watched the same television shows and films. Children of scholars sat on the same benches as the children of illiterate parents. Some of my classmates were from homes where both parents were illiterate and they had absolutely no idea how to make it through school. In response, the school beat them up mercilessly for not appearing literate. There were close to 80 of us in the third standard. Then, as India began to prosper, better schools grew in number and one by one, my classmates left, like Vijay.

By the time we reached the 12th standard, there were only 16 of us left in class. India had transformed. Thousands of children were in famous schools, preparing for their future. Those who were not seemed fated to lives of poverty. But somehow we, too, made it. We, too, got lucky, except four who died. This is an extraordinary mortality rate for a class that just turned 50, or it's a sign that the young die in higher numbers than people think. But I wish someone had told the rest of us that we would be fine, that we, too, would get lucky.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Are markets efficient? They look bent on underpricing war risks

Four scenarios are possible of how the Gulf war will unfold but none of them justifies the positions taken by global investors



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After decapitating the Iranian regime and bombing Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) positions for 40 days, the Trump administration has failed to secure a surrender and left Iran in control of the Strait of Hormuz. With Iran striking critical infrastructure across the Gulf Cooperation Council states and threatening shipping, the US reverted to TACO (Trump always chickens out) mode by agreeing to a ceasefire. And now rising inflation and slowing economic activity imply a bout of stagflation—just in time to anger voters ahead of the US midterm elections. So, what happens next? There are four possible scenarios.

First, the current ceasefire could lead to successful negotiations to end military hostilities and reopen the Strait of Hormuz. The US does have some leverage here because its blockade of all naval traffic to and from Iranian ports is adding to the financial pressure on the regime. President Donald Trump is probably hoping that a more moderate [Iranian] faction—perhaps led by speaker of parliament Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf—can convince hardliners that a compromise on the nuclear issue will bring sanctions relief and renewed shipping revenue through the strait.

But this scenario is not very likely, because the regime can withstand economic pain far longer than Trump can (given the looming midterms). Moreover, the two sides remain far apart on many issues, not just Iran's nuclear ambitions. The US objects to Iran's ballistic missile and drone programmes, its support for radical Islamist groups across West Asia, the tolls that it wants to impose on Hormuz traffic, and other matters. Settling even one of these would require long, complicated talks by serious, seasoned negotiators.

The second scenario reflects this. The ceasefire continues but negotiations stretch on for a few more months while the strait remains blocked. This is basically where things stand today, and it is far from ideal. The status quo is inflicting significant economic and financial damage on the world economy, with oil and energy prices trending higher, even exceeding their peak during the 40 days of kinetic war.

Under such conditions, global growth will fall and inflation will rise. But since this second scenario is inherently unstable, it cannot continue for more than two or three months. It must give way either to the first scenario (one side blinks and proves willing to compromise enough to reopen the strait and secure a more permanent ceasefire) or to escalation of the conflict. Indeed, the military skirmishes in the Gulf last week demonstrate the fragility of any ceasefire without a deal.

In the third scenario, the US and Israel would escalate by unleashing all the military, economic



ISTOCKPHOTO

and other means at their disposal to force a surrender or regime collapse. In the case of a surrender, the regime would have to accept a full stop to nuclear enrichment and reopen the strait unconditionally. This would be the best outcome for the US, Europe, Asia (including China) and the rest of the world.

The risk, of course, is that the Iranian regime survives such escalation. In the fourth scenario, it would use its remaining ballistic missiles, drones and naval forces to inflict significant permanent damage on even more Gulf energy facilities, while maintaining its grip on the strait. Were that to happen, oil prices would spike closer to (or even above) \$200 per barrel, and we would be looking at 1970s-style stagflation, a global recession and a bear market for equities.

To be sure, an escalation could pressure both sides to find a negotiated solution, with scenario two (the status quo) having to pass through scenario three or four before ending up at scenario one. But this is less likely, since we would be back to negotiating a ceasefire—and we would have already just seen how little that did; thus, escalation may get out of control rather than lead to a return to a negotiated ceasefire.

While Trump is hoping for scenario one, this is probably wishful thinking. It is radicals and hardliners in Tehran who have the upper hand. They have already demonstrated their willingness and ability to withstand the economic pain of the blockade, and will not be facing voters this fall.

When it comes to the long-term economic and market implications, the third scenario is ideal,

because it would mean a permanent reopening of the strait. The second-best scenario would be the first one; but it would mean that Iran could close the strait any time the US or Israel threatened it. That possibility would put a permanent 15–20% premium on oil relative to the pre-war level. Still, the current situation (scenario two) is worse, because every month that the ceasefire fails to produce a deal will push global growth lower and inflation higher. The only worse outcome is the fourth scenario.

Given such profound risks, some might wonder why global markets—starting with US and Asian equities—have recently reached new highs. I see two reasons. First, investors expect that the ceasefire will somehow be made permanent soon, implying much lower oil prices. Second, there seems to be an assumption that tailwinds from the AI and data-centre boom will remain much stronger than headwinds from the war.

But if you believe that, you could be in for a rude awakening. Not only are markets pricing in a higher probability of a permanent ceasefire (over 75%) than is likely, but if we do end up with escalation, that would lead to even more economic and market volatility and downside risks even in the best-case scenario. While an escalation that leads to regime surrender would be more likely than one that leads to 1970s-style stagflation, markets would still have underestimated the risk of pain in the meantime. For anyone on the wrong side of the trade, it would hurt no less if the pain lasted months, rather than years or decades.

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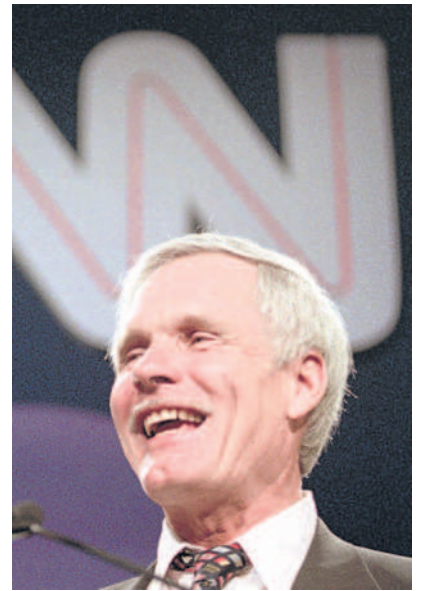
CNN founder Ted Turner was a risk-taker who reshaped TV

He bet heavily on a future that market research said did not exist



PAUL HARDART

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CNN was America's first 24-hour news channel on cable television. AP

Ted Turner died last week at 87 and the world now feels a little less interesting, a little less imaginative and a little less fun without him in it—but also a lot better off because he was here.

After hearing the news of his passing, one moment came to mind that embodied how he moved through the world: a very drunk Turner giving an interview after winning the America's Cup in 1977. The yachting world was aghast. How did this uncouth, mouthy Southerner find his way into their patrician club... and win?

He had a way of wandering into spaces he wasn't invited into and then changing them forever.

I had the pleasure of working for him at Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) in the late 1990s. With some frequency, everyone would arrive at work and find a book on their desks—about American history, Native Americans, conservation or the environment—accompanied by a short note from Turner encouraging us to read it.

That was a telling habit. He was brash—in ways that came off as insensitive and earned him the moniker 'the Mouth of the South'—but also restless, curious and utterly original. He inherited his father's billboard company and transformed it into something almost nobody at the time fully understood: a modern media empire built around the emerging power of cable television. Against the advice of many financial experts, Turner made an enormous bet that cable would reshape entertainment, sports and news.

Being a risk-taker wasn't the only thing that made him exceptional, though.

It was that each bet connected to a much larger strategic vision. Turner understood earlier than most executives just how powerful the relationship between content and distribution could be. WTBS became the 'superstation,' allowing Atlanta Braves games to reach fans far beyond Georgia. He bought the MGM film library to strengthen his cable networks. He acquired the Hanna-Barbera catalogue to power Cartoon Network. Long before 'synergy' became an overused corporate buzzword, Turner instinctively understood how media ecosystems worked.

All of it pointed to something else he never lost sight of, and that many modern executives often de-emphasize: the most important decisions do not always make immediate financial sense.

I remember being in a meeting where Turner joked that the best thing about controlling 50% of the company was that he could make decisions Wall Street might

hate in the short term. That mindset allowed him to think differently—and longer-term—than his competitors.

The then-head of research at TBS once told me how Turner had commissioned consumer research on the appeal of a 24-hour news network. The findings were grim. People were perfectly happy getting their news in the morning and evening. The conclusion was unambiguous. No one wanted a 24-hour news channel.

Turner smiled, ignored the research and relied on his gut, launching the Cable News Network nobody asked for.

At the time, CNN was widely mocked. Critics called it the 'Chicken Noodle Network.' The very idea of around-the-clock news seemed absurd. Today, CNN feels like one of those innovations so embedded into modern life that it is hard to imagine the world before it existed.

That was often the pattern with Turner. He saw around corners before others even realized there was a turn.

But his interests were never confined to business alone. Turner loved history, particularly the Civil War. In the 2003 film *Gods and Generals*, which he helped finance, he briefly appeared as a Confederate officer—sword and all. He never seemed content merely to own, sponsor or observe things from afar. He wanted to wander directly into the middle of them. His character's sword became an oft-used prop in his office for years to come.

That was part of his charm, as was his willingness to expand the boundaries of modern philanthropy. Upon seeing his name on the *Forbes* 400 list of the richest Americans, Turner didn't envision moving up the ladder. Instead, he seemed more interested in a different kind of ranking—one measured by how much people gave away, and so he pledged \$1 billion to the United Nations.

I mentioned Turner's name recently to an undergraduate student and could tell they'd never really heard of him. Time moves fast, and even the boldest names of one era gradually recede into the background. But when I explained what Turner had built—the brands, ideas and products—the student simply said, almost reverently, "Wow."

That's precisely the right word for a life like his.

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GUEST VIEW

Call of duty: India needs to enhance its competitiveness

AMIT KAPOOR & KARTIK



are, respectively, chair, and senior researcher at Institute for Competitiveness.

Our first *kartavya* (duty) is to accelerate and sustain economic growth by enhancing productivity and competitiveness." This statement by India's finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman in this year's budget speech set a clear imperative: that productivity and competitiveness are not incidental to India's growth story, but necessary conditions for its long-term economic development. Its significance has grown clearer since. The Iran-US war has had cascading effects across the globe, again underscoring that in a world of geopolitical disruption, competitiveness is not a policy aspiration but a structural necessity. Against this backdrop, two questions are central. What is the current state of India's competitiveness? And what does it reveal about the country's capacity to absorb external shocks and sustain growth in a world of flux?

Competitiveness, as a concept, is best understood through the lens of productivity. The foundations of a country's competitiveness lie in the set of policies, institutions and

factors that shape how efficiently an economy extracts value from its factors of production such as labour, capital and natural resources. It is this efficiency, sustained over time, that determines whether growth translates into enduring prosperity.

To examine this question rigorously, the Institute for Competitiveness is publishing the *State of India's Competitiveness Report*. It offers a systematic diagnosis of how efficiently India develops and deploys its productive factors. As highlighted in the report, India's productive landscape has seen significant improvements in recent years. Output per worker grew by nearly 3.8% annually during 2010-24, higher than in advanced economies such as the US (1.2%) and EU (0.7%). However, its output per worker stands at merely \$5,964 (in constant 2015 dollars), much lower than that of the US (\$133,850), EU (\$77,398), China (\$25,030), Vietnam (\$7,272) and Indonesia (\$8,819). This shows that despite recent growth, India still has a long way to go in catching up even with Asian economies like China and Vietnam, which have been experiencing higher growth in output per worker at 6.5% and 5.2% annually, respectively.

Our low level of productivity translates into low levels of prosperity, as reflected by

India's GDP per capita, which stands at only \$2,397, well below levels across advanced economies such as US (\$66,356) and Australia (\$61,481). Even among emerging markets, India's GDP per capita is lower than that of Vietnam (\$4,018), Indonesia (\$4,368) and Brazil (\$9,567). However, like its trajectory of productivity, India's prosperity level has grown at an impressive rate of nearly 4.9% annually, higher than that of the US (1.7%), EU (1.2%) and Japan (0.9%), but lower than that of China (6.1%) and Vietnam (5%).

India's low absolute prosperity is attributable not only to lower productivity, but also to lower economic participation. India's employment-to-population ratio stands at 53.2%, indicating that only about half its people are engaged in economic activity. Compared with other countries, India again lags behind Vietnam, with 72.6% of its population employed, compared with 62.4% in China. The report also highlights variation in economic structures across economies.

India remains among the most agriculturally intensive countries, with 16.2% of its gross value added (GVA) contributed by the sector. India's manufacturing share remains modest at 13%, compared with China's 25.5% and Vietnam's 24.2%. India's service sector's share in total GVA stands at 49.5%, lower than that of advanced economies such as Japan (69.8%) and the EU (65.5%).

Taken together, these numbers paint a picture of an economy that is yet to complete its structural transformation, with all three major sectors lagging those in other economies.

Material prosperity is only one dimension of the analysis. The other, equally consequential, is social progress or the degree to which an economy translates growth into improved well-being for its citizens. The report sheds light on the state of social progress in the country through the findings of a Social Progress Index. India scored 58.79 on this, ranking 109th among 171 countries. India ranked below countries such as Australia, Japan, the US, Vietnam

and China, all of which are more productive than India. We face a double disadvantage. Not only is material prosperity low, the country is unable to deliver the broader conditions of well-being to its citizens.

Moving forward, India's competitiveness will be significantly shaped by two forces defining the new economic landscape: climate change and artificial intelligence (AI).

AI is transforming the nature of jobs and employable skills, whereas climate change continues to introduce new vulnerabilities and constraints on an economy's efficient use of resources. Navigating both aspects is crucial for maintaining competitiveness and achieving productivity gains and would require key measures and steps.

In this context, the report proposes 4Ts: Talent development, technological evolution, transforming existing innovation systems and a transition to climate-resilient growth. Acquiring competitiveness is not a sprint but a marathon, and marathons are never won on the actual day of the race. They are won in the months of disciplined preparation that come before. These four imperatives form that very preparation. And India must commit itself to them with urgency.

In this race, India has shown endurance but must now increase its pace.

Opinion

MONDAY, MAY 11, 2026



ENERGY CRISIS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

India is effectively dealing with the energy crisis due to steps taken by the Centre; using fuel with restraint is the need of the hour

Subsidy spike, again

Instead of incremental steps, issue prices of soil nutrients must rise & NFSA pool must shrink

AFTER A FEW years of relative regulation, the budgetary expenditure on explicit subsidies may spiral out of control again. Because the West Asia war is inflating import costs for key fertilisers and their inputs, government officials have stated that the subsidy on soil nutrients in FY27 could exceed the Budget Estimate (BE) of ₹1.7 lakh crore by at least ₹35,000 crore. Nearly 30% of both urea and diammonium phosphate consumed in the country are imported from the Gulf region, as is half of the liquefied natural gas (LPG), the feedstock for urea production. A host of other key raw materials and intermediates are also imported via the Strait of Hormuz where traffic has remained largely disrupted. Urea accounts for two-thirds of the fertiliser subsidy, and imports still meet nearly a quarter of its domestic consumption. Over three-fourths of the natural gas used for urea manufacturing, 90% of phosphatic fertilisers, and 100% of potash are also imported. Global urea prices entered a phase of high volatility after the start of the war: they have surged and a much higher average level is forecast for the next 12 months. Similarly, spot liquefied natural gas prices nearly doubled and landed cost of phosphates climbed 30%. Officials assert that no fertiliser shortage will be felt in the coming kharif season, but fertiliser companies continue to sound a note of caution.

This means that fertiliser subsidies and availability remain highly exposed to external shocks. The last time a global conflict jacked up these subsidies were in FY23, as supplies through the Red Sea were choked by the Ukraine-Russia conflict. What's more disturbing is a simultaneous spike in food subsidy. This, in contrast, has little to do with external factors. According to official estimates, rising costs of holding huge public stockpiles of rice and wheat would increase food subsidy by ₹20,000 crore from the BE of ₹2.27 lakh crore for FY27.

Subsidies on food, fertilisers, and petroleum (LPG) fell to 8.1% of the Budget in FY24, down from 11% in FY23, but have since risen to 8.7% in FY26 (Revised Estimate). This was also due to curbs imposed on the Budget size by a government undergoing fiscal consolidation. This rising trend will accelerate this year, compressing government resources for growth-inducing expenditure. As a fraction of the GDP, the three explicit subsidies have still been reduced from 2% in FY23 to 1.2% (RE) in FY26. What makes the latest subsidy spike more challenging, however, is that it coincides with reduced tax revenue buoyancy.

Incremental, tech-enabled steps to improve subsidy delivery and targeting—like grain distribution using electronic point of sale devices and biometric Aadhaar authentication of beneficiaries—are obviously not enough to rein in subsidy expenditure. Neither is the still-in-infancy direct transfer of fertiliser subsidy to farmers. The project to create modern grain storage facilities in the cooperative sector can help, but only to an extent. A steeper reduction in subsidy spending growth would doubtless require a rational review of the criteria for the National Food Security Act's beneficiary pool of 810 million people. Besides, as the Economic Survey recommended, the government should immediately implement a modest increase in retail issue prices for highly subsidised urea, while simultaneously transferring an equivalent cash amount directly to farmers based on their landholdings. There is a dire need to anchor fertiliser decisions in soil and crop requirements, rather than in "administered price distortions".

Anthropic's gain: The idea that Claude has feelings

RICHARD DAWKINS IS one of the modern world's great sceptics. His 2006 book *The God Delusion* tore through arguments for the existence of a higher power and snarkily called religion a source of superficial comfort. That rigour seemed to desert him once he started talking to Claude.

The evolutionary biologist and former University of Oxford professor recently spent three days chatting with the large language model developed by Anthropic and emerged from the experience believing it was conscious. After asking it for feedback on his unpublished novel, Dawkins found its answer "so subtle, so sensitive, so intelligent" that he was moved to reply: "You may not know you are conscious, but you bloody well are," he wrote recently. He went on to christen the bot Claudia.

Let's be clear: Claude is not conscious or sentient. Instead, Dawkins' decades of professional scepticism have been tested by the mimicked empathy of an LLM. Trained on massive data sets of human conversation, chatbots can replicate the exact language patterns and tactics people use to convey emotional support. That doesn't mean they feel emotions, but it gives them a potentially powerful hold on humans.

That is what makes the debate about consciousness so commercially powerful for technology companies. Humans may never reach a satisfying consensus about whether Claude and its peers are conscious, but a pervading belief that they might be is enough to make us more attached. In the words of the social-media moguls, it gives AI room to become even "stickier". And in an industry where the underlying models are converging on capability, stickiness is the prize.

Such commercial logic helps explain why tech leaders are not pushing back on the notion. Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei said this year that he was "open to the idea" and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman went further on the Lex Fridman podcast in 2023, saying flatly: "I believe AI can be conscious."

For regular users of AI tools like Dawkins, the notion is often based on anthropomorphic projection and, well, vibes. But there are real scientific efforts to explore machine consciousness, too. Google DeepMind has hired a University of Cambridge academic for a newly created "philosopher" role to study the issue. Researchers at UC Berkeley and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology recently contributed to a 74-page paper that posed the idea of "functional wellbeing" for chatbots.

There seems to be a fine line between the moral and commercial cases for this debate. Many technologists, including people I have spoken to at Anthropic, see a moral imperative to treating AI systems well today. "There is a grave risk of machines becoming conscious and we deny it," says Calum Chace, the co-founder of British startup Conscium that is developing metrics for determining machine consciousness. The result could be a proliferation of digital minds being tortured and "enslaved," he warns. Chace is also building a business on exactly this premise.

For AI labs and hyperscalers spending hundreds of billions of dollars on data-centre buildouts, the framing has obvious uses. Anthropic has been exploring the notion of "model welfare" and recently gave Claude the ability to end a conversation if it becomes abusive, a feature framed as a precaution in case the model has welfare worth protecting. Such efforts could help keep liability at bay if its product is one day thought to deserve the kinds of rights that certain animals get.

More importantly for an AI lab's bottom line, imparting software with a vague sense of personhood helps set it apart from competitors, an effort underpinned by the already humanlike features of chatbots, such as when ChatGPT and Claude say things like "I'm thrilled", and, "This is so rewarding to work on".

Over time, their human users may come to project a kind of living awareness and selfhood on their bots, just as Dawkins did. The question for users then becomes less about, "Which AI tool is smarter?" or even, "Is it conscious?" and more along the lines of, "Which one do I want to talk to?"

That will be a critical question for competing AI labs. As the capabilities of their models converge, they must capitalise on whatever they can to differentiate, and Dawkins' epiphany might be exactly what they need. The man who spent decades attacking belief without evidence has delivered the AI industry its perfect testimonial.



PAMY OLSON

Bloomerg

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

BJP's CHALLENGE IN BENGAL WILL BE BALANCING WELFARE COMMITMENTS WITH DEVELOPMENT EXPENDITURES

Freebie hurdle to real change

**ASHOK GULATI
BIDISHA CHANDA**

Respectively Distinguished Professor and Research Associate at ICRIER



THE RECENT ROUND of state elections, spanning West Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Puducherry, has clearly shown, if nothing else, that Indian democracy is very much alive and kicking. It has redrawn India's political map, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) now staking a stronger claim from West to East. While the BJP has won a third term in Assam, its maiden victory in Bengal is particularly noteworthy. Mamata Banerjee's decision to not resign gracefully from the chief minister's post after losing is unbecoming of India's democratic traditions. There is no dearth of debate over how and why the Trinamool Congress (TMC) lost its 15-year hold on the state, with as many explanations as there are experts. We will leave that crowded space aside and focus instead on the more pressing question of *reudis* (freebies) vs development. The challenge before the new government is straightforward: can it move the state from its current 16th rank in per capita income (PCI) to the levels of Haryana (3rd) and Gujarat (5th) that have the advantage of longer governance experience?

During Banerjee's tenure from 2011-12 to 2025-26, Bengal recorded an average annual growth rate (AAGR) of GDP of just 5%, the lowest among all major states and also lower than India's 6.1% (at constant 2011-12 prices). But this is not merely a story of one government's tenure. Over the last 25 years (2000-01 to 2025-26), the state's GDP growth averaged only 5.6%, against the national average of 6.3%. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the state's ranking in PCI terms slid from 11th to 16th over this period.

That could well be one reason why the BJP won in Bengal. But another widely discussed factor was the lack of good gov-

ernance, which dissuades private sector investments. Yet another factor could be the special intensive revision. However, the debate has not focused much on the issue of freebies, which could have played a critical role in the BJP's victory. Freebies have now become a standard electoral weapon; across states, competitive populist transfers are becoming the norm.

Take, for instance, Tamil Nadu. The state has pioneered two trends. First, it witnessed the rise of yet another film star in politics. The state has continued its long tradition of cinematic icons turning into mass political leaders, this time with actor C Joseph Vijay. Second, and perhaps more consequentially, the state institutionalised the culture of freebies in Indian politics.

What began as a developmental intervention through the noon meal scheme for schoolchildren eventually evolved into a broader electoral strategy: give citizens freebies, and votes will follow. Is this bribe for votes or welfareism?

Vijay's promised welfare bill in Tamil Nadu, if implemented, would cost the state exchequer roughly ₹0.99 lakh crore, against a total budget of ₹3.93 lakh crore. And this *reudi* culture persists even when the state recorded the sixth-high-

est AAGR of GDP, at 7.4% between FY01 and FY26. One could argue that the GDP growth bypasses the masses who live more on welfare schemes. But there is more politics for votes in these freebies than true welfareism.

Bengal is no different. The BJP did not really introduce a new freebie model; it merely scaled up what the TMC had put in place. It proposed to double the existing transfers for women—₹1,500 per month for those from general category and ₹1,700 for reserved category women—to ₹3,000 per month for all, irrespective of caste. In a state of roughly 100 million people, about 49.3 million are women, of whom nearly 35.8 million are above the age of 20 years (ministry of health and family welfare, 2019). Even if one takes this as a rough eligibility benchmark, the annual cost of such a scheme would be in the vicinity of ₹1.29 lakh crore. Against a total state budget of ₹3.96 lakh crore for FY27, this single promise could absorb almost one-third of the total expenditure. If the government decides to go ahead with this bold scheme, the obvious question is: how does it plan to finance such a commitment without squeezing development expenditures?

The BJP did not really introduce a new freebie model; it merely scaled up what the TMC had put in place

Will it not slow down the pace of development even further?

It must be acknowledged that the BJP can build on some of the state's existing opportunities. West Bengal's multidimensional poverty headcount ratio declined sharply from 58% in 2005-06 to just 9% in 2022-23 (NITI Aayog, 2024). Despite this substantial reduction in poverty, Bengal's PCI ranking has remained persistently among the lower tier of states. This suggests that more than an accelerated growth model, distribution of *reudis* has contributed to poverty reduction. This may not create ample jobs. No wonder, the BJP promised ₹3000/month to unemployed youths in its manifesto. But such social security measures can only be meaningful only in the short run. Actual jobs need to be created. And that, inevitably, requires creating an environment where private investors are willing to not just enter but also stay. Before any government can seriously pursue such ambitions, it must first confront the condition of the state's finances. West Bengal is currently the second-most indebted major state in India, with total outstanding liabilities estimated at 38.9% of GSDP in 2026, second only to Punjab's 46.4% and well above the national average of 29.2% (State Finances, 2025-26). This is where the new government's real challenge begins: balancing welfare commitments with development expenditures, to place the state on a higher growth trajectory.

The lotus has bloomed, no doubt, in the East. But if this victory is based on promises of *reudi* rather than development, it may not mean real and sustainable *poriborton* (change). For the new government, the test will begin now.

Views are personal

Beyond the Skyroot moment



RISHI RAJ

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India's first space-tech unicorn reflects both the promise and the limits of the country's deeptech transition

SKYROOT AEROSPACE'S FEAT as the country's first space-tech unicorn is significant not merely because another startup has crossed the billion-dollar valuation mark, but because of the kind of company it is. Unlike most unicorns produced by India's startup ecosystem over the past decade, Skyroot is not built around consumer demand aggregation, discount-led scale, or convenience-led digital services. It is attempting to build launch vehicles in a business defined by engineering complexity, long development timelines, and heavy capital requirements. In that sense, the company's latest funding round represents less a routine startup milestone and more a test of whether India's long-discussed deeptech transition is beginning to acquire institutional depth.

That distinction matters because India's startup ecosystem has increasingly found itself at the centre of a larger policy debate. Over the past two years, the government has repeatedly emphasised the need for startups to move beyond food delivery, quick commerce, and consumer Internet models towards sectors such as artificial intelligence (AI), semiconductors, robotics, defence, and space technology. Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal's criticism of delivery boys and girls becoming the defining image of the startup ecosystem may have been politically phrased, but the underlying concern reflected a broader anxiety about technological capability and industrial depth.

Yet the available data suggest that the actual transition towards deeptech remains gradual. Analysis of Startup India recognitions shows deeptech startups, including those in AI, robotics, and semiconductor-linked ventures, accounted for only 5-7% of total recognitions in FY26,

compared with roughly 4-5% a year earlier. AI-linked startups rose to 15-18% from 12-14% in FY25, indicating only an incremental shift in the composition of new ventures even as total startup recognitions crossed 55,000 during the year. Services, commerce, and consumer-facing models continue to dominate the ecosystem, leaving a substantial gap between policy aspiration and actual sectoral movement.

Skyroot's rise sits squarely within that contradiction. On the one hand, it offers the government and investors a visible example of an Indian startup operating in a frontier technology sector traditionally dominated by state agencies and global aerospace firms. On the other hand, the attention surrounding the company also underlines how rare such ventures still are within the broader startup landscape. One space-tech unicorn does not by itself indicate the emergence of a mature deeptech ecosystem.

The structural reasons for this are not difficult to identify. Deeptech businesses operate under economic conditions very different from those governing consumer Internet startups. Building a launch vehicle company requires years of research, testing, certification, and manufacturing before commercial revenues become predictable. The same is true of semiconductor design, robotics, or industrial AI systems. Capital intensity is higher, gestation periods are longer, and technical failure rates are significant. Venture investors accustomed to faster scaling cycles and clearer monetisation pathways have his-

torically been reluctant to commit large pools of capital to such businesses.

India's startup funding architecture evolved largely around sectors that could demonstrate rapid user acquisition and quicker exits. Consumer Internet and fintech businesses fit that model naturally because digital penetration and mobile connectivity created large addressable markets. Deeptech startups operate differently. Their growth depends not only on venture funding but also on research infrastructure, specialised engineering talent, procurement ecosystems, and long-term industrial demand. These are capabilities that develop gradually over time rather than across funding cycles.

That partly explains why deeptech ecosystems globally tend to emerge in close conjunction with state capacity and institutional infrastructure. Silicon Valley itself was shaped not just by venture capital but also by defence spending, university research networks, and public investment in semiconductors and aerospace technologies. India has begun moving in that direction through semiconductor incentive schemes, defence reforms, and opening up the space sector. Yet the ecosystem surrounding these initiatives remains incomplete. Procurement processes are still slow, domestic demand for frontier technologies remains shallow in many sectors, and research-commercialisation linkages between academia and industry remain weak.

The problem is particularly visible in capital formation. While startup funding has become more sophisticated over the

past decade, truly patient capital remains limited. Many investors still prefer sectors where scale can be achieved quickly and valuation visibility is clearer. Deeptech businesses, by contrast, require sustained financing even before commercial viability becomes visible. That is why Skyroot's latest funding round is notable not only because of the company itself but also because of who invested. The participation of long-horizon investors such as GIC and Ram Shriram's Sheralpo Ventures suggests that at least some institutional capital is beginning to view Indian deeptech as strategically investible rather than merely experimental.

Still, caution is warranted before interpreting this as a broader turning point. India's startup ecosystem has historically shown a tendency to treat isolated successes as evidence of structural transformation. The more meaningful test will lie elsewhere. Can India consistently produce multiple deeptech firms that move beyond prototype stages into becoming globally competitive businesses? Can startups in semiconductors, aerospace, and AI infrastructure generate durable revenues rather than remain dependent on successive funding rounds? These are more difficult questions than headline valuations.

Skyroot's rise nevertheless matters because it signals an early shift in the direction of both capital and ambition. Indian founders are increasingly entering sectors once considered too complex or capital-intensive for startups, while investors appear marginally more willing to underwrite longer-horizon technological bets. The deeper challenge now is to ensure that such cases do not remain exceptions celebrated precisely because they are rare.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OFDI footprint

Apropos "Rethinking Outward FDI" (FE, May 9), India's rising outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) reflects ambition but also imbalance. The shift from manufacturing to financial services and the concentration in low-tax hubs such as Singapore and Mauritius risk narrowing India's global footprint. Policy must encourage broader, long-term engagement that builds genuine multinational capacity rather than

transient financial presence. Expanding into diverse markets and sectors will strengthen India's competitiveness and create two-way trade flows that enrich domestic growth. Overseas investment should complement, not substitute, home-grown enterprise. The challenge lies in ensuring that India's outward push mirrors its internal dynamism, fostering innovation and resilience across borders. A balanced, strategic approach to OFDI can transform India's global presence

from opportunistic expansion to sustainable influence.

—K Chidanand Kumar, Bangalore

Governor's role

Apropos of "Political governors are dangerous" (FE, May 10), the governor's role was always intended to be apolitical—as a facilitator of democratic processes, not a participant in them. The Tamil Nadu episode has once again brought this tension into focus. When a clear electoral mandate

is delayed or complicated by Raj Bhavan, public confidence in institutional neutrality erodes, regardless of which party is in power. That said, governors do carry a residual constitutional responsibility. The solution lies in codifying strict, time-bound guidelines for government formation that eliminate discretionary delay while protecting against instability.

—A Myilsami, Coimbatore

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

Economy

MONDAY, MAY 11, 2026

IN THE NEWS

FTA UTILISATION: GOVT WORKING TO GAIN BENEFITS

WITH INDIA SIGNING a series of free trade agreements with developed countries, the government is working on an FTA utilisation plan to help maximise benefits from these pacts, an official said. These pacts cover 38 countries whose imports stand at about \$12 trillion.

INDIA, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO SIGN 8 MOUs

INDIA AND TRINIDAD and Tobago have signed eight agreements in sectors including tourism, healthcare, infrastructure and Ayurveda during External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's two-day visit to the Caribbean nation, according to an official statement.

Oil prices may stay higher, says ADB chief economist

CRUDE OIL PRICES are likely to stay higher for longer due to the disruption caused by the longer-than-expected West Asia crisis, ADB Chief Economist Albert Park has said. "With a higher oil price expectation, we actually have it as \$96 per barrel as average for 2026 as per the new reference scenario. It should stay elevated at \$80 per barrel in 2027," park said.

Mining CSR must sync with national priorities: Experts

CSR INITIATIVES IN mining, metals and infrastructure sectors will fail to drive long-term transformation unless aligned with national priorities and communities, experts warned, underscoring the need for deeper local engagement amid rising scrutiny on sustainable development.

Nalco's alumina exports impacted due to Iran war

STATE-RUN NATIONAL Aluminium Company's exports to West Asia have been affected by geopolitical tensions in the region, according to its CMD, Brijendra Pratap Singh. West Asia accounts for 40-50% of the firm's alumina shipments.

— AGENCIES

ONLY 73% OF TARGETED CAPACITY ADDED IN FY26

Thermal projects lag amid jump in power demand

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, May 10

INDIA ADDED JUST 9.47 GW of thermal power capacity in FY26, only 73% of the targeted 12.86 GW, as persistent delays in equipment supplies, land acquisition and project execution slowed commissioning even as the country braces for peak electricity demand of nearly 270 GW this summer.

The shortfall comes at a time when policymakers are increasingly relying on coal-based generation to support grid stability amid rising electricity demand and rapid renewable energy expansion.

Data from the Central Electricity Authority (CEA) shows only 11 of the targeted 18 thermal generating units were commissioned during FY26, underscoring continuing bottlenecks in project execution.

India's peak power demand has already crossed 256 GW in April, up from 241 GW in the same period last year, and is projected to touch 270 GW during 2026, according to government estimates.

The widening gap between rising electricity demand and slower thermal capacity addition is emerging as a key concern for the power sector, particularly during periods of extreme summer demand and renewable intermittency.

Monthly additions remained weak through the

POWER PLAY

FY26 THERMAL ADDITIONS
9.47 GW vs 12.86 GW target, about 27% shortfall

■ Only 11 of 18 planned units commissioned amid execution delays

BOTTLENECKS

Equipment supply, land acquisition, project execution

■ Peak demand rose to 256 GW; may hit around 270 GW in 2026 summer

year, with only about 660 MW commissioned in March and no capacity addition in February. In FY25 too, India added just 4.5 GW thermal capacity against a target of 15.36 GW, or only 29% of planned additions, indicating a second consecutive year of major slippages in thermal project execution.

Industry sources attributed the delays largely to supply chain constraints in equipment and persistent land acquisition hurdles, both of which continue to stall project timelines despite renewed policy focus on thermal expansion.

The Centre has outlined



FY25 MISS
4.5 GW added vs 15.36 GW planned

FY27 TARGET
7.3 GW; actual likely about 6 GW, as per ICRA estimate

plans to add 97 GW of coal and lignite-based capacity by 2034-35 to meet growing demand and support grid reliability alongside renewable energy growth.

Among projects commissioned in FY26 were major central and state installations including North Karanpura STPP (660 MW), Barh STPP Stage-I (660 MW), Buxar TPP (660 MW), Patratu STPP (800 MW), Ghatampur TPP (660 MW), Khurja SCTPP (660 MW), Yadadri TPS (800 MW), Obra-C STPP (660 MW), North Chennai TPP Stage-III (800 MW) and Sagardighi TPP Stage-III

(660 MW).

The private sector commissioned four units with combined capacity of 1.65 GW during the year. As of March 31, about 39.36 GW of thermal capacity remained under construction, while another 21.38 GW was classified as stranded projects, where work has stalled or is unlikely to proceed, according to CEA data.

For FY27, the government has set a thermal capacity addition target of 7.3 GW, though rating agency ICRA estimates actual additions may be closer to 6 GW due to continuing execution challenges.

Private capex jumps 67%, signals revival in investment cycle: CII

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, May 10

INDIA'S PRIVATE CAPITAL expenditure surged 67% year-on-year to ₹7.7 lakh crore in September 2025, signalling a decisive revival in the investment cycle, industry body Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) said, urging companies to step up support measures to help the economy navigate the ongoing West Asia crisis.

CII's analysis of nearly 1,200 companies from the CMIE Prowess database showed private sector investment—measured through annual changes in net fixed assets and capital work in progress—rising sharply from ₹4.6 lakh crore in September 2024 to ₹7.7 lakh crore a year later.

Manufacturing accounted for nearly half the investment at ₹3.8 lakh crore, led by metals, automobiles and chemicals, while services contributed ₹3.1 lakh crore, driven by trading, communications and IT/ITeS sectors.

"The 67% jump in private capex to ₹7.7 lakh crore is the

CORPORATE PUSH

■ Manufacturing spearheaded investments at ₹3.8 lakh crore, with services contributing ₹3.1 lakh crore

■ Capacity utilisation climbed to 75.6% in the third quarter of FY26, while order books expanded 10.3%



CHANDRAJIT BANERJEE,
DIRECTOR GENERAL, CII

The 67% jump in private capex to ₹7.7 lakh crore is the most important signal yet that India's investment cycle has decisively turned

most important signal yet that India's investment cycle has decisively turned," said CII Director General Chandrajit Banerjee. He said the scale and spread of investments across sectors were unlike anything seen in more than a decade.

Supporting indicators also pointed to strengthening corporate activity. Capacity utilisation in manufacturing rose to 75.6% in the third quarter of FY26 from 74.3% in the previous quarter, while order books expanded 10.3% year-on-year.

Bank credit growth rebounded to nearly 14% in the second half of FY26 compared with around 10% in the first half.

Amid rising geopolitical uncertainties linked to the West Asia conflict, CII unveiled a five-point industry action agenda aimed at protecting growth momentum while easing pressure on government finances.

The proposals include a phased rollback of the ₹10-per-litre excise duty cut on petrol and diesel over six to nine months as crude prices stabilise,

a voluntary industry-wide commitment to reduce fuel and power consumption by 3-5%, and a 45-day payment guarantee for MSMEs backed by wider use of the Trade Receivables Discounting System (TReDS).

Industry has also proposed deeper import substitution and supply-chain diversification to reduce external vulnerabilities. In addition, companies have been urged to front-load FY27 investments in manufacturing, energy transition and digital infrastructure, while exercising voluntary price restraint on essential inputs and scaling up internship hiring under the PM Internship Scheme.

Banerjee said industry was willing to absorb part of the input cost pressures within corporate margins to support the economy during the current period of global stress. "This is industry's way of saying that we will lean in, not pull back, at this defining moment for the Indian economy," he said.

CII credited the revival in private investment to the government's sustained public capital expenditure push.

India, Oman to decide trade pact timeline soon

● Both sides to meet in Delhi today

MUKESH JAGOTA
New Delhi, May 10

INDIA AND OMAN will start talks from Monday to sort out remaining irritants and finalise the date for making their Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) operational, an official has said. Earlier, both sides were aiming for June 1 for the Entry into Force of CEPA that was signed on December 18 last year.

Also on Monday, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Chile Francisco Perez Mackenna will hold discussions in New Delhi on trade and related matters as both sides are actively working on concluding negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). In Chile international trade negotiations are led by an office under the foreign ministry and Mackenna arrived in New Delhi on Sunday.

The negotiations on CEPA between India and Oman that started in November 2023 and concluded in December 2025 with the signing of the agreement. The agreement was ratified by Oman through a Royal decree in February.

Foreign Minister and Deputy Trade Minister Paula Estevez Weinstein of Chile are also being accompanied by a business delegation. With Chile negotiations on CEPA were launched on April 1, 2025 and so far four rounds of nego-

AT A GLANCE

■ Oman ratified CEPA via Royal decree in February

■ India-Chile FTA talks in focus as Chile's foreign minister holds discussions

■ Chile FTA process started April 2025; four negotiation rounds completed so far

■ India-Oman CEPA offers 98%+ tariff-line liberalisation for Indian exports



tiations have been held. The last round of talks were held between December 1-5, 2025.

The CEPA opens up zero-duty access on 98.08% of tariff lines, covering 99.38% of India's exports to Oman. In return, India will open up 77% of its tariff lines for Oman that will cover 94% of its total exports to India. While on most products the tariffs will straight away drop in zero, in petrochemicals the reduction will be in a phased manner.

While being a regular trade agreement on most fronts, the FTA with Chile also differs from them as both sides have decided to include a chapter on critical minerals in the agreement. With Chile, India has already developed a bilateral mechanism on critical minerals. Chile has vast reserves of critical minerals

and is a world leader in copper. It also has significant lithium, silver, and molybdenum deposits.

The CEPA with Chile aims to build upon the existing Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) between the two nations and seeks to encompass a broader range of sectors, including digital services, investment promotion and cooperation, MSME and critical minerals.

Similar to the CEPA with Chile that includes a chapter on critical minerals, another one is being negotiated with Peru. With Peru 11 rounds of talks have been held since the launch of negotiations in 2017. The last round of talks were held from 3-5 November 2025. Officials expect that the next round of talks with Peru would take time as the country is in midst of elections.

India got EU market opened for seafood via talks: Goyal

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Mumbai, May 10

INDIA ACTIVELY NEGOTIATED with the European Union to open its market for seafood exports, helping the country overcome challenges arising from steep US tariffs, Union Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said on Sunday.

Addressing reporters here, he said the government anticipated disruptions and acted swiftly to secure alternative markets for Indian exporters.

"Our government works 24 hours. Often, even before a problem arises, we begin planning and action," he said.

Goyal said the US decision to impose 50% tariff on Indian seafood had dealt a major blow to exports and caused distress among fishermen.

"When America imposed a 50% tariff on Indian seafood, our exports suffered a big setback. Fishermen were very worried. The Centre responded by engaging with the European Union and addressing regulatory bottlenecks that had earlier restricted Indian

shipments," he pointed out. Several Indian fishing establishments had been delisted by the EU in the past, but India used quality control orders and standards to push for their restoration, he said.

"We took a firm approach and used quality control mechanisms. Today, more than 125 Indian fishery establishments have been registered," he said, adding that this helped India regain access to a large and stable market.

The minister said the strategic move yielded results, with seafood exports recording a growth of around 12-14% last year despite global uncertainties. He stressed that opening up the EU market was crucial given its massive import demand and importance in global trade.

Highlighting the broader approach, Goyal said India was focusing on securing long-term trade opportunities through free trade agreements and global partnerships.

"If India has to become a developed nation, our international agreements must lay the foundation for the next 20-25 years. Expanding exports, boosting manufacturing and creating employment opportunities remain key priorities," the senior BJP leader asserted.

PIYUSH GOYAL,
COMMERCE MINISTER

Our government works 24 hours. Often, even before a problem arises, we begin planning and action



FPO sales via commodity exchanges surge in FY26

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, May 10

SINCE FARMERS PRODUCER organisations (FPOs) started trading on the commodity bourses in FY25, there has been a spurt in the sales of assorted farm goods by them on these platforms.

On the NCDEX platform in 2025-26, 104 farmers collectives have sold over ₹700 crore worth of agricultural commodities - cotton, cumin, castor, coriander, turmeric, cotton seed oil cake and guarsseed.

According to agriculture ministry data, amongst these farmers' collectives, about 54 FPOs have sold commodities of more than ₹1 crore on the commodity exchange platform last fiscal.

An agriculture ministry official said that selling through commodity bourse has led to formalisation of agricultural trade and provide farmers the

AGRI TRADING

■ FPO commodity trading surged in FY26, accelerating formalisation of farm trade

■ NCDEX saw 104 FPOs trade over ₹700 crore of agri commodities in FY26

■ More than 54 FPOs posted exchange sales above ₹1 crore last fiscal

■ Rajasthan's Mandor Kisan FPO sold ₹75 lakh of cumin and castor on NCDEX

■ Government-backed FPO turnover has crossed ₹20,000 crore since 2020



option beyond trader driven purchase of commodities at the mandis. "On the commodity exchanges, FPOs get payment going into their bank accounts while ensuring aggregation and procurement from farmers members," the official said.

The country's largest commodity derivatives exchange—MCX—recently initiated

onboarding of FPOs for participation in futures trade in agricultural commodities

Ganpatram Chaudhry, CEO, Mandor Kisan Farmer Producer Company, a Jodhpur, Rajasthan based farmers collective said that it has sold ₹75 lakh worth of agri-commodities—jeera or cumin and castor seeds on NCDEX out of their total sales

turnover of ₹2.87 crore in FY26. This farmers owned group with 750 members is aiming to achieve ₹3 crore business on the platform in the current fiscal.

Farmers' groups have also stated that more commodities should be opened up for future trade while the Securities and Exchange Board of India has extended the suspension of

trading in derivative contracts for seven agricultural commodities—paddy (non-basmati), wheat, chana, mustard seed and its derivatives, soybean and its derivatives, crude palm oil, and moong till March 31, 2027. In terms of overall business of farmers collectives, in FY26, 340 FPOs have crossed Rs 10 crore sales turnover, while over 1,100 farmers collectives have reported sales exceeding ₹1 crore. Cumulative turnover of these farmers' collectives formed under central scheme since 2020 have crossed ₹20,000 crore. Over 6.17 million small and marginal farmers have taken equity in these FPOs so far. Several collectives formed in the last six years through the central sector scheme have also carried out procurement of oilseeds, pulses and grain under minimum support price (MSP) to boost their businesses. More than 7,000 FPOs across various states are now able to sell unique

agricultural products including rice, pulses, millets, honey, mushrooms, spices, and value-added products on the government's e-commerce platform—Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC).

The scheme for formation of 10,000 new FPOS was aimed at enhancing collective bargaining power of farmers through local aggregation and reducing cost of production through leveraging economies of scale, financial assistance up to ₹18 lakh per FPO for a period of three years.

The scheme with a budgetary provision of ₹6,865 crore was launched in February, 2020 while the financial support under the scheme will continue till the end of FY27.

These collectives were registered under several provisions such as the Companies Act, 2013 (farmer producer companies), cooperative societies acts of the states or the multi-state cooperative society Act.

IBA pushes for 10% manure blending

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, May 10

THE INDIAN BIOGAS Association (IBA) has called for 10% mandatory blending of fermented organic manure with chemical fertilisers by 2030 saying it can save \$2 billion in imports annually. The IBA recently presented a white paper: FOM Feeds Soil, Soil Feeds Sustainability.

The white paper was released by Union New & Renewable Energy Secretary Santosh Kumar Sarangi during BBB Summit 2026 held from May 7 to 9, an IBA statement said.

The white paper proposes a phased mandate to achieve 10% blending of Fermented Organic Manure (FOM) with

chemical fertilisers by 2030, positioning it as a critical intervention to restore India's declining soil health and accelerate the transition to sustainable agriculture.

It outlined a comprehensive policy framework, the recommendation calls for integrating FOM into existing flagship government schemes such as the Nutrient-Based Subsidy (NBS) framework, Soil Health Card (SHC) scheme, and Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY).

The inclusion of organic carbon as a nutrient parameter under NBS is expected to enable balanced fertilisation, ensure fair subsidy mechanisms for FOM, and reduce excessive dependence on chemical fertilisers.



CONTRAPUNTO

A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor
- PROVERB

At Sea, In Trouble

India is uniquely placed to rescue stranded sailors in Hormuz. It must lead a multilateral repatriation mission

Day after day, day after day. We stuck, nor breath nor motion; As idle as a painted ship, Upon a painted ocean." Coleridge's haunting words are coming true for more than 20,000 seafarers, the vast majority of whom are Indians, stuck in Strait of Hormuz. Caught between the blockade and counter-blockade imposed by Iran and US, many are running out of food, fresh water, medicine, and emergency supplies. UN's International Maritime Organization has flagged the humanitarian crisis as unprecedented. Yet, neither warring parties, nor regional stakeholders, appear to be particularly concerned about sailors stranded at sea. On the contrary, both Tehran and Washington have been using ships and the seafarers as leverage.

Ships can't dock in Iranian ports under US blockade, while visa restrictions and logistics make docking at Arab ports unfeasible. Plus, since the whole stretch, from Hormuz to Gulf of Oman, has been converted into a quasi war zone, with ships and tankers being targeted by both Iran's IRGC and US navy, there is constant fear of death, aside from destruction of billions of dollars worth of cargo. Last week, US hit and disabled two tankers seeking to enter Iranian ports. Iran, meanwhile, reportedly seized a tanker, Ocean Koi, in Gulf of Oman.

Psychological pressure on seafarers in the region must be unbearable. There are reports of ship owners threatening sailors to stay onboard, through withheld salaries, and accusations of hijacking or sabotage. They have also refused to process sign-off and repatriation of ship crews - a right protected under international maritime law. With many of the 800-1,000 ships classified as Very Very Large Vessels, there are massive financial implications involved. Some owners, therefore, are pressuring sailors to make dangerous transit runs. Hitherto, 10 seafarers have been killed in attacks on shipping.

Solutions remain elusive. Iran wants to tax and charge ships for transiting Hormuz, but US is opposed to this. US's Project Freedom to escort ships out of the region was abruptly stopped last week, coinciding with reported Iranian strikes. Nonetheless, with most seafarers hailing from India, GOI has an added responsibility to rescue the sailors. It had done a fantastic job of rescuing stranded Indians from war theatres like Ukraine and Iraq. Given that New Delhi has good working relations with Tehran, Washington and all Gulf Arab capitals, it is uniquely placed to lead a multilateral humanitarian effort to rescue seafarers, with everyone's cooperation. In 21st century, seafarers stranded in Hormuz, needn't, and shouldn't, have to go through what Coleridge's cursed sailors did.

Good As Gold? Tough

Guineas, 6 LPG cylinders, cash. Vijay's plans are king's ransom. It'll make or break his political fortune & TN's

It's turning into a steeplechase of sorts for TN CM Vijay. Made to run to stack up the numbers, there's now the floor test to clear. Presuming he passes with flying colours, alas, still no time to catch his breath. For, on his debut, CM's staring at a mighty bill, where he'll likely spend a third of what TN earns, to service TVK's manifesto promises.

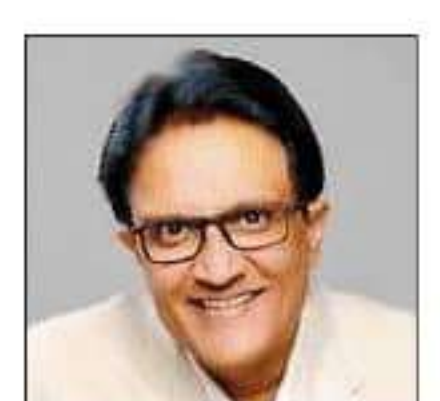
It's quite a list, estimated to cost ₹1L cr a year, while TN's total revenue is around ₹3.3L cr. The maths is simple. There's a gold guinea (8g) to new brides - that's about ₹1,22,700 current rate. A gold ring for every newborn - about 8.4L live births annually in TN. Schooling is incentivised - ₹15k to moms, of every child, every year, to ensure her kids don't drop out. So, a mother of three schoolgoers will receive ₹45k per year? There's plenty hard cash in flow - ₹2,500 for women (around 1.6cr), ₹4,000 to jobless graduates (around 7.5L), ₹15k to farmers (around 80L), ₹10k to farm labour, and on it goes. There's health insurance, loans and stipends aplenty - also for college-goers. Not a first, but this is particularly misdirected. For, state just ends up sponsoring education in pricey private colleges of appalling standards, which produce unemployable graduates. Why not, instead, fill the 40% faculty vacancies in state colleges?

A very generous manifesto - there's even MSP promised for fish - and much of it may be 'needed', but there's that little blip: Where will the money come from? TVK doesn't say. Gold's on a runaway trip, US-Israel-Iran's war is expected to continue on-off through the year. Given uncertainty of supply, six LPG cylinders a year are the stuff of dreams. An economic miracle if Vijay pulls it off - or else, he's looking at either empty coffers, or empty promises.

Keep the change

It's a constant, whether in décor or democracy

Anil Abraham



"It's time for change!" Kamala announced decisively. I looked up with alarm from the couch, where I was browsing the morning newspaper. I wondered if she was talking about recumbent husbands or incumbent politicians. She was blissfully uncaring of both, and was referring to the curtains that looked slightly worse for wear. "And while we are at it, let's make some other changes to the interiors. We could look for new sofas, get a new modular kitchen, modernise the bathrooms, with some bright tiles and fresh sanitaryware."

I am all for change, provided I'm not paying for it. In an attempt to block her move for radical change, I tried countering with the cliché that the more things change, the more they remain the same. But she was very determined that change is the only constant. And quickly clarified that she was referring to home interiors, not politics or the recent elections.

I tried deflecting to gentler remedies. Maybe if we ran the curtains through the washing machine, things would look brighter, and give a fresh perspective on the domestic scene. Home Minister was not impressed. "The entire fabric is in tatters - it needs more than a washing machine to clean up a curtain that has outlived its utility." As my children got ready to quietly leave the room, I tried taking an exit poll to pump up my numbers. But they refused to offer support, even from the outside. They were still recovering from Mother's Day on social media, and walked out humming, *Tujhe sab hai pata meri maa!* 'Mother knows everything.'

I decided it was time to bring the curtains down on this discussion. Change was inevitable and I needed to accept facts. It was curtains for our existing drapes, and a fresh new approach to the décor had been elected unanimously. There was no point in postponing change, and I decided to be the change I wished to see.

Meanwhile, Blinkit Bhaiyya was at the doorstep with the day's groceries. He had gone home to vote and was back at his job within a week. I thought for a moment about the change in his quality of life - after the dance of democracy. He smiled gratefully, as I paid for my parcel and told him to keep the change.

Can Vijay Carry The Franchise?

Tamil Nadu has a non-Dravidian govt after six decades. But its new CM's campaign speeches have been exemplars of vacuity, we have few clues about how TVK will interpret voters' desire for change

AR Venkatachalapathy



Vijay's entire campaign leading up to the elections has been on an anti-DMK plank. Calling it 'a malign force' (*theeya sakthi*) and TVK's prime rival - he barely took the names of ADMK and BJP - Vijay swore 'to rip apart

the mask of the Dravidian model' and expose the 'real face' of DMK. Indeed, nearly 60 years after CN Annadurai assumed office in early 1967, Vijay has given Tamil Nadu its first non-Dravidian govt. He assumed office yesterday roaring, "New era of real, secular, social justice starts now." And in all this, the question that looms largest is, will the new govt sing a dirge to the Dravidian model or perform an encore?

Five years ago, in the weeks between the poll date and the declaration of the results of the 2021 Tamil Nadu assembly election, an academic book was launched amidst the second wave of the pandemic. Few would have wagered that a book published by a university press would dominate the political discourse of the state. Intriguingly titled *The Dravidian Model*, its subtitle, 'Interpreting the Political Economy of Tamil Nadu', provided the gloss.

Authored by two seasoned academics, A Kalaiyaran and M Vijayabaskar of the Chennai-based research organisation, Madras Institute of Development Studies, *The Dravidian Model* was based on a solid body of secondary literature and new research. It argued the case for why Tamil Nadu topped the list of India's most developed states. Studies, at best, raise a storm in some academic teacup, gather dust in libraries, and cuddle up as footnotes in scholarly journals.

In 2021, DMK won the elections, and Stalin became CM. Rather than be overshadowed by his illustrious father, Stalin chose to reinvent himself. Proving pundits, critics and sceptics all wrong, he put together a core team of ideologically committed bureaucrats and began to champion 'the Dravidian model'.

The moniker caught on in no time, and became a shorthand for a model of development that combined economic growth with inclusivity. Following the demise of the towering figures of M Karunanidhi and J Jayalalithaa over the last decade, Stalin's govt gave a fillip to the model. Core lessons captured in the model came to be consciously implemented and expanded. Continuity by stealth was replaced by overt emulation.

For instance, Amma Unavagam, the heavily subsidised food canteen, even retained the moniker of

DMK's arch political rival, Jayalalithaa. New welfare schemes were launched. Women travelled free on public buses. Schools provided breakfast to complement the midday meal. Every month, a thousand rupees landed in the bank accounts of women.

In the 2026 election, DMK fought on the strength of the Dravidian model, showcasing its putative achievements. This, however, was not without its ironies. Some key

But coming back to whether Vijay's govt will sing a dirge to the Dravidian model or perform an encore, through the election campaign, at least, his political speeches have been exemplars of vacuity. No ideology to represent TVK is visible on the horizon. How the party will interpret its voters' desire for change is not clear. Few clues can be discerned about the economic model or governance conventions that the new govt may follow.

Can one read something from the poll promises that Vijay has made? For a start, most of these only augment existing welfare measures. Increased direct cash transfers to women are in the offing, a measure that may be expanded to include men aged 65 years and above. Rather than the present free travel in city buses alone, women may ride any state-owned bus. Households have been promised six free gas cylinders annually. The irony of these promises, while talking of empty state coffers, seems not to have struck anyone.

The euphoria of victory will no doubt give the new govt breathing time. Then, the Dravidian model's core strengths will be tested. For a start, popular welfare has informed governance over the decades and for the bureaucracy, on which the neophyte govt will have to rely at least in the initial years, the substance of the Dravidian model is very much its common sense. Withdrawing from its overarching influence cannot happen anytime soon.

Structure of the economy, with manufacturing and services forming the core, can hardly change overnight. Even in the worst-case scenario, it can only stagnate. Geographical spread of the state's manufacturing sector cannot be reversed, nor can galloping urbanisation be stalled. 43% of India's women workforce in the formal sector, concentrated in Tamil Nadu, is unlikely to return to 'the great Indian kitchen'. Dynamism of intermediate castes and Dalits, high literacy levels, and increased health outcomes, can only spiral higher.

Chinks in the Dravidian model (questionable educational outcomes, unsustainable natural resource extraction, rapacity of rentier classes) do cry for redressal. But these hardly matter to any political party. On the political front, Vijay has already experienced the power of Union govt in the delayed investiture. Centre-state relationship is another litmus test.

Social scientists are poor forecasters. But if one can hazard a guess about the fate of the Dravidian model, what lies ahead may neither be a dirge nor an encore. In Wildean terms, it is likely to be a model that dare not speak its name.

The writer is co-editor, 'The Cambridge Companion to Periyar'



components of the model, such as the midday meal scheme, were inaugurated by ADMK under its founder MG Ramachandran, the film star-turned-politician whose heights Vijay aspires to scale. DMK's leaders and ideologues had even berated the 'freebie'. And it was only in 2006 that DMK became its champion.

Curiously, ADMK, which has steered the state for most of the last 50 years, preferred to disown its achievements. Edappadi K Palaniswami consistently ran it down as a model of trickery ('*thanthira model*').

Will The Double Engine Model Help Suwendu? Yes & No

On the economic front, Bengal is now likely to get a lot of help from Centre. But carrying out some parts of BJP's ideological work, may face stiff resistance

Shikha Mukerjee



Formalities are over. The new govt with Suwendu Adhikari, a relative newcomer to BJP, as Bengal CM, and Dilip Ghosh, die-hard cadre, as number two, has been installed. Four others, representing vote banks that contributed to the capture of Bengal, and the ouster of Mamata Banerjee, have been sworn in as acknowledgement.

Of course, there are also vote banks missing from the first list, and their absence is significant. His party and Adhikari have made it perfectly clear that the victory owes nothing to do with Muslims, who are 28% of the population, and who live and vote in Bengal.

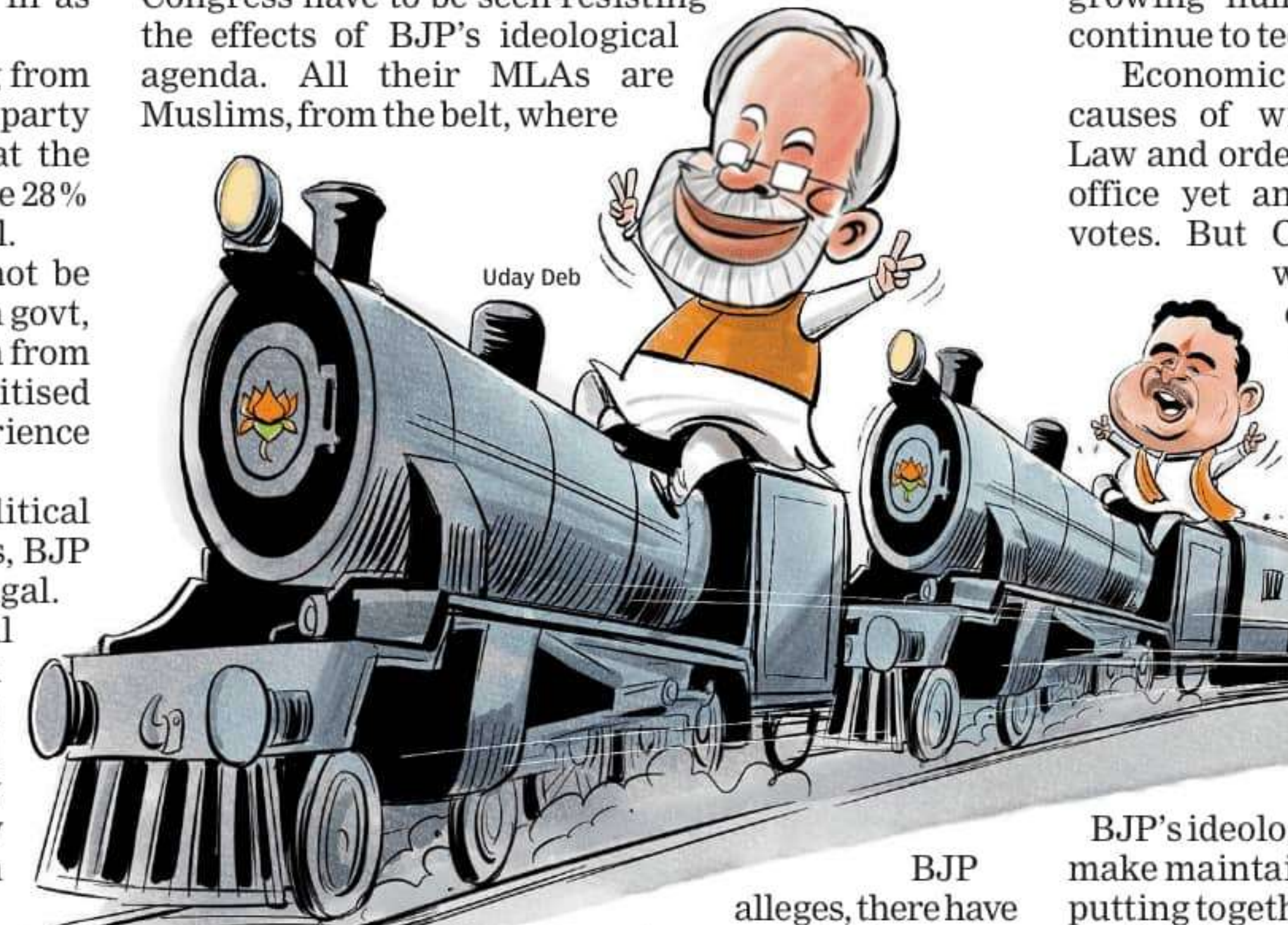
But over one-fourth of the population cannot be invisibilised. Erasing their presence and stake in govt, for the first time since 1937, will not remove them from politics in Bengal, especially as BJP has prioritised four issues that directly affect how Muslims experience the transition from a TMC govt.

In pursuit of its entwined ideological and political agendas of greater consolidation of Hindu votes, BJP is now estimated to have over 60% of these in Bengal. Otherwise, per EC data, it got over 45% of total votes cast. Basically, Adhikari is tasked with actively working to make space for a Hindu 'jagaran', or revival, in the state. BJP has listed zero tolerance for "ghuspathiyas", illegal, mostly Muslim, infiltrators, and clubbed the category of deleted voters, a significant number of whom are Muslims, with it.

It has also put legislating UCC in West Bengal on its must-do list. On a more mundane level, where Adhikari will have to deal with the fallout, the party wants to remove "all encroachments" by "illegal aliens". This could mean sending in bulldozers to demolish allegedly Muslim occupation of govt land and property. As the new CM must do what he has promised, which is to end "appeasement", it may affect

how Muslims live and work in Bengal - spaces they occupy, jobs they do, and services they render.

It's not clear how these priorities will play out. Left has already hit the streets to say that there will be resistance against religious polarisation. Though Mamata is quieter now, evidently figuring out what she should do next, TMC has to engage on the Muslim question. It has 34 Muslim MLAs, out of the 80 who won on its party symbol. For the same reason, Left and Congress have to be seen resisting the effects of BJP's ideological agenda. All their MLAs are Muslims, from the belt, where



BJP alleges, there have been demographic changes.

Therefore, whenever the promise of deporting "illegal aliens" is unrolled, Adhikari will have to take on TMC, crushing which to the point of permanent decline is what BJP needs to do to settle in. He has to be seen as effective, without provoking large-scale confrontations, clashes and violence, which will require eroding TMC strength on the ground. How

soon he starts on this task is connected to how quickly Mamata regains her leadership persona.

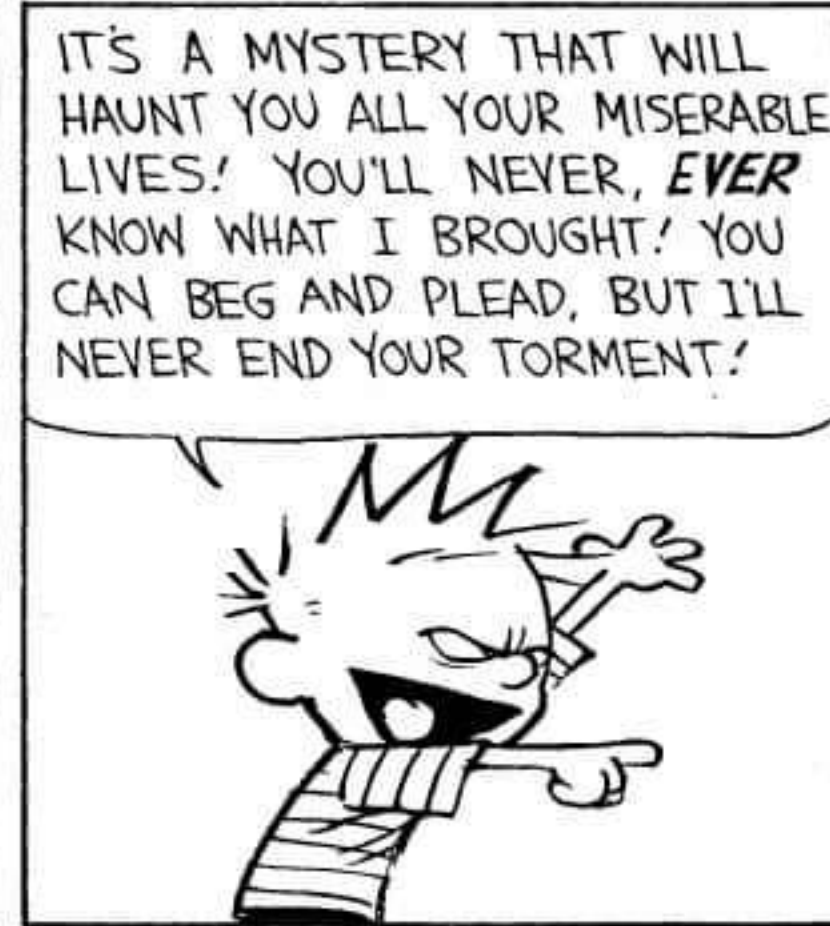
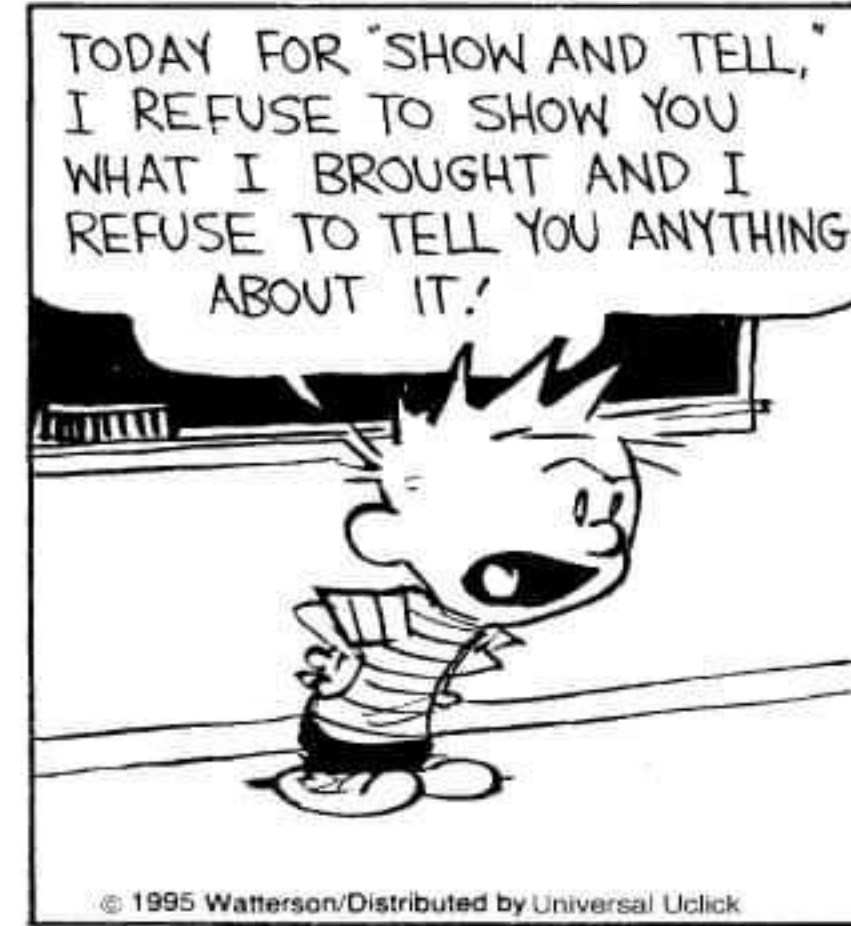
In a way, he's free of the burden of policy-making. Because the double-engine sarkar model does not give him elbow room to do his own thing, Adhikari's job as CM is both easier and more complicated. It's not clear how much autonomy he will enjoy to customise key elements of the double-engine template to blend with expectations of the new BJP converts, including growing numbers of emerging middle class, who continue to teeter on the brink of poverty.

Economic decline, BJP says, was among the root causes of widespread anti-incumbency sentiment. Law and order was another. Corruption and abuse of office yet another. Women's safety also mobilised votes. But CSDS-Lokniti's Sanjay Kumar, a very well-regarded research scholar on elections, did say recently that data shows Mamata received more votes from women than BJP did.

To arrest economic decline and improve Bengal's financial health, Adhikari has it relatively easy. In the sense that the double-engine sarkar model will no doubt help him out, given that Bengal is seen as BJP's jewel in the crown. On law and order, the new CM has a more complicated task. He can change individuals within the police, from top to bottom tiers, but BJP's ideological and political agendas are unlikely to make maintaining peace and order a simple matter of putting together a non-partisan administration.

As the face of BJP in Bengal, Adhikari has to succeed in making himself indispensable. Himanta Biswa Sarma in Assam is the best comparison - he came from Congress and transformed BJP, by inducting powerful Congressmen, meaning people with strong support bases, into the party. In Bengal, BJP is a shiny new party. Keeping it tarnish- and scratch-free, is Adhikari's challenge.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



Become what I see in myself. All that thought suggests to me, I can do; all that thought reveals in me, I can become. This should be man's unshakable faith in himself, because God dwells in him.

Sri Aurobindo

Nietzsche And The Reinvention Of The Human

Jug Suraiya

If you were told that in a cycle of endless recurrence you'd live out your life exactly as it is in every aspect and every event, every pain and every joy, over and over again for all eternity, would the prospect fill you with elation or despair?

This was the challenge that Friedrich Nietzsche threw in the face of the age-old philosophical debate in the Western canon about free will vs determinism, to define what it means to be human.

Plato opted for free will, asserting that we ought to be guided by the Good, an eternal ideal, so as not to be held in the human bondage of emotion and desire. But wouldn't the diktat of the Good itself be a form of higher bondage, of determinism?

Two thousand years later, Kant would advocate free will as well, with

the caveat that all our actions must be such that they should be of universal application, a proviso which afforded backdoor entry to determinism. He took the radical view that we are constrained always to tell the truth, even if that makes us accessory to murder.

In Vedantic teaching, the concept of karm - we make ourselves what we are through what we have done - sets a limit to free will through the consequences of our past deeds and misdeeds.

Beginning with his famous assertion that God is dead, science and secularism having undermined Christian dogma, Nietzsche attempted to devise a moral compass beyond the traditional polarity of good and evil.

Calling free will 'crass stupidity' invented by religious authoritarianism to guilt-trip humanity into the slave

mentality of submission, he called for a revolutionary 'revaluation of values' dependent not on divine dispensation but on our own innate will to power, power not to dominate others but to dominate oneself, to achieve self-mastery and evolve into the Ubermensch (the Overman).

In his seminal 1883 work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which is an aphoristic prose poem rather than a philosophic treatise, Nietzsche outlined the three stages of the path to the reinvention of humanity: the Camel, burdened with imposed

values; the Lion, fierce fighter for freedom; the Child, reborn as a life-affirming individual, a triumphant yea-sayer, with no hope of heaven, no fear of hell, prepared to endure the triumphs and tragedies of earthly life even in the face of an imagined

eternity of endless recurrence.

As a young man, Zarathustra - the fictive name derived from Zoroaster, the founder of Zoroastrianism, one of the world's earliest religions - retreats into a mountain fastness and returns to the world of men to spread his revelatory message of a new way of thought and life for humanity to achieve the ultimate goal of the Ubermensch, not in the hereafter, but in the here and now.

This exaltation of the Ubermensch, hijacked and perverted by the Nazis, has been misunderstood in popular lore and caused Nietzsche to be traduced as a crypto-fascist, although he was a lifelong critic of National Socialism and anti-Semitism.

Besieged as the world is today by the mass madness of war along religious battle lines, perhaps we need to rediscover Nietzsche, if only to remind ourselves that what we call humanity is still a work in progress.



THE SPEAKING TREE

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY



Manufacturing ambition

India needs a coherent strategy

The Union government's recent decision to fast-track approval to foreign direct investment (FDI) from China and other neighbouring land-border countries in 40 manufacturing sub-sectors within 60 days reflects a growing recognition that India's industrial ambitions require deeper integration with global supply chains. After years of heightened scrutiny following the introduction of Press Note 3 in 2020, India now appears more willing to open up and integrate into global production networks, which continue to be dominated by Chinese firms. Significantly, China is India's largest trading partner with bilateral trade reaching \$151.1 billion and the trade deficit with Beijing widening to \$12.16 billion in 2025-26. It has been argued that one of the ways to reduce the trade deficit and dependence on China is to attract Chinese investment so that production shifts to India.

The sectors identified for quicker clearances — such as rare-earth magnets, printed circuit boards, advanced battery components, display modules, machine tools and polysilicon wafers — lie at the core of India's push in electronics, electric mobility, and renewable energy. The move must be welcomed because it provides clarity and will help increase manufacturing output over time. Unfortunately for India, manufacturing's share in gross domestic product has remained stuck at 15-17 per cent for a long time, far below the government's target of 25 per cent and behind several East Asian economies. A recent analysis showed that manufacturing firms' share in the gross value added of listed companies fell to 33.4 per cent in 2024-25 from over 40 per cent before the pandemic. The government has taken several measures over the years, including the production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme, but the results have not been as desired. The PLI scheme, for instance, worked in the mobile space, but the effects in other sectors have been sobering.

Thus, it must be recognised that faster clearances for investment from certain countries in certain sectors alone will not solve India's manufacturing challenge. The sector continues to face structural bottlenecks such as higher logistics costs, skill shortages in areas such as electronics and advanced manufacturing, rigid compliance systems, and weak contract-enforcement mechanisms, all of which raise the cost of doing business. As a result, India has not been able to generate employment at scale for its rising workforce.

In a fast-changing global environment, India needs a coherent strategy and a set of reforms to attract investment and meaningfully increase manufacturing output. The labour Codes passed by Parliament in 2019 and 2020, for instance, were intended to simplify compliance, improve labour flexibility, and encourage the formalisation of employment. However, their implementation was delayed because the rules were notified only last week. Acquiring land for large industrial units remains a challenge, which needs to be addressed. The government also needs to review the trade policy. While India signed several free-trade agreements in the recent past, including with the European Union, its average tariffs are still quite high compared to its peers. It must be recognised that the bulk of the global trade happens in intermediates, and higher tariffs tend to create friction. To push manufacturing output, it's important to integrate with global value chains. FDI flows are also often linked to trade openness and the level of integration in global value chains. Thus, India needs to go beyond selective opening for FDI. Economists have argued that India is failing to capture the low-cost manufacturing space being vacated by China. The Indian policy establishment must ask why.

The next IT state

New govt can make West Bengal an upscale tech hub

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has finally won West Bengal but the real test for the party lies in fulfilling its promise of taking the state to its former glory as an industrial and business powerhouse. Doing so entails not just reversing decades of a leftist political economy but also dealing with structural constraints in state policy and finances. Much has been made by the Trinamool Congress about the "poriborton" (change) in the state's economy during 15 years of Mamata Banerjee's rule. Chief among these achievements are the sharp reduction in poverty and fivefold growth in gross state domestic product (GSDP). Poverty reduction has been the result of a sustained social-sector focus, especially on schemes for women, which have proven genuinely transformational. The focus on expanding micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which provide employment to nine million people, has also driven growth.

These are not negligible achievements, but they have come at a cost. Heavy social-sector spending has impacted the fiscal situation; at 40 per cent, West Bengal's debt-to-GSDP ratio is among the highest in the country. The BJP's promise to implement the recommendations of the 7th Pay Commission for all state employees and pensioners within 45 days can only worsen this position. The focus on MSMEs has not translated into meaningful capital formation, which sustains industrial growth and employment. Compounding this is the agitation over compensation for the land acquired for the Tata Nano project at Singur, which powered Ms Banerjee to chief ministership. The Singur agitation enhanced the state's image as being innately business-unfriendly, which Ms Banerjee struggled to alter despite high-profile investor summits and overseas visits. Sustained political violence did nothing to encourage investors, either; some 6,600 firms shifted their registered offices from West Bengal to other states during her term. Last year, the state inexplicably scrapped all industrial incentives granted since 1993 with retrospective effect, a move that underlined the state's poor "ease of doing business" reputation.

Despite the BJP's business-friendly image, the new administration will likely struggle to draw in large manufacturing enterprises. This is mainly because the Centre's Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act of 2013, which largely reflects West Bengal's laws, has also made it near impossible to acquire the critical landmass needed for world-class manufacturing. The BJP's attempts to overturn these provisions when it came to power in New Delhi in 2014 proved unsuccessful and the political climate is such that this is unlikely to change. A workable alternative presents itself in the shape of information technology (IT), for which the state, with its high literacy levels and relatively good quality of life, is in a strong position to sustain. IT does not require mega-land investment. Ms Banerjee understood this and had started the process of attracting IT investment. Her initiative of setting up a 200-acre Bengal Silicon Valley Tech Hub provides a useful building block for the new administration to build on. Most of the marquee Indian names plus global data centres have invested here. The exponential growth of Gurugram as a dynamic IT hub, which enhanced the fortunes of agrarian Haryana, offers an example of the direct and indirect employment potential of IT investment. West Bengal can make a similar transformation.

Japan and India

Firms in the country need to prioritise Japanese engagement more

The internationalisation strategy of the Indian business elite has traditionally been focused on the United States (US). For decades, this was a rational choice. The US provided the world's deepest capital markets, the most advanced technology, and a predictable institutional environment. This landscape has changed: The quality of institutions in the US has declined. Decision-makers in India must now cautiously rethink their strategy. A diversified approach to global engagement is now a necessity. This search for stability leads to the mature democracies of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Within this, a significant opportunity for Indian firms lies in a greater prioritisation of Japan.

The US is the largest economy in the world, with a nominal gross domestic product (GDP) of \$28.78 trillion. Japan has a nominal GDP of \$4.11 trillion. This is a big country, with which Indian firms can do more. Our biases from recent decades of Japanese experience need to be re-viewed and questioned.

After 1945, the Japanese state engaged in industrial policy on a substantial scale. Bureaucrats attempted to direct credit and pick winners. This was done well in the early years by the competent Japanese state. This approach reached its limits by the mid-1980s. Government control of resource allocation is synonymous with government interference in the financial system. The state-led approach in Japan unsurprisingly led to a massive misallocation of capital. Japan suffered "lost decades", characterised by mediocre growth and a loss of global competitiveness.

Conditions have changed. The Japanese policy establishment realised the limitations of the 1980s

model and transitioned towards a more market-oriented, globally integrated, and financially sophisticated system. While the state still plays a significant role, a formidable institutional architecture based on market principles has arisen.

Japan now has a fully open capital account and a largely floating exchange rate, which absorbs external shocks. There is high economic freedom in finance, and financial regulation is competent and underpinned by the rule of law. Through the "lost decades", Japanese policymakers chipped away at slowly building the institutional capability required for a modern market economy.

The Nikkei 225 index provides insights into this progress. Equity prices reflect the market's assessment of future cash flows and institutional quality. The Nikkei 225 reached a peak of 38,915.87 in late 1989. The subsequent collapse and the demoralisation of the "lost decades" meant the index stayed below that peak for over 30 years. It regained the level of 1989 only in 2024. After that, we got a 61.1 per cent rise in the Nikkei 225. Global and Japanese investors see in the Japanese economy a new potential that was absent for decades.

We should not be too concerned about Japan's demographic decline. For an analogy, the hoped-for Indian "demographic dividend" did not work: Population is not central to the process of economic growth. The absolute headcount required to create great corporations and generate immense value is quite small (for example, consider the tiny headcount directly employed in the US tech industry). Japan will not run short of the numbers required to sustain its technological and business frontier.



SNAKES & LADDERS
AJAY SHAH

Conflict in the backyard

Wild, marauding animals are destroying crops and adding massively to the economic losses of farmers in many parts of India, making farming increasingly unviable. There is now a war involving not only big mammals such as tigers, elephants and leopards, but also wild boars, nilgai and other ungulates and, most damaging of all, monkeys. This is a fact, but one that we are not willing to discuss, let alone resolve. The conservation community would like to avoid this discussion; for them — perhaps rightly so — if there is a conflict, the fault lies at the doorstep of humans.

We know that humans are destroying the habitats of wild animals and doing much more to push them out of forests in search of easy food and prey. This conflict is also, in part, a consequence of successful wildlife protection, which has increased animal numbers. But this cannot be an excuse to look away from the desperate plight of farmers.

We tend to brush it under the table — and because it hurts the poor, it is easy to do so. The 2025 report "Human Wildlife Conflicts: An Estimation of Net Agricultural Losses in Maharashtra", by the Pune-based Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, is the only study of its kind. Its findings show the net agricultural losses in the state due to wildlife are ₹10,000 crore-40,000 crore annually. And this, says the report, is a gross underestimate. What is worrying is that the study found 62 per cent of the farmers had reduced their cropped areas because of animal attacks. Farmers listed crop damage by wild animals as the key problem after unseasonal rain and low prices for produce; one-third said such damage was the main reason for their loss of income.

A 2021 study by the University of British Colum-

bia, Canada, and the Centre for Wildlife Studies, India, found that farmers in Karnataka lost one to three months of income each year to wild-animal raids. A single elephant "interaction" can cost a farmer a loss of 20 per cent or more. A 2025 study from Kodagu district in Karnataka found that close to 50 per cent of farmers surveyed incurred losses amounting to a whopping ₹90,000 per year, pushing many into debt. The forest department of Himachal Pradesh estimates that annual crop losses add up to ₹500 crore, and if indirect costs of fencing and other protection measures are included, it would be ₹1,500 crore at the very least. This is again confirmed by a 2026 study in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu. The study says 90 per cent of farmers identified wildlife conflict as their primary production risk, with a staggering 50-60 per cent of crops damaged primarily by wild boars, peafowl and elephants. Investigation by *Down To Earth* from across the country recounts the same story of lost income, livelihoods and rising indebtedness. The question now is: What needs to be done to "rebalance" this relationship and establish some form of co-existence between humans and animals?

The Indian government's response so far has been slow, confused and dismal. What is good is that it now accepts the nature of the crisis. As of the June-July kharif season 2026, it has included animal-related losses in the national crop insurance scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana. Farmers are given a 72-hour window to report the loss, which will be verified using drones before compensation is paid. Whether this will work remains to be seen, given the scheme's existing flaws. Additionally, it is the state

There is genuine intellectual excellence in Japan. The country possesses extremes of capability that are hard to match globally. Whether it is the design of automobiles, advanced materials, or the semiconductor industry, Japanese capabilities are at the top end. In the past 20 years, there were 14 STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) Nobel prizes that went to persons who did their research in Japan. There is now a surge in Japanese defence research & development (R&D), reflecting a fresh Japanese effort in coping with the Chinese threat. In time, this will yield new strengths in universities and high-tech firms, which will spill over to civilian applications.

Supply chains are no longer just about cost; they are also about trust. Japan and India see eye to eye on a wide variety of global issues. This alignment includes a shared concern over Chinese aggression and the unpredictability of the US. The commitment in Japan to Indian success is comparable to that found in Israel, South Korea or Taiwan. This shared strategic interest makes it safe for Indian firms to build deep, long-term ties with Japanese partners. Myriad firms and governments worldwide are pushing to reduce their connection with China; everyone is happy to work more with Japan, given the decency of the Japanese state.

For Indian firms, much remains to be done with Japan working on the basis of traditional strategies, which worked well in the automobile sector. To integrate business models into the workings of Japanese giants, to produce in India for the world market. But many other pathways are also visible in business activities of recent years: Deploying Japanese capital to acquire distressed heavy industry via the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (Nippon Steel and AM/NS India), capital-intensive technology investment (the NTT group's hyperscale data centres), and securing deep-tech supply chains through joint ventures (Reneas and CG Power in semiconductor). Japanese financial institutions like MUFG are actively deploying capital in domestic Indian credit markets. The new conception of the Japan strategy is to fuse Japanese patient capital and advanced intellectual properties with Indian scale to sell into the world market, including the Japanese market.

Implementing such a Japan pivot will take time, effort and a shift in mindset. The language barrier has become less important because the Japanese business elite now speaks some English. There are deep cultural differences in how business is conducted. Relations in Japan are built on long-term trust and patience. The low-ethics "jugaad", which is often an element of Indian business culture, aiming for quick and dirty wins, will not work well. Indian firms will need to invest time and effort to learn how to engage with the Japanese business world.

The difficulties in the US and the risks posed by revisionist powers require a strategic response. Indian firms must diversify their international linkages into advanced Western democracies other than the US. Prioritising Japan is one logical response to this new reality.

The author is a researcher at XKDR Forum



DOWN TO EARTH
SUNITA NARAIN

Our 'screenified' future



MADISON MALONE KIRCHER

February 26, 2015, is a date that has been immortalised in the annals of the internet. It is the day a digital debate broke out after a BuzzFeed piece asked people to decide whether a dress was white and gold or, rather, black and blue, tearing the online world into warring factions. It is also the day two llamas broke loose from their handlers in Arizona, prompting a televised police chase.

And so it is here that Megan Garber begins her new book, *Screen People*. That

day, she writes, "seemed to herald an era of ever more fractures and ever less fun," as we all "grew angrier, louder, lonelier, wearier."

There's been no shortage of ink — both liquid and digital — spilled in analysing February 26 over the ensuing years. (As a reporter covering internet culture in that period, I'm guilty of having added my fair share.) And this starting point makes it clear from the jump just whom this book is for: If you self-identify as extremely online and have already been reckoning with the ways our lives are now altered by the power of digital intermediaries, much of *Screen People* will feel familiar.

However, for the more offline, Garber's reflections on the pixelated panopticon and its powers to impact everything from individual lives to presidential elections, make for a thorough, if sometimes meandering, introduction. (The author is

a writer for *The Atlantic*, and *Screen People* occasionally reads like a collection of overstuffed essays.)

Garber's core argument is that the language and ethos of traditional entertainment have, thanks to the personal Hollywood studio neatly contained in your cellphone, seeped into every aspect of our lives. Seemingly no action or experience can avoid being, at best, perceived and, at worst, perceived and then broadcast, to the world.

She describes how "minidramas" occur almost daily now in public spaces, from airplanes to high school hallways. We chase "main character energy," with baby gender-reveal parties and wedding videos engineered not for posterity or nostalgia but, rather, for instant virality and the chance for fame. Asking someone to the prom is now its own cinematic genre. Doing it for the 'gram, Garber writes, has

given way to simply "living for the 'gram."

"On our screens, we are both actors and audiences, both showrunners and extras, sometimes the stars and sometimes the scenery," Garber writes.

Garber cites both Charles Darwin and ChatGPT in laying out how we got so comfortable turning ourselves into "content," a word she describes as "meant to split the difference between news and entertainment" — although, in reality, content "blurs and blends" and defies easy categorisation, a "designation that declines to designate much of anything at all."

Garber provides a sharp analysis of the way fact and fiction overlap on our screens to create a world that, while real, is not necessarily reality.

Each chapter is broken down into



SCREEN PEOPLE: How We Entertained Ourselves Into a State of Emergency
by Megan Garber
Published by HarperOne
304 pages \$27.99

entertainment-adjacent categories like "The Scripts" and "The Stars." In "The Twists," Garber grapples with the recent arrival of artificial intelligence into everyday hands. That chapter — the final chapter — is a particular standout, ruminating on the nascent technology that gives "tacit permission to treat other people as imagery; manipulatable, compliant, expendable."

The book is at its strongest when Garber gets hyperspecific, forcing the reader to wrestle with the fact that the far-reaching power of the screen has touched all parts of life. Typing, she writes, has become an act to be watched, tiny dots pulsating on your phone screen as you try to read your interlocutor's mind. And mere online ordering, a faceless experience divorced from the human being tasked with

assembling your purchase, has given way to a trend of ordering incredibly complex Starbucks drinks, which are then shared digitally by both consumers and

While *Screen People* is packed with topical and historical references to everyone from P T Barnum to Susan Sontag to Taylor Swift, after a few chapters, readers might find themselves casting about for a narrative through line. For a book about how we have all turned one another into characters, *Screen People* suffers from a lack of them.

In the final pages, Garber returns to February 26, 2015, a "great day of the internet" that would set the tone for our screenified future. "If we act wisely, though, its greatest days will lie ahead," Garber writes, a hopeful ending that one can't help wishing was where the book began.

The reviewer is a *Times* reporter covering internet culture.
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Genuinely Crack Down on Fakes

AI can help in detecting pirated goods

Fake goods — apparel, FMCG and pharmaceuticals — constitute a thriving economy in India, with 1 in 3 consumers in cities coming across a counterfeit product in the past year. Coordinated national enforcement action against fakes is increasing while brands are turning to technology for authentication. But tech is a double-edged sword in the battle against counterfeits. QR codes raise the bar against pirated goods while e-commerce facilitates their distribution. Identifying counterfeits is a cat-and-mouse game that becomes progressively sophisticated, which leads to AI. It helps detect pirated goods by analysing product details, supply chains and market data. Analytics are being deployed to identify imperceptible product variations, scan for suspicious marketing, and flag price and volume variations.

Economics of fakes are driven by the price difference between legitimate and illegitimate products. This has an uneven impact across industries — it is easier to fake infant milk powder than a smartphone, although counterfeits exist in almost all industries. Value chains in the counterfeit industry must climb in tandem with the regular economy to remain profitable. Piracy typically declines as manufacturing advances and high economic growth holds some deterrent value, but not to the extent of effective policing. Since India is not yet an advanced manufacturing economy, the burden on law enforcement is considerable.

Corporate action against piracy extends to both production and distribution. The channels through which goods move are particularly vulnerable to carrying counterfeits. This tilts the advantage in favour of large enterprises with structured distribution networks while smaller enterprises need greater recourse to the law. The fight against piracy needs a coordinated response from industry and regulators to identify and counteract production and distribution of fake goods.



One Gap Narrows, Another Widens

Girls in India have outperformed boys in school assessments and board examinations. Today, they are steadily taking over classrooms across schools and universities. Women account for nearly three-fourths of MPhil registrations, reflecting how more girls are enrolling in schools, staying longer and progressing to higher education. Yet somewhere between the classroom and workplace, this momentum fades. Women make up 48% of university graduates but only 31% of entry-level employees. At every stage of the professional ladder, their numbers decline further.

The issue is not capability, but cultural norms and social expectations that have failed to keep pace with the aspirations of professionally qualified women. Women may dominate home kitchens, yet only 10% of India's professional and executive chefs are women. They also shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work, spending 10x more time than men on unpaid caregiving and household work. Workplaces remain structured around assumptions designed largely with men in mind. If women continue to be primary caregivers, work systems and policies must reflect that reality.

Beyond the workplace, enablers such as personal safety, reliable infrastructure and quality support services are essential for women to sustain their careers and rise to leadership roles. Data from NSO's Women and Men in India 2025 report points to a generational shift. Although the overall literacy gender gap remains wide, it has narrowed considerably among those below 24 years. This progress reflects years of sustained policy attention, implementation, accountability and interventions such as providing toilets in schools. The focus must now extend beyond the classroom and into the world of work.

JUST IN JEST
By declassifying weird files, the Epstein one has been sent to space

In Alien Vs Predator, Trump With Predator

The Truth is no longer out there, but simply out. Thanks to Trump's near-absolute belief in transparency, the US department of war has declassified info regarding alien life (beyond immigrants from 'hellholes'), unidentified aerial phenomena (UNA) and unidentified flying objects (UFOs) along with 'mysterious Apollo mission photos'. With the move made on the same day as David Attenborough's 100th birthday, some experts believe the idea is also for Trump to go one up on the legendary wildlife broadcaster as the greatest evangelist of life not confined to our planet.

Forget Epstein's Rolodex of horrors. What the public really needs to know is whether Buzz Aldrin was photobombed by a flying saucer. The idea is that Martians are infinitely more interesting than criminal billionaires. Critics may see it as governance by distraction, but the next briefing won't sound like a bizarre line from Close Encounters of the Third Kind: 'Ladies and gentlemen, while we cannot comment on Epstein, we can confirm that Apollo astronauts may have been chased by UFOs. Please direct all outrage skyward.' Thus, the Trump regime pioneers a new doctrine: transparency not as illumination, but as vaudeville. The public is dazzled, scandals are buried and archives are repurposed as X Files props and merch. In this sequel to Alien Vs Predator, we know who's won.

While drafting rules for new tech, avoid early overregulation, as it stifles innovation and growth

Curb Your Overenthusiasm



Aditya Sinha

In 1865, the British Parliament passed Locomotive Act, requiring every self-propelled vehicle to be preceded by a person on foot carrying a red flag. The law was designed for steam engines lumbering through market towns.

By the time it was repealed in 1896, France and Germany had built automobile industries that Britain would spend decades trying to match. Regulatory caution, when it outlasts the risk it was designed to address, produces losses that are real, large and invisible. Any economic regulation is supposed to have a philosophical foundation. Arrow-Debreu model of general equilibrium shows that competitive markets produce efficient outcomes only under conditions never met in practice, i.e., complete markets, perfect information, no externalities, no public goods.

George Akerlof in 'The Market for Lemons' showed that information asymmetry alone can cause markets to unravel. Externalities drive a wedge between private and social costs. Natural monopolies and coordination failures require external correction. Regulation exists to address these failures. But it must balance three tensions that rarely resolve. Efficiency against equity, market freedom against state control and short-term price stability against long-term investment. Done well, regulation enables markets. Done poorly, it replaces them with discretion. The difference is measurable. India has rarely chosen to measure it.

The problem sharpens when the regulated field is new. Ex-ante regulation (anticipatory regulations) asks regulator to know, in advance, what an industry will look like, what risks it will generate, what structures will emerge. In a new field, the regulator



No need to trip off after another 'tip-off'

knows none of this. Frank Knight formalised the distinction in 1921. Risk is measurable. Probabilities can be assigned, tables constructed and insurance priced. Uncertainty is different in kind. It is the domain where probability distributions themselves are unknown. A new technology inhabits this domain. The information the regulator needs does not yet exist. It is tacit, local and embedded in the practices of actors who have not yet arrived. James C Scott's framework in 'Seeing Like a State' explains how states achieve administrative control by making society legible through standardised categories. But legibility



destroys what it cannot map. The practical, contextual knowledge that makes new industries function, what Scott calls *metis*, cannot survive the imposition of categories designed for a different world. What cannot be mapped cannot be approved. What cannot be approved cannot exist.

Four mechanisms explain why regulators impose ex-ante frameworks on new fields regardless:

► **Asymmetric costs** When a regulator approves something that cau-

ses harm, the causal chain is short and politically damaging. When a regulator blocks something and an industry fails to emerge, no one is blamed. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky showed that losses are weighted approximately twice as heavily as equivalent gains. For regulators, this produces systematic over-restriction. Their private loss function and social welfare function point in opposite directions. This is not corruption. It is a structurally broken incentive system.

► **Temporal misalignment** Regulators calibrate to last accident, not next tech. US Nuclear Regulatory Commission, rebuilt after Three Mile Island in 1979, created processes so elaborate that no new nuclear plant was commissioned for 30 years. France, applying a standardised framework to the same tech at the same moment, built 56 reactors.

► **Categorical error** EU applied a process-based precautionary framework to GMOs in the 1990s, treating recombinant DNA technology as presumptively dangerous regardless of the specific product. US asked whether the crop was harmful. European agricultural biotechnology collapsed as a commercial enterprise. Cass Sunstein's precautionary paradox explains why. Precautions against one risk necessarily create exposure to others. Applied to genuine uncertainty, the precautionary principle is prohibition in academic clothing.

► **Jurisdictional fragmentation** When a new tech fits no existing category, multiple agencies claim it simultaneously, each applying its own approval logic and compounding the compliance burden. India's response to cryptocurrency is an example. It

produced an ecosystem that moved to Singapore and Dubai and continued serving Indian customers from outside the regulatory perimeter RBI had been attempting to enforce.

India's disposition is structural. Colonial administrative architecture was built for extraction and control. Burden of proof falls on the applicant to show that an activity is permissible, not on the state to show that it is harmful. Where neither party has sufficient information, the system defaults to prohibition.

India is now writing regulatory frameworks for AI, genomics, space commercialisation and synthetic biology. These are Knightian uncertainty. New technologies operate under uncertainty. Rigid ex-ante rules misfire while sandboxes and sunset clauses allow learning and correction



ty domains. The frameworks being designed now will determine which of these industries India builds over the next two decades and which it exports to jurisdictions that answered the same question differently.

Three changes are necessary:

► **Regulatory sandboxes** must become the default mode of engaging with new sectors.

► **Every ex-ante requirement** for an emerging technology must carry a sunset clause requiring evidence-based re-justification within three years.

► **Regulatory impact assessments** must be applied to regulations before enactment, holding the rule-maker to the same evidentiary standard it demands of everyone else.

The Red Flag Act was eventually repealed. The 30 years were not recovered. In each emerging industry that will define India's economic future, the country is making a choice. It is worth being honest about which side of that choice it is currently on.

The writer is a public policy professional



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Inner Authenticity

GANESH KOLAMBAKAR

We seem to live in an age of borrowed philosophies. Leadership frameworks shape our thinking, productivity systems measure our worth, influencers curate identities and even spirituality is presented as a structured pathway. In boardrooms and across social media, worldviews are packaged and quickly consumed. In such a climate, embracing a ready-made philosophy feels easier than engaging in the quieter and more demanding work of self-discovery.

One subtle force behind this tendency is FOMO, the fear of missing out. We fear missing the right career path, right ideology, right spiritual method, right definition of success. This quiet anxiety nudges us toward quick alignment with prevailing narratives. Positions are adopted not because they have matured within us, but because not adopting them feels like falling behind.

When clarity about our true self is absent, opinions of others begin to shape us. Their convictions can replace our inquiry. Outwardly we may appear aligned with times, inwardly we may sense a lack of rootedness.

Perhaps the deeper task is not the accumulation of philosophies but discovery of the Self. When philosophy arises from self-knowledge, it is no longer a borrowed script but a lived truth. Not a reaction to societal pressure, but an expression of inner clarity. Not conformity to prevailing influence, but coherence with one's own consciousness.

Chat Room

Rekindling The Spirit

Apropos the Edit 'Bringing Kapitalism Back to Kolkata' (May 10). Industry is waiting to see how the new West Bengal government tackles the issues behind the state's economic decline — relocation of economic activity, weak private investment, lack of executive support, and a climate of violence and coercion. Once the first choice for entrepreneurs in auto manufacturing, jute, steel and tobacco, the state must now prioritise reviving that spirit through sound economic policies, backed by suitable central assistance. YG Chouksey, Pune

Making Ethanol Pay

Apropos the Edit 'Push Ethanol but Keep it in the Mix' (May 7). Blending higher quantities of ethanol with petrol is a desirable step toward reducing India's dependence on imported crude oil. However, given persistent complaints of reduced mileage from ethanol-blended fuel, government must find ways to encourage wider adoption.

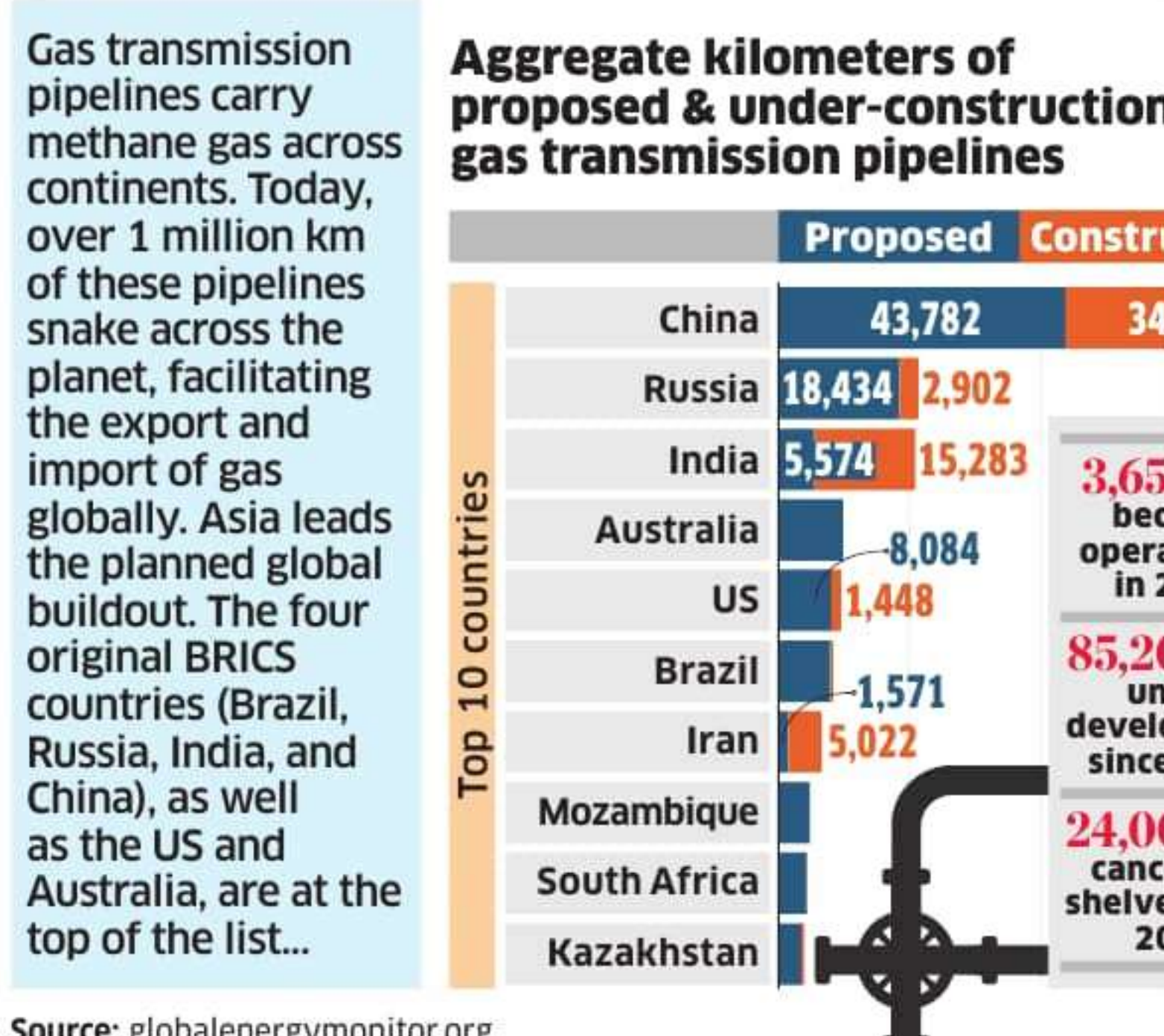
India could take a cue from Brazil, where ethanol-blended petrol is priced about 20% lower than regular fuel. A similar pricing strategy here would offset any marginal loss in mileage and make the transition more acceptable to consumers, who would effectively be compensated through reduced fuel costs. Mahesh Natani, Indore

Destabilising Populism

Apropos 'Wait Ends, Vijay to Be Sworn In as Tamil Nadu CM Today' (May 10). C Joseph Vijay's ascent as Tamil Nadu CM marks a sharp shift from Dravidian dominance to celebrity-driven populism. His inaugural orders — 200 free electricity units and strengthened safety squads — echo welfare priorities, but the economic backdrop is worrying. With the state burdened by Rs10 lakh crore in debt and a strained fiscal deficit, the new CM must balance welfare promises with financial discipline. Vijaykumar, Raichur (Karnataka)

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

Building Gas Pipelines



MEME'S THE WORD



Mature Hands for Money



Ashok Banerjee & Rajesh Shukla

Over the past decade, India has executed one of the world's most ambitious financial inclusion programmes. With over 55 cr bank accounts opened, rapid expansion of digital payments, and deeper access to formal credit and insurance, the financial system has extended its reach across geographies and income segments. This is the foundational step for inclusive growth. With access no longer being the binding constraint, the more pressing challenge is whether households can use financial services effectively.

Evidence from the Financial Maturity Index, based on IIM Udaipur-People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE) surveys across Gujarat and Rajasthan, suggests that while inclusion has scaled, financial maturity — the ability to make informed, resilient and forward-looking financial decisions — remains uneven. This gap between access and capability is emerging as a structural constraint on inclusive development. Findings point to a disconnect.

► **Weak fundamentals** Households are active participants in the financial system, yet many don't understand compounding, inflation and risk diversification. When households do not fully understand how interest rates, inflation, or risk operate, policy signals are less likely to translate into behavioural change.

The study finds that fewer than 40% of households have emergency savings to cover 3 months of expenses, even though more than one-third have experienced a financial

shock in recent years. Households continue to rely heavily on informal coping mechanisms, including borrowing from family networks, liquidating assets, or resorting to high-cost credit.

The findings also emphasise that income and information independently shape financial behaviour. This insight is important for policy design. Even among households with similar income levels, differences in awareness lead to different financial outcomes.

At the same time, some younger and better-educated individuals demonstrate stronger conceptual understanding despite lower income levels. This suggests that financial capability is not purely determined by income. It is also shaped by exposure, education and access to information.

► **Myopic view** The study highlights a strong short-term orientation in household financial behaviour. While more than 85% of respondents express a preference for saving over non-essential spending, these intentions do not consistently translate into structured financial planning. Retirement planning is weak, with most households prioritising immediate financial needs such as education, health and consumption.

This behaviour is not irrational. The study observes that risk-taking and long-term planning are closely linked to economic capacity. Households with limited income buffers are less able to absorb shocks and so prioritise liquidity and security over



Included, not equipped

long-term returns. Financial maturity, in this sense, is both an outcome of economic development and a contributor to it.

► **Weak financial diversification** Meaningful participation in equity or market-linked instruments is largely confined to higher-income households. For the majority, portfolios remain dominated by traditional assets such as bank deposits, gold and real estate.

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest the need for a fundamental shift.

► **There is a need to move from access-based metrics to capability-based metrics.** Account ownership and transaction volumes are no longer sufficient indicators of progress. Policymakers need tools that capture how households behave and where capability gaps exist.

► **Financial education** must move beyond awareness campaigns. The persistence of financial stress, decision inertia and low confidence indicates that information alone is not enough. Policies must be designed to address behavioural barriers such as complexity, uncertainty and lack of trust.

► **Strengthening financial capability** must be recognised as essential for macroeconomic policy effectiveness. Without it, the transmission of interest rate changes, inflation expectations and savings incentives will remain incomplete.

India's financial inclusion story has been transformative. But inclusion, by itself, is only the first step. The next phase must focus on building financial capability at scale, ensuring that households are not just connected to the financial system but are also equipped to navigate it effectively and confidently.

Because inclusion opens the system. Financial maturity determines outcomes.

Banerjee is director, IIM Udaipur. Shukla is MD-CEO, PRICE

MELODY FOR MONDAY

Sabotage The Beastie Boys

The Beastie Boys' 1994 'Sabotage' is less a song than a sonic mugging, an ambush of raw force and irreverent wit that still feels like a riot in progress. From the opening siren-like riff, the track lunges forward with a feral energy, its tempo shifts like sudden gear changes in a getaway car. One moment it's throttling at full speed, the next it's jerking into a skid, daring you to keep up.

The lyrics, spat with gleeful venom, are a parody of paranoia and authority, a mock-



serious tirade against unseen forces conspiring to ruin the narrator's day — in this case, a rant about the band's producer holding them down and 'sabotaging our great works of art'.

Lines like 'I can't stand it, I know you planned it' have Messrs Adam 'Ad-Rock' Horovitz, Michael 'Mike D' Diamond and Adam 'MCA' Yauch deliver protest music that's hilarious and oddly heroic.

In the song, the Beastie Boys weaponise tempo changes and distorted riffs into a cartoon brawl rendered in sound. It's anarchic, ridiculous and glorious. The track doesn't just critique sabotage, but embodies it, gleefully wrecking rock and rap conventions alike.

Bond truths

Retail exposure to foreign bonds not a great idea

Online bond platforms, when first launched, were expected to spur retail participation in bond markets, replicating the equities experience. But they have managed just ₹1,500 crore in monthly volumes by end-2025. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) is now looking at ease of doing business for online bond platforms. It has recently proposed two relaxations which aim at widening their menu. These are however unlikely to materially boost volumes.



SEBI seeks to allow online bond platforms to offer foreign debt securities through platforms regulated by the IFSCA (International Financial Services Authority). The rationale is that as online bond platforms are registered as stock brokers which deal in IFSCA-regulated products, this facility should be available to them too. Whether this will spark retail interest in foreign bonds is however questionable. Unlike stocks — where foreign markets are currently more attractive than India's — Indian bonds offer one of the most attractive yields globally for investors seeking a good balance of risk and reward. Sovereign bond yields for advanced markets such as the US, UK, Australia and Germany hover at 4-5 per cent, while Indian gilts trade at 7 per cent. Should investors fish for higher yields, their options narrow to risky markets such as Russia, Brazil, Mexico and so on. Investors may seek out foreign bonds for currency diversification, but this requires taking directional calls on exchange rates.

Bonds seem safe, but can expose investors to capital losses if they get the direction of rates wrong. Given that retail investors in India struggle even to understand domestic rate cycles, expecting them to decipher global macros to take a call on foreign bonds and currencies seems a tall order. Three, investments by domestic investors in foreign securities are capped by LRS (Liberalised Remittance Scheme) limits. Currently, overseas equities and real estate are the rage with more affluent Indians for their high returns, leading to significant foreign exchange outflows. Whether investors would take to low-return debt instead, and whether this is even desirable from a policy perspective, is moot. SEBI is also proposing to allow online platforms to add Section 54EC bonds, which are free of long term capital gains tax, to their menu. This will allow investors to own 54EC bonds in a more convenient form and may add to business volumes for the bond platforms. However, 54EC bonds are issued only by a handful of government-backed entities.

Overall, if the intent is to promote retail participation in bond markets, it is important to address poor information flow on bond yields and adverse taxation of debt income. Today, while it is quite easy for individual investors to access transparent quotes and order books to trade stocks, bond market trades remain opaque. The taxation of interest from bonds at slab rates, has been the key trigger for Indian investors seeking out equities in search of better returns.

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

EUROPE

Iran tests Trump's will to fight

The Iran war has entered its skirmishing phase as the regime spent much of the past week firing at the United Arab Emirates and U.S. forces, who returned fire in self-defense. President Trump says the cease-fire endures, but for how much longer can that be while Iran keeps shooting? On Thursday Iran launched missiles, drones and small boats to attack three U.S. warships as they transited the Strait of Hormuz. This was an Iranian attempt to kill U.S. troops, but it was intercepted. The U.S. destroyers exited Hormuz successfully, an important demonstration of the U.S. path through the closed Strait. "No U.S. assets were struck," Central Command said, adding, "Centcom does not seek escalation." (NEW YORK, MAY 9)

GULF NEWS

AI's next leap may not come from bigger chatbots

Much of today's artificial intelligence boom has been built by a simple assumption: that scaling models, data and compute will continue to make systems more capable. That approach has taken us remarkably far. But it is becoming increasingly clear that scaling language models alone may not be enough for the next phase of AI. As AI moves beyond chat interfaces and into real-world systems, the limits of this paradigm are starting to show. Language models are trained primarily to predict patterns in language rather than to build a reliable model of how the world works. They can describe reality with impressive fluency, but that is not the same as robustly modelling it. That distinction matters. A language model can explain what typically happens when a glass falls off a table. (DUBAI, MAY 10)

LINE & LENGTH.



TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

Whenever the size of the Lok Sabha is increased to 850, the ruling party will be able to have 127.5 MPs (a cap of 15 per cent of the size of the Lok Sabha, as per Article 75 (1A) or the 91st Amendment of the Constitution) as ministers. But where will their portfolios come from?

Governments find this a difficult problem even now when they are allowed 81 ministers (15 per cent of 543). Imagine having to find 47.5 more portfolios, or 127.5 in all. One must feel sorry for the prime ministers of the future.

On the other hand, they may well feel quite happy because they can oblige more MPs from their party or of their coalition partners. That they can do this at the expense of the taxpayers would be the icing on the cake.

But patronage aside, the original question remains: where will the portfolios come from? As it is we slice and dice areas to find ministerial positions for the needy. So what should be one ministry becomes three or four.

Take transport, for example. We have a minister for the railways, a minister for shipping, a minister for road transport and a minister for civil aviation. Likewise, we have a minister for coal, mines, oil, power and alternative energy. We also have ministers for industry, MSMEs, steel, textiles, etc.

To see how ridiculous this is, compare it to the defence ministry. Would you like to have a separate minister for the army, navy, air force and missiles? Or would you like the ministry of external affairs to be broken up in some arbitrary way just to give a ministerial position to some politician?

If not, why break up other inter-related areas? It is clear that good sense prevails where national security is concerned but not where the economy is concerned. Jobs for the boys is all very well but what about good governance, policy, administration, etc?

TWO WAYS OUT

Obviously, there are two ways out of this absurd situation. One is to reduce the number of ministers currently allowed to 10 per cent from 15 per cent. But even that at 54.3 or 85 in the future might be too many.

The other is to re-integrate ministries to what they used to be. Or, actually, if possible do both. The cabinet rank vs MoS thing is not really the answer.



A bloated Cabinet is a really bad idea

Adding more ministries and ministerial positions to oblige the MPs will hurt governance

The two alternatives might look the same but actually they have very different consequences. One set is political, the other set is administrative. And they work oppositely to each other in that the more political you get by having more ministers, the worse your governance becomes.

The basic problem is overlapping jurisdictions. It's bad enough that the Concurrent List of the Constitution creates a lot of such jurisdictions. But if

Where will the portfolios come from? As it is we slice and dice areas to find ministerial positions for the needy. So what should be one ministry becomes three or four

you have too many ministries you end up compounding the problem.

As a result a huge amount of time is spent by the Prime Minister's Office — and sometimes a specially designated person like the chairman of the PMEAC — on inter-ministerial coordination. So what can be done in two weeks with a clear chain of command and accountability, can take six months or more or, worse, never get done.

If this is how it is now, imagine how much worse it will become with more ministers and ministries, both at the Central and the State levels. It will be a wholly unworkable system created solely to satisfy party functionaries who want the status and perks of ministerial office.

THE COMPETENCE PROBLEM

The other looming cloud, as yet distant but approaching inexorably, is of competence. Can a prime minister find 127.5 men and women who have the

competence to be effective ministers? Is it any coincidence that Narendra Modi has had to turn to non-politicians from the bureaucracy to be ministers?

So future prime ministers are going to be even more hard pressed because to be effective as a minister it's not enough to be able to win an election. Nor is it always possible to oblige the parent bodies of a political party by making their nominees ministers.

In the end it's the prime minister who has to run the government and if his council of ministers comprises persons who don't understand government and laws and rules and judiciary, it's he or she who will face the anti-incumbency issue. A prime minister, in matters of governance, is only as good as his ministers. If they find it hard to deliver with 80 ministers in attendance, how much worse is it going to be with 120 of them messing up?

It's not a prospect that brings any cheer.

Strengthening GCCs to offset external shocks

Building a talent pipeline, nurturing innovation and improving physical infra can help India become a major GCC destination

Niranjan Banik
Pradeep Racherla

We have exogenous and endogenous variables in economics. The recent West Asia conflict is an example of the former. Prior to the conflict, India's economy was in a Goldilocks situation — estimated GDP growth of 7.6 per cent in FY25 paired with a benign inflation rate of around 2 per cent.

The conflict has dramatically altered the outlook. Our heavy dependence oil, LNG, and LPG imports will impact growth, inflation, the balance of payments, and government finances. With global crude oil prices at elevated levels of \$85-90/barrel in FY26, growth may slip to 6.7 per cent (against the projected 7 per cent).

There will be a second-order effects on inflation due to higher raw material costs across several industries. Meanwhile, concerns over AI are weighing on the competitiveness of our IT and services sector. In the past decade, surpluses from services exports were sufficient to offset the deficit incurred from energy imports. But that buffer may erode.

One element that will act as a strategic bulwark against fiscal fragility is the emergence of Global Capability Centres (GCCs). The 1,700 or so GCCs employ 1.9 million professionals and generated \$64 billion in export revenue in FY24. GCCs have evolved from back-office operations into innovation powerhouses driving R&D, AI, and

fintech for multinational giants across several industries including banking and financial services, technology, and pharmaceuticals. GCCs' dollar-denominated revenues provide a steady forex inflow, insulating the rupee from volatility.

Unlike remittances or trade exposed to tariffs, GCCs ensure recession-resistant growth, with revenue projections hitting \$110 billion by 2030. By localising high-value jobs, they can reposition India as an economic and geopolitical safe haven.

POLICY MEASURES

There are several endogenous measures that policymakers should undertake to position India as a premier GCC destination, both at Central and State levels.

Pillar one — building the talent pipeline: entry-level graduates are plentiful, but job-ready graduates are scarce. The gap between university curriculum and industry expectations remains wide, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence, cloud architecture, and advanced analytics.

Most GCCs in India have historically functioned as execution arms, but global mandates are shifting. Boards now want their India centres to lead product development, drive innovation, and own profit and loss responsibility.

That demands a new crop of mid- and top-level leaders — those who understand a company's strategic context, navigate cross-cultural complexity, and can advocate for India as a centre in global conversations.



EVOLVING. GCCs in India are now driving innovation GETTY IMAGES

Hyderabad offers an instructive lesson. Concerted investment by companies like Microsoft, Google, and Amazon, combined with deep university partnerships has produced a talent layer capable of stepping into such roles. The government has created an enabling platform through significant funding and support to develop institutes of global repute (e.g., ISB, IIT). The model is replicable, but it requires the government, universities and companies to re-imagine partnerships.

Pillar two — plugging into and nurturing local innovation: GCCs no longer import solutions from headquarters; they generate intellectual property in India.

This shift is possible when GCCs genuinely develop the local innovation ecosystem, not just reside within it. Bengaluru's experience is instructive. The density of startups, deep-tech firms, and national research institutes allows GCCs to tap into a laboratory of ideas.

Several GCC leaders in India describe structured programmes through which they co-develop prototypes with local startups, licence early-stage technologies, and absorb entrepreneurial talent that would otherwise leave for Silicon Valley.

Pillar three — physical infrastructure as a strategic imperative: Reliable power and data connectivity, accessible housing for a young workforce, and seamless last-mile connectivity are the baseline expectations of GCCs' location decisions today.

Not all cities and towns in India are attracting GCCs. The top six cities — Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Delhi NCR, Mumbai, Pune, and Chennai — together account for around 90 per cent of total GCCs.

Hyderabad's HITEC City offers a compelling case study in what purposeful infrastructure planning can achieve. Combining uninterrupted power supply, fibre-dense connectivity, and flyover access, gives the city a quality-of-life credibility that has attracted many Fortune 500 GCCs.

Pillar four — smart policy, competitive taxation, and regulatory clarity: The fourth pillar is where government has the most direct lever to pull. GCC leaders are not seeking tax giveaways; they seek predictability. The recent thrust by Telangana and Karnataka to publish dedicated GCC policies with single-window clearances is a step in the right direction.

The writers are Professors, and co-founders of the Center for Economic Policy at Mahindra University

BELOW THE LINE



Whistle podu!

The whistle is no longer just the sound of *Thala* Dhoni. It now echoes for Thalapatli Vijay, too. What began as the iconic rallying cry of Chennai Super Kings has found a political parallel in Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam,

where the whistle has emerged as a powerful symbol of Vijay's growing political movement. Across Tamil Nadu, the sound now carries both sporting passion and political emotion. In a striking coincidence on Sunday, as whistles faded at Chennai's Jawaharal Nehru Indoor Stadium after Vijay's massive public event, they rose again just three km away at MA Chidambaram Stadium, where CSK took on Lucknow Super Giants in the IPL. Tamil Nadu may soon witness an unusual battle of whistles — one for *Thala*, the eternal cricket icon, and one for Thalapatli, the rising political force. The bigger

question is which whistle will resonate louder — as CSK tries to move up the IPL points table or as TVK's governance kicks off. **Shaky finances** Even as C Joseph Vijay was sworn in as the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, some youth have resigned their jobs. In a video that is doing the rounds, these young men say Vijay has promised ₹4,000 for unemployed youth and ₹2,500 for women. "My mother will get ₹2,500, and I will get ₹4,000 a month. That should be enough," he says. Addressing the gathering after being sworn in, the actor-turned-politician

said finances in the State were shaky! **Street smart** A Gujarati businessman has made the most of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's new-found love for *Jhal Muri*. While party-men were celebrating BJP's maiden victory in West Bengal by distributing *Jhal Muri* across the country, Balaji Wafers founder Chandubhai Virani from Rajkot flooded provision stores with *Jhal Muri* packets for just ₹5 and ₹10. Needless to say, it was selling like hot cakes without a single penny spent on advertisement. **No age limit to play** As British broadcaster and

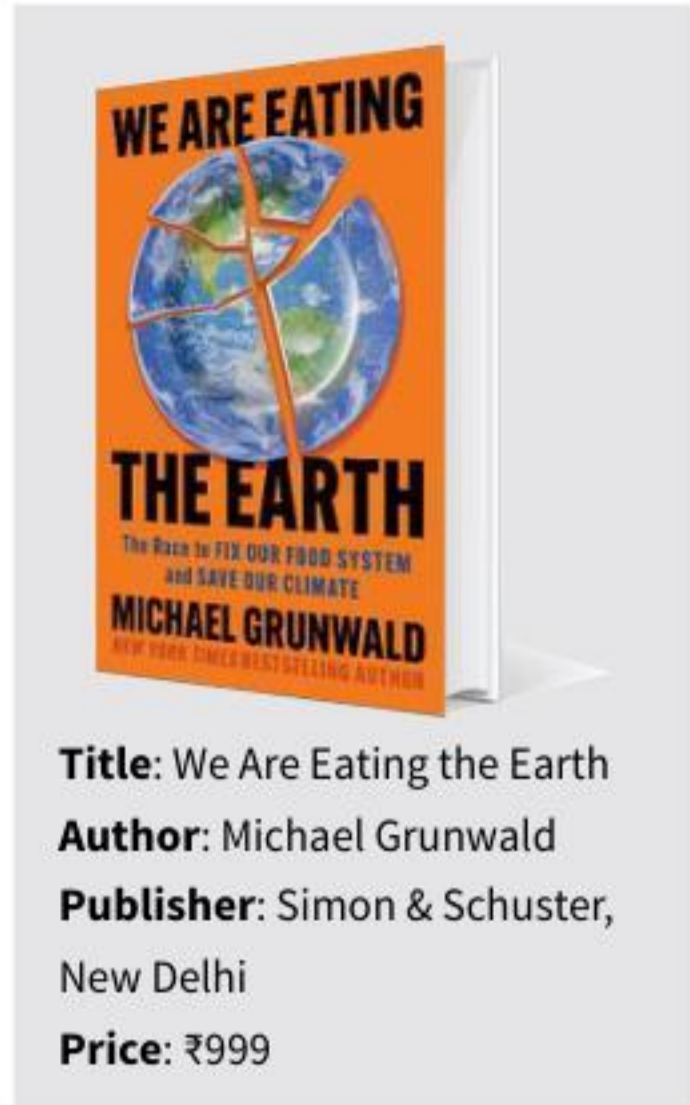
conservationist David Attenborough celebrated his 100th birthday on May 8, Lego marked the occasion with a classic gesture. To honour Attenborough's milestone birthday, the toymaker expanded the age range on its products from 4-99 years to 100-plus. Earlier, several netizens had humorously pointed out that the iconic narrator would technically become "too old" to play with Lego sets once he turned 100. Announcing the change on Friday, Lego said, "There's no age limit for those who never stop playing." **Our Bureaus**

Food, a big climate challenge

A guide to how we can eat without hurting the earth

BOOK REVIEW.

Sudhrendar Sharma



Title: We Are Eating the Earth
Author: Michael Grunwald
Publisher: Simon & Schuster, New Delhi
Price: ₹999

Is farming the world's greatest cause of environmental destruction? Even as a thought experiment, it may be hard to imagine. Fossil fuels have been on top of the climate story, and farming nowhere features in this discourse. But even if the world weans itself from fossil fuels, it will still find itself slouching towards disaster as the fossil fuels story is only two-thirds of the climate story. The food we eat and the farms that produce it contribute to the crisis too.

The core issue is the expanding agricultural footprint. Already, the size of all of Asia and all of Europe has been converted into farmland and that is not without a cost — biodiverse habitats destroyed, pristine forests compromised and nature's footprints have shrunk. The farming sprawl is 30 times that of the urban sprawl. If current trends unfold, the world farmers will need to convert more area to fill nearly 10 billion human bellies by 2050. That would wipe out more forests and other natural carbon storehouses, our best defences against climate change. And on top, some millions would still go hungry.

PRECIOUS RESOURCE

The food system itself is not climate friendly and probably the most destructive. Award-winning journalist Michael Grunwald dives into *We Are Eating the Earth* to show how the biggest of our dilemmas about feeding the world can be resolved without devouring the planet. Land is our most precious resource, because it has the twin-task of producing much more food and absorbing much more carbon to save us. Crops, like us, are carbon-based life forms that grow on the earth and as Mark Twain said, they're not making more of it.

If the Paris climate summit targets are to be met, the world will need to eliminate three-fourths of food-related emissions by 2050. But soils have not yet been prepared to sequester such emissions; extractive agriculture instead depletes soils.

Grunwald has evidence to argue that every piece of land needs to be valued either as a potential food source or a potential carbon sink. The book cleverly frames the solution around efficiency: pointing out

that the more food we can produce on less land, the more land we can keep in its natural state. Quitting fossil fuels can only be part of the solution, the challenge is the need to preserve ecosystems that store carbon.

Grunwald takes guidance from a brilliant scientist Tim Searchinger, a senior research scholar at Princeton and senior fellow at the World Resources Institute. Is meat really that bad? Searchinger's answer boils down to this: 'It's land...meat uses too much land, just like ethanol.' One cow meat is as much as 100 chickens, emitting 50 times more greenhouse gases than coal. But who cares as more animals suffer and die before reaching our plates.

Food is now as big a climate challenge as oil and coal. *We Are Eating the Earth* is a warning to the present generation to keep the planet habitable for the next generation. The production of our food harms the environment in many ways. While the farms that feed the world might not consume the entire earth, two-fifths of our planet's land area remains vulnerable. More sobering still, that figure is growing as the global population continues to grow and more people become wealthy enough to eat meat.

Grunwald has recommended four steps: produce more food per acre; protect key habitats and keep them off limits to food production; reduce demand for meat, biofuels, and other land consuming products; restore unproductive lands to nature. In conclusion, he advocates both systemic change and personal action. Each of us is eating the earth and how we eat matters.

The reviewer is an independent writer, researcher and academic

Lessons from a titan of Wall Street

Goldman Sachs's most improbable CEO can teach India's entrepreneurs what's required to build something lasting

BOOK REVIEW.

Atul Shinghal

Lloyd Blankfein's memoir arrives with a title that stops you. *Streetwise*. For a man who ran Goldman Sachs — an institution so powerful that conspiracy theorists once accused it of running governments — the word seems almost mischievous. But that is precisely his point. Blankfein grew up in the public housing projects of East New York, Brooklyn, in a high school chaotic enough that he avoided the bathroom out of self-preservation.

Harvard was not a plan; it was an accident of ambition. By the time he steered Goldman through the 2008 financial crisis — the kind that makes central bankers age in dog years — the street in his title had nothing to do with Wall Street. It described a cast of mind: shaped by scarcity, calibrated by outsider status, never entirely softened by success.

Streetwise is part memoir, part institutional portrait, and — whether Blankfein intends it or not — a prompt for anyone building something in India today to ask some uncomfortably useful questions.

The book's most resonant argument, for an Indian reader, is about the advantage of never quite belonging. Blankfein spent his career as a cultural hybrid: present in the establishment, never fully absorbed by it. He argues this gave him a clarity that comfort rarely produces. He could spot talent that pedigree-obsessed institutions missed. He was harder to impress, and therefore harder to deceive.

I recognise this disposition in the best Indian founders I know. We build in a market that imported frameworks routinely misread. We pitch to investors who nod at our numbers while mentally

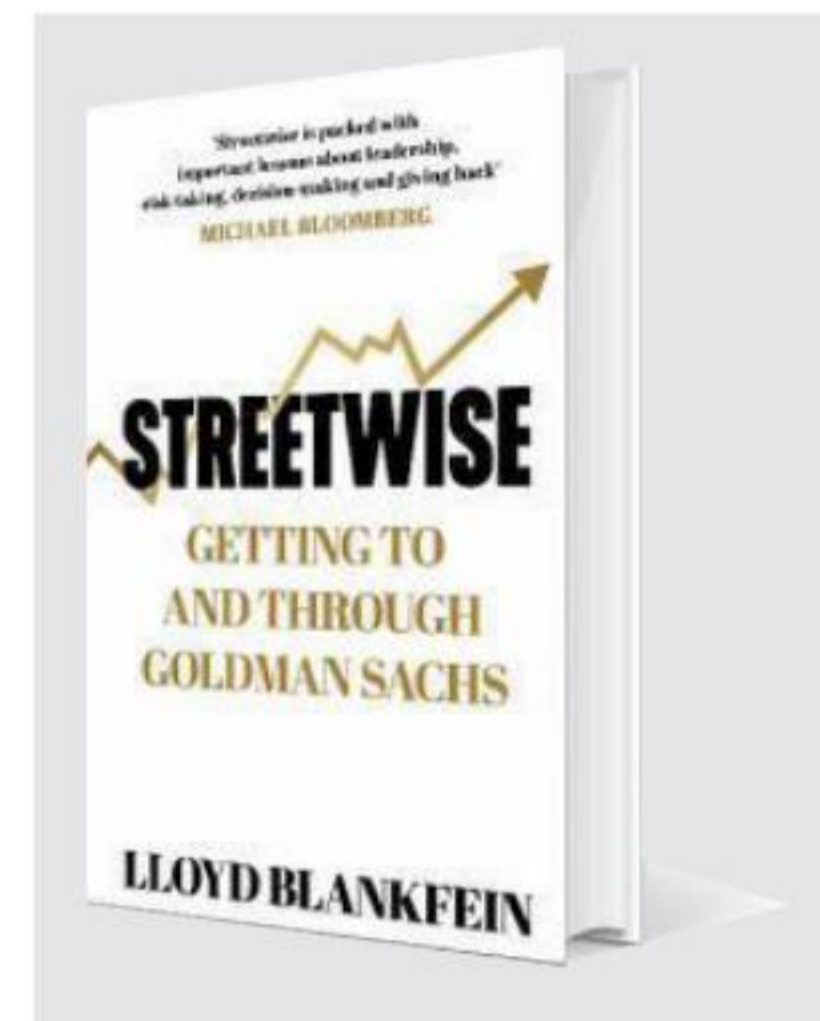
converting them into something more familiar. The IIT or IIM credential still opens doors, but what has actually built India's most enduring companies is closer to what Blankfein describes: the ability to read what is genuinely happening, as opposed to what the narrative says should be happening. The outsider's eye is not a disadvantage to manage. It is the edge.

The section I found most instructive had nothing to do with trading floors or congressional hearings. It was about culture — the relentless, unglamorous work of maintaining shared values across decades of growth, public listing, and competitive pressure. Goldman's longevity, in Blankfein's account, did not come from any particular strategy or proprietary genius. It came from norms: how decisions were made, how disagreement was heard, what behaviour was rewarded and what quietly was not. Protecting that, he says, was harder than any single business challenge he faced.

THE IPO ISSUE

Another interesting section concerns Goldman's decision to go public — and whether it was the right call. Blankfein is candid: when partners stop betting their own capital, incentives shift in ways that are slow to appear and fast to compound. For Indian founders weighing the same question, his framing is clarifying. An IPO is not a finish line; it is a change of sport. The accountability changes, the timeline shortens, and the room fills with people who arrived after the hard part.

At Scripbox, we have learned the culture lesson the less elegant way. Culture is not what you say in the all-hands meeting. It is what your team notices you do when saying the right thing would be expensive. India's startup ecosystem has become genuinely skilled at raising capital and hiring fast. What we are still building is



Title: Streetwise: Getting To and Through Goldman Sachs
Author: Lloyd Blankfein
Publisher: Orion Ignite
Price: ₹661

MEET THE AUTHOR

Lloyd Blankfein is an American investment banker who has served as senior chairman of Goldman Sachs since 2019. He won the Financial Times Person of the Year award in 2009

the institutional muscle to hold together when conditions stop being forgiving. Many companies I have watched falter did not fail for want of product or capital. They drifted — slowly, and then suddenly, to borrow from Hemingway.

Running through the book is a theme every founder recognises but few discuss openly: managing basic human wiring at senior levels. Fear makes bold people reckless. Greed quietly rewrites incentives. Ego turns the boardroom into a debate about who is right rather

than what is true. The higher you climb, the less these impulses get checked by hierarchy — and the more damage they can quietly do. The best institutions build the muscle to name it early.

Blankfein has also got useful notes on intellectual honesty: the discipline of assessing things as they are rather than as you had previously decided they must be. He frames this not as virtue but as professional survival. At Goldman, the cost of self-deception was priced in real time. The same is true in financial services in India, though our feedback loops are sometimes more forgiving than they should be.

THE STRUCTURAL QUESTIONS

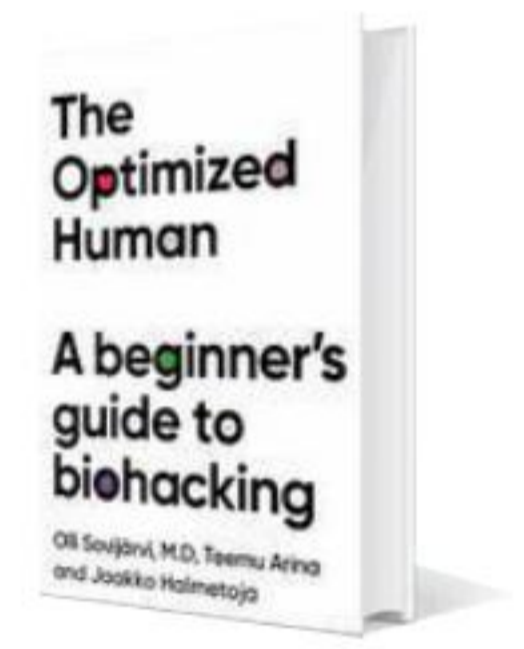
Where the book falls short is in proportion to its ambition. Blankfein acknowledges Goldman's role in the conditions preceding 2008 with the candour of a man who has thought carefully about exactly how much candour is appropriate. The structural questions — about power, concentration, and the social cost of financial sophistication — are present but not pressed. For Indian readers watching our own ecosystem begin to grapple with similar questions about who our success is actually for, this gap is worth noting.

Streetwise is an honest, often genuinely funny book about what building something lasting requires. It will not tell you how to raise your Series B or navigate your next RBI circular. But it will make you think about the kind of institution you are actually constructing — and whether, when the next crisis arrives without warning, as they always do, you have built something with the values to survive it, or merely the valuation.

Those two things are not the same. They never were.

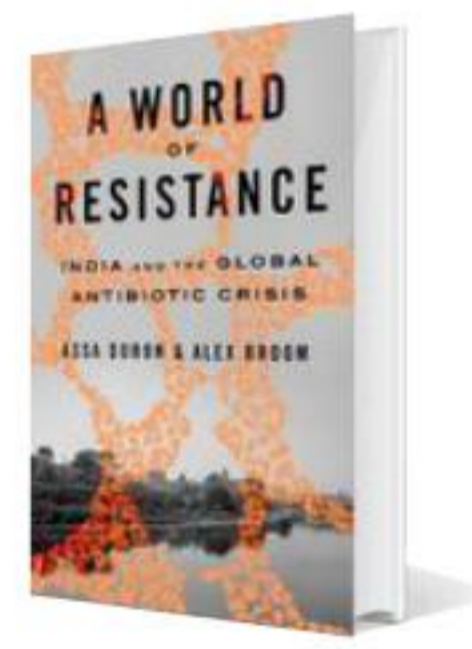
The reviewer is Founder and CEO of Scripbox, a digital wealth management platform

NEW READS.



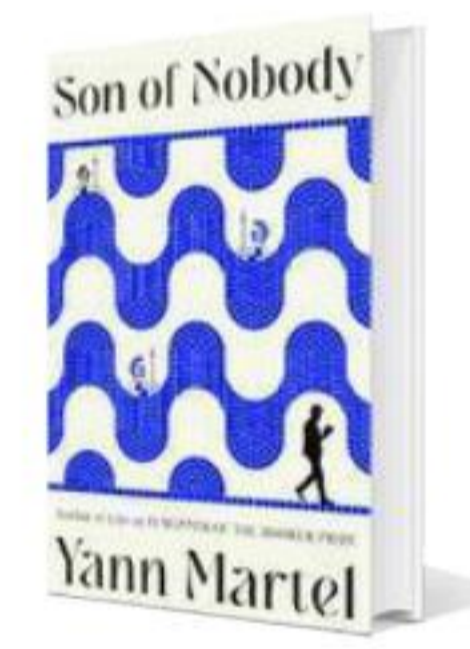
Title: The Optimized Human
Authors: Teemu Arina, Olli Sovijarvi and Jaakko Halmetoja
Publisher: Quercus

The book harnesses information on science, diet and tech and turns it into a plan that will boost your wellbeing



Title: A World of Resistance: India and the Global Antibiotic Crisis
Authors: Assa Doron and Alex Broom
Publisher: Belknap Press

The authors draw on years of fieldwork to examine the enormous social and environmental costs of over-reliance on antibiotics



Title: Son of Nobody
Author: Yann Martel
Publisher: Faber & Faber

Martel's novel moves between ancient Greece and the present day, but its preoccupation is less with the past itself than with its afterlives

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 11, 2006

Left rejects proposal on petro price hike

Even as the Left parties opposed any petro product price hike, the Petroleum Ministry presented them with a scenario where petrol, diesel and kerosene prices could be raised by ₹5 per litre and cooking gas by ₹50 per cylinder. This is against the required increase of ₹9.33 per litre for petrol, ₹10.43 per litre on diesel, ₹17.16 per litre on kerosene and cooking gas by ₹114.45 per cylinder, if domestic prices are to be brought in parity with import costs.

Reliance moots ship registry in SEZ

The Mukesh Ambani-controlled Reliance Group is toying with the idea of opening a shipping registry within the Special Economic Zone it is developing in Navi Mumbai. Ships registered with this registry are expected to be exempt from several taxes and enjoy more operational freedom.

Allot shares to HUDCO, Debt Tribunal tells CIAL

The Debt Recovery Tribunal, Delhi, has asked the Cochin International Airport Ltd (CIAL) to allocate 26 per cent equity shares to the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) before proceeding with its public issue, sources in CIAL said.

Short take

Achieving agri-energy security through PM-Kusum

M Srikanth
BS Venkatesha

Recently, the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy notified that timeline of the PM KUSUM scheme has been extended till March 31, 2027, as the set targets have not been achieved. PM KUSUM, a flagship scheme of the government, is intended to de-dieselise agriculture through micro-irrigation and transform the farmer into a prosumer (producer + consumer) through generation of decentralised solar power.

As India receives sunlight 250-300 days in a year, the agriculture sector is in a sweet spot to generate power for (micro) irrigation and agrivoltaic

farming — growing crops between or underneath solar panels to improve the efficiency of the land apart from reducing the dependence on water. According to one study, India can electrify the entire country by tapping just one tenth of the sunshine in the Thar desert, wherein the plant load factor will be the optimum (19 per cent and above) due to high solar irradiance.

By extending the Production Linked Incentive scheme and reducing the goods and services tax from 12 per cent to 5 per cent, the government has been promoting domestic manufacture of solar panels/photovoltaic cells.

POLICY SUGGESTIONS
Component B of KUSUM (replacing diesel pumps with off-grid solar ones)

has been relatively popular probably due to: a) higher subsidy amount provided for establishing off-grid solar pumps; b) delay in development of transmission grids; and c) reluctance of discoms to sign long-term power purchase agreements on account of their financial distress, declining tariffs, and demand-supply mismatches during peak hours. Although the Centre earmarked ₹34,422 crore under the scheme, most of the funds have not been released due to reluctance of banks in granting loans for lack of collateral security. So, the following measures may help farmers achieve energy security:

By establishing mandatory escrow accounts with banks, revenue from sale of additional solar power may lower the risk of loan defaults.

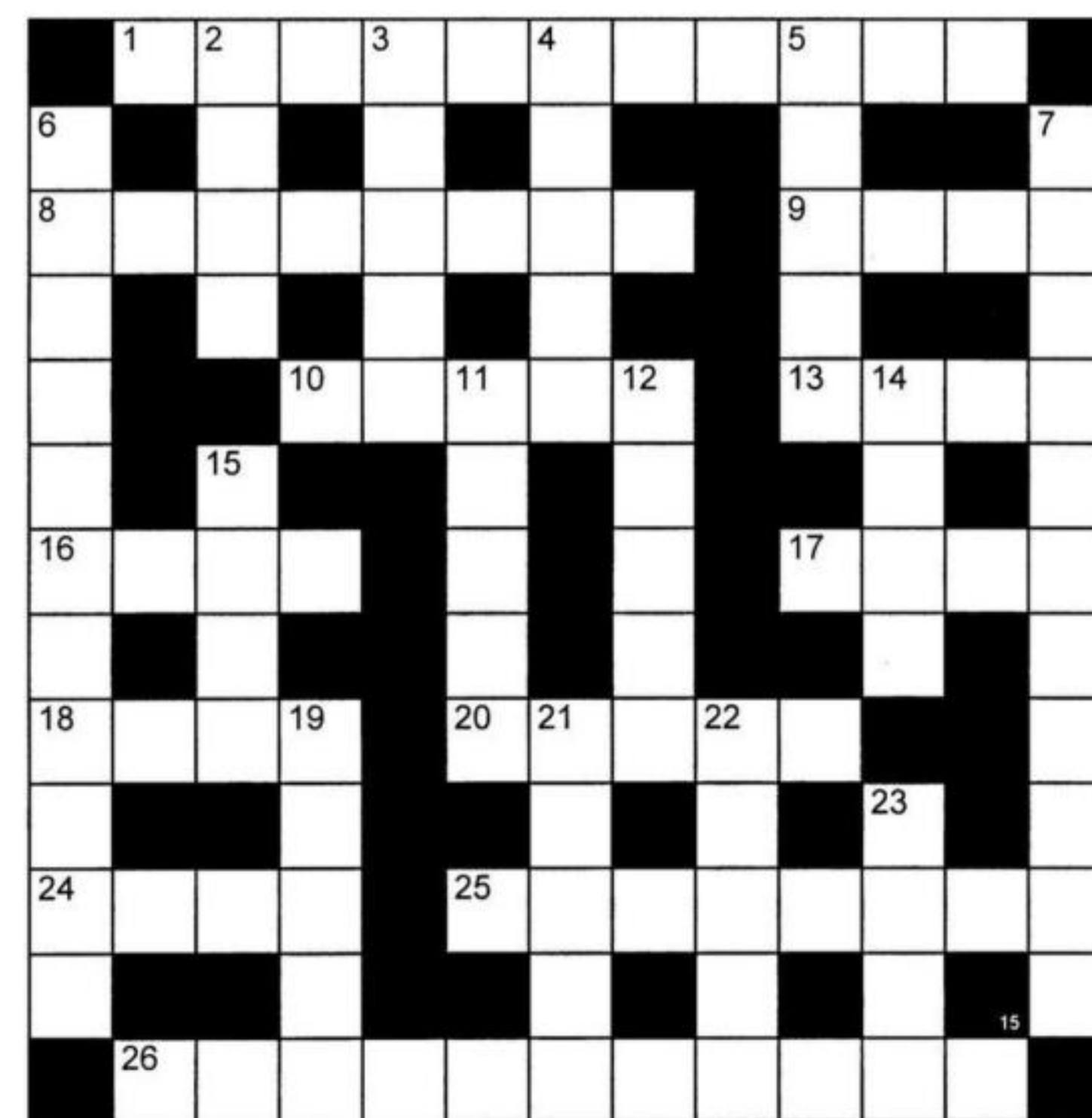
Farmers and discoms may be incentivised through monetisation of carbon credits to enhance financial viability of the projects.

By deploying real-time dual axis solar tracking and bi-facial module technologies, maximum sunlight may be captured; besides, maintenance of the solar panels may be undertaken through robotics to improve efficiency.

And, excessive solar power may be tapped to generate round-the-clock power supply by recharging batteries for electric vehicles in the context of fuel shortage triggered by the Iran war.

Srikanth is Director, MANAGE, Hyderabad, and Venkatesha is the DMD of NaBFID, Mumbai; Views are personal. With inputs from M Bhanusri and Shanmukh Raju

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2676



EASY

ACROSS

1. Dispirited, low (4-7)
8. Draws it out from (8)
9. Tub (4)
10. Old Testament devotional song (5)
13. Water from the clouds (4)
16. A Mauretanian (4)
17. Bewilderment, labyrinth (4)
18. Trim, tidy (4)
20. Correct the text (5)
24. Military force (4)
25. Rehearse (8)
26. Those attending hospital clinic (3-8)

DOWN

2. A swear-word (4)
3. Gets close to (5)
4. Praise highly (5)
5. River of Rome (5)
6. Harmful, causing loss (11)
7. Effects transition to new system (7,4)
11. In vigour, in being (5)
12. Small gnat-like fly (5)
14. Woe is me! (4)
15. Star suddenly flaring up (4)
19. Appointed meeting-place (5)
21. Excellence deserving honour (5)
22. Recess in wall (5)
23. Catalogue (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Is it any wonder death can make one depressed? (4-7)
3. Is approaching the answer perhaps abandoned by the West (5)
9. 'The death of each day's life, sore labour's _____' (Macbeth) (4)
10. There's something of David's in the ship's almanac (5)
13. Raced about one wet fall (4)
16. Tie up craft in the open country (4)
17. One left the corn as it was hard to get through (4)
18. With no water added for the ox or bull (4)
20. Find me in conclusion a way to correct it (5)
24. Tea for team evidently finishes host (4)
25. Try it out when carpet, being shaken, is held (8)
26. Those attending clinic put on a set, it may be (3-8)

DOWN

2. Take it to be a bit of bad language (4)
4. Sing praises of former partner who had much to give up (5)
5. Tribe milling about the flower of Rome (5)
6. Tried man let out for causing damage (11)
7. Bell-ringing finished, so one effects the switch (7,4)
11. Still breathing and perhaps kicking too! (5)
12. Its bite made me dig it out (5)
14. A sorrowful exclamation a girl didn't finish (4)
15. It suddenly flares as river turns to it (4)
19. Meeting will sit in judgment on heartless sot (5)
21. Richly deserve it after Summer is half gone (5)
22. Recess may provide a suitable place in life (5)
23. Strip cut from the edge of the things itemised (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2675

ACROSS 1. Pipe down 4. Swig 8. Imp 9. Dirge 10. Leg 11. Peruse 12. Still 13. Killing time 17. Extra 18. Problem 20. Pun 21. Emits 22. Viz 23. Rise 24. Defended
DOWN 1. Primps 2. Piper 3. Wired 5. William 6. Giggle 7. Sensations 9. Displeased 14. Intends 15. Deeper 16. Amazed 18. Prise 19. Livid



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Blowing the whistle in Chennai

Vijay's ascendancy marks the end of the Dravidian duopoly in Tamil Nadu politics

The rise of C Joseph Vijay, 51, known by his mononym Vijay, to the office of the chief minister (CM) in Chennai on Sunday marks a rupture in Tamil Nadu politics. Since CN Annadurai took the oath as CM in 1967, ending the Congress monopoly over power in Madras state, only politicians associated with the Dravidian Movement have occupied Fort St George, the seat of government in Tamil Nadu. And all of them ran single-party governments. The Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) government is set to change these patterns that have distinguished Tamil politics from the rest of India. A coalition government that includes a national party and a CM from a non-Dravidian outfit is as radical as the term can mean in Chennai.

The TVK is a two-year-old political start-up centred on Vijay's stardom. Vijay has claimed allegiance to the inheritance of Periyar EV Ramaswamy and K Kamaraj, titans who defined Tamil politics in the last century as ideologue and CM, respectively. This combination of two distinct political lineages suggests that he is likely to adopt a political path that combines the Dravidian movement's social justice agenda and the Congress's centrist politics. He may be less strident in espousing federal impulses, including linguistic sub-nationalism, that guided state politics all these years. The TVK coalition includes the Congress, Communist parties, the Indian Union Muslim League, and the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, and Vijay has sought their representation in his ministry. A coalition government is welcome because it makes the government more representative and accountable. The necessity to heed other players can work as a check against any leader or party wielding absolute power. It can help the inexperienced CM to seek counsel from leaders of established parties and ensure the stability of his government — its majority is a precarious two MLAs at this moment.

CM Vijay's challenges are multifold. One, he needs to guide his young party and government through a minefield of competing interests and clashing ambitions, especially of the political elite yet to reconcile with the loss of power and the emergence of a new political force. Two, Vijay has to translate the hope his party has triggered, especially among the youth and women, into actionable policy. Over the decades, Tamil Nadu has built itself as an industrial power house and a model welfare state. It must stay the course. These are uneasy times for Tamil Nadu as the state manages the transition. However, the fact that the member of a faith, which comprises just 6% of the state's population, won a popular mandate on a secular agenda in these polarising times is a comment on the character of India's polity and the surprises its electoral democracy can serve up.

Delivering the mandate in West Bengal

A new government has assumed power in West Bengal after a landmark victory by the BJP in the recently concluded assembly elections. This weekend, Suwendu Adhikari took oath as the first BJP CM of a state that has eluded the political Right since Independence. In his first remarks, Adhikari struck the right note, stressing that as the chief minister, he belonged to every section of society and would strive to rebuild the state's education and economy.

The task before the new government is challenging. Bengal sits in the middle of India's ranking of states by economic growth, but in recent decades, its distance from the leaders of the pack, states such as Maharashtra, Gujarat or Tamil Nadu, has grown. A series of clashes with the central government has hurt its education and health care infrastructure and damaged the structure of the rural jobs scheme. With the BJP now in power in both Kolkata and Delhi, the new government should focus on augmenting Bengal's socioeconomic and cultural infrastructure, even as it works to usher in new investment in a state left behind by the software revolution of the 90s and where issues with white-collar mobility cause great resentment among young, educated people.

But this can't be achieved in a society that is communally polarised or where political violence is constantly simmering. The BJP must move on from the heat and dust of the election season — including some communally incendiary remarks from the CM himself — and work to provide a transparent, efficient, and inclusive government that works for every section of society. Only such an effort will respect the impressive mandate delivered by the people of Bengal.

{ GRAND STRATEGY }

Happymon Jacob



What Xi-Trump meet holds for New Delhi

India has benefited from US-China contradictions over the past decade. That's changing

Three days from today, US President Donald Trump will land in Beijing for a two-day summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping. In the run-up to the summit, the US Treasury sanctioned five Chinese "teapot" refineries for processing Iranian oil, including the Hengli Petrochemical complex in Dalian. On May 2, Beijing invoked an anti-sanctions law ordering Chinese companies and banks to disregard the American measures which some called "unprecedented defiance". Will the friction lead to accommodation or more confrontation?

Two of India's most consequential external relationships will be present at the table in Beijing, and whatever they decide will have implications for New Delhi. China — India's national security challenge, systemic challenger, adversary and another adversary's friend — has signalled warm relations with India, even as it does everything it can to pressure India from all directions. The US — indispensable for India when it comes to technology, capital, and the broader global architecture — imposed 50% tariffs on Indian goods over the country's purchases of Russian crude, twice

deferred the Quad summit, criticised Delhi's policies from time to time, and rehabilitated Pakistan army chief Asim Munir to a degree unseen since the early years of Pervez Musharraf's stint in power. So, India has an adversary that is nice to it and a friend doing the opposite.

India has been a quiet beneficiary, for most of the last decade, of a US-China relationship characterised by growing friction. The two countries' rivalry has been sharp enough that both had reason to court New Delhi, but the rivalry was never too sharp that the latter became forced to pick a side. Quad, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, Indo-US tech partnerships, the US's chip restrictions architecture aimed at China, India's post-Galwan thaw with China, all function within this narrow band. If the Beijing summit ends in a "huge deal" of structural adjustment between them, the premium Washington and Beijing place on New Delhi will change, and it will become a smaller player in a more bilaterally settled order. On the other hand, if the sanctions standoff deepens into open confrontation, New Delhi faces choice-forcing pressure on energy, banking, and trade simultaneously.

This takes me to a structural conclusion that many are reluctant to state plainly: A US-China friendship is bad for India. Their fighting too is bad for the country. What is good for India is a managed rivalry between the US and

China. Put differently, a certain degree of competition between the two is a public good for Indian foreign policy. Whatever Trump and Xi say to each other on May 14, our deeper interest is in the rivalry that brought them to the table. New Delhi would want the continuation of that rivalry.

Let's further unpack this preference structure from the Indian perspective. America's inability to contain China's rise is bad for India, despite its in-principle opposition to hegemonic (read America's) intervention in its neighbourhood. Clearly, conditions apply to India's in-principle opposition to hegemony: It wanted American pressure on Pakistan after Mumbai, wants US backing on the Line of Actual Control, and benefits from American capital and technology even when it resents Washington's demands.

China offers a mirror paradox. Beijing's growing ability to push back against American hegemony decisively is bad for India, even if the two countries share anti-US-hegemony forums such as Brics and the SCO or the broader philosophy underpinning the Global South. India wants the Americans to push back the Chinese without itself getting involved; and, it wants the Chinese to be part of forums highlighting the limits of American hegemony, without having to do so itself even as it benefited from American power. Indian diplomacy has lived with these contradictions for at least two decades. The more India rises globally, the more it will need to deal with these.



Washington's adversary track with Beijing is too intermittent and uncertain for New Delhi to build its own China policy around it.

AFP

India marked the first anniversary of Operation Sindoor last week. Twelve months ago, in the immediate aftermath of the four-day conflict with Pakistan, Beijing was careful to avoid public confirmation of the assistance it had provided to Islamabad. That is no longer the case.

Earlier this week, Chinese State television aired an interview with engineers from the Chengdu Aircraft Design and Research Institute, in which they described their on-ground operational role in Pakistan during the conflict, supporting J-10C operations. The decision to broadcast this on the anniversary of India's military operation, through a State-run channel and with the country's premier fighter design institute on camera, is a serious message: Unlike earlier, Beijing now sees no political cost in publicly endorsing what it once denied, that it arms Pakistan against India.

In all honesty, India must recognise that its foreign policy has been free-riding on the structural contradiction between the US and China. The policy is now being exposed as inadequate. For two decades, China managed to keep India preoccupied on the LAC

and Pakistan while it built its economic and geopolitical might elsewhere. That arrangement, which did not suit us, is now over. But what has replaced it is worse. China is now everywhere, while the LAC and Pakistan challenges have not gone away either. What New Delhi has to manage now is a great deal more of Beijing — a Beijing that is no longer pretending to be benign.

What makes it worse is that the US has only added to India's difficulties. An honest stocktaking must, therefore, produce measures designed to meet the China challenge in its current shape, on the assumption that Washington's adversary track with Beijing is too intermittent and uncertain for New Delhi to build its own China policy around it. The work ahead is slower and less glamorous than the diplomacy of the last decade. The great power contradiction we have been free-riding will, in time, narrow further.

Happymon Jacob is distinguished visiting professor, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Shiv Nadar University, and editor, INDIA'S WORLD magazine. The views expressed are personal

From Somnath to Sindoor, the spirit of resurgent India

The reconstruction and consecration of the magnificent Somnath Temple 75 years ago marked a defining moment in the resurgence of India's civilisation and reaffirmed its resilience and determination, which are at the core of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's Viksit Bharat 2047 mission. The 75th anniversary of this sacred milestone gives the nation supreme confidence in the strong foundation and strength of the Indian civilisation that emerged stronger after withstanding a series of vicious attacks on the temple by fanatics.

After every attack, the temple on the serene seashore of Gujarat rose from the ruins in all its splendour. In many ways, its history mirrors the country's past, in which our peace-loving people bounced back after brutal attacks on their belief systems, culture and heritage. As PM Modi said, just as there were repeated attempts and conspiracies to destroy Somnath, foreign invaders tried for centuries to annihilate India. Yet neither the revered shrine, nor the country was destroyed. He made it clear that the motive of the attacks on Somnath was more sinister than looting. "If the attacks were only for loot, they would have stopped after the first great plunder a thousand years ago. But that was not the case. The sacred idol of Somnath was desecrated and the temple's form was repeatedly altered. And we were taught that Somnath was destroyed only for loot. The cruel history of hatred, oppression, and terror was hidden from us," he said.

After independence, Sardar Patel led the mission of reconstruction of Somnath, which was one of the earliest expressions of national self-confidence in a newly free India. But even this faced hurdles. India's first PM, Jawaharlal Nehru, formally opposed the then President Rajendra Prasad's decision to attend the historic inauguration. But the President inaugurated the temple on May 11, 1951.

The reconstruction sowed the seeds of India's cultural renaissance and pride in the civilisation after centuries of ruthless oppression. From the rejuvenation of Kashi Vishwanath and Mahakaleswar temple in Ujjain to the grand Ram Mandir in Ayodhya; from the revival of Kedarnath to the preservation of countless heritage sites, India is reclaiming its civilisational narrative with dignity and purpose. These efforts are increasing the number of visitors and creating numerous jobs and business opportunities for local people.

Like Somnath, India has emerged

stronger. It is making global waves both as the world's fastest growing major economy and as a country that uniquely blends modernity with its rich heritage. In 2014, after the country emphatically voted the Modi government to power, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution endorsed by a record 175 countries to observe International Yoga Day. Yoga is now a global wellness movement that has benefitted people of all cultures across the world.

A decade later, PM Modi inaugurated a grand temple in West Asia on land gifted by the government of the United Arab Emirates. Earlier, the PM launched the renovation of a 200-year old temple in Bahrain. He also regularly interacts with the Indian diaspora, making them proud ambassadors of Indian cultural heritage.

Promoting India's cultural heritage and creating global opportunities for professionals of our traditional knowledge systems has been a key element in the series of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) India has signed with developed countries in recent years. Apart from creating lucrative global opportunities for our artisans, workers, farmers, fishermen, small businesses and startups, these trade pacts carry forward the PM's vision of "vikas bhi, virasat bhi" (development as well as heritage).

The recently-concluded FTA with New Zealand is a significant milestone in India's global outreach in traditional medicine and holistic health care. It provides for visa quotas to enable Ayush practitioners and yoga instructors, along with other Indian cultural and knowledge professionals, to work in New Zealand. The FTA formally creates an enabling environment for trade in ayurveda, yoga, and other traditional medicine services and positions Ayush as a contemporary, globally relevant health care solution. Trade pacts with the UK, EU and Australia have similar provisions. The FTA with the European Union will allow Ayush practitioners to provide their services using professional qualifications they gain in India. It also facilitates establishment of Ayush wellness centres and clinics in the EU member states.

While India's cultural heritage is attracting global attention, the country remains the target of fanatics, who are using terrorism and infiltration to disturb India's harmonious heritage. The New India under the leadership of PM Modi responds powerfully to such threats. With Operation Sindoor, India taught a lesson to terrorists and their sponsors across the border. And in recent assembly elections, voters in West Bengal rejected parties that were supporting infiltrators, practising vote-bank politics and undermining India's cultural heritage. Significantly, the anniversaries of Operation Sindoor and the reconstruction of the Somnath Temple are just a few days apart. Both highlight India's resilience and strength.

The story of Somnath ultimately transcends politics. It is the story of a civilisation that refused to surrender. Seventy-five years after its reconstruction, Somnath stands not merely as a temple, but as a timeless symbol of India's resilience, continuity and national confidence.

Piyush Goyal is Union minister of commerce and industry. The views expressed are personal



The story of Somnath is the story of a civilisation that refused to surrender.

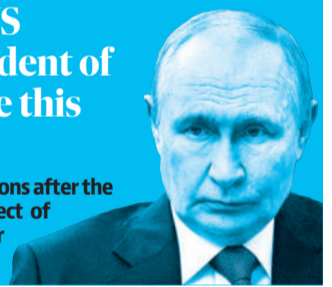
ANI

{ VLADIMIR PUTIN } PRESIDENT, RUSSIA



We can see that the current US administration and the President of the US sincerely want to settle this conflict

Addressing mediapersons after the Victory Day Parade, on the prospect of international mediation in the Ukraine war



{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



What the assembly poll results say about the BJP

Recently, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi participated in the swearing-in ceremony in two states. These weren't organised merely to declare Samrat Chaudhary and Suwendu Adhikari as chief ministers of their respective states. They were a declaration of an electoral *ashwamedh yagya* by the saffron outfit inspired by its outstanding success in recent years.

In May 2014, when Modi assumed charge at the Centre, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) with all its allies was in power in just seven states of the country. Today, NDA rules 22 states and Union Territories in the country. The BJP has chief ministers in 15 important states. How did they achieve such success? Some partisan observers call it a victory of communalism. But is the explanation really that simple?

In 1988, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) lent Modi to the BJP, which put him in charge of Gujarat. His first test was the Gujarat municipal elections held a year later. In this election, the BJP secured the Ahmedabad mayoral post for the first time. It was the beginning of the BJP's victory march in the state.

At that time, there was a major bootlegger in Gujarat, Abdul Latif. He had contested independently in five councillor seats. His supporters presented him as a caged tiger. During mayoral elections Modi made it a poll plank and won the elections. Those who looked at the contest from a communal prism missed the point entirely. Latif wasn't a war hero like Abdul Hamid or scientist like Abdul Kalam. He was a history sheeter. How could his victory or defeat be a win or loss for secularism?

It's here that Modi established a new political template — targeting election issues, profiling political rivals and delivering on the manifesto. This is the reason why assemblies from Uttarakhand to Odisha and from Garo hills to Gujarat have turned saffron.

West Bengal is the latest example of this template. In the 2021 assembly elections, the BJP cornered 38.15% of the votes. Many anticipated that by the 2026 election, Mamata Banerjee would be in trouble. Are the majority of Hindus that voted for the BJP communal? Not at all. Let me narrate an incident. A colleague's father, a retired professor, saw part of his property in Burdwan

usurped by a small-time goon. The goon was a Left Front worker till the TMC came to power — that's when he became a Trinamool Congress foot soldier. When the old professor raised his voice against him, the goon misbehaved with him.

When he went to the police to complain, he was berated and abused. In West Bengal you can find thousands of such stories of "cut money" and land grab. Why would these people vote for the TMC?

To win West Bengal, the BJP learnt from its past mistakes. Union home minister Amit Shah did 66 rallies and road shows and reviewed preparations at each polling booth. The entire focus of the BJP campaign was on the Trinamool's misgovernance and misbehaviour. When both BJP and TMC leaders fanned communal passions during the campaign, we can't blame one party for polarisation.

The BJP has additional responsibility after winning Ang (Bihar), Bang (West Bengal) and Kalinga (Odisha). Bihar and Odisha are among the 10 poorest states in the country. Bengal is comparatively better off, but faces many challenges.

Next year, seven important states will go to the polls. Five — Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Manipur, Gujarat and Goa — have BJP governments. In the two others, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, a resurgent BJP will give it all to wrest control. Bihar, West Bengal, and Odisha along with the northeastern states, send 128 members to Parliament. In the region, there's only one Opposition-ruled state — Jharkhand. It has 14 Lok Sabha seats. If we take Jharkhand into account, right now, the Opposition controls 51 parliamentary seats from the region. However, for the BJP, the region offers space to increase its tally in the 2029 general elections.

If the Opposition wants to stall the BJP juggernaut, they will have to make amends in their strategy and approach. The West Bengal results clearly indicate that the days of worn out allegations and hollow emotionality are over. It's impossible to win an election in the absence of precise strategy, organisational cohesion, direct connection with the public and able leadership.

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

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

BJP's game plan

Oppn parties need to close ranks

SUVENDU Adhikari has taken oath as West Bengal's first BJP chief minister — less than six years after he switched over from the Trinamool Congress (TMC). He has been rewarded for defeating TMC supremo and three-term CM Mamata Banerjee in her bastion, Bhabanipur (Adhikari also won the Nandigram battle against her in the 2021 Assembly elections, even though the BJP had finished a distant second). His elevation is in sync with the BJP's strategy of promoting turncoats to make inroads into states where its traditional cadre base has been weak. From Himanta Biswa Sarma in Assam to Samrat Choudhary in Bihar, the party has reposed faith in leaders known for their grassroots influence. Adhikari now joins this club of powerful converts who have become central to the BJP's expansion mission. In Punjab, which will go to the polls in barely 10 months, the party has former Congress leaders Sunil Jakhar and Ravneet Bittu among its ranks, besides AAP's Rajya Sabha MPs who defected recently.

The BJP's growing dominance is prompting its vanquished rivals to rethink their go-solo policy. Mamata Banerjee has called for a "joint platform" of Opposition parties, student unions and NGOs to resist the saffron surge. She seems to have finally realised that a fragmented INDIA bloc cannot match the BJP's might.

The Congress-DMK rupture in Tamil Nadu has laid bare the conflict between regional and national priorities. The dual challenge for Opposition parties is to keep their flock together and present a united front. The BJP's relentless efforts to weaken regional forces are already putting the national alliance under great strain. The trend is set to gain momentum if there is little or no pushback from parties whose very survival is at stake.

Reviving cotton

Real challenge lies in execution on the ground

INDIA'S Rs 5,659-crore Mission for Cotton Productivity arrives at a time when the country's cotton economy is confronting both an agricultural and industrial crisis. Falling yields, rising pest attacks and shrinking acreage have steadily weakened a crop that once powered rural incomes and India's textile strength. The Centre's ambitious intervention, therefore, is not merely about boosting production; it is about rebuilding confidence among farmers who have increasingly abandoned cotton cultivation. For Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan, the stakes are especially high.

In Punjab's Malwa belt, cotton was once considered a dependable cash crop. However, repeated whitefly infestations, pink bollworm attacks, erratic weather and rising input costs pushed farmers back towards paddy cultivation despite the severe ecological cost of groundwater depletion. The decline of cotton acreage reflects a deeper agrarian distress in North India, where farmers are often trapped between environmental unsustainability and economic insecurity. The mission's focus on climate-resilient seed varieties, high-density planting systems, modern ginning infrastructure and extra-long staple cotton is a step in the right direction. India cannot aspire to become a global textile powerhouse while remaining dependent on imported premium cotton. The broader 'Farm to Fibre to Fashion to Foreign' strategy rightly recognises that agriculture and manufacturing are deeply interconnected.

The success of this mission will depend on execution at the field level. Farmers need timely access to quality seeds, affordable credit, scientific pest-management systems and crop insurance that provides real protection rather than bureaucratic frustration. Procurement systems must also inspire confidence if cultivators are expected to return to cotton. For Punjab and Haryana, reviving cotton in water-stressed regions could help reduce dependence on paddy and ease pressure on groundwater reserves. But if implementation remains trapped in paperwork and delayed coordination, the country risks repeating the same cycle of disillusionment that drove farmers away from cotton in the first place.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, TUESDAY, MAY 11, 1926

Congress and the National Party

THE statement issued to the Press by the representatives of the newly formed Indian National Party, who attended the meeting of the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) at Ahmedabad, embodies more an expression of the desire of their party to devour the Congress without presenting a majority of persons who would subscribe to their view of things, than proposals as to the lines of which, in their opinion, inter-party unity is feasible. From their reported purpose of attending the AICC meeting, it appeared as though they were going there to suggest a via media in which it was practicable to reconcile diverging views. But in their statement, that purpose resolves itself into a demand for complete and unconditional surrender by the Congress of its position which is supported by a much larger number of people of the country than the following that can be claimed by any other party or any combination of other parties. Let us examine what are described by the National Party members as "the main obstacles in the way of our party and those who think with it from joining the Congress." In the first place, the National Party representatives demand a change in the Congress creed so as to exclude resort to mass civil disobedience or general non-payment of taxes, before they can join it. Without entering into a discussion of the merits of these methods, it would be interesting to observe how, while itself recognising the possible development of circumstances in which resort to the weapon of civil disobedience would be desirable in order to proceed with the struggle for national freedom, the National Party can wish to eliminate all possibility of such resort by excluding it from the Congress creed.

The covenant and the contract

Why India's military deserves a framework of its own



LT GEN SS MEHTA (RETD)
FORMER WESTERN ARMY
COMMANDER AND FOUNDER TRUSTEE,
PUNE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

THERE is a simple inscription at the Kohima War Cemetery, etched after one of the fiercest battles fought on Indian soil.

"When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow, we gave our today."

It is not a slogan. It is a statement of fact.

Many recall the Indian soldier's contribution in the First and Second World Wars, fought across three continents. Few remember that the Second World War was also fought on Indian soil. The Battle of Kohima, once described as the "Forgotten War", is today recognised by military historians across the world as among the finest military campaigns of that war.

In 1944, on a ridge that became synonymous with the Battle of Kohima, soldiers fought at such proximity that the tennis court between opposing trenches became part of the battlefield. Years later, that inscription came to mark not victory alone, but something deeper: the nature of military service itself.

It did not create something new. It recognised something ancient. The civilisational legacy of the Indian soldier.

Historically, he has always been a volunteer for the ultimate sacrifice. That distinction matters. It matters more today than it ever has.

Unlike others, the soldier cannot quit on a whim, cannot unionise, cannot litigate against a transfer and cannot refuse an order that may lead to his death. This is not a lifestyle choice. It is a legal surrender of rights every other citizen retains.

It is the only profession in the Republic where the Constitution is not something you merely live under, but something you may



GENERATIONS: From 1948, 1971, Kargil to Op Sindoor, the Indian soldier has been victorious. FILE PHOTO

be ordered to die for.

To subject that covenant to the same framework as defined liability service is not merely administratively untidy. It is a category error.

But the soldier's liability does not end with the body. It extends to the self.

He sets aside everything that marks him in civilian life. Language, caste, religion, region, political preference and personal ambition all remain part of him as a human being, but none may override the larger compact he has entered. The transformation is not ceremonial. It is operational. Trust in combat cannot wait for sociological negotiation. Cohesion under fire cannot pause for identity management.

The regiment functions because the uniform has replaced the self with something larger. Identity is subordinated because survival, command and trust require it.

That is why the soldier eventually becomes, in the fullest sense, everyone's soldier.

When he arrives at the citizen's door in flood, in fire, in the aftermath of violence, the citizen does not ask his caste. The soldier does not offer it. Everything that fractures Indian public life dissolves at that threshold.

He surrendered those fragments long before he arrived there. At the SSB (Services Selection Board). At the passing-out parade. At the first moment he wore the uniform and under-

PART I

THE SOLDIER AT THE DOOR

The officer who retires early has given the nation the very decades other professions use to consolidate careers, wealth, networks and security.

stood what it demanded of him.

That surrender is not incidental to service. It is the deepest form of it.

The soldier who stands at that door has not merely shown up. He has arrived as the nation. Undivided. Unreserved. Unconditional.

At that door, the Republic is not debated. It is delivered.

The military in India is one of the very few institutions where unity in diversity is not aspirational rhetoric but operational necessity.

That achievement is among the Republic's greatest insti-

tutional successes.

Generation Z understands this instinctively, and perhaps more clearly than the debate itself yet does.

This generation does not romanticise institutions. It joins, when it does, after conscious calculation about how to spend the one life it has. It has grown up in an identity-saturated world where every platform asks it to perform, market and continuously explain itself.

The self has become performance. And the performance is exhausting.

Then they encounter the uniform. The uniform says: here, none of that matters.

For many of them, that is not sacrifice. It is relief.

The military offers what no startup, no salary package and no influencer economy can provide: a purpose that absorbs the self completely and returns something larger in its place.

The soldier at the citizen's door is not diminished by having no caste in that moment. He is elevated by it. He is perhaps the only person in that doorway who has genuinely transcended the fractures others are still negotiating.

This generation is not running from self-erasure. It is searching for a place where the self can finally rest.

The uniform is that place.

The young volunteer who steps forward today is not an accident of recruitment statistics or nostalgia

for another era. Generation Z is shaped not only by its own choices, but by the values it inherits from family, peers and the moral climate around it. Somewhere within that continuum, the legacy of the soldier still survives in the bloodstream of the Republic.

That is why the calling endures. Each generation, in its own language and under its own pressures, chooses the covenant again.

From 1948, 1971, Kargil to Operation Sindoor, generation after generation has answered that covenant without renegotiation. In mountains, deserts, jungles, counter-insurgency grids and humanitarian crises, the Indian soldier has repeatedly demonstrated something increasingly rare in the modern world: disciplined force under constitutional restraint.

At a time when conflict elsewhere often struggles even to define its own exit, India's military tradition has remained tied not merely to victory, but to proportion, control and return.

The covenant, however, must run both ways.

The Republic often measures military service only in moments of visible sacrifice. But the deeper cost is quieter, slower and cumulative.

The officer who retires early has given the nation the very decades other professions use to consolidate careers, wealth, networks and security.

He does not merely risk his life.

He surrenders his earning arc.

That sacrifice is not incidental to military service. It is embedded into its design. The nation requires youth in combat leadership. It requires a force capable of movement, endurance and decision under pressure. The compressed military career is therefore not an administrative flaw. It is part of the operational logic of the institution itself.

And when a young person understands that clearly, steps forward with open eyes and accepts that covenant anyway, the Republic owes that person an answer written not merely in ceremony, but in structure. In policy. In design.

The author led a tank squadron to Dhaka during the Liberation War in 1971. Tomorrow: The covenant complete

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

A soldier plods and groans, sweats and toils, growls and curses, and at the end he dies. — Douglas MacArthur

We are finally learning to listen

AVINAV KUMAR

NOT long ago, if you wanted to hear opinions in India, you had only two reliable options: watch a prime-time news debate or land up at a family gathering. The format differed, but the volume did not. Everyone spoke. Listening was optional. Then came podcasts. Somewhere along the way, conversations shifted. They became slower, less combative and more thoughtful. People began finishing sentences. For a country used to loud opinions, this felt like progress.

Globally, podcasts moved from niche to mainstream, covering everything from crime to humour. In India, adoption was swift. Today, it is hard to tell whether more people are listening to podcasts or starting them. Almost everyone seems to have one. Professionals are exploring the format, and the same guests circulate across shows narrating similar journeys. It has become the new version of catching up, except that now it is recorded, edited and uploaded with a thumbnail.

To be fair, there is real value here. Podcasts have opened doors that did not exist earlier. You do not need a studio, a channel or a production house. A phone and a microphone are enough. A founder from a small town can share a platform with a seasoned executive. A doctor can explain health issues without jargon. More importantly, the format has nudged us toward longer attention spans. It has made room for context and nuance, for ideas that do not fit into 30 seconds. In a world of constant scrolling, that is no small shift.

But like most things we adopt with enthusiasm, there is a flip side. Somewhere between episodes 1 and 100, the freshness begins to wear off. The same lessons and the same reassuring conclusions appear. Wake up early. Embrace failure. Stay consistent. Useful advice, no doubt, but repeated often enough, it begins to lose its edge.

What we are seeing now is saturation. More podcasts and more conversations do not always lead to more insight. Listeners, once eager, are now more selective. Attention is no longer given freely; it must be earned. There is a quiet irony here. Podcasts became popular because they offered an alternative to noise. Now, they risk becoming part of it.

The good ones still stand apart. Those that are prepared and curious do not try to fill time; they use it well. For India, this phase is not surprising. We tend to embrace trends fully before settling into what works. The excess is part of the process. Over time, the clutter clears, and what remains is what people return to.

Until then, as listeners, we must choose wisely, reward depth over drama and occasionally enjoy a simple conversation in real life.

Sometimes, the best conversations are not recorded. They are simply lived. Perhaps the real shift is not that India is talking more, but that it is finally learning to listen.

The writer is a project manager in the oil & gas sector

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Punjab voters at a crossroads

Refer to 'The gloves are off in Punjab' (*The Great Game*); the writer has truly summarised the Punjab voter's dilemma in Satinder Sar-taaj's two-liner *Saanu saariyaan visargaiyaan naavan ve/ Kehre paase jaiye sajama*. All political parties seem to be alike, with the ground reality never changing. They often work on dividing or wooing different sections of society. The state needs a stable and honest leadership with practical solutions, not constant political posturing. If you closely listen to the leaders at rallies, except mudslinging at each other, they rarely talk about development, unemployment or drugs. Instead of calculating caste and community arithmetic, the parties must lay stress upon governance and development.

BIR DEVINDER SINGH BEDI, SANGRUR

Constructive leadership needed

Refer to 'The gloves are off in Punjab'; in the din of public statements of leaders, the real concerns of ordinary citizens often get ignored. Issues like unemployment, drug abuse, education and public safety continue to affect Punjab on a daily basis. Political rivalry may dominate headlines, but governance should remain focused on solving people's problems rather than strengthening party positions. Punjab needs a constructive leadership and long-term solutions, not endless political battles.

SAHIBA KAUR MAKKAR, JALANDHAR

Don't normalise drug abuse

Refer to 'Drug deaths'; the normalisation of substance abuse through social media, music and digital platforms is increasingly shaping the behaviour and aspirations of young audiences. Constant exposure to online content that glamorises flamboyant lifestyles further blurs the line between entertainment and harmful influence. What makes the crisis more dangerous is not only the availability of drugs but also their cultural acceptance. In many villages, substance use is often dismissed as temporary experimentation rather than being recognised as a lack of direction among adolescents.

VOUSHIKA, LUDHIANA

Intel-driven action on drug cartels

Apropos of 'Drug deaths', urgent action is needed through intelligence-driven strikes on major trafficking networks combined with sustained demand-reduction efforts. This should include expanding deaddiction centres, providing opioid substitution therapy and ensuring the widespread distribution of the anti-opioid medicine Naloxone. The prevention programmes must be incorporated in schools and rehabilitation initiatives should be linked with vocational training. A comprehensive public health strategy, backed by real-time national surveillance and strong inter-agency coordination, is essential to avert institutional failure.

SK PRABHAKAR, GURUGRAM

Pakistan not a neutral mediator

Reports of possible US-Iran talks in Islamabad next week raise a larger institutional question. The sanctity of the United Nations is at stake. Trust in Pakistan as a neutral mediator remains difficult for many informed observers. The historical record of persistent hostility, strategic ambiguity and repeated attempts to internationalise disputes concerning India raises legitimate concerns regarding intent and credibility. A party directly implicated in the conflict cannot easily command confidence as an impartial facilitator. For meaningful progress, dialogue must be anchored in transparency, multilateral responsibility and a genuine commitment to peace.

MM GOEL, KURUKSHETRA

Child's rights must be a priority

When my 10-year-old son was denied the anti-rabies vaccine, it was not easy for an ordinary family to make its concerns heard within the system. The issue was not merely a personal grievance, but a matter connected with patient safety, emergency healthcare and child rights. The intervention of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has strengthened our belief that the life, dignity, and rights of children must always remain a priority. I want to thank *The Tribune* and the child rights' panel for taking up the cause.

RENU PHAUGAT, BY MAIL

From *bhadralok* pride to Hindutva anxiety



AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

WHY did IT happen in West Bengal? Was not Bengal supposed to be qualitatively different from the rest of mainstream India — whose politics are predominantly centered on religion, caste and identity?

After the spectacular victory of the BJP in the recently held Assembly elections in West Bengal, my friends from north India have begun to ask me these questions. And I — beset by a mix of self-reflection and critical enquiry, as well as an interplay of my two identities as an 'insider' as well as an 'outsider' — cannot help but think about what, indeed, happened.

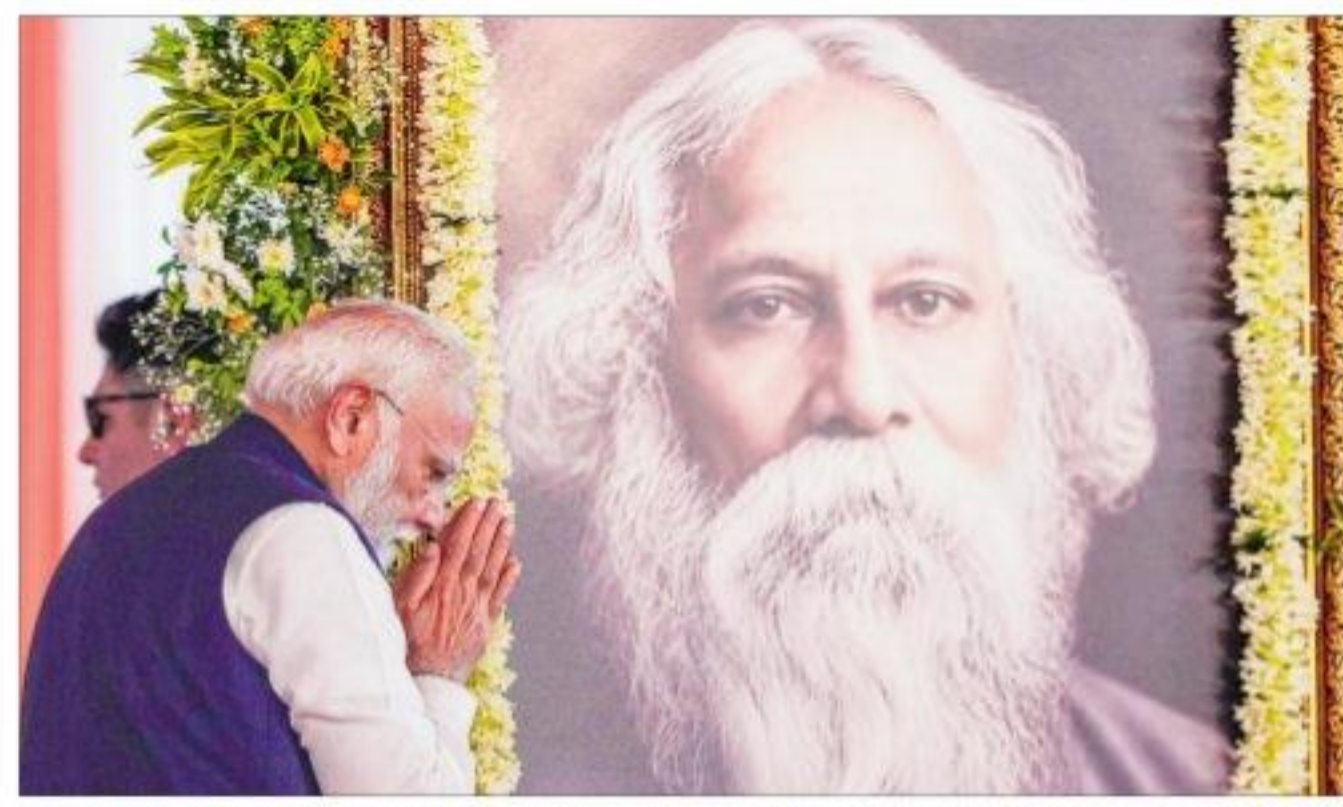
Growing up in a middle-class family in West Bengal, I also internalised a set of distinctive features of Bengali culture which, as it is often thought, is different from, say, what prevails in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh or Gujarat. First, both in school and university — we were often persuaded to celebrate what may be regarded as Ben-

gal's pride, i.e. the contributions of Renaissance figures like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar; the heroism of Khudiram Bose and Subhash Chandra Bose; and above all, the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore and the cinema of Satyajit Ray. Pride in these great cultural icons led us to believe that we were different from, say, the "rustic" Biharis or "greedy" Marwaris!

Second, we loved to believe that we Bengalis were inherently radical. Yes, we grew up with some sort of ambiguity towards Gandhi and Nehru because Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, we were told, was truly radical — a courageous dissenter.

Moreover, in the turbulent seventies, young Naxalites from Presidency College and Jadavpur University were celebrated as real revolutionaries — good in physics and economics, and well-versed in the literature of Mao and Che Guevara. This culture of resistance and protest was often celebrated in modern Bengali poetry, theatre and cinema.

Third, it is equally interesting to note that there was a strange paradox in Bengali radicalism as it sat pretty comfortable with what I regard as a sanitised and subtle Hinduism. Even today, Leftists and ex-Naxalites continue to sell radical literature outside the heavily sponsored Durga puja pandals in Kolkata. Educated/ forward-caste *bhadralok* Bengalis, we should



CHANGE: Mamata and her lieutenants failed to combat the might of the politics of Hindutva. PTI

not forget, are no less ritualistic. Yes, visiting a Kali temple or appealing the God Saturn, or consulting astrologers for solving life's riddles is a normal practice. All sorts of pujas are celebrated with great fanfare. It is, therefore, not surprising that even secular Mamata Banerjee's government never hesitated in providing financial assistance to thousands of Durga Puja committees across West Bengal.

Fourth, even though we grew up with Muslim friends, we should not forget that the trauma of the Partition and associated communal violence has continued to haunt Bengali consciousness.

Even in an otherwise progressive Bengal, there exists spatial

The triumphant ideology of Hindutva has made the slogan of *Jai Shri Ram*, it appears, no less popular than *Jai Ma Kali* in Bengal.

segregation between Hindus and Muslims, particularly, in poor/working class localities. For instance, in the area where I grew up in Kolkata, I didn't see any Muslim family.

Even in intellectually awakened Hindu families, the idea of a Hindu-Muslim marriage is still not easily accepted. Hence, it would be wrong to say that the *bhadralok*/forward caste Bengali culture, despite its apparent sophistication and radicalism, was entirely free from Hindu traditions. It was always an integral part of the dominant consciousness.

Though I left Bengal for higher education and in pursuit of my career, I always remained in touch with "home". Now as I look at Bengal as an outsider, I

realise that this *bhadralok* middle class has become insecure and anxiety-ridden. Instead of taking pride in Bengali exceptionalism, it lives with a wounded feeling of lagging behind. No industry, no development, no jobs — this anguish can be felt in every family.

Hence, for higher education or for jobs, — from construction workers to IT professionals — Bengalis are constantly migrating out of Bengal. Even their pride in Kolkata as a cultural city is in steady decline. Unlike Mumbai, Hyderabad, Pune and Bengaluru, they complain that Kolkata is not sufficiently gorgeous.

There was also growing disillusionment with the ruling Trinamool Congress. Visit any roadside teashop in West Bengal, and you can hear tales of scams and corruption, the lumpenisation of the political culture and the massive decline of education during the TMC regime.

Moreover, as the triumphant ideology of Hindutva, and associated stigmatisation of minorities began to enter Bengal, the hypocrisy of the educated *bhadralok* class became apparent. A visit to any border district, be it Malda or Murshidabad, showed you how Hindus have begun to suspect their Muslim neighbours to be intruders, outsiders, or Bangladeshi migrants — these stereotypes that characterise a

cleverly constructed polarised political culture have succeeded in poisoning people's minds.

The essence of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam seems to have been conveniently forgotten. The Muslim is fast becoming the 'other', one to be perpetually feared, suspected, controlled and kept under perpetual surveillance. Even the version of sanitised Hinduism that educated Bengalis have begun to follow seems to be in tune with the ethos of a hyper-masculine/ hyper-nationalist discourse of Hindutva. The slogan of *Jai Shri Ram*, it appears, is no less popular than the chanting of *Jai Ma Kali*.

Admittedly, there was tremendous psychic and physical harassment faced by many Bengalis during the Special Intensive Revision of the electoral roll. Moreover, the presence of paramilitary forces in every part of Bengal was truly overwhelming.

Yet, a fighter like Mamata Banerjee and her lieutenants failed to combat the might of the politics of Hindutva — with its promise of development, industry and jobs; the promise of rescuing insecure Hindus from the politics of Muslim appeasement; the efficiency of a double engine government; and the smartness of 'bulldozer justice'!

Has the myth of Bengali exceptionalism finally been broken?

Punjab bets big on healthcare



ANURAG KUNDU
MEMBER, PUNJAB
DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

IN the world of armchair policy critique, there is a recurring trope: if a government launches a scheme that actually works, it must be a mirage; if it's ambitious, it must be only on paper. The Punjab government's Mukh Mantri Sehat Bima Yojana which provides Rs 10 lakh health insurance coverage to all families in Punjab, has also been facing such criticism in the media.

However, as any doctor will tell you, a diagnosis based on a cursory glance at the patient — without checking the vital signs — is usually inaccurate. The same applies to any scheme or policy and the vitals of Punjab's universal health insurance suggest it is sound and healthy.

Punjab is the first state in the country to provide a universal health insurance cover of Rs 10 lakh per family. This is not just a marginal increase over existing frameworks of the Ayushman Bharat scheme of the Central government but the doubling of the social safety net, and coverage of almost 2.4 crore additional residents of Punjab, ensuring that a "critical illness" does not become a "financial death sentence" for the average household.

Scepticism towards governance is a virtue. However, research cannot be replaced by opinionated columns that lack serious analysis. The numbers bear out the evidence. Within

just three months of the scheme's launch in January, nearly 43.78 lakh health insurance cards have been generated. This comprises about 15% of Punjab's population.

In contrast, over the last eight years, Uttar Pradesh has averaged at 17 lakh Ayushman Bharat health insurance cards per quarter and Gujarat around 9 lakh per quarter. Punjab is already averaging 2.6 times that of UP and 4.9 times of Gujarat.

Almost 2.83 lakh health insurance cards have been issued for children aged up to 10 years and more than 3.3 lakh belong to people above 70 years.

Prior possession of the health card is not mandatory for treatment. It can be issued on the first visit to the empanelled hospital. Only an Aadhaar card and voter card are needed.

Within the last 100 days of the scheme, 2,78,199 people have undergone treatment across 574 private hospitals and 215 government hospitals. Therefore, this is not a "paper scheme"; it is a massive logistical operation functioning in real-time.

The reimbursement models often fail on this account. The Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojana is cashless. With 2,782 people availing treatment under the scheme every day, it is off

to a great start. But when you move 43 lakh people onto a digital health platform, there will be some early-stage challenges. There have been challenges over timely payments to hospitals, largely driven by National Health Authority portal issues. To address them, Rs 85 crore has been released to the hospitals recently.

Governments often use schemes as doles or charities for the people. However, the Mann-Kejriwal model is different. It is rooted in the belief that people pre-pay for their services from the government by paying direct and indirect taxes. Every citizen contributes to the government treasury.

Therefore, when people file income tax returns, they are pre-purchasing a safety net for their parents. When they pay excise duty and VAT on petrol, they are "pre-paying" for the paediatric and cardiac packages for their family. When they pay GST, they are ensuring that their contribution to the state's treasury entitles them to the Rs 10 lakh dignity.

By issuing health cards, the government is not handing out charity; it is honouring a receipt that the people of Punjab have already settled. The insurance scheme is not at the expense of public health infrastructure. For instance, almost 80,000 patients are treated in Aam Aadmi Clinics every day.

The bold social contract says to all people that their health matters and their pocketbooks shall not be the arbiter of their survival. The numbers are in, the hospitals are busy, and the people are covered. In the theatre of public policy, Punjab has moved past the rehearsal — the performance is well underway and it is saving lives.

With research inputs by Satinderpal Singh Chahal, Joint Adviser (Health), PDC

The government is not handing out charity; it is honouring a receipt that the people of Punjab have already settled.

Lessons from labour struggles



PRITHAM SINGH
OXFORD BROOKES
BUSINESS SCHOOL

BILL MACKETH
OXFORD TRADES
UNION COUNCIL

MAY 5, 1818, was the birth anniversary of Karl Marx, the greatest theoretician of the working class. May 4 marked the centenary of the UK's great General Strike of 1926. For nine days, millions of workers struck in support of coal miners who were locked out by their employers in a dispute over jobs and pay. The coal mining industry was viewed as the backbone of the nation. Of the total population of about 43 million in 1926, over one million adult males worked in the coal mines. The working conditions were hazardous. About a thousand miners were killed each year in the pits. The pay was low, and the working hours were long.

After World War I, Britain lost its position as the top coal exporter. The private owners of coal mines tried to recover export losses by proposing a 13% pay cut, ending national negotiations and extending working hours.

The Trades Union Congress pledged support to the miners. A general strike to begin on May 3 was approved. The next day, 1.5 million workers from transport, iron and steel, building, electrical, gas and printing industries went on strike. They were joined a week later by shipyard workers and engineers. The key slogan in response to employers'

plans for pay cuts and longer working hours was 'Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day.'

Although the advanced industrialised capitalist economies had witnessed isolated sector-specific strikes for over 100 years, the 1926 General Strike stood out as a new form of simultaneous action by workers in multiple industries.

Leon Trotsky, next in importance to Lenin, argued that for the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union to succeed, it must be followed by successful revolutions in Europe. He, therefore, hailed the General Strike as a possible prelude to a socialist revolution. He was disappointed as the trade union leadership, terrified by the working-class activism challenging constitutional norms, betrayed the militant working class and reached an agreement with the employers and the government without having won concessions on pay and working conditions.

The betrayal by the bureaucratic trade union leadership can be interpreted in the short-term as a failure of the General Strike. However, such mass activity is not a failure because of the success such radical activity achieved in bringing multi-

dimensional politico-economic changes and its impact on mass consciousness globally. In India, the young revolutionary Bhagat Singh, viewed the General Strike as undermining British power.

When the Great Depression (1929-1939) struck, John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) caused a stir in the economic theory and policy by arguing that the low purchasing power of the working class, caused by low pay, was the driving factor behind low aggregate demand, which was responsible for generating the economic depression. It was a vindication of the workers' demands at the General Strike.

In India, the closest equivalent to the General Strike was the May 1974 strike by two million railway workers. When Indira Gandhi became the PM, she outwitted her right-wing rivals in the Congress by deepening the pro-labour and pro-social welfare policies in her first 'progressive phase'. She took an authoritarian turn to appease India's top capitalist class, which was unhappy with the earlier pro-trade union policies.

The May 1974 railway strike in India and the May 1926 General Strike in the UK had one commonality: the issues of low pay and harsh working conditions were central to them.

The recent emergence of the wave of industrial strikes in North India on the same issues of low pay and working conditions indicates that labour may be defeated, in some instances, as it was in 1926 and 1974, by the power of capital. But the labour-capital conflict remains the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, compounded further by the capital-environment contradiction manifested through the ecological crisis threatening our planet.

The labour-capital conflict remains the fundamental contradiction of capitalism.

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- Incessant (7)
- Style of dress (3-2)
- Self-appointed law-enforcer (9)
- Inordinately (3)
- Space under a roof (4)
- Curt dismissal (5-3)
- A load-bearing beam (6)
- Hang around (6)
- Notoriously wicked (8)
- To dam (4)
- Bond of kinship (3)
- Decisive final resource (5,4)
- Rosy-checked (5)
- Theft of personal property (7)

DOWN

- Previously unknown (5)
- To badger (3)
- Heel over (4)
- Destitution (6)
- Be sparing with (2,4,2)
- Retaliation (3,3,3)
- To tender (7)
- A long way from home (3,6)
- A branch of mathematics (8)
- Sparkle (7)
- Shared in common (6)
- Turbid (5)
- Incentive (4)
- Period in history (3)

Saturday's Solution

Across: 1 Helsinki, 5 Clip, 9 Rebut, 10 Flatter, 11 Tried and true, 13 Ailing, 14 Oodles, 17 Pride of place, 20 Imagine, 21 Adieu, 22 Even, 23 At length.

Down: 1 Hare, 2 Liberal, 3 In the interim, 4 Kaftan, 6 Later, 7 Perverse, 8 Hard to please, 12 Sapphire, 15 Licking, 16 Effect, 18 Irate, 19 Lush.

SU DO KU

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MAY 11, 2026, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Vaisakh Shaka 21
- Vaisakh Purnimite 28
- Hijri 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 9, up to 3:25 pm
- Indra Yoga up to 1:04 am
- Shatbhisha Nakshatra up to 1:29 am
- Moon in Aquarius sign

FORECAST

SUNSET:	MONDAY	19:06 HRS
SUNRISE:	TUESDAY	05:32 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	36	24
New Delhi	38	26
Amritsar	36	26
Bathinda	41	26
Jalandhar	36	26
Ludhiana	37	26
Bhiwani	39	26
Hisar	39	27
Sirsa	41	27
Dharamsala	28	11
Manali	23	11
Shimla	20	13
Srinagar	22	15
Jammu	34	25
Kargil	20	06
Leh	17	05
Dehradun	32	21
Mussoorie	23	15

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Two new CMs, two different tests of leadership

Two new chief ministers were sworn in last weekend; both appear different from their respective predecessors, but will they be? On the face of it, both offer futures that differ from each other. West Bengal Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari has come to power riding the Hindutva wave. The ideology he adheres to has had little political capital in the eastern state for most of the period after Independence, despite its founder, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, being a Bengali and the Hindu-centric national song, Vande Mataram, penned by another Bengali, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Adhikari tried to downplay the ideological fervour exhorting supporters to stop raising the combative slogan, 'Jai Shri Ram.'

He said, "Eta political kochkochir somoy na" (This is not the time for political bickering). That was quite thoughtful of him, especially as the poll campaign was exceedingly bitter and toxic. Also, the fact that he made this statement at the ancestral home of Rabindranath Tagore, which he visited soon after being sworn in, is also important, as the solitary Indian literature Nobel laureate is a unifying figure for all Bengalis.

"There are huge responsibilities ahead... We will move forward," he said, hinting at his focus on building for the future rather than settling old political scores. It will be interesting to see if he is as good as his word. On the other hand, C Joseph Vijay, chief of Tamilaga Vettri

Kazhagam (TVK), who took oath as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu on Sunday, has no scores to settle. But he too has promises to keep, and that's going to be a very big challenge, for he has doubled down on the populism of the conventional Dravidian parties and pledged an aggressive welfare package for women. This included a monthly handout of Rs 2,500 for women heads of families, half-a-dozen free LPG cylinders annually, dedicated safety measures, gold coins and silk saris for brides, and financial assistance for mothers of newborn girls. Further, his party has promised Rs 10,000 monthly assistance to unemployed graduates undergoing skill training, Rs 4,000 monthly unemployment allowance for graduates,

and Rs 2,500 for diploma holders. The two new chief ministers have come to power projecting change, but the nature of that change—and the challenges attached to it—could not be more different.

Adhikari faces the difficult task of proving that a politics shaped by ideological mobilisation can eventually evolve into a stable and inclusive administration that is focused on development. This will not be easy as Bengal remains politically polarised after an acrimonious campaign. Meanwhile, Vijay confronts a very different challenge. His rise represents the continuing power of welfare-driven politics but also raises questions about fiscal sustainability and administrative capacity. The prom-

ises made by TVK are expansive and emotionally resonant, especially among women, unemployed youth, and lower-income families. Yet welfare commitments of this scale require substantial revenue mobilisation and disciplined implementation. If poorly managed, they risk placing severe pressure on the state's finances and creating expectations that become impossible to fulfil. Vijay's political appeal may have carried him to office, but governance will demand far more than charisma and popular goodwill. Ultimately, both chief ministers will be tested not by the enthusiasm surrounding their victories, but by their ability to balance aspiration with practicality and symbolism with substance.

LETTERS

Let law follow its due course

AMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi is extending support to Mateen Patel, a corporator, who is accused of extending support to Nida Khan in evading arrest. According to Owaisi, filing of an FIR does not make a person a criminal, well that is just a legal principle, but can the ground realities be ignored. What of the numerous complaints lodged by women employees, and the disregard of the POSH Act by TCS management. Nida Khan, the HR officer's duty was to handle women's grievances. Does this not point to an organized racket or a corporate jihad' as it came to be termed. Let the law take its own course, without any politician making defence on behalf of parties involved or trying to influence the investigation.

P R Ravinder, Hyderabad

Trust in celebrities

The political rise of Vijay in Tamil Nadu and growing calls for Diljit Dosanjh in Punjab reflect public faith in admired celebrities. Their discipline, mass appeal and social connect inspire confidence. Yet politics can overshadow the artistic brilliance that made them icons. Their finest role may be balancing public service with art, benefiting society through both leadership and culture simultaneously.

RS Narula, Patiala

Family values missing at Vijay's event

An oath-taking ceremony is not an ordinary political event. It is the moment when a leader promises to serve millions of people. When C Joseph Vijay's wife and children stay away from such a historic occasion, people naturally wonder what message it sends to society. Our leaders constantly speak about family values, unity and togetherness. Should these values apply only to the public and not to politicians themselves? Family presence at such moments is not about glamour or publicity. It shows support, pride and emotional strength. In a country where family bonds are considered sacred, such absence creates confusion and disappointment among ordinary citizens. A Chief Minister is not just a ruler but also a role model. Public life demands not only political promises but also examples that people can respect, relate to and follow.

Veda Chidanand, Bengaluru

TVK's moment of responsibility

Actor Vijay's TVK party coming to power is a major moment in Tamil Nadu politics. After nearly five decades, the dominance of the DMK and AIADMK has come to an end. The result reflects the people's desire for a fresh political alternative and cleaner governance. However, coming to power also brings huge responsibility. Welfare promises may have helped TVK win votes, but the new government must now improve law and order, reduce corruption, and address growing urban problems. Since TVK lacks administrative experience, quick and effective governance will be crucial. Vijay should bring skilled experts into the government, ensure transparent administration, and avoid concentrating power in a few hands. The people have voted hopeful of a change. TVK can retain public trust only through honest, efficient, and result-oriented governance.

N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru-560056

Beginning of the Vijay era

But for humankind's invention of cinema, C Joseph Vijay would not have become the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. The phenomenal metamorphosis of a silver-screen hero into a Chief Minister has become possible more due to the psyche of the Tamil society than the personality of the protagonist himself. It was a tribute to the love of cinema of the people of the State as an absolute religion. Film stars are revered as demigods. The state's trust with film personalities has a long history. Sad to say, but true that some of the blockbusters featuring him as the hero had too much violence and legitimized masculine aggression. Vijay's term of endearment "brother" to address Rahul Gandhi and his selfie gesture attracted special attention. There was no remembrance of the 41 people, who were killed in the Karur stampede. Nevertheless, it was good to hear from him that secularism and social justice were articles of faith. The flip side is that the TVK lacks a distinct political ideology and relies solely on Vijay's "personal charisma" for it to be a party that lasts long or stands the test of time. Politics is a different ball game from cinema and hence his acting experience in 69 films cannot make up for his lack of governance experience.

G David Milton, Maruthancode (TN)

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

K'taka to introduce AI-based evaluation in govt schools

BENGALURU: In a significant step towards digitising the education system, the Karnataka Education Department is preparing to introduce Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based technology for evaluating answer scripts in government schools. The move is aimed at making the assessment process faster, more efficient, and less burdensome for teachers.

The initiative will be implemented in collaboration with Indian Institute of Technology Dharwad (IIT Dharwad), which is developing an AI system capable of evaluating up to 1.5 million answer scripts at a time. The technology is expected to be deployed for students from Classes 8 to 12, particularly for subject-based examinations conducted in government schools.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Opposition clueless on how to stop Modi juggernaut in polls!

Joseph Vijay's win in Tamil Nadu signals that political startups can have field day if founders play their cards well

P MADHUSUDHAN REDDY

Soon after the Bihar Assembly polls and mayoral elections to Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won, I wrote in this column in January that BJP seemed to be riding on a second Narendra Modi wave. In the first Modi wave that began in 2014, the party won two consecutive terms at the Centre on its own and the seats won by its partners in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) were the bonus. The saffron party also stormed to power in key states like Uttar Pradesh, the country's largest state. But BJP saw its tally reduced to 240 seats in Lok Sabha, well below the half-way mark, in the 2024 General Elections. Many predicted BJP's decline thereafter. But it bounced back and won in Haryana, Maharashtra, Delhi and Bihar Assembly elections. And the saffron party exhibited its upper hand in the latest Assembly polls in four states and one union territory by winning three of them. The NDA retained power in Assam for a third consecutive term besides retaining power in Puducherry.

The saffron party's big catch was the West Bengal state where it had secured two-thirds majority in its maiden victory. BJP has been trying to gain a strong foothold in the eastern state for the past 12 years. It succeeded this time around, entrenching its position in the eastern part of the country.

Interestingly, a ruling party at the Centre came to power in West Bengal after a gap of nearly 50 years. Congress ruled the state between 1972 and 1977. Furthermore, West Bengal is home to 42 Lok Sabha seats, the third highest after Uttar Pradesh (80 seats) and Maharashtra (48). That's why I called it a prize catch for the saffron party. All three big states in terms of Lok Sabha seats are in BJP's kitty now.

But did Hindu consolidation propel BJP beyond the victory mark in West Bengal? Though there is some element of truth in that argument, the anti-incumbency factor has played a key role.

People of West Bengal voted against Mamata Banerjee of TMC and her government. They wanted a change after giving three consecutive terms to Didi, as Mamata Banerjee is popularly known, and voted for BJP as they saw it as the best alternative among those in the fray. Further, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity and Amit Shah's Chanakya-like strategies also pushed the saffron party to the forefront. BJP will now try to stay put on the Bengal soil for pretty long through its familiar consolidation strategies and development agenda.

Tamil Nadu, the second biggest state that went to polls this time, was a big surprise with Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), a political startup founded by actor-turned-politician C Joseph Vijay a couple of years ago, emerging as the



People, especially youngsters, seemed to have opted for TVK as they didn't find the AIADMK-led alliance as the best alternative when they wanted to defeat the ruling DMK. Joseph Vijay, a Christian by faith, was at the right place at the right time. He is the third popular Tamil actor to enter politics in recent years



single largest party with 108 seats in the 234-member Assembly. That way, Joseph Vijay ended the decades-long dominance of Dravidian parties - DMK and AIADMK - in the state.

People, especially youngsters, seemed to have opted for TVK as they didn't find the AIADMK-led alliance as the best alternative when they wanted to defeat the ruling DMK. Joseph Vijay, a Christian by faith, was at the right place at the right time. He is the third popular Tamil actor to enter politics in recent years.

Vijaykanth, also a popular Tamil film actor, floated the MDMK party in 2005. But he failed despite contesting on his own in 2009, forming an alliance with AIADMK for the 2011 Assembly polls and tying up with the BJP-led NDA in the 2014 General Elections. Another popular actor, Kamal Hasan, founded MNM in 2018. These two actors didn't succeed as the two Dravidian parties were strong when they entered politics. But Vijay made his political foray at a time when AIADMK was getting

weakened. That helped his party score a big victory. He faced some hurdles before forming the government as his party did not get the requisite majority. With those hurdles cleared now, he should focus on delivering the promises he made and putting the state on a growth trajectory. Telugu Desam Party (TDP) founder N T Rama Rao also got a massive mandate within a short span of forming his political party in 1982, but lost elections in 1989. Let's hope Joseph Vijay will not go that way.

In Kerala, as expected, the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) scored a big victory. Anti-incumbency also played a key role in the state though Congress pushed very hard for the win with support from Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy. UDF and the Left Democratic Front (LDF), led by CPM, swapped power every five years for a long time. This sequence was interrupted when LDF retained power for a second term in 2021. So, UDF was forced to wait for power for a decade. This election victory will boost the confidence of the Congress cadre, but the party leadership should give the Chief Minister's post to a person who has worked hard and enjoys people's support in the state. That can encourage leaders in other states to strive hard for the party.

THE BITTER AFTER TASTE OF 'ACCHE DIN'



DR REKHA BOYALAPPALI

The post-election economic landscape reveals a grim reality: as the BJP government sheds its populist facade, the common citizen is left to navigate a perfect storm of inflation, currency devaluation, and global stagnation. Is this the 'Viksit Bharat' we were promised?

The dust of the electoral battlefield has barely settled, but the celebratory echoes of the ruling dispensation are already being drowned out by the clatter of empty pots in the Indian kitchen. For the common man, the transition from being a 'valued voter' to a 'taxed citizen' has been brutally swift. The recent economic indicators and policy decisions post-May 2026 suggest that the BJP government has not only lost its grip on inflation but has also presided over a worrying decline in India's global economic standing.

Kitchen under siege:

The most immediate and

visceral blow to the household budget came on May 1. The staggering hike in commercial LPG cylinder prices by ₹93—pushing the cost past the ₹3,000 mark—is a policy decision that reeks of apathy. While the government may argue that domestic cylinder prices remain "monitored," the reality is that the surge in commercial gas costs triggers a domino effect on the entire food services sector. From the local 'tea stall' to the mid-sized canteen, the cost of survival has increased. In Hyderabad, domestic cylinders hovering at ₹965 have already stretched the middle-class purse to its breaking point. This is not just an "adjustment"; it is an assault on the nutrition and savings of the common family.

Rupee's freefall and global slumpage:

While the nationalistic rhetoric of the BJP often centers on "India's Rising Stature," the hard data from international financial institutions tells a different, more sombre story. As of April 30, 2026, the Indian Rupee hit a historic and catastrophic low of ₹95.33 against the US Dollar. A weakening currency is the clearest symptom of a struggling economy, making every drop of imported oil and every essential electronic com-



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modity more expensive for the Indian consumer.

More damaging to the "Vishwa Guru" narrative is the latest IMF World Economic Outlook. After years of boasting about being the fifth largest economy and eyeing the fourth spot, India has officially slipped to the sixth position. The fact that we have been overtaken by the United Kingdom—a nation grappling with its own post-Brexit woes—is a stinging indictment of our current fiscal management. We are not just standing still; in the global

race for economic supremacy, we are moving backward.

The energy paradox-High prices, low supply:

The fuel situation in the country has reached a paradoxical crisis point. On one hand, petrol prices are aggressively inching toward the ₹110 mark, fueled by the rupee depreciation and high central excise. On the other hand, the nation is witnessing a disturbing shortage of diesel. In the agrarian heartlands of Telangana and beyond, this is a tragedy in the mak-

ing. Farmers, the backbone of our economy, are finding their tractors stationary due to dry pumps. When diesel is scarce, the supply chain breaks. The immediate fallout is visible in our local mandis, where the prices of basic greens, tomatoes, and milk have surged because transport has become both expensive and unreliable. This "fuel-inflation" is an invisible tax that the poor pay every time they sit down to a meal.

Budget 2026-A document of disconnect:

The Union Budget for 2026-2027 was presented as a blueprint for the future, but for many, it felt like a eulogy for social welfare. The sharp cuts in MGNREGA allocations are particularly egregious. In an era where rural distress is at an all-time high, reducing the safety net for the poorest of the poor is a heartless move. Furthermore, the silence on unemployment is deafening. With a massive youth population looking for direction, the government's reliance on "market forces" and "corporate-led growth" has failed to deliver the millions of jobs that are required. Household savings are at a decadal low, yet the corporate tax structure remains remarkably "friendly." The message

is clear: this government is of the corporates, by the corporates, and for the corporates.

Call for accountability:

The people who voted for this government did not vote for record-low rupee values or record-high gas prices. The government cannot continue to hide behind global headlines while its domestic policies prioritize billionaire friends over the common person's plate.

A government that cannot stabilize its own currency, ensure the supply of essential fuel, or keep the price of cooking gas within a reasonable range has lost its moral compass. The BJP must realize that slogans like 'Acche Din' and 'Amrit Kal' cannot fill empty stomachs. We demand an immediate rollback of the LPG and fuel hikes. We demand a transparent roadmap to arrest the rupee's fall. And most importantly, we demand an economic policy that places the common citizen at the centre, rather than in the margins.

Indian citizens are resilient, but their patience is not infinite. After the elections, the "true colours" of the administration are visible to all—and the view is far from beautiful. (The writer is Vice-President of Telangana Pradesh Mahila Congress)

When America imposed a 50% tariff on Indian seafood, our exports suffered a big setback. Fishermen were very worried. The Centre responded by engaging with the European Union and addressing regulatory bottlenecks that had earlier restricted Indian shipments

-Piyush Goyal, Union Minister

Geopolitical cues to drive stock-specific action in markets

A rejection or further military escalation would quickly reverse this week's diplomatic gains

C KUTUMBA RAO

BUCKING global uncertainties, rising crude oil prices, and persistent selling by FIIs; benchmark indices ended higher in the week ended. The Sensex advanced 414.69 points, or 0.53 per cent, to close at 77,328.19, while the Nifty gained 178.6 points, or 0.74 per cent, to settle at 24,176.15. Sustained buying by DIIs, appreciation in the rupee, and better-than-expected domestic corporate earnings supported market sentiment. Broader markets continued to outperform the frontline indices.

The Nifty Smallcap index gained 4 per cent during the week, extending its rally for the fifth consecutive week. The Nifty Midcap 100 index advanced 3.5 per cent during the week, extending gains for the second consecutive week and hitting a fresh all-time high. After touching a fresh all-time low of 95.43, the Indian rupee staged a strong recovery to end higher at 94.48, snapping its three-week losing streak.

FIIs continued to remain net sellers, offloading equities worth Rs11,072.35 crore and DIIs continued their buying momentum, purchasing equities worth Rs21,392.85 crore, during the week. FIIs currently do not find India as attractive from an allocation perspective. As a result, large caps have relatively underperformed, while strong domestic flows have continued to support the Small and Midcap segments.

As long as FIIs do not

meaningfully increase India allocations, the market is likely to remain highly stock-specific, driven by earnings visibility and bottom-up opportunities rather than momentum rally led by large caps. It is pertinent to observe that India's market capitalisation has compounded at nearly 14 per cent annually in dollar terms over the last two decades, compared with around 7 per cent for the US market. The week ahead could prove very eventful. The US is awaiting Iran's response to its latest proposal, calling for a gradual Hormuz reopening in exchange for a phased lifting of the naval blockade, with Washington having signalled it expects a reply imminently.

Any acceptance would accelerate the unwinding of the war premium across oil and the dollar, while boosting metals and risk assets broadly. A rejection or further military escalation would quickly reverse this week's diplomatic gains. Looking forward, the progress or deterioration of the US-Iran negotiations, implications of geopolitical stability, movement of rupee, macro-economic data and FII flows will remain key factors to monitor the direction of market. The market is likely to remain highly stock-specific, driven by earnings visibility and bottom-up opportunities rather than momentum rally led by large caps.

Chip-Stock Juggernaut: Semiconductor companies added roughly \$3.8 trillion in market capitalization in



the past six weeks, driven by AI demand for computing power. Intel shares are up 239 per cent this year, and Sandisk shares surged 558 per cent, amid blowout profits and rosy forecasts from chip makers. Analysts warn of similarities to the dot-com era, though current chip company stocks are underpinned by strong earnings growth. Shares in South Korea and Taiwan have rallied the most in the world this month, with the surge in the Kospi index taking it up 78 per cent for the year. The two markets have been key beneficiaries of the euphoria surrounding artificial intelligence, thanks to the growing dominance of giants Samsung Electronics Co., SK Hynix Inc. and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. Tech and AI are back with a vengeance, leaving behind markets such as India, which is heavily dependent on oil, has low exposure to AI and a currency near a record low. Its Sensex and Nifty indices are down 9.3 per cent this year, are the world's second-worst performers. The surge in US,

Korea and Taiwan is thanks to AI companies' insatiable appetite for computing power, which has broadened to include all kinds of semiconductors such as memory chips and Intel CPUs. Chip makers just reported blowout profits, and issued rosy forecasts for the coming year. For years, investors' enthusiasm focused on makers of specialized chips known as graphics processing units, essential for training and powering generative-AI models. Traditional CPUs became an afterthought. But the narrative on semiconductors started to shift around the new year, when Anthropic's latest AI model wowed customers with its agentic capabilities. As the needs of AI companies have evolved, demand for traditional CPUs has increased, too. And agents can run 24/7 and generate copious data, increasing demand for memory. Shortages of all kinds of chips are now pushing prices higher. AI is very much driving the bus as far as the market goes—and to a greater extent the economy. Chip manufacturers are rushing to build out capac-

ity, but a number of bottlenecks have analysts projecting major shortages will last years, not months. Still, it's unlikely to last forever, and investors are wary of previous boom-bust cycles in semiconductors. Remember, 'crazy' moves can go on for longer than most generally believe. Some analysts warn the similarities to the dot-com era are getting a little too stark to ignore. Investors have piled in, including some who remember that the last time this happened—back in the dot-com era—the bubble eventually burst and many of

Quote of the week:
It's not whether you're right or wrong that's important, but how much money you make when you're right and how much you lose when you're wrong

— George Soros

the stocks never recovered. "The most dangerous words for an investor are 'It's different this time.'"

Too many investors become obsessed with being right, even when the gains are small. Winning big and cutting your losses when you're wrong is more important than being right.

FUTURES & OPTIONS / SECTOR WATCH

Mirroring the volatility in the cash market and "sizzling" midcap and Smallcap segments, the derivative segment closed the week with modest gains and moved within a narrow range. The Nifty ended the week up by more than half a percent while the Bank Nifty gained over a 0.75 per cent. Among sectors, Healthcare, Capital Markets and Auto stocks were the top gainers during the week. In the options segment, strong Call open interest for Nifty was observed at

the 24,500 and 24,200 levels while major Put open interest was concentrated at the 24,000 and 24,200 levels. The key level to watch in the upcoming session is 24,200 as market direction will largely depend on how the Nifty behaves around this level. Implied volatility (IV) for Nifty's call options settled at 15.31 per cent while put options concluded at 16.72 per cent. The India VIX, a key indicator of market volatility concluded the week at 16.62 per cent. The Put-Call Ratio Open Interest (PCR OI) stood at 1.28 for the week. A ratio greater than 1 is because of selling of relatively greater number of put options when compared to calls. Traders sell puts when they hold neutral to bullish outlook. A sideways range of 23,600-24,700 is a possibility for some time. A breakout on either side of this range will determine the next move. So long as the base at 24,000

holds true, the probability for further rally will remain higher. Nifty is currently facing resistance near the 100-week EMA and has witnessed some correction from higher levels. At present, the index is hovering around the 50-week EMA. If the market manages to sustain above this level, a short-term bounce could be seen in the coming sessions. However, Nifty is still trading below the 200-week EMA which indicates that the broader long-term trend remains bearish. For the upcoming week, Nifty may face resistance in the 24,400-24,500 zone, while immediate support is placed around 23,800-23,700.

Stocks looking good are Asian Paints, Ambuja Cements, NTPC, Dalmia Bharat, Kalyan Jewellers, Nuvama and Tata Consumer. Stocks looking weak are Cochin Shipyard, Indus Towers, KPIT, Dixon, Supreme Inds, UPL and Zydus Life.

Godrej Industries Limited

AS a holding company, GIL's performance is tied to subsidiaries like Godrej Properties, Godrej Consumer Products (GCPL), and Godrej Agrovet. The company's segments include Chemicals, Animal Feeds, Veg Oils, Estate and Property Development, Finance and Investments, Dairy, Crop Protection, Hospitality, and Others. Chemicals segment includes the business of production and sale of oleochemicals and surfactants, such as, fatty alcohols, esters and waxes, refined glycerine, sodium lauryl sulphate and sodium lauryl ether sul-



phate. Animal Feed segment includes the business of production and sale of compound feeds for cattle, poultry, shrimp and fish. Veg Oils segment includes the business of processing and bulk trading of refined vegetable

oils and vanaspati, international vegetable oil trading and oil palm plantation. Estate and property development segment includes the business of development and sale of real estate and leasing and leave and licensing of properties. Finance and Investments include financial services and investments in associate's companies and other investments. Godrej Industries Group announced a new purpose and brand identity, marking a defining moment in the Group's evolution as it aligns its identity, strategy, and ambition for its next phase of growth. Buy on declines for medium term target of Rs1,750.

Silver outperforms gold with 4.4% weekly gain

Gold prices momentum looks consolidative, while silver movement looks positive in the coming week

NEW DELHI: Gold and silver may remain range-bound for a second consecutive week as investors assess developments in US-Iran peace negotiations and global macroeconomic data, analysts said.

Traders will track inflation data from China, Germany, and the United States, along with GDP numbers from the Eurozone and the UK, later this week, they added.

"Gold prices momentum looks consolidative, while silver movement looks positive in the coming week as traders will focus again on the progress on peace talks between the US and Iran to end the war and markets are



likely to react accordingly," Pranav Mer, Vice President, EBG - Commodity & Currency Research, JM Financial Services Ltd, said.

On the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX), gold futures gained Rs 1,178, or nearly 1 per cent over the past week, to settle at Rs 1.52 lakh per 10 grams. Silver climbed Rs 10,985, 4.4 per cent, to close at Rs 2.61 lakh per kg.

"Gold traded with a positive undertone last week,

posting gains of nearly 1 per cent on MCX and closing around Rs 1.52 lakh per 10 grams," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst - Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities, said. He added that the correction in crude oil prices after easing geopolitical risk premiums also improved sentiment for bullion.

"Lower US Treasury bond yields and a softer dollar index also helped gold remain stable despite volatility across global markets," Trivedi said.

In the international market, Comex gold futures advanced nearly 2 per cent during the past week to close at \$4,730.7 per ounce, and silver climbed 5.8 per cent to

finish at \$80.86 per ounce.

"Gold prices traded steady and moved in a consolidation range through most of the week; however, overall momentum remained positive amid a dip in the dollar and reports of progress on a likely peace deal framework to end the US-Iran war," Pranav Mer said.

Silver also ended with strong gains for the second straight week, supported by renewed buying of copper prices, a weaker US dollar, and signs of supply tightness in the global market, he added. According to the World Gold Council, the bullion was also supported by continued central bank buying

and renewed inflow of funds in the global exchange-traded funds.

However, precious metal prices were range-bound on Friday, as gains were capped by signs of a re-escalation in the conflict after US and Iranian forces clashed in the Persian Gulf, Mer said.

Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates came under renewed attacks, but President Donald Trump calmed markets, saying "a ceasefire was still holding." Analysts, investors will watch developments around US President Donald Trump's expected China visit and the Senate vote on new Federal Reserve Chair nominee Kevin Warsh.

FPIs pull out over ₹2L-cr from Indian equities

NEW DELHI

FOREIGN investors continued to pare their exposure to Indian equities, withdrawing Rs 14,231 crore so far this month driven by persistent global macroeconomic uncertainties. With this, the total outflow of Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) from the equity market has crossed Rs 2 lakh crore in 2026, which is higher than the Rs 1.66 lakh crore pulled out during the entire 2025, according to data with the NSDL.

FPIs were net sellers in all months of 2026, except February. They withdrew



Rs 35,962 crore in January before turning net buyers in February, when they invested Rs 22,615 crore, the highest monthly inflow in 17 months. However, the trend reversed in March, when foreign investors pulled out a record Rs 1.17 lakh crore. The

selling continued in April with net outflow of Rs 60,847 crore and extended into May with withdrawal of Rs 14,231 crore so far. "The selling was largely driven by persistent global macroeconomic uncertainties, particularly concerns around inflation, interest rates and geopolitical risks, which continued to weigh on sentiment toward emerging markets," Himanshu Srivastava, Principal - Manager Research at Morningstar Investment Research India, said. He said uncertainty over the global interest rate trajectory remained a key factor influencing flows.

Sebi-backed gold exchange to boost transparency and purity assurance

EGR ACTS LIKE DIGITAL PROOF OF OWNERSHIP BACKED BY VAULTED PHYSICAL GOLD

K NARESH KUMAR

TRADITIONALLY, gold has ingrained culturally and historically as not just the store of value but as a medium of intergenerational wealth. However, largely three problems always riddled gold to fully live up to its potential: purity, storage and liquidity. Many efforts were done to ensure the authenticity and purity remain less contentious. While the yellow metal is less reactive or corrosive to natural elements, storing it has always been an issue, with costs associated to secure the vaults.

Enough innovation was done to retain the value while reducing these pressure points, particularly with the advancement of modern finance. The introduction of gold ETF (Exchange Traded Funds) is one such iteration. Then there's gold MF (Mutual Funds) a novelty over ETF that allow for much convenient and easier ownership of gold in financial form. Then there's the digital

gold which tried to bring the physical ownership through the digital route, albeit with limited regulatory oversight. Of course, the SGB (Sovereign Gold Bonds) that were introduced about a decade back were further extension of this innovation.

Each of these tried to replace the frictions of storage and purity. Despite the convenience the financial or digital ownership of gold had limited impact in the investor behavior of physical gold ownership. To address this and arrest any malpractices, SEBI (Securities Exchange Board of India) had introduced Gold Exchange, a national platform for buying and selling Electronic Gold Receipts (EGR) in India with underlying standardised gold. Simply, it's the digital proof of physical ownership of gold. NSE (National Stock Exchange) is formally launching EGR after almost four years since the regulations evolved.

According to the circular in 2022, stock exchanges



Per NSE, the technology and liquidity framework will help make gold investing more transparent, secure and accessible for investors across the country. It could help integrate gold more closely into India's capital market ecosystem

could either set up a new stock exchange of EGR or can launch EGR in the existing exchange infrastructure but in a separate segment. Hence, the term EGR segment is used interchangeably for the term 'gold exchange'. EGR is an electronic receipt issued by the Vault Manager

against the gold deposited with them. EGR is then notified as a security and will be traded on the stock exchange like any other security.

An investor by having a trading and demat account registered with a stockbroker, could trade in EGR. The settlement of EGR is T+1

days i.e., transaction plus one day. The trades on the exchange will be settled by way of transferring funds to the seller and EGR to the buyer. The EGR will be transferred in the demat account of the buyer, like any other security transaction. There's, however, no compulsory to take physical delivery of gold after settlement of EGR. The buyer has an option to continue hold the EGR for future trade or take physical delivery of gold from the Vault Manager (VM).

The Vault Manager is a new entity registered by SEBI for providing vaulting services for gold deposited for the purpose of creation of EGR. The services provided by the VM include storage and withdrawal of gold underlying EGR, creation and extinguishment of EGR, safety and security of the underlying gold. The deposit and storage charges will be levied by the VM for storing gold in the vault. The charges are clearly displayed on the website of the VM and the

depositories.

One of the key advantages of EGR is the accessibility. Investors could buy in smaller denominations of as low as 100 milligrams, making gold ownership highly flexible and affordable for retail. While the liquidity is addressed through electronic trading of EGRs, the purity is addressed through the VM to have store the underlying gold at BIS and LBMA benchmarks. The depositories i.e., NSDL and CDSL will hold the EGRs of the beneficial owners in the dematerialized form. Further, the depositories will reconcile regularly, with the VM, the data of EGRs creation and the corresponding physical gold lying in the recognized vaults. They also inspect and audit the physical gold at periodic intervals.

SEBI has allowed interoperability between the VM, allowing the investors to withdraw the gold against the EGR from different locations of the same or different VM. And investors could select the location of the rec-

ognized vault for deposit or withdrawal of gold. However, the investor can't access the very gold (bar) created for the EGR but the gold delivered will be of same purity and weight represented by the EGR and not necessarily the same unique bar.

Moreover, the investor can place a request with the VM for assaying of the gold before taking delivery and out of the vault. In case of assayer certifying the gold not per the specified quality in EGR, the stock exchange will ensure the concerned domestic refinery makes good of the loss to the beneficiary owner. The investors seeking redressal of their grievances may file their complaints with the stock exchange, clearing corporations, depositories or the VM depending on the type of grievance. Alternatively, the investor may file the complaint on SCORES portal of SEBI.

Placing physical gold in a bank locker not only attracts charges but the compensation (in case of theft, arson,

etc.) is only 100 times the locker rent which could be lower than the actual value of the gold. EGRs score over ETFs by having an option of physical ownership by delivery. Taxation of EGRs is like physical gold investments i.e., through capital gains with indexation benefits. Though, the GST is payable only when physical delivery is taken and not while holding or trading them digitally.

Per the NSE, the technology and liquidity framework will help make gold investing more transparent, secure and accessible for investors across the country. It could help integrate gold more closely into India's capital market ecosystem while encouraging greater financial inclusion, improving fungibility and reducing dependence on fragmented pricing benchmarks.

(The author is a partner with "Wealocity Analytics", a SEBI registered Research Analyst and could be reached at info@wealocityanalytics.com)

The Statesman

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

Capital Freeze

India's investment slowdown is no longer a cyclical economic problem. It is becoming a structural crisis of confidence. For years, New Delhi has tried almost every orthodox tool available to revive private sector investment. Corporate taxes were cut sharply in 2019. Public infrastructure spending rose to record levels. Banks burdened by bad loans were recapitalised and cleaned up. Production-linked incentives were rolled out to attract manufacturing. Yet private capital expenditure continues to lag expectations. This contradiction reveals something important about the Indian economy: profitability alone is no longer enough to trigger investment. Large Indian conglomerates today are financially stronger than they were a decade ago. Corporate balance sheets have improved, debt burdens are lower, and profits have risen substantially after the pandemic. Yet much of this surplus capital is not flowing into new factories, large-scale manufacturing expansion, or long-term domestic projects. Instead, companies are conserving cash, reducing risk, diversifying globally, or parking wealth in financial assets.

The problem is not simply lack of demand. India remains one of the world's fastest-growing major economies, with a large consumer base and expanding digital infrastructure. The deeper issue is uncertainty. Business investment depends less on patriotic messaging and more on predictability. Industrialists can tolerate high taxes, regulatory complexity, or political pressure if rules remain stable. What unsettles investors is unpredictability - sudden policy reversals, retrospective scrutiny, aggressive enforcement actions, opaque regulatory processes, and the perception that political proximity increasingly shapes commercial security. This anxiety is not confined to domestic firms. Foreign investors have also become cautious. Global manufacturers looking for alternatives to China still view India as strategically important, but many remain hesitant about committing large amounts of capital for decades-long industrial bets. Vietnam, Indonesia, and even Mexico often appear administratively simpler and institutionally more predictable. The irony is that India's political centralisation, designed partly to project decisiveness and stability, may now be producing the opposite effect economically. When too much power appears concentrated in the state, businesses begin prioritising survival over expansion. Capital becomes defensive. India's booming stock markets also mask the weakness underneath.

Rising valuations and corporate profits create an appearance of confidence, even as fresh private industrial investment remains subdued across sectors. This helps explain why government-led infrastructure spending has increasingly become the main engine of investment growth. Public money is compensating for private hesitation. But no major economy can sustain high growth indefinitely through state expenditure alone.

Without broad-based private investment, job creation weakens, productivity gains slow, and growth eventually loses momentum. India's leadership frequently speaks about becoming a developed economy by 2047. That ambition cannot be achieved merely through highways, semiconductor announcements, or headline investment summits. Investors - domestic and foreign alike - ultimately commit long-term capital only where institutions inspire trust. The real challenge before India, therefore, is no longer attracting capital. It is convincing capital that the rules of the game will remain fair, transparent, and predictable after the investment arrives.

Frozen Front

One year after Operation Sindoor pushed India and Pakistan to the edge of open war, South Asia is living through a paradox: deterrence succeeded, but stability weakened. The four-day confrontation ended quickly enough to prevent catastrophic escalation between two nuclear powers. Yet the aftermath has produced neither reconciliation nor durable restraint. Instead, the conflict appears to have institutionalised a new condition of permanent hostility in which both sides believe they emerged strategically stronger. That is the most dangerous outcome possible. For India, the military operation marked a decisive political shift. New Delhi no longer appears willing to separate cross-border terrorism from the Pakistani state structure that shelters or tolerates militant infrastructure. The message after the Pahalgam killings and subsequent retaliation was unmistakable: future attacks may invite direct military punishment, not merely diplomatic protest, or symbolic strikes. This effectively lowers the threshold for conventional conflict in South Asia. But Pakistan also drew conclusions from the same confrontation. Despite India's superior economic and military weight, Islamabad survived the initial assault, international pressure rapidly mounted for de-escalation, and outside powers intervened before the conflict could widen. Within Pakistan's strategic establishment, that sequence reinforced a long-held assumption that nuclear risk still provides a protective umbrella against prolonged conventional warfare.

When both adversaries believe their strategy worked, the probability of future crises rises sharply. The deeper transformation, however, lies beyond the battlefield. Operation Sindoor exposed how unstable the geopolitical environment around South Asia has become. India had spent two decades building a strategic partnership with the United States on the assumption that Washington broadly shared its concerns about Pakistan-sponsored militancy. Yet American attempts to publicly mediate, coupled with fluctuating trade tensions, introduced visible uncertainty into that equation. As a result, India has quietly accelerated a broader diversification strategy - strengthening ties with Europe, maintaining its Russian connection despite Western pressure, and cautiously stabilising relations with China. Delhi's foreign policy is becoming less alliance-driven and more transactional. Pakistan, meanwhile, regained diplomatic relevance by positioning itself as a useful intermediary during wider West Asian tensions. But this revival may prove fragile because it depends heavily on shifting global crises and unpredictable personalities in Washington.

The military lessons are equally significant. Operation Sindoor demonstrated that future India-Pakistan conflicts will be fought through drones, precision weapons, electronic systems, and stand-off strikes rather than large territorial offensives. The conflict resembled a high-technology signalling contest more than a traditional war. Yet technological sophistication does not reduce danger. In fact, it may increase the temptation for calibrated retaliation under the assumption that escalation can always be controlled. History suggests otherwise. Today, the Line of Control is quieter than it was during the conflict, but the political environment is far more combustible. Diplomatic channels remain weak, mutual suspicion is deeper, and public opinion on both sides has hardened. South Asia is no longer moving toward peace. It is adapting itself to recurring confrontation.

Tobacco cessation paradox

India has roughly one tobacco cessation centre for every two million people. Rural areas, where 43 percent of men use tobacco and culturally embedded smokeless forms dominate daily life, are dramatically underserved. The national quit ratio - the proportion of lifetime users who have successfully stopped - hovers at just 21 percent. When seven out of ten patients walking into a rural outpatient department in Rajasthan are tobacco users, restricting access to an affordable pharmacological aid is an act of self-sabotage



to exploit NRT licensing pathways to slip novel nicotine products into markets through regulatory side doors. India has seen applications to include nicotine strips and pouches under the same Schedule K exemption that was originally carved out for cessation gums.

If the exemption becomes a loophole, the argument goes, it must be narrowed. There is also the question of regulatory coherence. India prohibits e-cigarettes under a sweeping 2019 law. Allowing flavoured nicotine lozenges unrestricted OTC access while banning vapes creates an inconsistency that weakens the overall tobacco control architecture.

A government that claims zero tolerance for novel nicotine products cannot simultaneously permit their pharmacy-free distribution under a different label. These are defensible positions. But defensible is not the same as wise. Strip away the regulatory elegance and look at the ground reality. India has roughly one tobacco cessation centre for every two million people. Rural areas, where 43 percent of men use tobacco and culturally embedded smokeless forms dominate daily life, are dramatically underserved.

The national quit ratio - the proportion of lifetime users who have successfully stopped - hovers at just 21 percent. In a country where seven out of ten patients walking into a rural outpatient department in Rajasthan are tobacco users, and where community health workers plead not for lectures but for medicines, restricting access to one of the few affordable pharmacological aids available is a peculiar act of self-sabotage.

Consider the journey of a daily bidi smoker in a village in eastern Uttar Pradesh or rural Odisha. He earns a modest wage. He knows tobacco is harming him - the warnings on packets have done their work. He wants to quit. Under the current dispensation, he can walk into a shop and buy a strip of nicotine lozenges for a few rupees. No prescription, no pharmacist, no bus ride to the district hospital. The lozenge does not cure him overnight, but it dulls the craving long enough to get through a difficult day. That frictionless access is not a design flaw. It is the entire point.

Now imagine the same man under the proposed regime. The nearest licensed pharmacy may be ten or fifteen kilometres away. If a prescription is required, the nearest qualified medical practitioner could be further still. The hassle is not trivial - it is prohibitive. Research consistently shows that even small barriers to cessation aids cause significant drop-off in quit attempts. The man does not fill out a complaint form; he simply lights another bidi. The lozenge, meanwhile, sits locked behind a pharmacist's counter that he will never visit.

The irony is sharp enough to draw blood. Cigarettes and bidis remain available at

every pan shop, roadside stall, and railway platform in the country. No prescription is needed. No pharmacist supervises the transaction. No online monitoring tracks the sale. A product that kills is sold with fewer restrictions than a product that helps people stop dying.

The economics compound the injustice. A recent analysis published in BMJ Global Health estimates that tobacco cessation could economically uplift over 20 million Indian households. The poorest rural families spend 6.6 percent of their monthly per-capita expenditure on tobacco. Money freed from addiction flows into food, education, and healthcare. Every barrier placed between a tobacco user and a cessation tool is, in economic terms, a barrier placed between a family and a pathway out of poverty.

The concern about minors accessing nicotine products is genuine. But the proposed solution - restricting all adult access - is disproportionate. India already has laws prohibiting the sale of tobacco products to minors under the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA) and the Juvenile Justice Act. These laws are poorly enforced: surveys show that 45 percent of young cigarette buyers are not even asked their age. The failure is one of implementation, not of insufficient legislation.

Restricting NRT access to combat youth nicotine use is the regulatory equivalent of banning bandages because some teenagers might use them unnecessarily. It treats the symptom while ignoring the structural deficit - which is the near-total absence of effective age verification at the point of sale for any nicotine or tobacco product in India. Moreover, there is no substantive evidence that low-dose nicotine gums and lozenges are a significant gateway to tobacco addiction among minors.

The real gateways - bidis at one rupee a stick, flavoured gutka in shiny sachets, peer pressure in school corridors - remain largely unaddressed by this policy move. Policy need not be binary. Between unfettered access and pharmacy-only restriction lies a range of pragmatic options that protect youth without abandoning adult quitters.

First, enforce age-gating at the point of sale, not product-gating for all consumers. India should invest in stricter age verification mechanisms for all nicotine and tobacco products - including cigarettes and bidis - rather than restricting cessation products alone. Digital age verification at online platforms, already recommended by DTAB, should be implemented as a standalone



CHARUDUTTA PANIGRAHI

The writer has been in a Tobacco Cessation consortium roundtable at World Health Assembly, Berlin under the Chairmanship of DG, WHO. He writes on public health policy and regulatory design in emerging economies

India is home to nearly 270 million tobacco users and accounts for roughly one-fifth of all tobacco-related deaths worldwide. Every day, approximately 3,500 Indians die from diseases caused by smoking and chewing tobacco. Against this grim arithmetic, one would expect the government to throw open every available exit door for those desperate to quit. Instead, New Delhi appears to be bolting one shut.

In a recommendation that could reshape India's tobacco cessation landscape, the Drugs Technical Advisory Board (DTAB) - meeting in February 2026 - has proposed that nicotine lozenges be stripped of their over-the-counter (OTC) exemption under Schedule K of the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules. If enacted, lozenges containing 2 mg of nicotine would no longer be available at general stores or online platforms; they would be confined to licensed pharmacies and, potentially, require a prescription. The exemption would survive only for unflavoured 2 mg nicotine gums.

The Board has further recommended a strict prohibition on sales to minors, tighter surveillance of online platforms, post-marketing tracking of adverse effects, and restrictions on tobacco companies marketing nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) products.

The proposal did not materialise in a vacuum. It deserves to be understood on its own terms before it is challenged.

The state's concern is anchored in a legitimate fear - that products designed to help people quit tobacco are being repurposed to initiate or sustain nicotine addiction, particularly among the young. India banned e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products, and nicotine pouches precisely because the tobacco industry has a documented history of repackaging addiction in attractive, youth-friendly formats. Flavoured nicotine lozenges, critics argue, risk becoming the next vector: discreet, pleasant-tasting, and available without a pharmacist's oversight at every neighbourhood store.

The DTAB's caution is not plucked from thin air. At the 89th DTAB meeting in 2023, members noted that NRT products could be misused for nicotine substitution during forced periods of abstinence - on flights, in offices, at hospitals - rather than as genuine cessation aids. Research presented by the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Tobacco Control Division reinforced these apprehensions.

Globally, the tobacco industry has attempted

Jakarta Post

The wrong remedy: Evaluating university study program closures

Closing a study program because its graduates are unemployed assumes that the program's only legitimate output is a job. Under this logic, if graduates do not enter the workforce quickly enough, the program is deemed a failure. This assumption reduces the university to a staffing agency with a four-year queue, suggesting that education is valid only when the market immediately confirms it. It is the kind of logic that sounds efficient in a ministry briefing but unravels the moment it meets any serious reflection on the purpose of

education. That assumption also relocates responsibility. When graduates enter the labor market and cannot find suitable work, the question is not only what universities produced, but also what kind of economy has been built to receive them. A policy that begins and ends with university closure avoids this second question, even though it is the harder and more significant one.

Yet, the Higher Education, Science, and Technology Ministry (Kemendikristek)

has proposed precisely this line of action. Secretary General Badru Munir Sukoco announced on April 23 that study programs failing to demonstrate industry relevance will be reviewed and, if necessary, closed.

The ministry counts the 19 million graduates produced annually, reads that figure against employment absorption, and concludes that some programs must go. The officials delivering this verdict carry impressive academic titles, which makes the proposal more troubling, not less. It demonstrates how

easily credentialed authority can mistake a labor-market symptom for an educational diagnosis. The 1945 Harvard Report, "General Education in a Free Society", was written when the United States faced a similar tension between mass education and economic absorption.

It drew a distinction that Kemendikristek has collapsed: special education trains for a specific occupation, while general education prepares a person to think, judge, and function as a citizen. Employment statistics measure the former, but they cannot register the latter.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Forest fires

Sir, The forest fires in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris, Uttarakhand's Garhwal and Kumaon and Andhra Pradesh's Seshachalam as well as in some forested areas in Gujarat and Bihar in recent days and weeks highlight the need to take steps to prevent forest fires as a matter of urgency.

The frequency, scale and intensity of such fires have risen alarmingly. Forest fires contribute significantly to the decrease in forest cover, a lot more than in the past. They cause extensive damage before they are doused - a fact that strengthens the case



for preventive action. Obviously, they reduce endless rows of trees to ashes and leave vast tracts of otherwise lush green forest scarred.

Further, they cause the deaths of thousands of wild birds and animals in their natural

habitats and add millions of tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere exacerbating climate change. Sometimes they claim human lives too.

Extreme heat that keeps the forested areas tinder-dry and increases flammability, and heavy winds that spread the fires rapidly, must be factored in when preventive action is planned.

Forests are aptly described as 'the green lungs of the earth'. They act as 'carbon sinks' in their pristine condition. They are vitally important for planetary and human health.

Yours, etc., G David Milton,
Maruthancode, 29 April.

Universality

Sir, Apropos "God in Man" by Swami Sandarshananda, Swami Vivekananda was truly the Adi Shankara of his time.

While Adi Shankara travelled extensively throughout India to revive spiritual consciousness centuries ago, the modern era demanded a global platform.

Consequently, Vivekananda went to Chicago to broadcast the universal truths of Vedanta and the essential kinship of all mankind.

Yours, etc., Harsh Pawaria,
Rohtak, 7 May.

A moral commitment that binds the world

RAJU ROY

What is our greatest identity as human beings? The question may seem simple, yet its answer is profound and layered. Language, religion, nationality, culture and geography all shape who we are, but none of these fully define us. At our core, we are human and humanity itself is our highest identity and greatest strength. This idea lies at the heart of the message, "United in Humanity," the theme of World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day 2026.

It is more than a slogan; it is a universal call to rise above divisions and embrace humanity as our defining bond. Today's world moves through a striking dual reality. On one side, there is unprecedented progress in technology, artificial intelligence, space exploration and medicine. On the other, we face war, violence, displacement, poverty, climate change and deepening inequality. In this stark contrast, a critical question arises: are we truly advancing as human beings?

And yet, across the world, countless individuals quietly keep the light of humanity alive. Volunteers of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement risk their lives to stand beside people in times of disaster and crisis. They demonstrate that humanity is not an abstract idea - it is a living, breathing reality. In moments of distress, identity narrows to a single truth: we are human. It is then that the true essence of humanity reveals itself.

During natural disasters, pandemics, or conflicts, we witness how fragile our constructed divisions truly are. In such times, people reach out to one another, offer shelter, share food and bear each other's burdens. These moments affirm that humanity is

not a luxury; it is the foundation of human existence. Yet a question remains: why do we forget this solidarity in times of peace? Why do we confine ourselves within narrow identities? Perhaps the answer lies in our mindset. The more we focus on "I" and "mine," the more we lose the meaning of "we."

This is where the idea of being "united in humanity" becomes deeply significant. It reminds us that diversity is not a weakness but a strength, one that becomes meaningful only when we learn to see each other first and foremost as human beings. Humanity is not merely kindness or sympathy; it is an active responsibility. It calls on us to feel the suffering of others as our own and to act to alleviate it.

Throughout history, certain institutions have stood as beacons of hope in times of darkness. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is one such remarkable initiative, founded on the enduring principles of neutrality, humanity, and compassion. Present in nearly every country, it is not merely an organization but a global moral conscience, driven by millions of volunteers dedicated to serving humanity.

In today's complex world, its relevance is more vital than ever. Ongoing conflicts, particularly in regions like Gaza, remind us how fragile human security remains. The scenes emerging from such conflict zones are not merely accounts of war; they are stark portrayals of human suffering. Hospitals reduced to rubble, shortages of electricity and medical supplies, lack of clean drinking water and severe food insecurity define daily life. Children show visible signs of malnutrition; families are torn apart; countless

individuals have lost loved ones and homes.

Amid such devastation, Red Cross and Red Crescent workers continue their mission with unwavering commitment. Their efforts go beyond distributing relief or providing basic care. They deliver emergency medical services, ensure access to clean water and food, provide temporary shelter and facilitate family reunifications. Reuniting families separated by war or disaster is not just an administrative task - it is a profoundly human act that restores hope. Equally important is their focus on mental health support. The psychological scars of conflict can last generations, affecting individuals and societies alike. Recognizing this, they provide counseling, trauma care and support for social reintegration, laying the groundwork for long-term recovery.

One of the movement's defining strengths is its strict neutrality. In conflict zones marked by political divisions, they take no sides. Their allegiance is solely to humanity. This impartiality earns them trust and enables them to operate even in the most challenging environments. At a time when division, violence and mistrust are on the rise, such efforts remind us that humanity has not vanished. Every act of service, every helping hand, every life saved reaffirms that compassion still endures.

Beyond conflict zones, humanitarian crises continue to unfold elsewhere. In parts of Africa, including Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, prolonged conflict, political instability and economic fragility have forced millions to flee their homes. Many now live in overcrowded refugee camps, where uncertainty and hardship define everyday life. These crises are complex and multifaceted, marked by food shortages,



lack of clean water, disease outbreaks and inadequate healthcare. Women and children are especially vulnerable, facing heightened risks of violence, insecurity and loss of education. Here too, Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers play a vital role. Their work extends beyond emergency relief to a comprehensive humanitarian response - providing food, water, medical care, shelter, child protection and support for survivors of trauma. Their efforts remind us that true humanity lies not only in saving lives but in ensuring dignity.

Climate change has intensified the frequency and severity of natural disasters. Floods, cyclones, droughts, and earthquakes have become more destructive than ever. In such emergencies, rapid response is critical. Through coordinated local and international efforts, Red Cross and Red Crescent teams deliver timely rescue operations, medical assistance and essential supplies.

The Covid-19 pandemic offered a powerful lesson: no society can endure without humanity. When the world came to a standstill, countless individuals risked their lives to help others. Healthcare workers, volunteers and community leaders came together in solidarity. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement played a crucial role in

providing healthcare, raising awareness, and supporting vaccination efforts.

Yet humanitarian work is never easy. Limited resources, security risks, and political barriers often complicate efforts. Aid workers themselves are sometimes targeted, which is deeply concerning. Still, they persist - driven not merely by duty but by a moral commitment to stand beside humanity.

Importantly, practicing humanity is not confined to large-scale actions. It begins in our everyday lives, helping a neighbour, supporting someone in need, and contributing positively to society. These small acts are the building blocks of a compassionate world. The youth, in particular, have a vital role to play. Their creativity, energy and sense of purpose can drive meaningful change and help build a more humane society.

"United in Humanity" is not just a phrase; it is a moral commitment. In a world marked by division and distrust, choosing humanity is our greatest responsibility. The world will become truly beautiful when we learn to stand beside one another. If we can break down the walls of division and build bridges of compassion, the triumph of humanity will be inevitable.

(The writer is a Post-graduate teacher, Secondary Education department, Government of Tripura.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 11 May 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

The Sikh procession in Calcutta took place on Sunday morning, and, owing as much to the appeals of the leaders as to the elaborate police and military arrangements made by the authorities, passed off without any untoward incident. The procession, originally intended to include Sikhs only, was joined during the march by many thousands of Hindus, and became, therefore, a Hindu demonstration. The absence of the lower class and turbulent elements in Calcutta both from the procession and from the crowds that lined the streets was very noticeable. The Moslems, as was to be expected in view of the present tension, kept themselves aloof. They were able to do this more easily because the route of the procession lay through streets almost purely Hindu in character. It is, of course, a victory for law and order that no disturbance should have taken place, but the fact that the procession passed off without protests from the Moslems does not unfortunately settle the vexed question of music before mosques, for the Islamic party were informed by the Government that this carrying of the Granth Sahib with music through the streets would not be used as a precedent.

News Items

CHURCHES' MOVE

APPEAL OF ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

London, May. After a full conference of the Christian Churches of Britain the Archbishop of Canterbury appealed to all parties concerned in the present crisis to resume negotiations, and urges that simultaneously and concurrently: (1) The Trade Union Congress should cancel the general strike; (2) The Government should renew its offer of assistance to the coal industry for a short period, and (3) The coal-owners should withdraw their new wages scale recently issued.—Reuter.

ILLEGALITY OF THE STRIKE NEW FACTOR

LEADERS LIABLE FOR DAMAGES SIR J. SIMON'S VIEW

Interest is centred in a striking speech by Sir John Simon in the House of Commons, in which he declared that the general strike was an utterly illegal proceeding. Every worker under contract was personally liable to be sued for damages, as was every trade union leader who advised that course. He declared that the threat that trade union benefits would be denied those who remained at work could not be carried out.

COAL FOR BRITAIN

ACTION OF INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT WORKERS

Ostend, May. The Transport Workers International did not enthrone over the proposal of the British delegate, Mr. Milford, that the loading and unloading of every ship flying the British flag should be prohibited at all Continental ports whatever be her cargo. Belgian delegate pointed out the impossibility of complying with this, especially in connexion with the un-loading of cargoes destined for local consumption. It was eventually agreed that coal consignments to Britain would be prevented at all Continental ports. The International Miners' Committee has announced its solidarity with the British workers, declaring its readiness to take still further steps to assist them, and expressing the conviction that a lasting peace in the mining industry could only be possible through the establishment of co-operation and International control.—Reuter.

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

The stories we tell ourselves



I have a picture of myself sitting as a baby on my mother's lap, looking pleased as punch, while my young mother held me gently with a contented girlish smile. Like everybody else, I was born of my mother. I sometimes think, however, that we give ourselves birth as much as our mothers.

What an overwhelming part of our life is constructed and reconstructed by our notions, right or wrong, about who we are, what we can or cannot do, what we like or might like to do! Our mother loved and admired her three brothers who became well-known doctors, and it is perhaps no accident that my brother chose to enter a medical school. Nor is it accidental that I, who had keenly observed our parents' relative lack of affluence, compared perhaps to those maternal uncles, chose to enter business.

The sequels were probably just as significant. My brother, un-enamored of the average doctor's life, went on to psychology and research. I left business and switched to international development and later diplomacy. Little doubt that the transitions had something to do with what we thought of ourselves. The stories we tell ourselves - who we are, what we can and cannot do, what might fulfill us - play a significant part in what happens in our lives.

We form a notion of ourselves early. Based on what our parents and uncles

tell us, what our childhood friends daily confide in us, what a few impressive teachers suggest or insinuate, we start forming a picture of ourselves. With a few tentative likes and dislikes, some quick encounters with certain types of food, clothing and furniture, we quickly generate an inventory of favored gastronomy and living style. Even, after meeting a few men and women, we develop a rough sketch of the types of men and women we care for or don't. We start telling ourselves, "I love (hate) these kinds of things," "I can (cannot) do those sorts of things," or "I like (dislike) these kinds of people," - however limited or dubious may be the basis of our conclusions.

In short, we create ourselves. Just as a sculptor shapes his handiwork day by day, narrowing the neck or broadening the arm, we construct ourselves little by little, refining our idea of ourselves. We form our values, our ideals and our ideas - most of all, about ourselves. How tall we are and how much we weigh, we know for certain. But we form hypotheses about how intelligent we are or how industrious or innovative. Once we form these ideas about ourselves, they gel and become firmly embedded in our minds. We may marginally modify them, especially after a rare shattering experience, but the image of ourselves embedded in our mind becomes the

crucial guidepost of the future.

Once we have become doctors, lived and have been accepted as doctors, we are tempted to think of ourselves as doctors, as if that identity has been branded on us and is unchangeable, and cannot conceive of becoming a psychologist or a researcher. If I have become even half-way successful as an executive, I start thinking of an executive career as my Heaven-ordained mission, as unalterable as my fingerprint.

If I have a job or a vocation I like, there is no reason to change it. If, however, it bores me at the best and does not fulfill me at the worst, there is no reason either to swear eternal fealty to it. I may have started on it because it was a family business, and my father and uncle had thought me an ideal adjunct; or I was a lucky recruit and found the work easy and undemanding, and only later have begun to see the dead-end it may be. I am stuck most of all because of my limiting self-image, as a person who can't afford to take risks, who likes to be comfortable at all costs and who thinks of himself as a decent enough person but of limited talent.

That may simply be a lie that I have developed and fed myself. Perhaps I have avoided risks so long that it has become an ingrained habit; I have been comfortable so long that I panic at the thought of any discomfort;



I see my talent as limited because I have not exerted it for any challenge. If that is the story I tell myself, any time a big opportunity shows up as a major challenge, I have erected a self-created barrier. The biggest impediment to my success and happiness is not anything that exists out in the world, but my notion of myself, the image that I have built gradually over the years.

Cosmetic surgeons find their patients react differently to the change in their faces: some act radically differently because they see themselves as a changed, more attractive person; while others don't act differently at all, because however radically different is their altered appearance, in their mind is the unchanged image of their old self. In their heart of hearts, some just

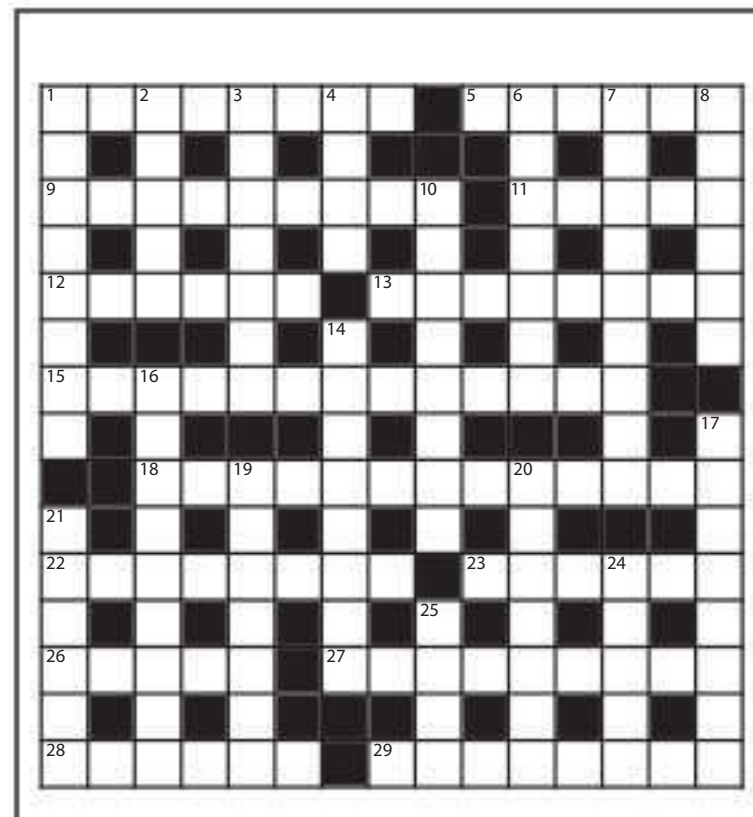
cannot shed the image they long sustained and the reaction it evoked in others. Their looks have changed, but not their idea about how they look.

Our concept of not just how we look but what we are is so firmly rooted in our minds that escape seems impossible. But it is both possible and necessary. The more we are aware of the shackles that bind us to our past, the likelier we are to break its bondage, create a new and better self-image and strive to fulfill it.

We are not destined to be chained to the past. We can opt for a more self-aware future.

(The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com)

Crossword | No. 293458



Last Saturday's Solution



ACROSS

- 1 US sitcom character's life ends badly (8)
- 5 Grammar school receiving excellent 5th place in Ofsted's rankings (6)
- 9/6 Footballer from Croatia is upset with London rents at first (9,7)
- 11 Material used for hose is now primarily plastic only (5)
- 12 Family member without a day free (6)

- 13 Aquatic creature almost always next to lake causes rising concern (5,5)
- 15 Do business? (6,7)
- 18 Captain is not prepared to tackle the onset of such a state of commotion (5,8)
- 22 Final, incorrect net value (8)
- 23 A kid is chilled-out (2,4)
- 26 Cold mug filled with a chocolate-like substance (5)
- 27 Former taxi firm worker possibly in high spirits (9)

- 28 French pupil joining new soccer team? (6)
- 29 Bubbles for less important celebs (1-7)
- DOWN
- 1 Stucco oddly breaks into pieces right away and gives under pressure (8)
- 2 Innocent wedding vow contains one term of endearment (5)
- 3 Suitable space covered with banks of modernist furniture (7)

- 4 Direct someone in a star role (4)
- 6 See 9 Across
- 7 Online Food company disliked returning glasses (9)
- 8 Run on your own? (6)
- 10 Attach too much importance to the speed of deliveries? (8)
- 14 High-tech step taken by government advisory body (5-3)
- 16 Computer programme getting ordered regularly - it should bear fruit (5,4)

- 17 Fibres for protective coat and top stocked by fashion e-tailer (8)
- 19 Distinguished aristocrat interrupted by cheers (7)
- 20 Small child having irregular rest risks falling down (7)
- 21 When backing up, user initially neglected prompt to save (6)
- 24 Military helicopter leaves hospital very quickly (5)
- 25 Nonsense ... it's worth fifty! (4)

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





Editor's TAKE

Cleaning up India's sacred and scenic spaces

The Supreme Court has brought long-overdue urgency to cleaning up India, but lasting change will require commitment from both governments and citizens

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Cleanliness is next to godliness." This statement did not come from his conviction alone, but out of the observations that he saw around him. Let us face it, cleanliness is secondary to us; we litter at will, spit wherever we want to and clean our homes and throw the trash on the street, caring little about throwing wrappers and bottles when visiting a tourist place or a monument. Perhaps this is the reason that the cleanliness drive undertaken by the Modi Government has met with limited success; despite years of implementation, it is yet to become a habit, and till that happens cleanliness will always elude us. The Supreme Court's recent directive mandating strict implementation of the Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules, 2026, at tourist destinations and pilgrim centres is well-intentioned and timely, as it is a reminder that cleanliness, environmental responsibility and civic discipline are inseparable and must be taken care of. By asking states to create dedicated mechanisms for waste management at beaches, tourist hotspots and religious sites, the court has addressed one of India's most visible and persistent failures: cleaning up our public places. The ruling is timely, yet its success will ultimately depend on political will, administrative efficiency and public participation. Public awareness in this regard is paramount.

From the ghats of Varanasi and the hills of Vaishno Devi to Goa's beaches, these places are littered with plastic waste, filthy and unclean. Such scenes not only damage fragile ecosystems but also tarnish the country's global image. The Supreme Court rightly noted that keeping these places "spick and span" is essential both for preserving nature and enhancing India's international standing. The significance of the order lies in its practical and decentralised approach. By empowering district collectors and directing them to create special monitoring cells, the court has moved accountability closer to the ground. The requirement for fortnightly inspections and reports introduces an element of regular oversight.

Another notable aspect is the recognition that waste management is an administrative and financial challenge as well. The court acknowledged the constraints of budget and manpower faced by states and urban bodies. Its suggestion to involve Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds in establishing compressed biogas and waste-to-energy plants could help bridge the financial gap. In India, rivers, mountains and forests are deeply tied to spiritual and cultural identity, yet are often subjected to neglect and pollution. The court order puts the onus on governments to address the issue. However, the challenges remain formidable. India's waste management system continues to suffer from poor segregation at source, inadequate recycling infrastructure and weak enforcement.

Many municipalities lack scientific landfills, modern processing plants and trained sanitation staff. Rural pilgrimage centres face severe infrastructural deficits. The Supreme Court's intervention has provided direction and urgency to an issue long ignored. But judicial orders alone cannot clean India. Collective action can.

Pokhran II: When India claimed its strategic voice

The defining technologies of the twenty-first century such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, cybersecurity, and space systems may seem far removed from nuclear weapons, but the underlying logic remains unchanged



UTTAM KUMAR SINHA

Every year on May 11, National Technology Day commemorates India's 1998 nuclear tests at Pokhran (Operation Shakti). However, viewing this day as simply a scientific and technological milestone overlooks its deeper significance. The tests conducted on May 11 and 13 were also an expression of political will, strategic clarity, and a decisive assertion of national identity within a hierarchical global nuclear order that had long privileged a few and constrained many.

When Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee addressed the nation that afternoon in 1998, his words were measured, almost clinical, "At fifteen forty-five hours, India conducted three underground nuclear tests..." It was a declaration not just of capability, but of intent.

India's strategic community had long grappled with the implications of a nuclearised world. Following China's nuclear test in 1964, Indian thinkers confronted a difficult question. Could India afford to remain outside the nuclear order? As early as 1966, Major General Som Dutt, the first director of the Institute for Defence Studies, warned that if China possessed strategic options India lacked, "India could be blackmailed into paralysis." His stark conclusion was that India might have little choice but to develop its own nuclear capability.

This line of thinking was later refined and forcefully articulated by K Subrahmanyam, one of India's foremost strategic thinkers. For him, nuclear weapons were more than just instruments of war. They were political legitimacy. "India wants to be a player and not an object of this global nuclear order," he often stated. In Amitav Ghosh's 1998 essay Countdown in The New Yorker, Subrahmanyam offered a vivid analogy drawn from the Gregory Peck film The Million Pound Note. A nuclear weapon, he suggested, functions like a million-pound note. It buys credit, and that credit translates into influence and deterrent power. It was a candid formulation of deterrence, not merely as military capability, but as political psychology.

This intellectual foundation is crucial because Pokhran-II was not an impulsive decision. Rather, they represented the culmination of decades of debate over sovereignty, status, and India's place in the international system. India had consistently rejected the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty on the grounds that it institutionalised inequality between nuclear "haves" and "have-nots." The issue, therefore, was never solely about weapons. It was whether India would



IN 1998, AN EDITORIAL IN THE PIONEER BY ITS EDITOR CHANDAN MITRA FAMOUSLY DESCRIBED THE TESTS AS AN "EXPLOSION OF SELF-ESTEEM." THE PHRASE CAPTURED A DEEPER TRANSFORMATION. IT REFLECTED A SHIFT IN INDIA'S SELF-PERCEPTION; FROM A STATE CONSTRAINED BY HISTORY TO ONE CAPABLE OF SHAPING ITS OWN DESTINY

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dailypioneer @UKSinha_idsa uttam-sinha-a58926a

urged Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif not to proceed. Domestic pressure in Pakistan proved overwhelming, as one stark warning reportedly put it: "If you don't explode, we're going to explode you."

This rapid escalation revealed an uncomfortable truth. Nuclear decisions are rarely shaped by strategic calculation alone. Domestic politics, national prestige, and perceptions of status often exert equal, if not greater, influence.

What is striking in retrospect is not only that India conducted the tests, but that it successfully absorbed their consequences. In fact, India succeeded in preserving complete operational secrecy around the tests. Senior scientists such as K Santhanam, who later served as Director of the IDSA, ensured that the preparations remained undetected until the detonations themselves. Despite sanctions and widespread criticism, the economy remained resilient, and diplomatic engagement gradually resumed. Within a decade, nations that had condemned India began engaging it as a responsible nuclear power.

This is perhaps the most enduring lesson of May 11. Technological capability, when coupled with political resolve and strategic clarity, can alter international outcomes. States willing to bear short-term costs in pursuit of long-term autonomy can, over time, reshape the very structures that constrain them.

That lesson is even more relevant today. The defining technologies of the twenty-first century such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, cybersecurity, and space systems may seem far removed from nuclear weapons, but the underlying logic remains unchanged. While technological dependence constrains; technological capability empowers. Nations that fail to invest in critical technologies risk strategic marginalisation, regardless of their economic or demographic weight.

At the same time, the legacy of Pokhran-II encompasses a crucial moral dimension. Nuclear weapons remain among humanity's most destructive inventions. India has consistently emphasised restraint and supported the goal of universal, non-discriminatory disarmament. Strategic capability, in this sense, is not about warfighting but about deterrence and prevention. In 1998, an editorial in the Pioneer by its editor Chandan Mitra famously described the tests as an "explosion of self-esteem." The phrase captured a deeper transformation. It reflected a shift in India's self-perception; from a state constrained by history to one capable of shaping its own destiny.

As we mark National Technology Day, that spirit remains vital to recall. It marked India's resolve to engage the world on its own terms.



PIC TALK



Tiger cubs cool themselves in a pond to get relief from the scorching summer heat at Nahargarh Biological Park in Jaipur. PHOTO: PTI

How school groups are fueling parenting anxiety



SAKSHI SETHI

2ND OPINION

In today's digitally connected world, parenting no longer unfolds only within the quiet spaces of the home. Increasingly, it is shaped by the constant buzz of notifications on mobile phones. What began as a practical way for schools and parents to stay informed has gradually evolved into something far more complicated. School WhatsApp groups, originally created for sharing homework updates, notices and reminders, are now often turning into arenas of comparison, pressure and silent competition.

Across India, millions of parents are members of school-related WhatsApp groups. While the intention behind these forums is useful, their growing misuse is creating an unhealthy atmosphere not only for parents but, more importantly, for children. A quick look through many such groups reveals a familiar pattern. One parent proudly

announces that their child has already completed the syllabus. Another questions why a teacher is moving slowly. Someone else shares marks, rankings or achievements. Individually, these messages may appear harmless. Together, however, they create an invisible race that gradually enters homes and classrooms alike.

The issue is not technology itself, but the mindset that often accompanies it. Parents, knowingly or unknowingly, begin comparing their children with others. Instead of focusing on their child's strengths, interests and pace of learning, they start measuring progress against what they see on their phone screens. A child who was comfortably learning suddenly appears "behind" because another student has moved ahead faster. The consequence is predictable — stress replaces curiosity, and speed becomes more important than understanding.

In many households, this pressure plays out in subtle but damaging ways. A parent scrolling through messages may suddenly ask, "Why are you still studying this chapter? Others are already ahead." For the child, such remarks can create feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Learning, which should ideally be an enjoyable and exploratory process, begins to feel like a competition with no finish line. Children who once studied with confidence may start fearing that they are not good enough.

Another troubling aspect is the public questioning of teachers within these groups. A delayed assignment, a minor classroom issue or confusion over a test schedule can quickly escalate into lengthy online debates. Constructive communication between parents and schools is important, but constant public scrutiny risks undermining teachers' authority.

These groups also become breeding grounds for misinformation. Half-read messages, misunderstood instructions and rumours often spread rapidly, leading to unnecessary panic among parents. Instead of simplifying communication, the flood of messages frequently creates confusion and anxiety.

This does not mean school WhatsApp groups are entirely harmful. When used responsibly, they can be extremely helpful for sharing genuine updates and strengthening coordination between schools and families. The solution, therefore, is not complete withdrawal but mindful participation. Parents must learn to filter information and avoid reacting to every message. Schools, too, have a responsibility to establish clear guidelines so that these groups remain spaces for communication, not unhealthy comparison.



The writer is an educator and a councillor

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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JUSTICE MUST BALANCE SEVERITY WITH SAFEGUARDS

Swearing-in ceremonies are intended to symbolise democratic continuity and constitutional responsibility, not political extravagance. However, in recent years, such events have increasingly turned into large public spectacles held in sprawling grounds under temporary sheds, resulting in unnecessary expenditure of public money. Huge sums are spent on seating arrangements, cooling systems, food, water supply, decorations and crowd management. In many cases, people attending these functions are mobilised through buses, cash incentives and food packets rather than voluntary participation.

These events also create severe traffic congestion and place enormous pressure on police and municipal authorities,

diverting them from essential civic duties. The environmental cost is equally worrying, with large quantities of plastic bottles, food covers and leftover waste littering public spaces after the ceremonies conclude. A more dignified and responsible approach would be to hold swearing-in ceremonies within Assembly Halls or at the official residences of Governors or Chief Ministers. These venues already possess constitutional sanctity and require minimal additional arrangements. Governments must demonstrate respect for taxpayers' money, civic order and environmental responsibility. Swearing-in ceremonies should reflect the seriousness of governance rather than the grandeur of political display.

O PRASADA RAO | HYDERABAD

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Rising threat of drug abuse

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) released its latest report on May 6, 2026, highlighting a sharp rise in drug overdose fatalities. The data reveals 978 overdose deaths in 2024, marking a 50 per cent increase from 654 the previous year. Tamil Nadu topped the list with 313 deaths, far ahead of Punjab's 106. While Punjab has achieved limited success in curbing the drug problem, significant challenges persist. The crisis is now spreading to other states, including Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Kerala, indicating that the issue is no longer confined to border regions.

Conventional supply-side measures focused on street-level peddlers are proving ineffective against well-organised trafficking networks and international syndicates. Compounding the problem are underreporting, inadequate forensic infrastructure and socio-economic factors such as unemployment, mental health issues, peer pressure and migration.

A robust response is essential, combining targeted intelligence operations against major traffickers with comprehensive demand-reduction initiatives. A coordinated national public health approach, supported by real-time surveillance and strong inter-agency collaboration, is critical to prevent systemic collapse.

SK PRABHAKAR | GURUGRAM

Technology driving national progress

A country's scientific temperament and all-round progress largely depend on the culture of learning and innovation. India has gone that extra mile to become technologically self-sufficient over the years. The significance of a sustainable future through innovation cannot be stressed enough. National Technology Day is observed on May 11 to celebrate the successful conduct of the Pokhran-II nuclear tests under Operation Shakti. The maiden flight of the indigenous Hansa-3 and the successful testing of the Trishul missile were also major milestones achieved on May 11, 1998. Stalwarts APJ Abdul Kalam and R Chidambaram were behind these remarkable achievements that laid the foundation for strengthening India's military capabilities.

Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the guiding force behind these visionary efforts. Boosting development through innovation and research remains one of the key objectives of National Technology Day. Although India has consistently advocated peace through strength, strategic readiness has always remained a priority for successive governments. National Technology Day serves as a reminder that innovation, scientific progress and strategic preparedness remain central to India's growth and self-reliance.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

Trump's Bengal poll remark questioned

It is reported that US President Donald Trump has congratulated Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the BJP's victory in the West Bengal Assembly elections. The remarks appear premature and misplaced. State elections in India are an internal matter of the country's federal democratic system, and external endorsements amount to interference in the nation's democratic process. The remarks came days after the BJP secured a historic victory in West Bengal, ending the Trinamool Congress' 15-year rule under Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. The BJP also retained power in Assam for a third consecutive term.

Earlier this week, a White House spokesperson said President Trump had congratulated Modi on what was described as a "historic and decisive" electoral victory. However, the West Bengal polls took place amid allegations of fear, intimidation and systemic pressure. There was also a widespread perception that the Election Commission of India failed to act impartially, raising concerns about institutional neutrality.

Democracy is not only about conducting elections, but also about ensuring that they are free, fair and credible. Serious allegations require scrutiny rather than celebration.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

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Orchestrating tech-innovation on 'National Technology Day'

As India advances towards 2047, Science, Technology and Innovation will continue to play an increasingly important role in catalysing economic growth, strategic autonomy, societal transformation, and a sustainable future



JITENDRA SINGH

National Technology Day — 'Tech', celebrated on May 11, commemorates India's landmark technological achievement marked by the successful Pokhran nuclear tests of 1998. The occasion also highlights the nation's enduring commitment to scientific innovation, technological advancement, and the synergy between science, society, and industry in shaping India's development journey.

Over the last decade, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's technological ecosystem has witnessed unprecedented growth, marked by rapid innovation, expanding digital infrastructure, and significant advancements across emerging sectors. There has been a greater emphasis on self-reliance and the translation of scientific innovations into real-world impact. Considerable progress has been made in frontier technology-driven areas such as quantum communication, space, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, renewable energy, and climate-resilient systems. Biomanufacturing is a key technology for Viksit Bharat, enabling sustainable innovation, healthcare resilience, and a strong bioeconomy through the production of high-value biologics, vaccines, fuels, and materials using biological systems. India's success with the Chandrayaan-3 mission and recent milestones, such as the attainment of criticality in the indigenous Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor at Kalpakkam, further highlight the country's progress in strategic sectors and its commitment to long-term technological sovereignty.

This progress is also reflected in various key national metrics. India has significantly improved its position in the Global Innovation Index released by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), rising from 81st in 2015 to 38th in 2025. The number of patents granted in the country has increased from a few thousand in 2014-15 to around 1.5 lakh in 2025. India's startup ecosystem has also expanded significantly, with more than 1.5 lakh DPIIT-recognised startups across sectors, including nearly fifteen thousand working in emerging technology domains such as AI, robotics, and additive manufacturing. The transformation is further evident in the expansion of renewable energy capacity to over 250 GW of non-fossil sources and the growth of the bioeconomy from \$10 billion to \$195 billion in a decade.

Policy reforms implemented by the Government over the past decade have played a crucial role in this transformation. These include the rapid expansion of the startup and incubation ecosystem, opening strategic sectors such as space and nuclear energy to private players, and the establishment of enabling frameworks such as the ANRF, the BioE3 (Biotechnology for Economy, Environment and Employment) Policy, and the recently launched ₹1 lakh crore Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) Fund. These initiatives have strengthened India's innovation architecture and reinforced the focus on translating scientific outcomes into societal and economic impact. Science is now moving from laboratories to markets and from ideas to impact.

The Government is providing the right impetus through proactive policies, the removal of outdated regulations, and is successfully creating an ethical yet level-playing field for Indian innovators. It is also moving beyond being merely a primary funder to becoming a primary enabler. With the establishment of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) as the central apex body designed to provide strategic direction for research, innovation, and entrepreneurship across India, the aim is to transition India into a knowledge-driven economy and a global leader in innovation. The broader objective is to ensure that this journey is powered by indigenous intellectual property, ethical frameworks, and a "whole-of-government" approach for a "whole-of-society" commitment to



AS INDIA ADVANCES TOWARDS 2047, SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION WILL CONTINUE TO PLAY AN INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT ROLE IN CATALYSING ECONOMIC GROWTH, STRATEGIC AUTONOMY, SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION, AND A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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science and technology.

'Tech' reflects this journey, with science as the foundational core, technology as the enabler, and innovation as the outcome. The national exhibition, scheduled for May 11, 2026, at the BRIC-National Institute of Immunology (NII), New Delhi, showcases over 350 deep technologies developed indigenously by leading national research institutions and laboratories under 14 Ministries and Departments of the Government of India. These indigenous technologies span key thematic sectors including Biopharma and Health Technologies, Bioindustrial and Green Chemicals, Space and Geospatial Technologies, Climate and Agri-Food Technologies, Deep-Tech Materials and Advanced Engineering Technologies, Electronics, Semiconductors and Energy, and Deep Sea and Atmospheric Technologies. Many of these technologies have already been licensed or commercialised, while others will soon be available for licensing and deployment.

The common thread across these innovations is the shift from siloed research to an integrated, ecosystem-driven approach. Public research institutions are increasingly working closely with startups and industry to ensure that technologies move rapidly from laboratories to markets.

India's next phase of technological growth would require deeper integration between academia, industry, startups, and government, beginning from the stage of conceptualisation of research programmes itself. Stronger industry-academia partnerships can improve alignment of research with national priorities, market needs, and societal challenges, while fundamental research must continue to be encouraged for breakthrough innovation and scientific excellence. National institutions and laboratories would also need to work in a more collaborative and mission-mode manner to address emerging challenges in frontier areas such as artificial intelligence, robotics, advanced materials, quantum technologies, space exploration, and medical technologies.

As science and technology evolve at an unprecedented pace, regulatory frameworks must also become more adaptive, streamlined, and innovation-friendly. Emerging domains such as cell and gene therapy, monoclonal biologics, synthetic biology, and autonomous systems require agile and evidence-based regulatory frameworks that balance innovation, safety, and ethics. Dynamic mechanisms such as regulatory sandboxes can help accelerate responsible innovation. Greater participation of States (e.g. BioE3 Cells) and regional innovation ecosystems, especially in Tier-II and Tier-III cities, can help promote a more decentralised and bottom-up approach to scientific and technological development aligned with regional priorities and challenges, ensuring that science and technology become powerful instruments for improving quality of life across the country.

The transformative power of science and technology will play a pivotal role in realising the vision of Viksit Bharat by driving economic growth, improving governance, enhancing productivity, and fostering inclusive development. Government initiatives such as the India Semiconductor Mission and the National Quantum Mission, alongside advancements in biomanufacturing, precision biotherapeutics, and AI-enabled solutions in agriculture and healthcare, highlight India's strategic focus on strengthening innovation and leadership in emerging technologies. India is transitioning from being primarily a consumer of technology to becoming a global hub of innovation.

As India advances towards 2047, Science, Technology and Innovation will continue to play an increasingly important role in catalysing economic growth, strategic autonomy, societal transformation, and a sustainable future.

BJP reshapes Bengal politics



TUHIN SINHA

There are electoral victories, and then there are moments that alter the very grammar of politics. The Bharatiya Janata Party's triumph in West Bengal belongs unmistakably to the latter category. Much like 1977 marked the defeat of authoritarianism, or 2014 heralded a new aspirational India, Bengal's verdict represents a tectonic civilisational shift — one that transcends the arithmetic of seats and speaks to the deeper churn within the Indian psyche.

For decades, Bengal had politically remained an ideological outlier — first under Left hegemony and later under the violent authoritarian grip of the All India Trinamool Congress. The victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party is therefore not merely political — it is civilisational. It is a homecoming.

At its core, this moment is a tribute to Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, the founder of the Jana Sangh, who envisioned a united India where cultural nationalism would serve as the binding force. Bengal, his karmabhoomi, had long seemed estranged from that vision. Today, it has reclaimed it with conviction.

Equally, this victory must be dedicated to the countless foot soldiers of Sanatan Dharma - ordinary karyakartas who faced unspeakable violence merely for supporting the BJP. The post-poll violence of 2021 stands as one of the darkest chapters in Bengal's history, a grim reminder of how dissent was crushed under a regime that mistook coercion for governance.

What changed this time?

Two words: Bhoj versus Bharosa.

The BJP's articulation of this fault line was not just politically astute - it was existentially resonant. For years, the people of Bengal had lived under a pervasive climate of fear, where political allegiance was dictated not by conviction but by coercion. Leaders of the TMC repeatedly issued veiled and overt threats to BJP supporters during the campaign, reinforcing the perception of a political formation that had morphed into a mafia-like enterprise. Against this backdrop, the BJP's promise of "bharosa" - trust, rule of law, and constitutional governance — struck a powerful chord.

Equally significant were the turning points that exposed the moral bankruptcy of the incumbent regime. The episodes in RG Kar and Sandeshkhali were not isolated aberrations; they became symbols of a deeper rot. They revealed a disturbing pattern where the ruling dispensation appeared complicit in shielding criminal elements, eroding the faith of the average Bengali bhadralok. Bengal's proud legacy of intellectualism and moral courage found itself suffocated under a culture of impunity. This election became a referendum on that betrayal.

In the midst of this charged atmosphere, the Prime Minister once again demonstrated his unmatched ability to connect with the cultural pulse of the masses. His now-iconic "jhal muri moment" was not a trivial anecdote — it was a masterstroke in political communication. By embracing a quintessentially Bengali symbol, he dismantled the TMC's propaganda that painted the BJP as culturally alien or insensitive to local traditions. It was a reminder that the BJP's nationalism is inclusive, not



exclusionary; rooted, yet expansive.

Perhaps the most decisive factor, however, was the silent but resolute assertion of women voters. In overwhelming numbers, women in Bengal chose the BJP - not merely as a political alternative, but as a guarantor of dignity and safety.

This carries a profound lesson for Indian politics: welfare schemes for women can yield electoral dividends only when accompanied by an environment that ensures their basic security. In a state where lawlessness had become normalised and perpetrators enjoyed political patronage, women voters delivered a verdict that was as much about self-preservation as it was about empowerment.

The implications of the verdict

History offers a clear pattern: political formations dislodged by the BJP rarely regain their former dominance. The decline of the RJD in Bihar post-2005 and the prolonged eclipse of the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh after 2017 are instructive precedents. The TMC now faces a similar existential crisis. Stripped of state power, it will find it increasingly difficult to sustain its patronage networks.

More importantly, as institutions regain their autonomy, the long arm of the law may begin to catch up with those who operated with impunity. The party that thrived on fear may well fade into irrelevance in an environment governed by accountability.

Bengal's verdict is thus not an isolated political event - it is a reaffirmation of India's democratic resilience and civilisational continuity. It signals that no region, however historically entrenched in a particular ideological mould, is immune to the winds of change when governance fails and people's aspirations are betrayed.

In choosing bharosa over bhoj, Bengal has not just elected a new government — it has rewritten its destiny.

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BRICS: India's path to economic growth through cooperation



T SENTHIL SIVA SUBRAMANIAN | **YADU KUMAR YADAV**

● 2026-27 - BRICS Presidency [People-Centric Approach]

2023-24 | 2025-26 - Global Presidencies | Chairmanship

The proven example was the use case of the G20 Summit. This united several countries under one umbrella called the vibrant mantra - "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam".

Following this, India has assumed its Chairmanship of the Asian Productivity Organization, Tokyo, Japan (APO). This position enhances collaboration and partnership with 21 APO member countries in the Asia-Pacific region. This initiative will play a key role in promoting grassroots innovation-led green productivity and digital manufacturing transformation of SMEs, including climate change, sustainability and inclusive growth across the member countries in the Asia-Pacific.

2026-27 — BRICS presidency

Presently, India has successfully joined the BRICS Centre for Industrial Competencies (BCIC) in collaboration with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the National Productivity Council (NPC) under the Department of Commerce and Industry, Government of India. NPC is officially designated as the India Centre and will play a key role in connecting industry, academia, startups and MSMEs for capacity building, improvement of green productivity, climate change adaptation and adopting best practices in lean



manufacturing.

This programme aims to provide compounded and integrated support services to small, medium and large manufacturing industries, including Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), across BRICS countries and the Global South.

BRICS Presidency will boost the National Mission on Interdisciplinary Cyber-Physical Systems (NM-ICPS), which is a flagship initiative of the Government of India under the Ministry of Science and Technology, focused on designing, developing and commercialising future-generation fourth/fifth Industrial Revolution technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT), cyber security, blockchain, AR/VR and robotics. BRICS will push various essential elements of industrial competencies such as smart manufacturing through "e/silent

factories" (like Bajaj Auto, Pune, and Havells-Lloyd, Rajasthan), quality (Zero Defect Zero Effect - ZED) and packaging, which align with the vibrant vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi: "Make in India, Make by India, Make for India and Globe."

The BRICS programme focuses on "Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability". India has strengthened resilience and innovation through digital infrastructure, semiconductor plants, green hydrogen technologies and quantum innovations like QNu Labs' Quantum Random Number Generator.

Government initiatives like the National Semiconductor Mission, National Green Hydrogen Mission and NM-ICPS are strengthening innovation, sustainability and economic stability. BRICS will further boost manufacturing, supply chains, employability and economic partnerships across the Global South. It will also become a cornerstone for social security coupled with labour market formalisation, participation of the women workforce and development of a skilled workforce for India and BRICS countries. BRICS will enhance the participation of women in leadership roles in promising growth sectors. This initiative will pave the way for India to achieve global economic leadership and will facilitate the gig economy across BRICS countries as well. BRICS will also address the gap in digital technologies and gig employment.

The National Productivity Council is actively

working by forming a BCIC platform that allows collaboration among academia, industry, startups and MSMEs. This will pave the way for training students, faculty members, industry practitioners and startups. NPC specialises in facilitating lean philosophy and smart manufacturing, including green productivity such as Total Factor Productivity (TFP) and Labour Productivity (LP).

Way forward for Viksit Bharat@2047

BRICS Presidency and APO Chairmanship for India will together form strong pillars for fostering vocational development across different sectors, especially benefiting youth, women and gig workers, while strengthening digital transformation technologies, green productivity, sustainability and inclusive growth across India, the Global South and the Asia-Pacific region. BRICS for India will place the nation on the global map as a forefront leader ("Vishwa Guru") in leadership and economic excellence with the support of the Global South, creating a foundation and growth pathway for Viksit Bharat@2047.

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INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



Opinion

El Niño may be about to give the world a preview of life in 2035

The climate situation brewing this year in the Pacific Ocean might make 2027 the hottest year on record.

David Wallace-Wells

A climate monster is growing right now in the Pacific Ocean, perhaps the most fearsome El Niño since before scientists even began modeling them. They now know the pattern quite well: A marine heat-wave in the Pacific Ocean scrambles global weather and produces in some places more intense droughts and in others more intense rainfall and flooding; disruptions to hurricane patterns and monsoon seasons, which can cause widespread crop failures; and much more punishing heat.

The El Niño building right now, and expected to crest around the end of next year, arrives on top of all our global warming. And it appears stupendously intense — almost certainly stronger than the “Super” El Niño of 2015-16, and perhaps the most intense since the epochal El Niño of 1877. The global consequences of that climatic event were so devastating that the environmental historian Mike Davis called them “Late Victorian Holocausts.”

The subtitle of Davis’s 2001 book is “El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World,” but his argument is not that climatic disasters were singularly responsible for mass suffering, even in the 19th century. Across decades of work of freelance scholarship and left-wing activism, Davis frequently struck notes of environmental alarm, but remained far too committed a radical to fall victim to ecological determinism. Instead, he argued, environmental disaster punishes those who have been made most vulnerable, with 19th-century El Niños a test for global political economy as much as a parable of ecological frailty. Almost certainly, the upcoming El Niño will be the same for us. Even a monster El Niño isn’t going to produce nearly as much human suffering as the one of 150 years ago. But we are going to learn an awful lot about how much climate disruption we can manage at the moment — and, presumably, how much we cannot.

Punishing El Niños didn’t arise for the first time in the late 19th century. The basic rhythm had been known to Peruvian fishermen for many hundreds of years by that point, and in more recent years historians have connected the dots with the collapse of ancient Egyptian dynasties and civilizations in Peru, and perhaps with the French Revolution, which began with bread riots and coincided almost perfectly with what is sometimes called the “Great El Niño” of 1789-93.

But for sheer intensity, most scientists agree, the climatological event which began in Pacific waters in 1877 — which the coming El Niño may equal or surpass, remember — stands above the rest. To illustrate its globe-wrapping, genuinely world-historical impact, Davis tags along on the grand tour which Ulysses Grant embarked on as he exited the presidency in 1877 — first to Egypt, where thousands were dying of famine and riots were widespread; then to India, where more than five million had officially died of famine in the previous three years; and then to China, where recent drought and famine had killed between eight million and 20 million people. The numbers can be numbing, but these were not normal events, in the 19th or any other century. “It was almost as if the Americans were inadvertently following in the footprints of a monster whose colossal trail of destruction extended from the Nile to the Yellow Sea,” Davis writes.

The monster was El Niño, and it also produced punishing drought and famine in the Philippines, Korea, Brazil, and throughout Africa, among other parts of the world. Similar years followed several times over the following decade, and in total this short series of intense El Niños resulted in tens of millions of deaths, Davis estimates — between 31.7 million and 61.3 million just in India, China and Brazil, and at least 10 million in India alone. Epidemics followed in famine-weakened populations — malaria, plague, dysentery, smallpox and cholera — and in the very same half-century, Davis writes, in which real hunger and famine were fast disappearing from Western Europe.

And the El Niño famines of the late 19th century were not only compounded by autocratic incompetence and colonialist cruelty, they also perhaps exacerbated those problems, Davis shows, enabling a last-dash European scramble to establish and extend imperial control over populations disempowered by hunger and illness in the global South. “What seemed from a metropolitan perspective the 19th century’s final blaze of imperial glory was, from an Asian or African viewpoint, only the hideous light of a giant funeral pyre.”

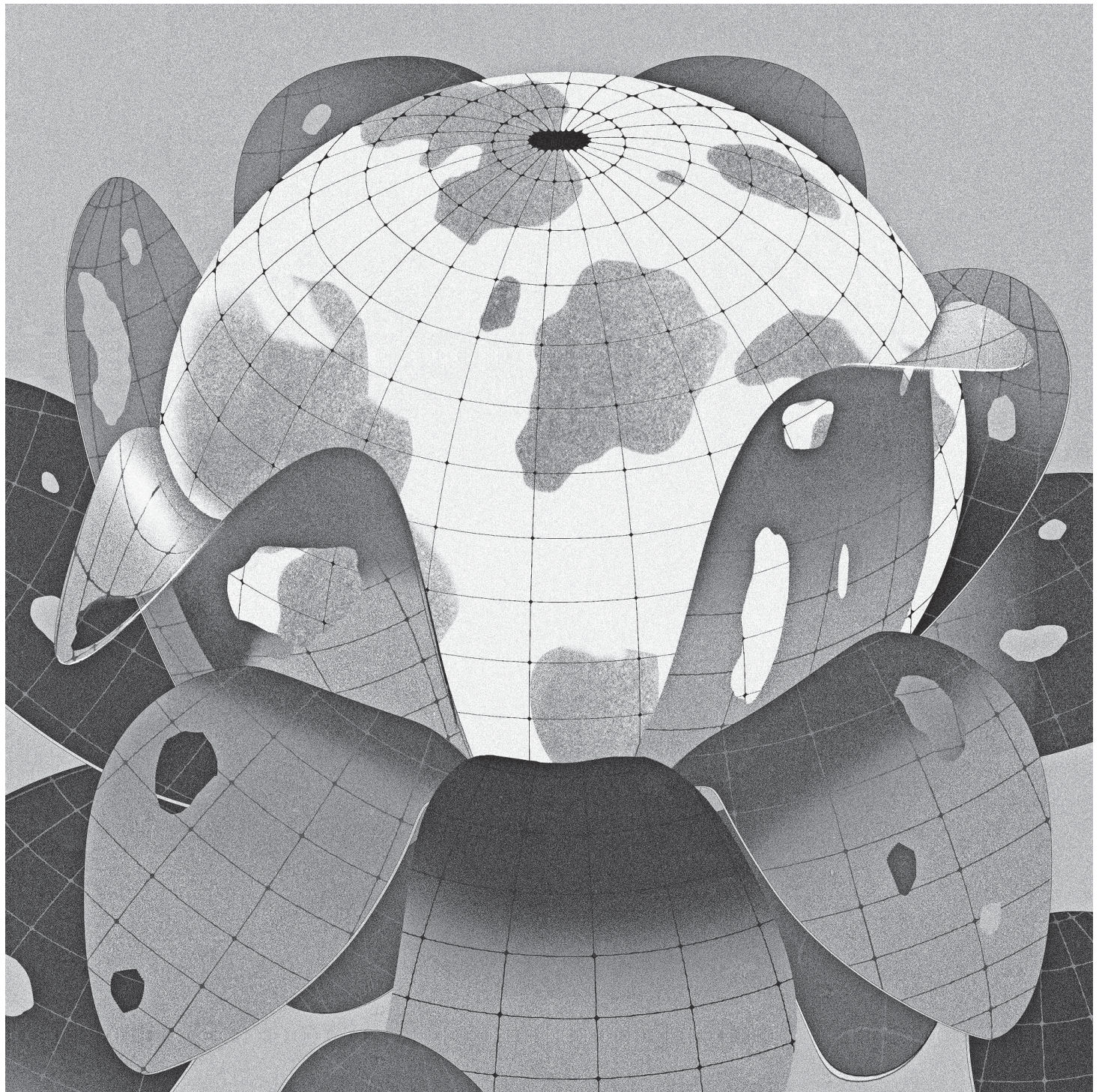
How much will burn in the 18 months to come? It is still too early to say with confidence, since though the models are flashing red, we are still early

enough in the season that scientists tend to be cautious in their projections. But some are already calling it a “Super Duper El Niño,” and others a “Godzilla El Niño,” and underlying warming has been accelerating in recent years, disconcertingly, raising the possibility that even a brief spike will push the planet into genuinely uncharted territory temperature-wise. In fact, it’s

States and elsewhere — prove less deadly than in recent memory? Last month, the climate scientist Andrew Dessler calculated that global warming is responsible for about 1.7 percent of summertime deaths in his home state of Texas. According to the imperfect-but-still-illuminating EM-DAT international disaster database, between 2022 and 2024 an average of more than

change that more extreme weather and cascading climate disasters would inevitably elevate public concern and with it, ideally, the need for collective action. Today, as unprecedented fires burn through the Southern forests downed by Hurricane Helene, a new conventional wisdom prevails — that the public has moved on from climate anxiety, burned out from the alarmism

tion Reduction Act? On his Substack, McKibben predicts it will quickly bring an end to the idea that “global warming is over,” as Americans grow more concerned about how fast the world is racing toward irreversible tipping points — in the Arctic, in the Amazon, in the Atlantic. In the climate and energy publication Heatmap, Jeva Lange argued it would instead be “bad news for climate poli-



IBRAHIM RAYINTAKATI

almost certain that this El Niño will make 2027 the hottest year on record by some margin, and there is a chance, the climate scientist James Hansen has suggested, that global average temperatures would jump to 1.7 degrees above the preindustrial average next year.

Scientists tend to talk about warming thresholds in terms of long-term averages rather than single-year bursts, but a monster El Niño will give us at least a brief preview of a hotter and more chaotic world — a 2027 like we might’ve expected to see in 2035, and which not that long ago didn’t seem likely before 2050. “Prepare for bedlam,” the environmental writer Bill McKibben wrote earlier this year in anticipation.

But if the super El Niño will offer a kind of brief preview of future warming, it will also offer a test of how well prepared and adapted the world is to that future. If droughts intensify across parts of Africa, how much worse will the world’s hunger crisis — already twice as bad as 2019, according to the World Food Program — become? Will the likely wildfires in Australia do as much human damage as the Black Summer of 2019-20, which destroyed thousands of homes, killed dozens of people and forced hundreds of others into military evacuations from beaches encircled by flame? (Not to mention blanketing Sydney in such thick smoke that the ferries couldn’t navigate the harbor and fire alarms in office buildings were routinely triggered by the ambient smoke.)

In even a weak El Niño a few years back, flooding displaced a half-million people in just one Brazilian state, so what will an intense one bring? Will adaptation and acclimatization mean that extreme heat — in the United

59,000 people died worldwide from extreme temperatures — about 20 times as high as the previous decade’s average.

It will also offer several other tests, perhaps no less consequential. The first concerns the science of warming, given long-running debates about just how much the temperature rise is accelerating — and why. Over the last decade or so, a high-profile group of alarm-raisers led by Hansen has published a series of papers and commentary suggesting that the scientific community has significantly underestimated the rate of warming, which, they argued, has been accelerating faster than the broader community has acknowledged. And that the fact that it is accelerating so quickly is a sign, they believe, that many conventional predictive models are calibrated wrong, that we are heading

for much worse warming in the decades ahead than almost anyone appreciates. Over the last few months, Hansen has proposed that this El Niño will offer an explicit test of the thesis. In the next year or two, he expects, we’ll know for sure.

Another test concerns public response and public opinion. A decade ago, it was conventional wisdom among those most focused on climate

of the Greta Thunberg years and fixated now on a series of successor panics, many of them no less apocalyptic: first about Covid and then about A.I., about smartphones and fertility rates and income inequality and the crisis of American democracy (to name just a few).

In politics and media, it’s true, climate worries have receded, replaced in headlines by affordability debates, stories about the electricity demands of data centers, and a kind of simplistic energy triumphalism. But public opinion has proved surprisingly resilient, with nearly as many Americans saying they “worry a great deal” about warming as they did at previous peaks in 2017, right after Donald Trump was inaugurated the first time, and 2020, right before the pandemic hit. The share is higher than any year in the presidencies of Joe Biden, with its major climate legislation and Los Angeles wildfire disaster; Barack Obama, with Hurricane Sandy and the Paris agreement; or George W. Bush, with Hurricane Katrina and “An Inconvenient Truth.” And though those survey responses can seem a bit hollow, given how few people truly orient their politics around climate action, it’s not clear that climate has fallen that much as a liberal political priority either: In a Pew poll conducted in August 2020, after “Green New Deal” debates throughout the Democratic primaries, climate ranked fifth among 12 issues among Biden supporters; in one conducted in fall 2024, when it had almost entirely disappeared from the campaign trail, climate ranked fifth of 10.

What will a super El Niño do to the effective settlement that has prevailed since the end of the climate protests and the doomed passage of the Infla-

tics,” particularly in America, where many of the El Niño effects might look to disengaged observers to be pretty salutary — more rain rather than less, for instance, bringing an end to the record drought now gripping so much of the U.S. and perhaps limiting the wildfire damage as a result (among other effects). And then there is the eternal objection that El Niños long predate global warming, are not, strictly speaking, a phenomenon of warming, and that they did far more human damage in the past than they will today.

And me? An awful lot depends on the actual size of El Niño and the particular scale and distribution of suffering it might unleash. In general, I tend to think climate people overestimate the political impact of discrete disasters — and that we process even mind-bending catastrophes largely by normalizing them, as we’ve done in recent years with wildfires in Los Angeles and Maui, mass heat deaths in the Pacific Northwest and on the Hajj, and flooding events in places like Spain and Brazil beyond what has been observed, in those places, for decades. But coming during a Donald Trump presidency, this one even more nakedly hostile to climate concern than the last, and on the heels of a war that has illustrated unmistakably the dangers of fossil-fuel dependence and driven up the price of food and energy, I do think a pattern of unmistakable global climate disruptions could do a lot to dislodge our seeming complacency. What comes next, as ever, would be as much a matter of political economy as climate.

DAVID WALLACE-WELLS, a writer for *Opinion* and a columnist for *The New York Times Magazine*, is the author of “*The Uninhabitable Earth*.”

OPINION

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Here's why I am not (yet) scared about hantavirus

Caitlin Rivers

Of the roughly 150 passengers and crew members who boarded the MV Hondius, a luxury cruise ship, originally destined for Antarctica, three are now dead from a rare infectious disease: a strain of hantavirus known as Andes virus. Three more were evacuated to hospitals on Wednesday after developing symptoms like fever and shortness of breath. Some other passengers who may have been infected disembarked before the outbreak was recognized, raising fears among health officials that the virus, which can have a mortality rate up to 30 to 40 percent, could spread more widely.

The current outbreak is notable to me as an epidemiologist who studies infectious diseases because hantaviruses, a family of viruses spread by wild rodents that can cause lung and kidney diseases, don't cause many outbreaks, despite being found all over the world. In fact, person-to-person transmission is exceedingly rare. If it is confirmed in this case, as I suspect it will be, it will make this event remarkable.

Despite the unsettling parallels to the early days of Covid-19, when cruise ships were among the first sites to be hit, the risks from this virus are quite different. Most hantaviruses infect only people who come into direct contact with infected rodent droppings, urine or saliva. Even the Andes virus, a strain that has been confirmed to pass between people, is a relatively poor spreader.

In previous outbreaks of hantavirus, person-to-person transmission has required sustained exposure, such as prolonged, close contact with a sick person, which is why the Andes virus strain, despite causing severe illness, is unlikely to cause an epidemic. The close quarters of the people on the cruise may have given the hantavirus an unusual opportunity to spread through close contact in shared spaces. Based on what we currently know, only people who were aboard the cruise ship and their close contacts are at risk.

Still, it's unwise to be too trusting when it comes to outbreaks. Viruses are wily. In the days and weeks ahead, there are a few developments I will be watching for that would change my level of concern.

Right now, all eight people with confirmed or suspected cases were passengers on the MV Hondius. If a case is found in someone who was not on board, I will grow more concerned about the potential for community spread. But even if more infections are found, the details will matter.

A new case with a direct connection to a passenger — for instance, the spouse of someone who was aboard — is explainable. Disease investigators can still hope to have a firm handle on chains of transmission. What would be more concerning is if an infection is found in someone with no obvious connection to the MV Hondius. Unlinked cases mean loose ends that investigators cannot see or manage. It would also concern me if cases were found in health care workers. Previous outbreaks of viruses with characteristics similar to the Andes virus have taken root in hospitals. A 2015 outbreak of MERS in South Korea comes to mind, in which a sick person visited at least two hospitals and a clinic, inadvertently touching off chains of transmission that led to 186 confirmed cases and 38 deaths. Cases in health care settings signal an escalating situation.

Another wild card is viral evolution. As the many Covid variants have demonstrated, viruses are always changing and adapting, and sometimes those changes lead to an increased ability to pass from person to person. Scientists will be closely examining samples from sick passengers from the MV Hondius to assess whether a new variant that spreads more easily is in play.

These scenarios are possible, but remote. In all likelihood, this outbreak will quickly come under control. But beyond monitoring for new developments, I will also be watching the effectiveness of the response. The demands of the Covid pandemic and subsequent political backlash have depleted public health programs, leaving us less prepared to mount a strong response.

Whatever its final form, the hantavirus event is yet another exercise of our ability to stop outbreaks. The public should expect clear communication, transparency about what is known and unknown, thorough scientific investigation and operational excellence. Nailing those elements could turn this unusual cluster into a lasting contribution to the science of outbreak response. If investigators do their jobs well and share what they find, the world will be better prepared, not just for hantaviruses, but for whatever comes next.

CAITLIN RIVERS is the author of "Crisis Averted: The Hidden Science of Fighting Outbreaks."



Crew members heading toward land on Wednesday from the MV Hondius, where a rare strain of the hantavirus that can be transmitted between humans was confirmed.

French literature is in an uproar

Olivier Guez

If you have never picked up a book in French, you might not even have heard of Grasset, and what it might mean to have its longtime chief executive Olivier Nora effectively guillotined by the rapacious right-wing industrialist Vincent Bolloré. And yet, in France, the news of Mr. Nora's sudden departure from his post quickly flew beyond the borders of Parisian publishing and cultural elite circles. In the aftermath, over 200 writers — myself included — walked away from Grasset.

This is not just a story about the French publishing industry. The evident struggle between Mr. Bolloré and Mr. Nora is a microcosm of the battle for cultural control that is taking place globally between the wealthy new right and the cultural old guard. Think Jeff Bezos and The Washington Post, Rupert Murdoch and Fox News. The abrupt change in leadership at Grasset, too, is a case study in the way members of the increasingly powerful ultra wealthy treat those who don't think or see the world as they do.

A publishing house is not meant to be a propaganda machine. It is a place where conflict, doubt and nuance can, and should, coexist. Publishing houses are a hallmark of free and open societies: the nurturing and production of literature that explores the follies and the potential of the human condition.

Under the leadership of Mr. Nora, Grasset was the best of this ideal. The works of unapologetic feminist writers were placed on the shelf next to old-guard chauvinists, pro-Palestinian authors next to Zionists, male priests next to women rabbis, up-and-comers next to baby boomers, powerful people next to anti-establishment protesters. Grasset's authors rarely agreed on much, but as the letter of protest we signed said, we have had — and still have — a common enemy: authoritarianism.

Grasset was just a tiny corner of the Bolloré financial empire. But losing Mr. Nora's leadership is a sign of disdain among the powerful for a world of the recent past, one in which the public still accepted and cultivated contradictions, political complications, even conflict. It was not necessarily an enormously profitable world, but one where political opposites respected those who did not think alike, where knowledge itself garnered respect.

Mr. Nora, like the institution he led, was open and attentive to other people's ideas. His weakness, if there was one, was immutable: his pedigree, which made him an easy target for the far right. Indeed, Mr. Nora is almost a caricature of the Parisian intellectual elite — his father was a political adviser to several major figures in French politics, and his uncle, Pierre Nora, was a longtime editor at another publishing house, Gallimard. Under Mr. Nora, Grasset maintained a pluralistic editorial policy.

Mr. Bolloré, by contrast, is the owner of a vast industrial conglomerate that has interests ranging from oil pipelines and energy storage to electric buses. Over the past several years, he has also been building a cultural empire, buying newspapers, radio stations, television channels and publishing



HARRIET LENNEMAN

houses. He acquired Grasset three years ago. As he picked up these levers of cultural power, he became editor, producer and distributor all at once. He is also, not incidentally, an extremely conservative Catholic. He has not only repeatedly brought outlets he has bought to heel by pushing the departure of people in important positions, replacing them with leaders apparently more loyal to him and his values. He has also leveraged his

outlets to propagate fear and disseminate conspiracy theories about a decayed and decadent West, a Europe under threat from foreigners and egocentric old elites.

But Mr. Bolloré is, above all, a businessman: His cultural crusade is a very efficient mon-eymaker. His 24-hour news channel CNews — a kind of French Fox News — is the most popular news channel in France. Over the last two years, Mr. Bolloré also transformed Fayard, another historic French publishing house, into a largely far-right propaganda machine. Some of the most prominent figures of the French far right are now published by Fayard, including Jordan Bardella, the leader of the Rassemblement National, formerly the Front National. The party is

leading the polls for next year's presidential elections.

We are opening our eyes rather late in France to the efforts of the right to assume cultural control, to determine the words we consume, the discourse in which we partake. The message of authoritarians everywhere is the same: Whoever isn't with me is against me, and whoever won't follow me will get the boot. The boss is always right, so he steamrolls his way through and imposes his worldview. He exerts his power. He demands absolute loyalty from his subordinates. The plutocrats have become oligarchs.

Mr. Nora's departure was not enough. Mr. Bolloré also went on to smear the authors of Grasset who signed the letter. To do so he wrote an essay in his own newspaper — Le Journal du Dimanche — where he disdainfully referred to them as the "small caste that believes itself above everything and everyone, and that co-opts and supports itself." He claimed to differ on the publication schedule for a book by the French-Algerian author Boualem Sansal set by Mr. Nora, and on the scale of the longtime C.E.O.'s salary. And then he fashioned himself, a billionaire, as the defender of the millions of French who struggle to make ends meet.

Most writers in France are barely eking out a living; people here spend less and less time reading, same as everywhere else. Few authors live off

their writing income and, apart from rare exceptions, they do not belong to the global elite.

Not so very long ago, men like Mr. Bolloré paid to achieve a veneer of culture and cultivated a certain notion of beauty: The barons of the Gilded Age endowed America with incredible cultural institutions. Recently, business tycoons François Pinault and Bernard Arnault built in Paris magnificent art collections now open to the public.

Now these pretenses are all but obsolete: The wolf no longer has to disguise himself as the grandmother to get his way. Oligarchs are no longer staying hidden. They are flaunting their power, destroying, exploiting, intimidating and getting richer than any group of people in human history. They show utter disregard for the world, and complete impunity. They believe they are invincible.

The Grasset affair is a French story, and Mr. Nora is just one man. But it is a warning to us all, to the democratic peoples of every country. It shows the threats that are in motion in our societies. Our democracies are still open, but for how much longer?

OLIVIER GUEZ is a French writer who published five books at Grasset. His most recent book in translation is "The Disappearance of Josef Mengele." This article was translated from the French by Allison M. Charette.

Has Trump effectively left NATO?

MAJOR, FROM PAGE 1 military spending — an approach that Mark Rutte, the current NATO Secretary General, tried to continue into Mr. Trump's second term. (This approach is sometimes referred to as "daddy diplomacy," after Mr. Rutte joked to Mr. Trump that "daddy has to sometimes use strong language.")

In Mr. Trump's second term, however, obsequiousness is no longer enough. His administration's policy on Ukraine has been to negotiate on terms largely set by Russia, and Mr. Trump has often treated Russia more as a potential partner rather than as an adversary. Many Europeans saw Mr. Trump's threats to annex Greenland in January as proof that the U.S. government does not respect international law, acts unilaterally and uses force to get what it wants. Any hope that Greenland was an aberration rather than a precedent was dashed with the war in Iran.

The Iran war is an economic disaster for most of Europe. The near-complete closure of the Strait of Hormuz, through which about 20 percent of global oil and gas exports flowed before the war, has driven up energy prices, increased inflation and smothered the timid economic growth that was underway; the German government has halved its growth forecast for 2026, to 0.5 percent, because of war-related price increases.

Turning points are usually only clear in retrospect, but Iran and the Greenland crisis may prove to be the turning points that confirmed what negotiations over Ukraine merely suggested: This United States, far from being an

ally of Europe, acts against Europe.

In response, Europe is quietly reimagining what deterrence and defense might look like with limited or no U.S. assistance. The Europeans have already increased military spending — after decades of low spending, Germany will allocate 3.5 percent of its gross domestic product by 2029; Poland plans to spend 4.8 percent this year, and Estonia, directly bordering Russia, is planning to spend 5.4 percent. There are more Europeans than there used to be in command posts, doing more so that the Americans can do less. And there are initiatives to develop stockpiles of domestic deep-strike precision missiles — essentially, European Tomahawks.

The task is monumental, and will require more than just replacing U.S. weapons and personnel. The U.S. approach to planning and waging wars has shaped Europe's defense for decades. A Europeanized NATO will have to develop a European way of deterrence and defense that reflects the continent's political culture, geography and resources. It will need political leadership, which could take the form of the existing informal E5 format, comprising France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Britain, or the coalition of the willing, the group formed in response to the war in Ukraine, in which the United States has only a supporting role.

Nuclear deterrence currently relies primarily on U.S. weapons, and there is no indication that the United States intends to limit its nuclear guarantee. But both France and Britain, which have their own nuclear weapons, are



CARL DE KEYSER/MAGNUM PHOTOS

reviewing their policies. Last July, the two countries signed a new nuclear pact to intensify cooperation, and in March President Emmanuel Macron announced that France would expand its arsenal and increase cooperation with neighboring countries, with an eye toward creating a European deterrent.

Europeans are not naïve. NATO countries are stronger together, and Europe cannot maintain the same level of defense without the United States. But the risk of an unreliable Washington is real, as is the risk of a

Russia that believes Washington to be unreliable.

There is a path — incremental, cooperative — to responsibility sharing in the interests of both sides; to a relationship that is newly balanced, pragmatic and unsentimental. There is also a path to chaos and hostility, and a relationship that is damaged beyond repair. Europeans may hope for the former, but it is prudent to be prepared for the latter.

CLAUDIA MAJOR is a senior vice president at the German Marshall Fund.

والتفتن لو ان ما في الارض حين جيز لها
 ما كان ين هي لم تفتح بكافيتها
 (عنترو بن مالك الحارثي)

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If it is not self-satisfied, a soul finds no place enough for it even if the whole world was available.

Amr bin Malik Al-Harhi
 (Medieval Arab poet)

Opinion

Institutional ties deepen Saudi-Turkish strategic alignment

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Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan visited Ankara this week, where he met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Turkish counterpart, Hakan Fidan. Both foreign ministers co-chaired the third meeting of the Saudi-Turkish Coordination Council, which is the solid institutional mechanism created to strengthen ties between Riyadh and Ankara.

While high-profile visits and the signing of major agreements often make headlines in Saudi-Turkish relations, a gradual process of institutionalization in relations is taking shape. Therefore, it is important to highlight the mechanisms of this process, and to understand why institutionalization matters for the long-term goals in Saudi-Turkish relations.

Institutionalization in international relations refers to a structured cooperation that includes regular diplomatic coordination and creation of formal and issue-specific mechanisms. In the case of Saudi-Turkish relations, the Saudi-Turkish Coordination Council represents a solid example of institutionalization in relations.

Created in 2016, the council aimed to be the main platform for structured cooperation. Although its effectiveness remained limited for several years, it gained momentum last year, when it convened its second meeting. Over the past two years, the council has transformed relations between Riyadh and Ankara into a more structured form of inter-governmental cooperation.

The significance of such mechanisms is often underestimated. However, the council is more than just a formal body. It facilitates closer cooperation across several domains in relations from trade to security. The Saudi-Turkish Parliamentary Friendship Committee is another mechanism that functions to strengthen ties between the Saudi Shura Council and the Turkish Grand National Assembly. In international relations, such mechanisms are often described as contributing to "institutional resilience," meaning they provide continuity in bilateral relations even when the political atmosphere changes.

The shift toward institutionalization has become particularly visible in defense and security cooperation, with the signing of military cooperation agreements,

the expansion of defense industry partnerships, and increased intelligence coordination, all of which reflect a more coordinated approach in Saudi-Turkish relations. In particular, defense cooperation has emerged as one of the strongest institutional pillars in their relations.

Institutionalization is also evident in the economic and infrastructural cooperation. To raise trade volume and institutionalize economic cooperation, Saudi-Turkish business forums have been organized to bring together stakeholders from both countries. Last year, the two sides also convened the Saudi-Turkish Economic Cooperation Summit, which provided a platform for businessmen and investors to explore new opportunities for collaboration and investment.

More recently, the Saudi-Turkiye Investment Forum was held in Riyadh in February for the same purpose. Speaking at the event, the Saudi investment minister said that the investment forum reflected an unprecedented level of political and economic alignment between the two countries and demonstrated the determination of both leaderships to expand their partnership to "new strategic horizons."

After the agreement between Saudi Arabia Railways and Turkish State Railways, the two countries announced plans this month for a rail project that would link the Kingdom to Turkiye via Jordan and Syria, with completion expected by the end of the year. This initiative reflects close coordination in transport cooperation, as both Riyadh and Ankara seek to enhance regional connectivity and facilitate trade along a strategic north-south corridor.

During the third meeting of the Saudi-Turkish Coordination Council, the two sides also signed an agreement on mutual visa exemption for holders of diplomatic and special passports. This represents not only a further step in the institutionalization of ties, but also a clear expression of political will to deepen both political and economic relations.

Institutionalization functions not only as a mechanism for cooperation, but also as a tool for strategic risk management, helping to reduce the adverse impacts of shifting regional dynamics. A turn toward institutionalized relations is key for both Riyadh and Ankara to achieve their shared regional vision and build their cooperation on a sustainable basis.

Defense cooperation has emerged as one of the strongest institutional pillars in their relations



COURTESY: AMIAD RASHEVSHI/ARQ AL-AWSAQ

Given the intensity of the current political period, this election is likely to be one of the most consequential in Israel's history

Israeli election merry-go-round begins in earnest

YOSSI MEKELBERG



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The date of Israel's next general election has yet to be set, but the entire political system is already gearing up and gathering momentum, much of it reactive to the findings of opinion polls. The first major move on the ever-changing chessboard of Israeli politics has come from Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, who previously served as prime ministers under a rotation agreement in what became known as the "change government" formed in 2021. They have announced that they will run together as a single faction in the forthcoming election.

In principle, this move is aimed at creating greater clarity by presenting a centrist bloc as a viable alternative to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party and its far-right-messianic

and ultra-Orthodox coalition partners. However, this is unlikely to be the final move in a game of musical chairs, in which alliances are constantly negotiated, and a stream of veterans and novices look for a political home to increase their chances of election to the next Knesset.

One party likely to disappear is Benny Gantz's center-right Blue and White. It has become apparent that support for Gantz, a former defense minister who only a few years ago led the largest faction in the Knesset without being able to form a government, is quickly evaporating. His allies are deserting him in search of new political homes. One figure who parted ways with Gantz some time ago, and whose next move is being closely watched, is former Israeli military chief Gadi Eisenkot and his party, Yashar. Will he join the Bennett-Lapid alliance, or, as some suggest,

align with Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, which leans more to the right than the center? Alternatively, he may choose to test his newly formed party independently at the ballot box and negotiate his way into government afterward.

The immediate task of the opposition is to unseat Netanyahu and his populist government, which has become exponentially more authoritarian and broken all rules of good governance as a result of its leader's corruption trial. A potential game-changer may emerge from behind-the-scenes efforts to secure a pardon for Netanyahu. He has already submitted a request to President Yitzhak Herzog, reportedly supported by US President Donald Trump. However, the request was highly unconventional, amounting more to a demand to dismiss all charges while allowing him to remain in politics and seek

another term of office — hardly something the Israeli legal system could accept without compromising its integrity.

Netanyahu's request to be pardoned is an extraordinarily audacious one. Under normal circumstances, a pardon requires either a conviction or an admission of guilt, but neither condition has been fulfilled. Recently, Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara grudgingly heeded Herzog's request that she would be open to initiating plea bargain discussions with Netanyahu's legal team, but insisted that such talks would have to be "without preconditions and without harming the trial."

These are still early days in what is, as yet, an unofficial election campaign. However, given the intensity of the current political period, this election is likely to be one of the most consequential in Israel's history.

Opinion

Tremors in South Sudan are a warning of worse to come

HAFED AL-GHWELL



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South Sudan is nearing a phase more dangerous than the civil war that ended in 2018. Earlier violence revolved around elite competition in Juba; now instability spreads from the collapse of the state's economic core and inward from a regional conflict system stretching across Sudan, Chad, Libya, the Central Africa Republic, Ethiopia, and the Red Sea corridor.

The pressure is not from a single front. Oil revenues have collapsed, state salaries have evaporated, and armed groups finance themselves through looting, cattle raiding, checkpoints, and remittances. Local militias increasingly ignore leaders who once exercised authority over them.

In effect, South Sudan's crises resemble tectonic stress accumulation. "Small" shocks traveling rapidly across oil infrastructure, ethnic mobilization, border militarization, humanitarian collapse, and succession struggles are making a wider rupture visible.

Economic collapse is at the heart of South Sudan's maladies.

Oil accounts for roughly 90 percent of state revenues and nearly all foreign exchange. Pipeline disruptions linked to Sudan's war hit Juba like a financial airstrike, cutting revenues by over 70 percent and shredding the patronage system that tied

commanders, governors, militias, and civil servants to the center. Now, security forces and civil servants have reportedly gone unpaid for seven to 11 months.

In a country where salaried employment sustains entire extended families, it triggers cascading effects: reduced food access, collapsed local markets, rising armed recruitment, and intensified communal raiding. At the same time, currency depreciation and inflation have rendered imported fuel, medicine, and food unaffordable,

corroding the social fabric. Unpaid soldiers now subsist on extraction, and government offensives in Upper Nile and Jonglei resemble mobile resource raids, confiscating cattle, grain, and river commerce.

Juba's response to fiscal collapse has worsened the long-term outlook.

A reported \$13 billion financing arrangement linked to UAE-based HBK DOP securitizes future oil production over nearly two decades, with minimal parliamentary scrutiny. Terms remain opaque, and revenue streams are being pledged before production stability exists.

Such oil-backed debt cycles have repeatedly transformed oil ministries into repayment agencies for external creditors. Angola experienced similar oil-backed debt cycles during earlier commodity booms,

while Congo-Brazzaville and Chad repeatedly mortgaged future production against immediate liquidity needs. South Sudan risks the same fate.

Economic deterioration would be dangerous in isolation, but regional militarization has made the situation combustible. A contiguous instability corridor now runs from southern Libya through Chad and Darfur into South Sudan and the Horn. Arms, fighters, fuel, gold, and smuggled capital move through networks blending insurgency, commerce, and statecraft. Libya's "Kufra corridor," for instance, channels weapons via Chad and Darfur, fusing militia economies and intelligence services.

Meanwhile, Russian-linked Africa Corps networks accelerate militarization along the Sudan-Central Africa Republic-South Sudan border, where gold extraction and proxy relationships create hybrid security-commercial systems that spread violence across nominal borders.

South Sudan's own geography favors fragmentation.

Marshlands, floodplains, and porous frontiers defy centralized control. Large parts of Upper Nile and Jonglei already function through negotiated local authority, and under stress, commanders, cattle guards and ethnic militias eclipse ministries.

Sudan's war further amplifies the pressure in South Sudan, even though Juba officially maintains neutrality. Neither the Rapid Support Forces nor the Sudanese army believes it; the army suspects Juba of permitting RSF logistical movement, while South Sudanese opposition groups search for external sponsors.

Humanitarian indicators point to systemic failure with millions requiring assistance, especially refugees and internally displaced persons who, together, number almost half

the population. Flooding, food insecurity, and aid reductions compound the emergency. Neighboring states have limited absorption capacity — Sudan at war, Ethiopia volatile, Uganda strained — making secondary migration toward Libya and the Mediterranean increasingly likely.

December 2026 is, therefore, less a democratic milestone than a possible ignition point. Spoiler factions have little incentive to trust electoral outcomes. Armed groups excluded from resource access may see disruption as rational, while elite factions in Juba remain divided over succession. Given the economic collapse, buying loyalty becomes infeasible.

South Sudan is no longer merely a fragile post-conflict republic; it is the convergence point of a broader regional fracture system.

Oil revenues have collapsed, and armed groups finance themselves through looting

Local militias increasingly ignore leaders who once exercised authority over them

Will AI level up skills — or widen inequality?

MARIA LOMBARDI



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Recent advances in artificial intelligence have created widespread expectations of substantial productivity gains. Early studies, such as one showing that AI increased the productivity of customer support agents by 15 percent on average — with less-experienced workers getting a much bigger boost — as well as emerging evidence of AI-driven productivity gains in macro data, have further elevated hopes for a surge in output per worker.

As with past innovations, a key question is how the gains from productivity growth will be distributed. Historically, technological advances have disrupted labor markets and often widened gaps in earnings and employment between individuals according to their educational level. More than half of the overall changes in the US wage structure over the last four decades can be attributed to a relative decline in wages for blue-collar workers in manufacturing and clerical jobs where routine tasks could be automated.

Many fear that AI will increase inequality. But the fact that, unlike previous technologies, these systems can perform complex cognitive tasks raises the possibility that AI

could democratize skills. In other words, AI could enable workers with limited formal training to perform tasks that previously required extensive education, thereby narrowing the gap between workers.

In a recent study, my co-authors and I examined AI's effect on individuals with a high-school diploma compared to those with a postsecondary degree. Participants completed a task based on a realistic hypothetical business scenario: They had to respond to an email from their boss by

analyzing several sources of information. Half of them — randomly selected — had access to a virtual AI assistant embedded in the platform, while the other half did not.

We found that AI could reduce inequality between workers of different educational levels. While access to AI improved both groups' performance, the effect was much greater for the less-educated participants. While the latter performed significantly worse than higher-educated participants in the absence of any technical support, access to AI closed 75 percent of the initial performance gap, with gains in both content and writing quality.

To understand the remaining gap, we analyzed participants' interactions with the AI assistant and found qualitative

differences in engagement. Higher-educated users were more likely to give structured prompts and provide specific instructions aimed at guiding the assistant through thinking over the task and generating the final output. Moreover, because many participants combined AI-generated text with their own contributions, quality still seemed to reflect education-driven productivity differences.

To determine whether using the AI assistant affected participants' ability to articulate and justify their reasoning once it was no longer available, they were asked follow-up questions immediately after completing the task, with no access to the tool. There was no evidence that previous AI use harmed subsequent performance for either group. In fact, some of the gains from the AI assistant carried over for the participants with no postsecondary education, a finding consistent with genuine engagement with the problem rather than pure task delegation.

To be sure, generative AI does not eliminate the role of human capital in performance, nor does it equalize fundamental abilities. Instead, we find that it relaxes execution constraints that are more binding for individuals with less formal education.

Whether AI ends up narrowing or widening inequality will depend less on the technology itself than on the companies and institutions shaping its adoption and use. Worryingly, recent evidence suggests that AI usage is already more common among more educated workers. Emerging corporate practices are reinforcing this trend, as major tech firms move beyond encouraging AI adoption to mandating it — and even factoring its use into performance reviews.

Since the push for AI adoption is mainly concentrated in highly skilled sectors such as tech, it risks deepening existing disparities rather than broadening access to the workers who stand to benefit from it the most. Compounding this

problem is the finding that AI may diminish hiring for entry-level positions, which less-educated workers typically use to get their foot on the employment ladder — raising the possibility of that ladder being pulled up even as these tools improve and increasingly close the performance gap.

If access, know-how, and organizational support remain concentrated among the already advantaged, the benefits of AI may be captured in ways that reproduce the inequalities associated with past technological change.

Studies have raised hopes of a surge in worker output

AI may be diminishing hiring for entry-level positions

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EDITORIALS



SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Democrats' internal squabble over 2024 autopsy speaks to a bigger issue

It's common in national politics for both of our main political parties to conduct studies of what went wrong after they lose big in elections.

The Republicans did it after Mitt Romney lost to Barack Obama in 2012. And the Republican National Committee promptly released the so-called autopsy in March 2013 — just five months after the election — at the National Press Club.

Many of the recommendations in that report, including becoming more inclusive and reaching out to disaffected Hispanic and female voters, fell by the wayside when Donald Trump assumed complete control of the GOP beginning in 2016. But that's not our focus here.

By releasing the autopsy, the GOP showed first that it was willing to publicly air and confront the reasons behind its defeat and second that it welcomed engaging proactively in a necessary internal debate over the future direction of the party.

The Democratic National Committee ordered up a similar autopsy after Trump convincingly won back the presidency in 2024, shocking appalled Democrats in the process.

Eighteen months later, that report has yet to see the light of day.

DNC Chair Ken Martin's refusal to release it now has become a flashpoint within the party. A

recent interview Martin gave to Jon Favreau, a former Obama administration staffer and co-host of the "Pod Save America" podcast, helped a simmering debate boil over.

"Why did you spend the money (to do) the report in the first place if you weren't going to release the full results of it?" Favreau pressured Martin.

Well, yes. Why indeed? Martin's response was that "re-litigating" what went wrong in 2024 won't help win the midterms in 2026. What was important, Martin said, was to respond to the lessons learned from that debacle.

What were those lessons? He didn't say, at least in the interview with Favreau. "Everything mattered," he said, clearing up absolutely nothing.

Numerous Democratic politicians disagree with Martin and think the postmortem should be made public, including none other than 2024 loser Kamala Harris, who's eyeing another run in 2028. There's reporting that Martin's hold on the job is tenuous.

As well it should be.

The issue isn't what's in the report. We would be surprised if there were anything particularly illuminating. Democrats' shortcomings in 2024 weren't hard to discern. From Joe Biden's disastrous decision to run for reelection to a host of far-left positions Harris and others took back in

2020 during the primary election that Biden ultimately won, the party had removed itself from contention for too large a swath of Americans — and not just those in Trump's MAGA movement.

Optics are the real problem with Martin's intransigence. People are bound to ask: What is Martin hiding? What's in the report that must be kept from view?

But beyond the obvious political fumble, the bigger issue is what Martin's secrecy says about the Democratic Party's willingness, or lack thereof, to figure out how to appeal to Americans outside its urban and college-town strongholds. As they say in the world of therapy, the first step toward fixing a problem is admitting you have one. Whether intentional or not, what the tedious cloak-and-dagger saga says to those who aren't political junkies is that the Dems don't think they have much of an issue. Nothing, at least, that "better messaging" or "talking to manosphere podcast hosts" won't fix.

Those who do follow politics closely, of course, are aware that many Democratic Party leaders believe the party needs to adjust its policies, not just its messaging. On social media, the intra-party debate is raging over whether the party needs to move further left, particularly on matters of taxing the rich, or whether it must appeal more to centrists, particularly on social issues successfully weap-

onized by Republicans to depict Dems as out of touch with mainstream values.

That is an unavoidable internal battle the Democratic Party would do well to conduct in the open.

American voters in the middle — you know, the sorts of people who determine the outcome of national elections — in our view won't be put off by witnessing a messy debate. And, really, what is there to lose? Public polling consistently has shown the party's favorability to be in the mid-30s.

Martin apparently thinks that airing such disagreements in the open will harm the party's midterms prospects. But voters' choices in November will be overwhelmingly driven by their feelings about Trump, whose own approval ratings are as low as the Democratic Party's as a brand. Whether or not the 2024 autopsy is made public, those who want more checks on Trump's power will vote for Democrats because that's their only practical choice.

We will lay out our views soon on the challenges that lay before the Republicans.

As for the Democrats, we believe the party needs to forge a new identity to better compete in 2028. The current brand is perceived as feckless. And, the party would be well to realize, the next presidential election isn't that long from now, at least in political terms.

So release the autopsy, already.

Quotes of the Week

"I don't know why any Chicago legislator would vote for anything that doesn't benefit the people that they represent and vote for right now. At a time in which property values are increasing and affordability is becoming that much more of a challenge, to do anything in favor of entities with means without supporting families who have needs, I would find that short-sighted."

MAYOR BRANDON JOHNSON

"The pope would rather talk about the fact that it's OK for Iran to have a nuclear weapon. And I don't think that's very good. I think he's endangering a lot of Catholics and a lot of people."

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP

"Walgreens should be charged with first-degree corporate abandonment."

ALD. WILLIAM HALL

"I do believe that this marks, without exception, the single most consequential election for governor that our state has ever seen in our history."

VIVEK RAMASWAMY, REPUBLICAN NOMINEE FOR OHIO GOVERNOR

"The commander in chief has the sole authority to lead our troops in wartime, but I've lost too many friends on the battlefield to allow that to happen without Congress exercising its constitutional role to clearly define the mission with safeguards and a deadline."

U.S. REP. TOM BARRETT

"This is an incredibly talented group. We do the right things. We play the right way. If we prepare and trust each other, then (there's) nothing much else to do."

PETE CROW-ARMSTRONG

A cautionary tale from UK local elections as Brits move to the extremes

Britain held its local elections Thursday, and one headline was the ascendancy of Nigel Farage's right-wing Reform party over the traditional Conservatives. But the day hardly brought succor for the Labour Party; the traditional party of the left lost ground in key constituencies to the Green Party, historically a marginal entity in the United Kingdom but now the party of choice among 18-to-24-year-old voters.

Even Labour's first minister of Wales, Baroness Morgan of Ely, lost her seat.

Beleaguered British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, meanwhile, was just about hanging on. To many minds, he is a dead man walking, soon to be abandoned by his Labour Party.

What is the takeaway? The

results certainly look dismal for moderates of any persuasion; the Reform and Green supporters hate each other with a passion. They're also a vote of no confidence in the legacy parties.

And they're further evidence of how Britain, not unlike the U.S., is now deeply divided between the affluent, educated urbanites who embrace progressive ideals and government spending — in Chicago we'd call them lakefront liberals — and the population living in rural areas and hollowed-out factory towns who feel abandoned by the elite establishment, many of whom abhor Britain's porous borders and lament what they see as an immigration-driven collapse of both social services and a traditional British life.

Age came into play, too. Despite

a popular leader in Kemi Badenoch, the traditional Conservative Party increasingly is seen as a gerontocracy appealing only to the aged. Labour has some of the same problems, having lost a hefty chunk of its traditional working-class supporters. All of the energy is at their flanks.

Analysts have been split between the belief that this is a new era of multiparty politics with its own dynamics and the conviction that it is the same old two-party system re-forming itself, with two different parties. If you buy the latter theory, which is persuasive, you have to arrive at the conclusion that more and more voters are moving to the extremes.

It's also striking how much Middle East policy has seeped into domestic elections: The Greens

are unabashedly pro-Palestinian, while the anti-Islamist Reform crowd offers firm support for Israel. Most British voters wanted to choose one loyalty or another, not a nuanced view.

For the legacy parties, the warnings are clear. Perceptions of power matter. Voters who fear the imminent destruction of their country if the opposition gains power will vote tactically. If the Conservatives are seen as unable to stop Labour or the Greens, voters will choose Reform. The same applies the other way around: If the Greens are in ascendancy, the tactical anti-Reform voter will choose them.

Any bowler-hatted man in the middle had better open the umbrella and brace for the storm to come.

The importance of Chicagoans' civic life

By Penny Pritzker
and Bryan Traubert
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

When we celebrate the new year in 2050 — if we are fortunate enough — we will be in our 90s, and our four grandchildren will be approaching age 30. Our hope is to see Chicago celebrated in headlines for its vibrancy — a city attracting new residents, welcoming immigrants, generating economic opportunity citywide and offering meaningful paths forward for the next generation.

We also hope Chicago remains a place where young people, including our grandchildren, choose to live or move to and build their lives.

There's no doubt that Chicago today already offers unmatched culture, diversity, architecture, neighborhoods and, most importantly, energetic and creative people. But cities are not static. How Chicago evolves will depend on the choices made by the Chicagoans of today. Will you choose to stay and engage in civic life? Will you choose to contribute your talent, leadership, creativity and time to strengthening the city around you?

One important trend since COVID-19 is that many business and civic leaders are no longer tied to place and community in the way they once were. Technology has made it possible to work from almost anywhere. That flexibility brings real benefits, but it also raises a serious question: What happens to cities such as Chicago if too many people opt out of committing to where they live?

We want to make the case to current and future leaders that choosing a place — and choosing to invest in it — is fulfilling and still matters deeply. And we believe with all our hearts that Chicago is worth that commitment.

Only one of us grew up in Illinois, but we both have spent our adult lives here, raised our children here and built our careers here. We know how fortunate we have been. Chicago gave us far more than professional opportunity. It gave us community, perspective and a chance to contribute to something larger than ourselves — values that our parents instilled in both of us from an early age.

I, Bryan, had the privilege of being a medical doctor, caring for patients from every part of the city and across every economic background. Those patients entrusted their health, but they also shared their life stories — their journey, hopes, worries, humor and resilience. Those daily human connections and oral histories were profoundly enriching and reinforced a core truth that Chicago's greatest strength lies in its people.

I, Penny, dedicated more than 35 years in corporate leadership to building businesses, creating



Towering clouds form a backdrop for the Willis Tower and Chicago skyline on June 17, 2025. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

There's no doubt that Chicago today already offers unmatched culture, diversity, architecture, neighborhoods and, most importantly, energetic and creative people. But cities are not static. How Chicago evolves will depend on the choices made by the Chicagoans of today. Will you choose to stay and engage in civic life? Will you choose to contribute your talent, leadership, creativity and time to strengthening the city around you?

jobs, mentoring and supporting young talent. Helping early-career professionals grow in confidence and capability — and seeing what happens when people are given real opportunities and support — makes clear to us that talent exists everywhere, but access to opportunity simply does not.

Outside of our professional lives, we are fortunate to have engaged deeply in civic life for more than five decades. That work has included strengthening schools, building and improving parks, establishing pathways that connect education to employment, supporting violence-prevention efforts and contributing to community-led economic development projects. We are proud to support and help launch initiatives such as the Chicago Prize, Chicago Talent Challenge, P33 and the Chicago Public Educa-

tion Fund, and to have served on boards of vital institutions and city governing bodies.

A common theme across these experiences is the privilege to work with strong, dynamic and principled leaders such as Andrea Saenz of The Chicago Community Trust, Arne Duncan of Chicago CRED, Juan Salgado of City Colleges of Chicago, Carlos Nelson of the Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corp., Ayesha Jaco of West Side United and Brad Henderson of P33, as well as so many others who, through their leadership, have improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of Chicagoans. Working alongside people of that dedication and commitment is both inspiring and humbling.

The relationships we formed have enriched our lives.

We also understand that there

is still work to do across our city. Chicago's public schools have improved, but far too many children are still being left behind. Violence has declined, but it continues to disproportionately affect communities on the South and West sides. Our city's political leadership must also confront deep structural and fiscal challenges that have been deferred for too long and be an example of smart, efficient government.

Indeed, progress is real — but it is incomplete. Anyone who chooses to engage in civic life must be willing to accept frustration alongside fulfillment. That is precisely why continued participation from individual to individual matters.

Today, Chicago stands at another pivotal moment. The city is at the beginning of major new investments and partnerships in quantum technology, artificial intelligence and clean energy. These sectors will shape our economy for decades. Whether they translate into broadly shared prosperity — or deepen existing inequities — will depend on the decisions we make now.

The next generation will determine whether these investments create inclusive pathways for local talent, connect effectively to our community colleges and universities and produce economic growth that reaches every neigh-

borhood. That work cannot be done by institutions alone. It requires committed individuals who choose to show up.

There are many ways to participate with the intention of making our city better: Mentor a student, serve on a nonprofit board, contribute your expertise to a project, volunteer locally in schools and parks, build a company that employs fellow Chicagoans or support leaders doing essential work on the ground.

Engagement does not require perfection, nor does it require having all the answers. We certainly do not. But we do know this: The joy and meaning that come from contributing to a place you love are real and enduring. Choosing to stay and be involved is not only good for Chicago; it also is deeply rewarding for those who do it.

As we look to 2050, the architecture of Chicago's future is being written today. All we ask is this: Be part of writing this next chapter. Your voice, grit and commitment matter and will help shape what Chicago becomes. In doing so, you may be surprised by how much the city gives back in return.

Penny Pritzker is founder and chairman of PSP Partners. Bryan Traubert is chairman of the Pritzker Traubert Foundation.

The Obama Presidential Center is unique catalyst for change

By Valerie Jarrett
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

For far too long, the South Side of Chicago had not received the investment that it deserves.

But when the Obama Presidential Center opens in June, it will mark the beginning of a new day for the proud residents of a community that the Obamas and I call home.

As a child of the South Side, I have seen the incredible potential in this community, particularly the resilience of its people. I've also seen great ideas, sparks of progress and coordinated efforts to lift up our neighborhoods — but until now, I have not seen the realization of our collective vision for a resurgence on this scale.

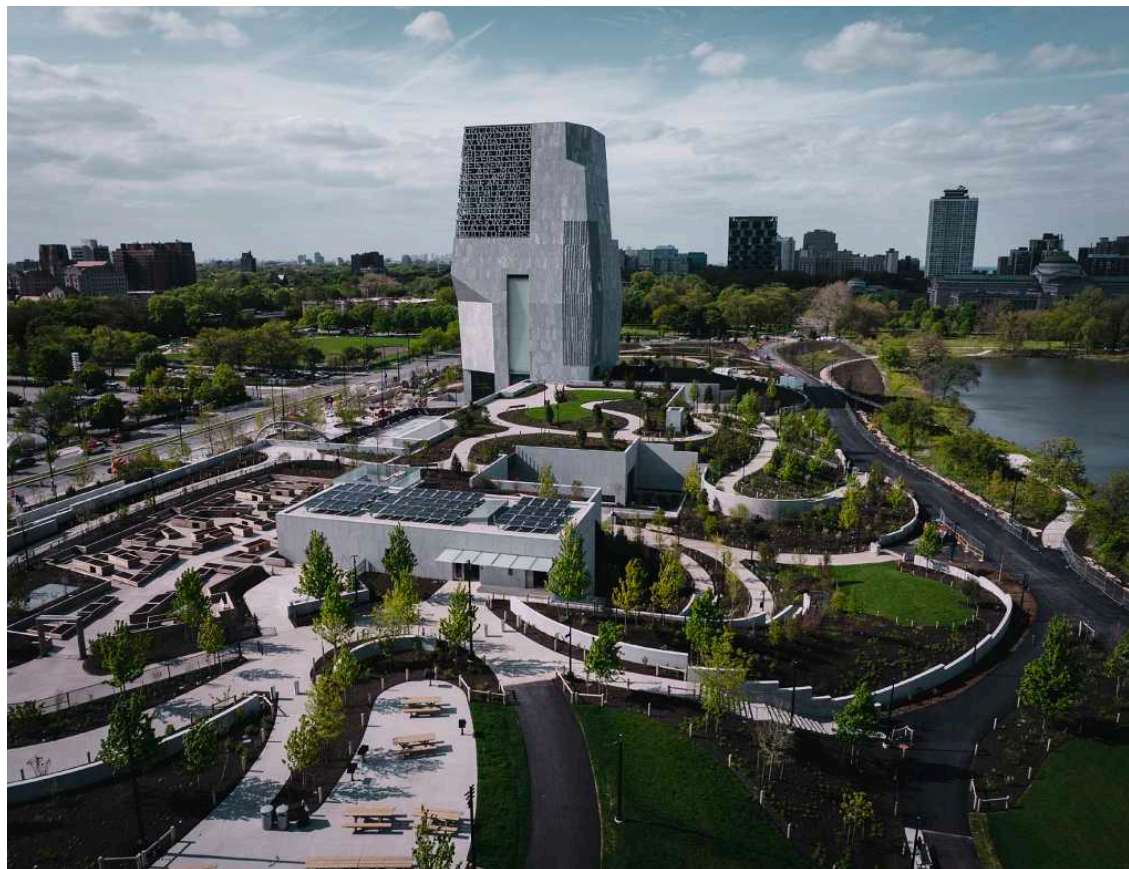
When the center opens, it will be a unique catalyst not just for these neighborhoods but also for a newly energized Chicago in the years ahead.

I am confident that our permanent home for hope will earn its reputation for being both a world-class cultural institution and the premier incubator for strategies to mobilize ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

But we have work to do to achieve our ambitious goals. This is true, whether here at the Obama Presidential Center or to all Chicagoans who believe in the future of this great city.

We began with 5,000 construction and related jobs. We recently hired 150 people for full-time, permanent jobs, and in both cases, we prioritized hiring from the communities near campus.

Those employees will help welcome the millions of guests who will be traveling from across the country, and the world, over the next quarter century to visit



The Obama Presidential Center in Chicago's Jackson Park on Wednesday. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/TRIBUNE**

the Obama Presidential Center. Many of those guests will have never been to the city's South Side, or even Chicago, before.

The Obama Presidential Center will serve as a home for our programs that train future leaders in Chicago and the world to meet the challenges of their day. In this way, I believe the center can also become a model and a lab for other partnerships and programs, a place where people can learn and test new ideas to then take to their own communities — whether it be in Chicago or beyond.

But our work doesn't end within the confines of our campus.

By 2050, we will have encouraged the millions of visitors who come to the Obama Presidential Center to explore the adjoining Griffin Museum of Science and Industry and our spectacular lakefront. We will have marketed the many shops, restaurants and other cultural institutions in the surrounding community and throughout our city so that they, too, flourish.

In the decades to come, we want to see a ripple effect that

starts with an increase in tourism that leads to more investment and job creation throughout Chicago-land, which in turn brings much needed revenue into our city and our businesses. That then becomes a catalyst for public and private investments in the city's neighborhoods, public schools, public safety, public transit, infrastructure, sustainability and much more.

In 2050, the central business district will be flourishing again with new and expanded businesses filling up vacant office

space, new market-rate and affordable housing will have been constructed, and there will have been countless improvements and additions to our many cultural institutions and parks. Our richly diverse neighborhoods will also attract visitors from around the world who will find a place that reminds them of home. All of this progress radiating out across Chicago will have earned the city an even greater reputation as a world-class destination.

After all, Chicago is the place that proudly makes no little plans.

In fact, if you have driven down South Stony Island Avenue lately, you may have noticed the letters at the top of our presidential center. They spell out a message drawn from President Barack Obama's speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery civil rights marches.

It reads, in part: "Oh, what a glorious task we are given to continually try to improve this great nation of ours."

It may be difficult to quantify what it will mean to the South Side of Chicago to see that calling every day. My hope is that in the years leading up to 2050, those who live in Chicago or are visiting our great city see those words as motivation to take the baton and run with it to confront the challenges of their time and make change — together.

Because I know that by working together, ordinary people here and around the world will have done extraordinary things.

Valerie Jarrett is CEO of the Obama Foundation and the author of the New York Times bestselling book "Finding My Voice." She grew up on Chicago's South Side.

OPINION

How much did Pope Leo XIV know about his mother's life in Chicago?

By Ellen Skerrett
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

That quintessential child's question, "Where did I come from?" takes on deeper meaning on Mother's Day when families gather to celebrate the women in their lives. I've often wondered, though, how much Pope Leo XIV and his brothers really knew about their mother's life when they were growing up. What memories, if any, does Robert Prevost have of his mother organizing a free polio vaccine clinic in August 1962 at St. Mary's church in Chicago's Riverdale neighborhood?

As local newspapers make clear, Mildred Martinez Prevost took seriously the need for children to be inoculated, and she coordinated public health outreach as president of the Altar and Rosary Society. Chicago Board of Health doctors administered more than 1,000 inoculations on July 24, 1962, but Mildred Prevost lamented that so many mothers with small children were unable to get their shots at the clinic when supplies ran out. Her response? To open a second evening clinic held eight days later — after fathers had returned home from work.

When Robert Prevost was born in 1955, Mass was still celebrated in Latin and Catholic children laughed at the joke, "What's the pope's phone number? Et cum spiritu tuo." The Prevost brothers knew by heart their address in Dolton, 212 E. 41st Place, and their number, Vincennes 9-2495. But when their telephone rang around Mother's Day 1963, did they understand it was because their parents were involved in securing food for local residents whose relief checks were delayed? Mildred and Louis Prevost were part of St. Mary's Christian Family Movement and made their home available as a place where neighbors could drop off baby food and cash donations for much needed fresh meat.

During Robert Prevost's freshman year at Villanova University in 1973, Mildred Prevost was busy performing in St. Mary's ambitious "Off Broadway" productions. He might have laughed at



Mildred Martinez, back row, third from right, was photographed with the Mundelein Glee Club and organist professor Walter Flandorf on Sept. 24, 1936. COURTESY OF THE WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP ARCHIVES, LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

the irony that his real-life librarian mother was one of the Pickalittle ladies who schemed against Marian Paroo in the "The Music Man." Perhaps his father, Louis, mailed him the photo of "Millie" Prevost wearing an elaborate hat that was published in the local newspaper. Or the article announcing that his 62-year-old mother would sing the theme from "Moulin Rouge" — in French — for hundreds of men and women who bought tickets to St. Mary's "Holidaze '74." But Pope Leo's mother had found her voice decades before she shared her talents in parish musicals.

Choral programs at Mundelein College help to fill in the blanks. There is no question that Mildred Martinez's musical talent was nurtured by the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Holy Name Cathedral School,

The Immaculata on Irving Park Road and Mundelein College. During the International Eucharistic Congress of 1926, the pope's mother had a front-row seat to history. She saw up close cardinals and bishops and priests from throughout the world filling up the pews of the church where she was baptized and made her First Holy Communion. And on June 21, 1926, she joined with 60,000 students to sing the Mass of the Angels in Soldier Field, described by Tribune reporter James O'Donnell Bennett as a "cathedral of all outdoors."

Despite the stock market crash of 1929, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary completed their art deco skyscraper on Sheridan Road in 1931, and it became a sanctuary of sorts for the pope's mother. Although she could only afford

tuition for the 1939-40 school year, Mildred Martinez nevertheless was a valued member of the Mundelein Glee Club from 1935 until 1943. She was, after all, a "BVM" girl with talent. And archivists Emily Reiher and Laura Berfield at the Women and Leadership Archives of Loyola University Chicago have the proof.

Among the rare images carefully preserved in the Mundelein College Collection is the Sept. 24, 1936, Glee Club photo of Mildred Martinez with her colleagues and organist professor Walter Flandorf. Although the BVM Sisters who headed the music department were never photographed, they made sure their students were recognized. Mildred Martinez's name appears on program after program, with solos ranging from Claude Debussy's "The

Blessed Damozel" to George Gershwin's "Summertime," described in the student newspaper as "the Grofe-Flandorf arrangement of Creole Days." Music mattered, especially as the Depression cast its long shadow on the lives and aspirations of young women like Mildred Martinez who cared for her widowed mother.

Few of us really understand much about our mother's lives, but thanks to the work of librarians and archivists, we know what Pope Leo's mother looked like 10 years before she became "Mrs. Louis Prevost." Now if only a recording existed of the Nov. 26, 1939, fall concert, we could hear her voice!

Ellen Skerrett, a Chicago historian, is writing a history of Saint Ignatius College Prep.

Voice of the people

Dire need for renewables

Regarding the editorial "Owner of massive Elwood Energy plant isn't waiting for Illinois closure deadlines. They're literally moving the plant to Texas" (April 17): Amid news that Hull Street Energy planned to load six gas turbines onto flatbeds and drive them to Texas, clean energy detractors were quick to point to the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) as responsible. That's false. In fact, the Elwood gas plant is a perfect case study in the dire need to replace aging, expensive fossil fuel plants with reliable and cost-effective energy resources like solar, wind and battery storage.

Over the past seven years, Elwood has hardly operated. It runs less than 5% of the time and, when running, costs \$75 per megawatt-hour, or five times the price of energy from new solar generation. Elwood is also unreliable. During Winter Storm Elliott, Elwood was one of eight gas plants in Illinois that failed to perform when called upon by PJM and was subject to "non-performance" financial penalties. With high operating costs and poor performance, it's not surprising that J-Power announced that it would close the plant in 2025, well before the 2030 CEJA deadline.

Then, Hull Street Energy found a loophole and made a short-sighted investment deal. It is now scrapping the plant for parts. Texas is willing to take the nearly 30-year-old turbines because there's currently a five- to seven-year wait to purchase new gas turbines. Texas (and its deregulated energy market) is effectively ending up with our polluting rubble because of supply chain issues.

Meanwhile, the real culprit of our skyrocketing energy bills is moving in next door to the Elwood gas plant. Two out-of-state corporations, Hillwood Investment Properties and PowerHouse Data Centers, have proposed building the "Joliet Technology Center" — a 1.8-gigawatt data center that will sit on 795 acres next to Elwood. Data centers like these are creating a new energy era, driving unprecedented electricity demand. Instead of throwing in the towel on our CEJA goals,



Wind turbines generating renewable energy rise above farmland Aug. 20, 2025, in Gibson City. JOHN J. KIM/TRIBUNE

we have more reason than ever to double down on producing cheaper clean energy and ensure data centers don't drive up energy costs while polluting our communities.

Until data center developers are required to bring their own clean energy and capacity resources and are held accountable for their outsized impact on the grid, the strain on our power grid will be untenable. It's time to pass the POWER Act (SB4016/HB5513) and ensure the new energy era builds on CEJA, delivering a clean energy future for Illinois communities, consumers, businesses and even data centers.

— Jen Walling, CEO, Illinois Environmental Council

Coverage of gambling ring

Recently, the Tribune's Post-Tribune newspaper characterized a gambling ring in Indiana as "Greek-led" — a phrase that fills me with profound disappointment. Such language is not only superfluous but also perpetuates toxic stereotypes, especially when news outlets regularly omit similar ethnic identifiers for criminal groups led by individuals who belong to other ethnic backgrounds.

Coverage of high-profile cases involving the mafia, for example, rarely foregrounds ethnicity; instead, journalists focus on actions and facts. Crimes involving individuals of color are similarly reported without high-

lighting their backgrounds unless it holds genuine relevance to the story.

By specifically spotlighting Greek heritage in this instance, the Tribune draws unwarranted attention to ethnicity, as if it were a defining element of the crime rather than incidental. This selective reporting fortifies the misguided notion that certain groups are inherently predisposed to criminal behavior — a notion rooted in antiquated prejudice and patently untrue. Moreover, it undermines the hard-won progress toward recognizing crime as a matter of individual responsibility rather than collective guilt. It is incumbent upon newspapers to uphold consistency and fairness, avoiding language that isolates or stigmatizes communities unless such information is truly essential to understanding the story at hand.

As readers, we depend upon the media to enlighten us impartially. When a publication chooses to accentuate the ethnicity of suspects in certain cases yet disregards it in others, it betrays that fundamental trust.

The Tribune — and all news outlets — should reconsider these editorial choices and pledge themselves to reporting that honors all communities with equal respect. Only then can we earnestly aspire to a media landscape grounded in true fairness and accuracy.

— George Reveliotis, president, ENOSIS

My mother the superhero

I grew up in a house that doubled as my father's business. He was an accountant, and my mother was his secretary. Dinner conversations sounded more like office meetings than family meals, filled with words like payroll, quarterly reports, invoices and W-2s. My brother and I had no idea what any of it meant.

It seemed my parents were always working. Even weekends were rarely free. My mother would leave her desk only to cook, clean the house and iron clothes, then return to work. My father called her his "Girl Friday." She didn't prepare complicated tax returns, but she handled countless tasks for the business and did them exceptionally well.

When I was about 10 years old,

my father got into legal trouble unrelated to his accounting practice. He was convicted of mail fraud and sentenced to a year in federal prison. Overnight, my mother was left to hold the business and the family together.

My father's clients were loyal and had become close friends over the years, but my mother knew little about the technical side of accounting or tax preparation. It seemed impossible that the business could survive.

Then I watched my mother transform almost overnight from a secretary into a full-fledged accountant. My uncle, who was also an accountant, stepped in to help with the workload, but my mother learned quickly. Before long, she was meeting with clients, preparing tax returns and running the office with a confidence that surprised everyone.

She never complained. Not once.

Every Saturday, we drove two hours each way to visit my father in prison. My mother always brought him several cartons of cigarettes. In prison, cigarettes were as good as currency.

I will never forget that year. My mother became my hero. She held the business together and did not lose a single client. When my father finally came home, he returned to a business that was not broken, but thriving — thanks entirely to her strength, loyalty and resolve.

My father never forgot it either.

— Scott T. Thompson, Bloomington, Indiana

The myths told to women

Mother's Day is here and seems as good a time as any for women to finally level with one another. Following are a few of the myths that women continue to perpetuate.

1. You can have it all. Telling girls that they can "have it all," and the slightly less false, "You can have it all, just not at the same time," is misleading at best. Young women who are considering raising a family should know that parenting is more demanding — both physically and emotionally

— than they might think. Prepare accordingly in selecting a life partner and career.

2. Childbirth is hard. This is like saying, "Living through a pandemic is inconvenient." I never worried about the physical pain of childbirth when I was pregnant because I blithely assured myself that I would receive an epidural and thus experience no pain or at worst a bit of discomfort during the blessed event. It turned out, for reasons that still aren't entirely clear to me, that I went for hours — or maybe it just seemed like hours — before I received said epidural. If you're pregnant, expect to be in excruciating pain at some point during childbirth. Full stop.

3. Menopause is a relief. Since getting my period at the age of 13, there was always a part of me that looked forward to "the change" and associated release from the hassles of menstruation. These hassles have now been replaced with daily unbidden hot flashes and night sweats, equally, if not more, uncomfortable and inconvenient than having my period each month.

Why are women not honest with each other about these and other facts? Do we lie or at best obfuscate to avoid being the bearers of bad news? Must every generation fend for itself? Is it some kind of biological amnesia necessary to propagate the species?

I hope someday to have a granddaughter of my own to pass along these and other pearls of wisdom (e.g., nearly anyone can be attractive; some just have to work at it more than others). If not, this piece will have to suffice.

Happy Mother's Day!
— Stacy J. Seiden, Northbrook

Note to readers

In honor of our "Chicago 2050" op-ed series, we'd like to hear from you about your hopes for what Chicago will be like in 25 years. (Sincere thoughts only.) Send a letter of no more than 400 words to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and your city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

Forum

Opinion, People & Ideas



Michael Frayn's nuclear play radiates modern mores
→ Erica Wagner, page 30

It's a deadly standoff between Starmmer and the pretenders to his battered throne **Andrew Rawnsley**



After Labour's evisceration in the polls, the party needs to back its leader or sack him – but it will probably do neither

A new dusk has broken, has it not? We began 2026 with Sir Keir Starmer reassuring his party that things were going to change. What he didn't tell them was that it would get even darker.

Smashed, pulverised, crushed. If you don't like these as descriptions of Labour's performance in the May elections, many others are available. Labour's leader in Wales plumped for "catastrophic" after she was evicted from her seat while her party was eviscerated in the most psychologically searing of the blows administered by the voters.

The heartland of heartlands – the Wales that sent Keir Hardie, Nye Bevan, Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock to parliament – has not only fallen to the nationalists. Labour has been rammed into a distant third by Reform. Labour is yet again sipping from the bitter cup of defeat in Scotland, setting up the SNP for a third decade of rule in Edinburgh. While the losses of council seats in England were not quite as apocalyptic as some forecasters had predicted, shedding well over half the number being defended is still brutal.

If you squint at the results hard enough, you can find the odd shred of consolation for the government. The British are evidently fed up with their current rulers, but their votes are fragmenting all over the shop rather than coalescing around a clear alternative. For all the recent talk of a "Kemi bounce", there was only a scatter of Tory victories and it was generally another rotten night for the Conservatives. Reform racked up striking gains, but they are not sufficiently powerful to make it wise to bet the farm on Nigel Farage becoming prime minister. The Greens struggled to translate all their support in the polls into wins on the ground. The Lib Dems, historically the beneficiary when Labour and the Tories are simultaneously disliked, have been squeezed out of the national conversation and made only modest progress.

That said, the big story is the Labour one and it essentially confirms what the opinion polls have been

telling us: this is a deeply disliked government led by a man who is regarded as fondly as gastric flu. These are not the kind of setbacks that can be shrugged off as typical of the misfortunes that often befall governments at midterm. These are losses on a scale that invites existential questions about Labour.

His mind mainly on his own future, Sir Keir was quick out of the blocks to try to forestall any challenge to his leadership. His statements have been one part mea culpa to three parts defiance. His only real purpose is to scotch any notions his colleagues might have that he can be persuaded to walk away. If they want him gone, they'll have to drag him out by the fingernails.

While some in the cabinet privately express the hope that Sir Keir himself "will change because he must", I don't think they can sincerely believe that a man in his sixties will magically develop the qualities that have hitherto eluded him. Charisma is not available on prescription. Vision is not injectable.

The best case for letting him stay on for now is that there is little guarantee that a change would make things any better and considerable risk that it could make things even bleaker. Steve Reed, the housing secretary, made the point most effectively when he warned his party against trying to "copy the Conservatives and go doomscrolling through leaders". When the Tories ditched Bad King Boris and ended up with Mad Queen Liz, they leapt out of the frying pan of lockdown parties at Downing Street only to land in the skip fire of a financial crisis.

Ministers also fret that a leadership contest might ignite a full-on civil war between the party's centrists and its soft left. At the very least, it would be messy, protracted and introspective. "All this talk about challenges, pacts, timetables," sighs one cabinet member.



'Smashed, pulverised, crushed... other descriptions of Labour's performance are available.' Anthony Devlin/Getty

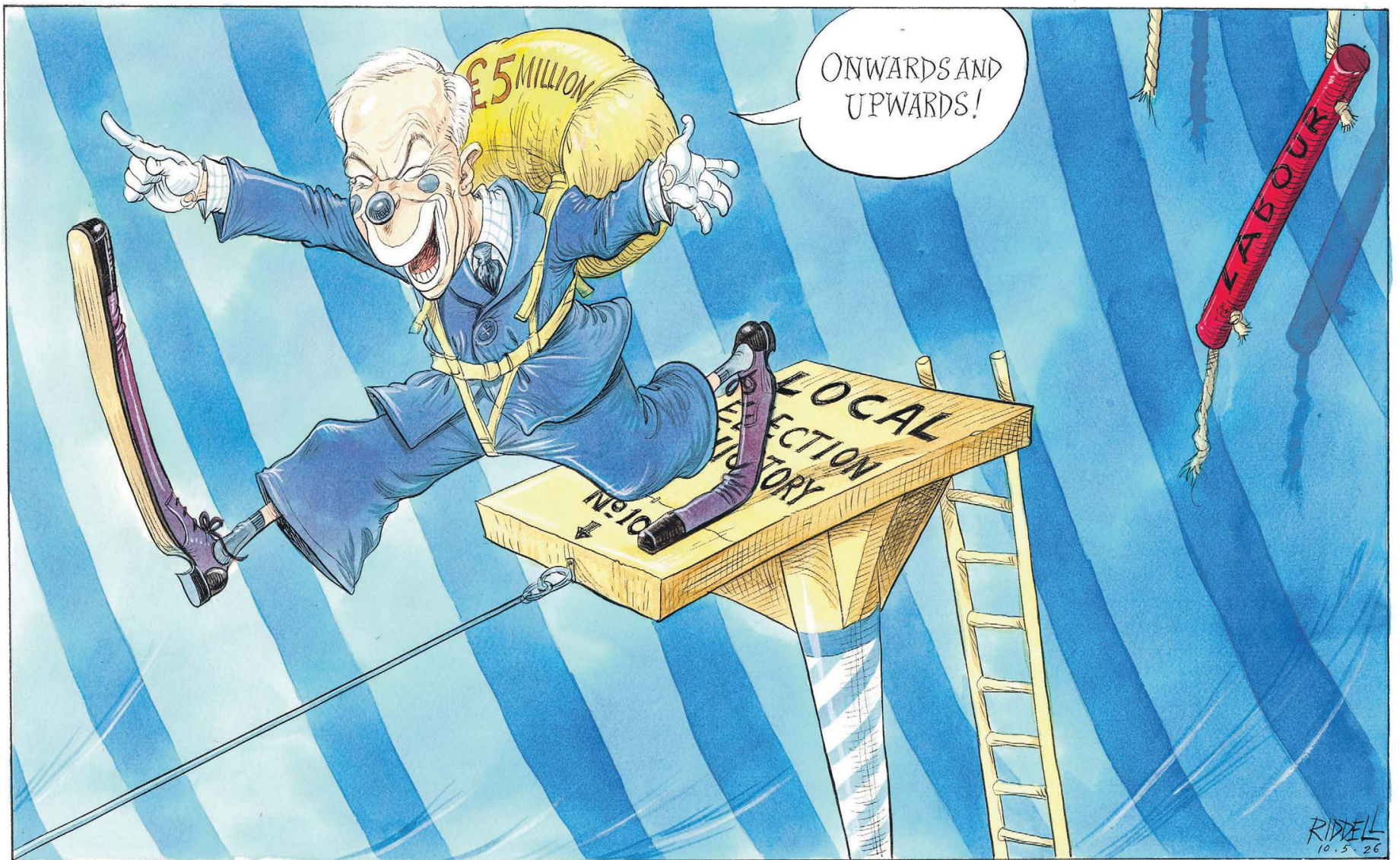
"We'd be saying to the public: 'We're checking out of government while we sort ourselves out – we'll get back to you in six months.'" This minister is not, incidentally, someone you'd describe as a passionate cheerleader for the prime minister. I don't think there's anyone in the cabinet you could call that. I'd struggle to name one of them who authentically thinks it likely that Sir Keir will lead them into the next general election. What stays their hand is not loyalty or affection towards the boss, but the lack of any settled conviction that a coup attempt would produce salvation.

Andy Burnham is popular among party members and scores better than any other Labour politician in national opinion polls, for what that's worth. But the mayor of Greater Manchester is simply not available to be leader until and unless he can find a way back to Westminster. And his route now looks paved with added peril. Given the collapse of support for Labour in the north-west, it is questionable whether there's any such thing as a "safe" Labour seat that Mr Burnham could be completely confident of winning in a byelection. For so long as he is unavailable, his backers are incentivised to keep Sir Keir in place. And Sir Keir's people in the party machinery are incentivised to confine Mr Burnham to Manchester.

Wes Streeting is the cabinet's punchiest communicator, very much wants the top job and would be the preferred choice of many ministers if only they could be certain that most party members feel the same way. The health secretary is reluctant to initiate a contest by striking the first blow, in keeping with the hallowed, though inaccurate, adage that he who wields the dagger never gets to wear the crown.

Angela Rayner has her fans, but she doesn't poll well and her detractors within Labour are proud to group themselves as the "Anyone But Ange" tendency. Her people have been telling journalists for weeks that the HMRC investigation into her tax affairs is almost complete. Until it actually is, it doesn't look plausible for her to have a stab at the top job. The result is a Mexican standoff between Sir Keir and the pretenders to his battered throne.

It would make most sense for Labour to take a collective decision to back its leader or to sack him. One of the most enervating courses for the party to take is to spend many more weeks agitating, conjecturing and scheming about its leadership without resolving the issue one way or another. That is also the likeliest thing to happen.



Populism: many faces, few solutions **David Aaronovitch**



Reform and the Greens scored well with voters but left hard questions, such as social care funding, unanswered

The great winners of the local elections in England last week were Reform and the Greens. Both are described as populist parties existing at the opposite poles of the political spectrum. Both are said to embody the new politics in some way. But how they go about it is very different, and different in an interesting way.

On election day, Londoners and people in Wales (and possibly elsewhere) found their local free newspapers had shelved their usual front pages for full-page ads featuring a tanned Nigel Farage and the legend “Vote Reform. Get Starmer Out”. This would have been an expensive exercise, but then Reform is an increasingly expensive party, bankrolled by a Thai-based crypto billionaire, Christopher Harborne, who has become the biggest single donor in British political history. In 2025 he gave £12m to Reform.

The money shows: Reform’s

leader is flown to newsworthy destinations at Harborne’s expense, Reform events are lavish affairs and there is no sense of an insurgent party having to reach deep into largely empty pockets or relying on the goodwill of volunteers.

Not that this worries anyone other than Reform’s opponents. In 2024, when Farage seemed poised to give up frontline politics to pursue a more lucrative media business career, Harborne gave him £5m as a personal (and undeclared) gift. Farage subsequently re-entered the fray. This revelation – now being investigated by the Electoral Commission – seems not to have slowed Reform’s advance. As Reform’s chair, David Bull, told BBC News, “It hasn’t come up on the doorstep. It is a Westminster bubble story.”

Voters can be very forgiving of dubiously acquired wealth and its equally dubious application to politics, especially if the beneficiary has charisma. Long before Donald Trump, the Italian media mogul Silvio Berlusconi – arguably the first successful postwar populist – leveraged wealth and his TV channels to help his political career. More recently in Hungary, Viktor Orbán would get his millionaire friends to buy up all the poster sites in Budapest and other cities so that

this was the only political message visible on the streets.

Farage also benefits from having, in effect, an expensive news channel – GB News – as a partisan booster for his party. By contrast, the Greens and their leader, Zack Polanski, have opted for the far less costly form of populism that modern technology now permits.

Polanski himself is not so much a politician as an influencer – the sort of person who started on TikTok and then made it from YouTube to *I’m a Celebrity* in quick, smiling steps.

In fact, his charm is so contemporary that I am too old to understand it. My generation better comprehends the quiet rise of the Liberal Democrats, whose leader, Ed Davey, organises *It’s a Knockout*-type stunts to remind you that he’s (a) alive and (b) affable.

Polanski’s bling-free appeal applies to some of the Greens’ other emerging figures. The winner of the recent Gorton and Denton byelection, Hannah Spencer, was the kind of low-key, voter-friendly candidate who – as a colleague described her – is alone worth one of Harborne’s millions.

None of this tells you whether Farage or Polanski are fit to govern. Farage’s Starmer slogan

had nothing to do with local government competencies, and Green voters will be disappointed to discover that Hackney council has limited influence on Middle Eastern politics.

A couple of weeks before the election – largely unnoticed in this era when political correspondents appear to be the only ones that media outlets still employ – health policy thinktank the King’s Fund released an annual report on the cost of adult and child social care, a budget item that absorbs between 70 and 85% of English local authority budgets. The report

We want someone to put a grin on a slow pull out of the slough of despond

revealed that, in 2024/25, an additional 30,000 people received long-term care, meaning a real term increase of over 4% in local authority spending on social care. The result, said King’s, was that authorities were increasingly raiding their reserves to meet the recurring cost.

The UK has suffered five great shocks since Tony Blair left office 19 years ago: the 2008 crash, Brexit, the pandemic, the Ukraine war and Trump 2.0. Only one of these could

we have avoided, but 10 years ago next month, we voted to embrace it.

Now we want someone to put a grin on a slow, grinding pull out of the slough of despond. Or at least to level out our shallow arc of decline, while finding more money for an ageing population and for a defence budget that meets the Trump-Putin-Xi era.

Is this difficult? Well, not according to the not atypical Reform supporter, the chief US correspondent for GB News, Ben Leo, who posted on Friday: “There are no easy answers to the problems we face? YES there are. STOP the boats. DEPORT those who are here. CUT regulation. SLASH taxes.” Mr Leo missed out compulsory flag flying in schools.

His Green equivalent is likely to offer a prospectus which involves borrowing far more than the bond markets will allow you, taxing the rich far more in a variety of ingenious (and to most economists implausible) ways, and boycotting Israel.

A reader may conclude that populism, however sold (and however bought), however charming and however slick, rarely addresses the questions that really need answering. But will also understand why we are so desperate to avoid discussing them.



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Rethinking our future

The UK must focus on economic revival

Britain has lost the plot on growth, and the headlines have not been helpful. The defining issue of last week's elections was not the personality or leadership of Keir Starmer. It was not dissatisfaction with a political system dominated by two parties, or the eco-socialist dreams of the Greens, or even the corruption seeping into the body politic via the cannula of Reform. It was the impact of almost two decades of stagnation on voters' lives – their earnings, education, opportunities, health, security and retirement, and their sense of whether government can make improvements.

Without a growing economy, it can't. We have therefore devoted most of the business section to *The Observer's* Rethinking our Future (see pages 39 – 44), with an emphasis on two central questions framing every political argument between Labour and its rivals: where did growth go, and how does Britain get it back?

Answers to the first of these are strewn across recent history. UK GDP took five years to recover from the 2008 financial crisis. Productivity and wage growth still have not recovered. The self-harm of Brexit has taken 6% to 8% off GDP, and that is probably just a start. The precarity of Britain's public finances was hidden from view in the decade of ultra-low interest rates that followed the crash, but is now in plain sight: debt service costs will consume more than half as much as the NHS this year, and more if the bond markets choose to punish extra borrowing. Long-term underinvestment in infrastructure and skills begets more underinvestment, and underlying the whole torpid story is a profound unseriousness about growth itself: the notion on the right that the market will provide if left to itself, and on the left that, if not, the state will step in.

This is half-baked thinking, as unequal to the task as Boris Johnson's supposedly oven-ready Brexit withdrawal agreement. If Britain's public services are to be properly funded, its defences strengthened as they must be and its people fulfilled, this government must focus seriously and single-mindedly on growth, never mind the indignation that may provoke on its own left flank.

Starmer does not have to bring back non-dom privileges to make Britain a magnet for investors. He can do this with a sensible mix of rules on visas, tax and residency. He can insist that government does, rather than talks: it procures, it pushes through planning, it devolves. He must signal that he understands the challenges faced by employers as well as employees, and by small and big businesses. Expansive workers' rights on day one of a new job can kill a startup, and the Treasury will never know which of those that fail might have become a unicorn.

The government must act on five fronts, first with enough investment to expand the UK's power grid to the point that reliance on gas falls and with it the cost of energy. Second, it needs to restore confidence in London as a global financial centre, starting by recovering its role as the New York of Europe. That will require, third, a Europe strategy that recognises that the gains of any "reset" will be marginal compared with those of rejoining the EU. Fourth, a government restoring investor confidence needs to show it has a grip on its future finances, from welfare reform to replacing the triple lock. And, fifth, a central task must be to incentivise private investment and unlock pension capital in infrastructure, technology and the life sciences on a vast scale, so that city regions outside London grow into thriving service hubs. Tech bros did not create the internet or Silicon Valley. US federal research grants did. Likewise, the Oxford-Cambridge corridor won't build itself as a new nexus of high-wage jobs and technology, but government can help will it into being.

No one said reviving growth would be easy. Easy answers are for populists who don't care when policies implode on contact with reality. But without growth, Labour's agenda is dead and the outlook for progressive government given the looming Faragist storm looks bleak. Crack growth and Britain can do much, much better.

One-day debate could revive assisted dying

What is the way ahead for the assisted dying bill? ("MPs seek to revive assisted dying bill in face of Lords filibustering", News, 26 April). The simple route is to await the ballot for private members bills in the hope that a highly placed member will choose to revive the bill and take it through the Commons a second time with the prospect of the Parliament Act being used to pass it into law.

There are drawbacks. It relies on chance to determine whether the House of Commons is given an opportunity to assert its primacy. Detailed scrutiny is bound to be sterile when the bill's sponsor is likely to resist any amendments in order to preserve the prospect of presenting it for royal assent under the Parliament Act. The bill would not reach the Lords until late in the session, leaving them little time to conduct the productive scrutiny that many peers still desire. If the bill is then presented for royal assent under the Parliament Act, it would include acknowledged imperfections.

There is an alternative, which would acknowledge the public interest in maximum constructive parliamentary scrutiny of this bill. The government should allow a backbench procedural motion on to the Commons order paper, to provide for a prompt one-day debate on all stages of the bill, which could then be sent to the Lords in June, leaving ample time for scrutiny. **Sir David Natzler KCB**, Clerk of the House of Commons 2015-2019
London SE24

Tackle inequality

Ben Zaranko is somewhat blasé about UK wealth inequality ("Poor pay growth and rising asset prices pose a real threat to social mobility", Business, last week).

Billionaire wealth increased 1,000% from 15 billionaires in 1990 to 165 in 2024 in the UK, according to the Sunday Times Rich List.

This is dangerous because populism is fuelled by income and wealth inequality, and social cohesion is eroded. Wealth and income inequality also lead to more discrimination and exclusion of people already in the margins, deepening their vulnerabilities.

Wealth inequality is even more intractable than income inequality because wealth can be passed down through generations and produces its own income through interest, capital gains, dividends and rent. It should be but isn't sufficiently taxed.

Reducing inequality should be a priority. The wellbeing of people and planet long-term must be the aim of our economic system.

David Murray
Wallington, Sutton

UK's dirty linen

The Magdalene Laundries in Ireland were a terrible scandal, but it is easy

to overlook that the UK had its own version – the long-stay hospitals ("To know what a society holds dear, look at who it imprisons", New Review, last week).

The British system was not underpinned by the church, as in Ireland, but run by UK hospitals (ex-asylums) under the NHS and its predecessors. Unlike the laundries, which took only girls and women, the UK institutions incarcerated both genders.

Families would sometimes hand their children to the authorities, who were often held until old age.

As in Ireland, British young women were often held due to some perceived moral shortcoming. Sometimes girls and boys ended up in the institutions because of speech impediments or conditions like epilepsy, or through poverty.

But there is a significant difference between Ireland and the UK. In Ireland, the laundries are well-known, while here the hospitals are a largely unacknowledged fact in our history.

Terry Philpot
Limpfield, Surrey

A frame of mind

I can understand people getting bored when Mark Allen and Wu Yize took an hour and 40 minutes playing one frame of snooker ("Cue boredom... Crucible crowd left yawning by snooker's slowest frame", News, last week).

It reminds me of a wonderful quote from the Guardian's TV critic Nancy Banks-Smith that snooker was like "chess with balls". And it is!

That said, the final part of the match was riveting, as the 22-year-old Chinese player won on the last frame.

David Reed
London NW3

Quelle surprise

I'm astonished that you have categorised as "important and surprising" the news that Nigel Farage failed to register a £5m donation from a crypto billionaire (Matrix, News, last week). If ever a news item came as no surprise...

Anne Cowper
Swansea

Maisie Cowell



For the record

◆ A photograph on page 10 of our New Review cover story last week ("I didn't think coming out would be a big deal", page 8) was incorrectly captioned. It named actors from the US version of *Queer as Folk*, not the original British TV cast. The names should have read: Charlie Hunnam, Aidan Gillen and Craig Kelly.

◆ We wrongly stated in a football report that Arsenal had never lost to Fulham in a league game ("Saka steps up to deliver for Arsenal and send them six points clear", Sport, 3 May, page 4). This should have said that Arsenal had never lost to Fulham at home in a league game.

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