



More heft

The BRICS Summit allows India to advance its global ambitions

For a joint statement at a major multilateral conference, in the midst of global conflicts where members are involved is never easy – for India, hosting the BRICS Summit in Delhi is the second time in recent years, since the G-20 Summit in 2023, that it has had to shoulder such a responsibility. That, however, is not the only reason India's BRICS presidency comes at a difficult time. The past few occasions India has hosted the coalition of emerging economies – in 2012, 2016 and virtually in 2021 – it was a smaller grouping of just five major powers, where managing consensus was easier. Since the expansion in 2024 – adding Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – and Indonesia's induction in 2025, BRICS' identity has evolved, but a common focus remains elusive. In addition, global conflicts involving BRICS members have grown. The war involving Iran has heightened this impact, as Iran, a victim of the U.S.-Israel strikes, as well as the UAE that was attacked by Iran in retaliation, are members that have been unwilling to agree to a common narrative on the problem. India's position on Israel also came into conflict with other members earlier this year, as the grouping has traditionally taken a much more critical line on Israel's actions. The largest share of New Delhi's problems as host comes however from the United States, where President Donald Trump has accused it of plotting to overthrow the U.S. dollar's domination of the global economy, and has been threatening tariffs on all members for planning to increase intra-BRICS payments and trade. As the Modi government seeks to restore ties with the Trump administration, on trade and its Indo-Pacific strategy, hosting BRICS also risks invoking America's ire, however irrational.

As a result, a success in reconciling all these different strands at this time would indeed be a shot across the bow for the grouping and a big win for Indian diplomacy. Since it was first conceptualised 25 years ago, and a summit convened in 2009, the BRICS countries have risen in global stature and economic heft, benefitting intra-BRICS trade. Today, BRICS accounts for half the world's population, two-fifths of the global economy and a fourth of global trade; it also includes many of the world's top energy producers and biggest consumers. While the grouping prefers not to be called anti-western it is certainly a powerful counter to the G-7, and western-led thinking. Being part of BRICS gives India more heft in advancing its ambitions on the global high table, and its presidency has ensured it prominence on the world stage, as leaders and representatives of 11 BRICS countries including Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Masoud Peshkian began deliberations on Saturday at the Bharat Mandapam to discuss the future of global governance.

Eyes on the road

Judicial fiat alone cannot prevent traffic fatalities

Despite hosting only 1% of the world's vehicular fleet, India accounts for around 11% of road traffic fatalities, due in some part to widespread non-compliance with wearing seat belts and helmets while driving. Post-crash investigations have often revealed victims being ejected from vehicles or suffering lethal secondary collisions against vehicles' interiors; children are also vulnerable due to the patchy use of child restraint systems and rear-seat belts. Recently, a Supreme Court Bench asked the Road Transport Ministry to consider a petition to reduce road traffic deaths by habituating the use of these measures. Actual policing is certainly wanting, including due to chronic shortages of traffic police cadres; there is also room to constrain manufacturers to install tamper-proof seat belt reminders and thwart modifications after purchase. The Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act 2019 instituted or scaffolded various mechanisms to prevent road traffic deaths whereas the national data so far have not presented evidence of improvement at the scale India needs.

However, in 2024, Road Transport Ministry data said that two-wheeler riders constituted 46.2% and pedestrians 20.6% of road deaths. Seat belts and child restraints only protect occupants of enclosed vehicles, so better enforcing their adoption will address the reasons underlying only one-third of the total mortality. In fact, speeding has been found to be the dominant recorded violation associated with fatalities, and a national strategy focused on mitigating opportunities for vehicles to accelerate to high speeds may yield greater gains. Second, neither the Union government nor State governments have systematically employed the 'Safe System' approach. While individual responsibility and the duty of care accruing to schools and similar institutions matter, governments are still expected to design roads assuming that not everyone will behave perfectly. Put differently, they need to reduce the probability as well as the severity of crashes, including by identifying and fixing accident-prone locations, setting up physical environments that compensate for human error, reducing children's exposure to two-wheeler traffic, and improving timely access to trauma care. Finally, India lacks a public culture that reinforces safe behaviour and it fosters unsafe behaviour. For India to reduce road mortality in a sustained manner, governments must tread safety through a combination of approaches that does not overstate the role of individual decisions. It is also commendable that the Court has referred the petition to the Centre, rather than assumed an interventionist posture as it did in 2019, in a tacit acknowledgment that road safety has outgrown judicial fiat.

When India hosts the 18th BRICS summit in New Delhi on September 12-13, 2026, under the banner of "humanity First", the occasion will be draped in a familiar promise: that the bloc is building an alternative to the western-dominated global financial order. A new bank to rival the World Bank. A reserve fund to free countries from the International Monetary Fund. A path away from the dominance of the U.S. dollar. Seventeen years into the BRICS project, it is worth asking a blunt question: has any of this actually materialised?

The short answer is no; the reasons have less to do with intention than with structure. The BRICS countries, for all their rhetoric about reshaping the world, are deeply enmeshed in the very system that they claim to challenge. The institutions they built reflect that reality.

The same bank, different nameplate

The New Development Bank (NDB), launched in 2015, was BRICS's flagship creation. It was supposed to offer developing countries an alternative to the World Bank: loans without the political strings, governance without western dominance, financing in local currencies rather than dollars.

A decade later, half of the NDB's outstanding bonds are denominated in U.S. dollars, with the Chinese yuan making up most of the rest. The South African rand accounts for just one per cent. Local currency lending, which the bank's own leadership set as a target of 30% of its portfolio by the end of this year, sat at roughly 22% as of mid-2025. The NDB's first rupee-denominated bond was still in planning stages as late as September 2025, a full decade after the bank opened for business.

The NDB courts the same western credit-rating agencies (S&P, Fitch, Moody's) that the BRICS governments publicly criticise as biased against developing countries. And when those agencies' rules collided with bloc solidarity, the ratings won. In March 2022, days after Russia invaded Ukraine, the NDB froze all operations related to Russia, a founding member and 20% shareholder, to protect its own credit standing in New York. Russia has since relinquished its turn at the NDB's rotating presidency, extending the Brazilian incumbent's term to 2030. Whatever else this is, it is not an institution that operates outside western financial discipline.

The bank's total project approvals reached \$39 billion by the end of 2024. To put that in



Sushovan Dhar

Member of the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM)

BRICS promised a new financial order through the New Development Bank, but the truth is that it remains deeply tied to the old one

perspective: the World Bank Group commits roughly \$100 billion every year. In a full decade of operation, the NDB has approved less than what its supposed rival disburses in six months. More importantly, the NDB co-finances projects with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) rather than offering a genuine alternative to them. The relationship is complementary, not competitive. That may be smart banking, but it is a far cry from the institution's founding rhetoric.

The safety net nobody uses

Alongside the NDB, the BRICS countries established the Contingent Reserve Arrangement in 2015: a \$100 billion pool of foreign exchange reserves meant to help member-countries weather financial crises without turning to the IMF. In principle, this was the most radical idea in the BRICS repertoire: a mechanism that could, over time, break the IMF's monopoly on emergency lending to the Global South.

In practice, the CRA has never been activated. Not once in a decade. And a closer look at the fine print reveals why. Any member-country that wants to draw more than 30% of its allotted share must first enter into a programme with the IMF. The escape hatch, in other words, leads right back to the institution that it was supposed to escape. The CRA has no permanent staff, no independent surveillance capacity, no research wing. It is, in effect, a promissory note dressed up as an institution; one that, by its own rules, cannot function independently of the very body it was created to rival.

If there is one idea that captures the public imagination about BRICS, it is de-dollarisation: the notion that the bloc will reduce the world's dependence on the U.S. dollar and shift global trade toward local currencies. Media coverage of every BRICS summit amplifies this promise. The reality is more modest than the headlines suggest.

The 126-point declaration issued at the Rio summit in July 2025 – the bloc's most comprehensive statement to date – does not contain the word "de-dollarisation" even once. Russian President Vladimir Putin himself stated in November 2024 that the bloc has "not sought to abandon the dollar". India opposes any move toward a common BRICS currency, fearing trade reprisals from Washington. South Africa considers the idea too risky. China prefers the gradual internationalisation of the yuan on its

own terms. When U.S. President Donald Trump threatened a 10% tariff surcharge on countries aligning with "anti-American" BRICS policies, the bloc offered no collective response. The episode was revealing: it showed how little it takes to deter the BRICS from even the appearance of challenging the dollar system.

Perhaps the most telling detail is what the BRICS actually ask for when they talk about reforming global finance. The declarations issued at both the Kazan summit in 2024 and the Rio summit in 2025 call for a "quota-based and adequately resourced" IMF. Read that carefully. The BRICS are not calling for the IMF to be replaced, restructured, or even fundamentally reformed. They are asking for a bigger say within it.

The problem is structural. The U.S. holds 16.49% of IMF voting rights, and all major decisions require an 85% supermajority. This gives Washington, and Washington alone, an effective veto over every significant decision that the fund makes. The BRICS countries know this.

They have known it for decades. And yet their official position is to ask for more chairs at a table whose rules guarantee that the outcome will always be decided by someone else.



What this tells us about BRICS

The bloc's defenders will point out that the NDB has financed rail infrastructure, that its expansion to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates reflects a genuine desire among Global South countries for alternatives to western-led institutions, and that the frustration driving the BRICS agenda: with IMF conditionality, with dollar hegemony, with a financial system designed in 1944 by and for the industrialised West.

But the gap between the rhetoric and the record matters. The BRICS countries have not built an alternative financial architecture. They have built a set of institutions that operate within the existing one: lending in dollars, deferring to western rating agencies, designing safety nets that require IMF approval, and pledging loyalty to the very governance structures they publicly denounce. As India prepares to chair the bloc, the honest question is not whether BRICS can reform the global financial order. It is whether the governments that make up the bloc have any material interest in doing so, or whether, for their ruling establishments, a better seat at the existing table has always been the real objective.

A bigger BRICS, shaped by India's vision

The BRICS summit in New Delhi (September 12-13, 2026) will be a landmark one for a couple of reasons. First, it takes place against the backdrop of geopolitical turbulence unleashed by a combination of forces: raging wars and conflicts, a breakdown in global governance and the changing nature of global alliances. Second, the BRICS now has 11 prominent members (and about 10 of them who are partner countries) and its collective economic output (in purchasing power parity) outstrips that of the G-7, making it one of the largest and most important transcontinental groupings outside of the West. Last but not the least, technological forces such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing are being weaponised with both great powers trying to win the battle for tech supremacy.

India's BRICS moment

India must be credited with thorough preparation for this summit. In many ways, India has followed the successful template established when it hosted the G-20 Summit in New Delhi in 2023. In a similar vein, around 350 meetings were conducted by India in cities across the country, with as many as 22 held at the ministerial level. India has announced that it will focus on "building resilience, innovation, cooperation and sustainability", thus giving a new twist to the BRICS acronym. In doing so, India is seeking to refocus and recalibrate the BRICS agenda.

BRICS has traditionally comprised three pillars: political and security; finance and the economy; and, finally, culture and people-to-people exchanges. While all three pillars are important and, indeed, interlinked to an extent, it is the view of this writer that the agenda pursued by India relates more to the second and third pillars than to the first. The leaders will largely decide what to do with the big geopolitical issues of our times. However, substantive outcomes seem assured, given the outcome of the meetings chaired by India so far.



Mohan Kumar

Former Indian Ambassador to France and currently Dean/Professor at the O.P. Jindal Global University

BRICS, which is now too big to fail, confronts geopolitical turbulence while pursuing practical cooperation

Hence, this writer's sentiment is that, no matter what happens at the summit level, BRICS will have much to show in terms of cooperation across various areas. Quite simply put, BRICS is now too big to either ignore or fail.

Building resilience, driving innovation

When it comes to resilience, the work done by BRICS under India's stewardship has been stellar. This includes the launch of the BRICS Digital Centre of Excellence for Smart Grids and Energy Storage, the adoption of the BRICS Logistics Supply Chain Cooperation Framework, and the establishment of the Centres of Excellence on Agro-Ecology and Regenerative Agriculture, to name just a few initiatives. Once operationalised, these initiatives will provide the ballast needed for BRICS countries to become truly resilient.

On innovation, India has tried to push the envelope within BRICS. Proposals such as a start-up innovation fund, an incubator network, a digital public infrastructure repository, a science and research repository, and the action plan of the BRICS Working Group on research infrastructures and mega science projects will be beneficial to all BRICS members, particularly since they are not all at the same level of development when it comes to scientific research.

On cooperation, the BRICS leaders will hopefully endorse recommendations pertaining to, but not limited to, revitalising the multilateral trading system; welcoming the network of centres of excellence on mental wellness; establishing the BRICS urbanisation forum; enhancing the digital capacity of women; and, more broadly, intensifying cooperation in areas such as education, youth skilling, and the BRICS Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Cooperation Portal. All of these initiatives provide concrete benefits to the man (or woman) in the street in BRICS countries.

It is particularly comforting to note that

"sustainability" is very much part of the Indian agenda. The Brazilians made it the centrepiece of their BRICS agenda last year, and India seeks to build on where its Brazilian friends left off. There are specific areas of cooperation under this rubric: combating desertification; developing guidelines for disaster management and forest-fire preparedness; the BRICS forum on sustainable aviation fuels; and advancing climate resilience through people-centric and community-based adaptation. The last of these is critical, since international fora tend to focus almost exclusively on mitigation.

The central tenet of the Indian agenda, as may be seen from above, is to create a collaborative platform that enables the sharing of knowledge and best practices, facilitates joint research, and promotes capacity building. If this is not a people-centric, humanity-first approach, then what is?



Keeping BRICS on course

BRICS is here to stay and will, slowly but steadily, help its members achieve two central objectives: enhance their strategic options and drive geopolitics

towards a truly multipolar world. These are, of course, organising principles of India's foreign policy. In a world characterised by geopolitical uncertainty, other countries, too, see enormous value in adopting a foreign policy based on these principles. If there is one caveat for the BRICS grouping, it is this: it must avoid getting caught in geopolitical currents that are not necessarily of its making and certainly not of any strategic value for its members. All eyes may be on leaders such as Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as it should be. But the bigger picture remains that of the BRICS grouping living up to its full potential. The Delhi Summit ought to make concrete progress towards that end.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BRICS must pursue peace

The BRICS Summit in New Delhi needs to be more aspirational than merely a forum for geopolitical positioning. Amid two major ongoing wars, India should leverage its BRICS presidency to demonstrate to the world that the Global South can also contribute to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. India uniquely enjoys cordial relations with all the countries in the grouping, giving it a strategic diplomatic space that many other BRICS members do

not possess. As a result, India has acquired considerable diplomatic strengths. Its bilateral meetings with the leaders of countries directly involved in the conflicts can be proactively utilised to build consensus around peace and dialogue. India can also vociferously reiterate the position it articulated at the Bishkek SCO Summit last month: there should be no "endless wars", but certainly an "end to the wars".

G. Ramasubramanyam, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

Undermining democracy

United States President Donald Trump's promise to give \$5,000 to adult voters if his party wins the election is a worrying development for democracy (World page, September 11). The scheme strongly resembles India's own "freebie culture", in which political parties promise cash and consumer goods to win votes. Seeing the world's oldest democracy adopt a similar vote-buying is becoming a global concern. Elections should be about sound

policies and long-term vision, not the use of public money to buy votes.

Kshirasagara Balaji Rao, Hyderabad

Need for fruit safety

I wish to draw attention to a concern that many of us may have noticed in our fruit markets – the way bananas are sometimes artificially ripened. A banana may look perfectly ripe from the outside. Yet, in my experience, the familiar fragrance of a naturally ripened banana is often

absent, along with some of the sweetness and flavour we normally associate with it. Artificial ripening itself is not the issue. When done scientifically, using approved methods, it is a legitimate practice. The concern is the use of prohibited substances to speed up the process, apparently for quicker turnover and higher profits. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) prohibits the use of calcium carbide, popularly known as "masala", for the artificial ripening of fruits.

Ethylene, on the other hand, is an approved ripening agent. State food-safety authorities and the FSSAI should continue to keep a close watch on fruit markets, storage facilities, wholesalers and ripening premises, particularly where the use of prohibited ripening agents is suspected. Consumers, too, have a meaningful role to play.

Radhakrishna Prasad B.R., Bengaluru

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



A rescue operation underway after a building collapsed in Satya Niketan, a major student hub, in Delhi. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

When home in Delhi became a death trap

The collapse of a five-storey building in Delhi's Satya Niketan on September 6 killed seven people. The incident has exposed the precarious housing conditions for students in the capital, where the demand for affordable accommodation far outstrips the availability of institutional hostels. **Lavpreet Kaur** reports on the rescue and the questions being raised over the safety of paying guest accommodation

In the gloomy afternoon of September 6, Amit Choudhary, 20, stood waiting for a friend at the Nigori tea stall in Satya Niketan. A major student hub in south Delhi, Satya Niketan is located about 2 kilometres from Delhi University (DU)'s South Campus. The two of them had planned to drive to the university's North Campus, about 20 km away. Suddenly, the ground beneath him shook. He heard a deafening sound and saw a huge cloud of dust. "I was blinded for 2-3 minutes," he recalls.

When the dust began to settle, Choudhary was shocked by what he saw. The five-storey building a few steps away, named Hostel Daze, had vanished. In its place was a heap of concrete slabs, bricks, and twisted metal. He could hear cries for help from beneath the rubble.

For the first few minutes, nobody went near the site, says Choudhary. Live electricity wires had fallen, and the neighbouring building, packed with female students, was shaking. People stood panic-stricken at windows and on staircases, afraid that building might also come down. They watched, frozen, as screams continued to rise from beneath the debris next door.

Seven people, including a labourer, died. Twelve people were rescued, while five others are battling for their lives in hospital. In Satya Niketan, many students stay in buildings that have been altered and expanded over the years to accommodate more tenants. As per the police investigation, Hostel Daze had been extended from its original structure, with changes made to the basement and ground floor. Locals and students say 35-40 students stayed there as paying guests (PG). Since September 6 was the Sunday of a long weekend, there were fewer students in the building at the time of the tragedy.

The incident has raised questions about the safety of buildings across the neighbourhood: in 2022, a three-storey building in Satya Niketan collapsed during renovation work to convert it into a PG accommodation, killing two labourers and injuring four others.

It has also exposed failures by both the building owner and the authorities responsible for enforcing construction and safety regulations. Officials from the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) say the building had no sanctioned plan and that the owner had not obtained the required fire no-objection certificate or occupancy certificate. The civic body, meanwhile, has no record of inspections or enforcement action against the unauthorised construction.

Hands before machines

Choudhary says the first people to attempt rescues at the scene were not uniformed personnel; they were students, shopkeepers, and residents.

When he and a few other students realised that some people were trapped beneath a big slab of concrete, they began breaking through it by hand. The reinforcing steel bars inside the slab would not give way easily. "It took us about an hour to break the slab," he says. Between broken pieces of concrete still held together by steel,



This area is the most common choice for those of us who join DU because of its proximity to campus. But after what I saw, I don't want to stay here any more.

UNNAYAN
Student

they began pulling people out.

Choudhary says that by the time Delhi Fire Service personnel reached the scene through the narrow lanes, three people had been rescued. According to the Delhi Fire Service, the first distress call reached them at 1.33 p.m., about 15 minutes after Choudhary recalls the building collapsing. The first vehicle turned out from the service a minute later, according to Chief Fire Officer A.K. Malik.

Assistant Divisional Officer Santosh Kumar was among those who responded. It was his day off, and he was leaving home in Safdarjung to visit a temple when his phone rang. He says he immediately climbed into the response vehicle outside his house and changed into his uniform on the way. "When a call comes, everything else becomes insignificant," he says.

But the last stretch had to be covered on foot. Satya Niketan's lanes are so narrow that two people can barely walk side by side. Fire personnel carried hammers, shovels, electric cutters, and other equipment towards the site. By 1.50 p.m., after a preliminary assessment of the scale of the collapse, Kumar says they sought more people on ground and a senior officer.

Kumar remembers one victim being trapped beneath a large concrete slab, with only his legs visible. His face and abdomen were pinned beneath the slab. "It took us over 30 minutes to get him out. We could hear his heartbeat. We just wanted to pull him out alive," he says.

As he was being placed on a stretcher, another survivor informed Kumar that more people remained trapped. "I could see them. Some of them were crying to be saved. I held their hand and told them, 'Don't worry, you will be okay. I hope they were able to recover from their injuries,'" Kumar says.

The rescue operation involving the Delhi Fire Service, the National Disaster Response Force, and the Delhi Police continued into the following day. The final survivor was pulled out at noon on September 7.

Identifying the dead

At the AIIMS Trauma Centre, located about 7 km from the scene, Pushpa Jhaji sat in the waiting area, crying for her 19-year-old son Arpit. He had

celebrated the festivals of Raksha Bandhan and Janmashtami with his family in Dewas in Madhya Pradesh and had returned to Delhi just hours before the building collapsed. He called his mother after reaching his PG at 8 a.m. At around 11.30 a.m., he called her again on video. "Who would have known that was the last time we would speak," says Jhaji, crying.

On hearing the news, she and her husband Bhupendra caught the first flight to Delhi with two other family members. They reached AIIMS around midnight.

For hours, they were unable to find out what had happened to Arpit. The next afternoon, Jhaji was finally taken to see an unidentified body. The face was severely distorted. Then she noticed the mole on his chest.

Near the mortuary, Biren Singh Yadav waited for the body of his nephew, Akshat Singh Yadav. The 19-year-old's face was also too disfigured to be immediately recognisable. The family eventually identified him by the mark left by an operation he had undergone as a child.

Akshat, too, had gone home and returned to Delhi just two days earlier. His mother had asked him to stay back for a little longer. "But he said he had to leave for classes," Biren says.

Running away

By the evening of the tragedy, students in neighbouring PGs had begun packing their suitcases. Anushriti, 20, from Kanpur, had been staying in Satya Niketan for nearly a year. She was sleeping on the fourth floor of a nearby PG when her bed shook. She left her accommodation in her night clothes with only her phone in hand and went to a friend's home in Moti Bagh.

By about 10 p.m., the area beneath the Durgabai Deshmukh South Campus Metro station had become a waiting area for students who had nowhere to sleep. Many sat on the footpath.

Unnayan, 19, a student who lives in a cramped accommodation in Satya Niketan and had been house-hunting in the same locality that morning, saw the building collapse just 20 metres away. The image kept returning whenever he tried to sleep. He eventually left his PG at about 1 a.m. and went to a friend's home in Ber Sarai. But he could not sleep there either.

Another student from Guwahati, who has no relatives in Delhi, spent the night at her college. She says the classrooms were turned into temporary shelters, with mattresses spread across the floor.

Living on borrowed floors

Satya Niketan did not become a student neighbourhood overnight. Its proximity to South Campus, the metro station, Ring Road, and colleges such as Motilal Nehru College, Sri Venkateswara College, Aryabhata College, and Ram Lal Anand College has made it one of the most sought-after residential areas for students from outside Delhi.

However, the demand for rooms has outpaced institutional accommodation. DU has more than 2.5 lakh students in conventional programmes, while its hostel capacity is estimated at only around 9,000 beds. More than half its students come from outside the capital, according to the university's 2024-25 annual report. That gap has produced a parallel housing economy.

MCD officials and Malik say the five-storey building was originally constructed as a G+1 (ground floor plus one upper floor) structure in the 1970s and 1980s when Satya Niketan was being developed as a resettlement colony by the Delhi Development Authority to provide modest, low-rise housing for displaced families and low-income groups from across Delhi. The original structure had no columns or beams and relied on load-bearing brick walls. Malik says three additional floors were added in 1990.

As per the MCD, freehold rights were granted in 2011, allowing owners to extend buildings up to the permissible floor-area ratio, subject to an approved building plan and the condition of the existing structure. But this building never had a sanctioned plan.

Similarly, across Satya Niketan and other areas



They (the men hired by the contractor) were digging a basement within a building when it was already occupied. The additional floors and the basement are anyway illegal, but the building should have at least been vacated if they wanted to carry out work.

A.K. MALIK
Chief Fire Officer

such as Mukherjee Nagar, Old Rajinder Nagar, and Karol Bagh, old residential houses have gradually been converted into PGs. Floors have been divided into rooms, rooms into beds, and balconies, terraces, and other spaces absorbed into the rental market.

A bed in a shared room can cost ₹12,000-₹24,000 a month, while annual academic fees at DU range from ₹15,000 to ₹80,000, depending on the course and college. In these buildings, two beds are placed just inches apart, leaving barely any space to stand. Food and water may be included, while electricity is charged separately. "Students often accept these conditions because the alternative is to pay more for a flat farther from college or spend hours travelling every day," says a student, Yash Malhotra.

The result is a neighbourhood of narrow lanes lined with multi-storey buildings, balconies jutting over roads, and electricity and cable wires strung between structures.

Several students who left Satya Niketan after the collapse say cracks and seepage are common in rented accommodation, but leaving is not easy. Rent agreements, deposits, and the shortage of available rooms can make it difficult for them to leave even when they are unsafe.

The economics are stark. Landlords have a steady stream of prospective tenants, while a student arriving in Delhi may have only days to find a room before classes begin. In such a market, a room does not remain vacant for long.

Police say the PG operator of Hostel Daze, Sudhanshu Lovneesh, and his business partner, Shubham Tyagi, had taken four floors on lease in August 2025 for ₹1.05 lakh a month. They were operating seven PGs in the vicinity. The police say the operators had taken the building on a lower rent than the market rate because of its "dilapidated condition". This detail has become central to the investigation.

Two days before the collapse, Dhruv Singh Bhatia, a third-year student of Motilal Nehru College, had visited the PG to check on first-year students from his college. About 15 students from the college stayed there and had complained about loud work in the basement, where water had also accumulated.

Bhatia says he noticed cracks in the building, damp walls, and three or four beds packed into some of the small rooms. The entrance was narrow and the building poorly maintained.

"It is scary that I was here just two days ago. We told the students, 'Let's wait and see for one or two days. And this happened,'" he says.

The aftermath

According to the police investigation, Mahesh Gupta, the son of the property owners, had engaged a labour contractor, Sanjay Kumar, about 10 days before the incident, for work in the basement and on the ground floor.

Investigators found three truckloads of debris in the basement, which had been used to raise its level to that of the ground floor. On the day of the collapse, a wall on the ground floor that obstructed space intended for a shop was allegedly removed. Police suspect the alterations and the resulting changes in the load on the structure contributed to its collapse.

"They were digging a basement within a building when it was already occupied. The additional floors and the basement are anyway illegal, but the building should have at least been vacated if they wanted to carry out work," Malik says.

Sanjay was arrested in Kasganj in Uttar Pradesh on September 9 and brought back to Delhi. Police say he was being paid ₹2,800 a day for the work. An FIR under Sections 105 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder), 290 (negligent conduct with respect to pulling down, repairing, or constructing buildings) and 125 (a) (endangering life or personal safety of others) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, has been registered.

The property was registered in the name of Urmila Gupta. The police say her husband Harihar Gupta and son Mahesh were involved in its management. All three were arrested from Bhiwadi in Rajasthan, where they were hiding.

After the incident, the MCD suspended five South Zone officials, including the Deputy Commissioner, and began inspecting and sealing buildings in the neighbourhood. It demolished the wobbly building next door and evacuated the PGs and hostels nearby.

The Delhi High Court has taken up the issue of student accommodation, including the shortage of institutional hostels and the safety of private PGs. A petition has sought city-wide safety audits and accountability for regulatory failures. The Court has also been asked to examine the shortage of hostel accommodation for DU students.

The Delhi government has said it plans to strengthen regulation of PG accommodation, including licensing and safety requirements.

Many students have left Satya Niketan, saying they will not return until the MCD conducts safety checks and assures them that the buildings are safe. "This area is the most common choice for those of us who join DU because of its proximity to campus. But after what I saw, I don't want to stay here any more," says Unnayan.

A relative of a student from Guwahati says she had moved to the PG only a month ago. "How can we let our child live here knowing that she is not safe," she asks. "Even if it means she has to travel longer to get to her classes, we would rather have her somewhere safe."



A survivor being taken into an ambulance. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

BRICS SUMMIT 2026

From Page One

End Ukraine war, says Modi as he meets Putin

Mr. Putin invited Mr. Modi for the 24th India-Russia Annual Summit, which India accepted. The dates of the summit will be decided as per "mutual convenience" following diplomatic consultations.

The talks featured ways to expand industrial cooperation with Russia, collaboration in railway and tunneling, developing a steel value chain, and more business-to-business opportunities. Russia has been increasing employment opportunities for Indian blue-collar professionals and cooperation in the mobility of skilled manpower.

Against the backdrop of the conflict in West Asia and supply chain disruptions, measures to ensure the flow of energy and fertilizers through strategic joint ventures were discussed, as was cooperation in critical minerals.

Mr. Modi gifted Mr. Putin a Russian translation of *Thirukkural*, the classical Tamil poem collection authored by poet Thiruvalluvar.

Mr. Modi was accompanied by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, Principal Secretary Shaktikanta Das, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, and other senior officials in the meeting.

The two leaders last met on the sidelines of the SCO summit in the Kyrgyz Republic's capital, Bishkek, on August 31. Mr. Modi had called for an end to the Ukraine war then.

Modi and Pezeshkian discuss Iran conflict

Referring to the U.S.-Israel attack on Iran, Mr. Pezeshkian said, "Iran will not accept bullying. History of humanity tells us that bullies and oppressors are ultimately destroyed."

"The two leaders exchanged views on recent developments in West Asia. Prime Minister reiterated India's consistent position that all issues must be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy," said the Ministry of External Affairs.

"He also underscored the need for continued efforts to ensure lasting peace and stability in the region, safeguarding freedom of navigation and commerce, and the safety of seafarers," said the Ministry on Mr. Modi's remarks, highlighting the challenges that India has been facing on energy security and maritime freedom because of the chokehold in the Strait of Hormuz.

Mr. Modi appreciated Iran's regular participation in the multilateral consultations under BRICS and welcomed President Pezeshkian to the Leaders' Session of the BRICS Business Forum.

The Iranian leader is accompanied by a large delegation that includes Foreign Minister Syed Abbas Araghchi and Minister of Finance Seyed Ali Madanizadeh. At the BRICS Business Forum, Mr. Pezeshkian called for greater use of national currencies to deal with "currency risk and mutual settlement". He called for the creation of a joint BRICS insurance company with an initial capital of \$10 billion to cover major infrastructure and energy projects.

China calls for 'long-term' view of ties ahead of Xi visit

Modi and Xi set to hold talks today on the sidelines of BRICS Summit; Beijing says it will work with Delhi to 'handle bilateral ties from strategic height' as Chinese leader makes first trip in seven years

Ananth Krishnan
BEIJING

Beijing on Friday said it was willing to work with Delhi to handle relations "from a strategic height and long-term perspective", a day ahead of Chinese President Xi Jinping's first trip to India in seven years.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Xi will on Saturday hold talks on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in New Delhi.

"This will be the third year in a row for the two leaders to meet with each other following meetings in Kazan and Tianjin," China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said on Friday. "China will work with India to act on the strategic guidance of the two leaders, handle bilateral relations from a strategic height and long-term perspective, step up communication and enhance cooperation, properly handle differences, and be friends enjoying good neighbourliness and partners helping each other."

Mr. Xi will "put forward China's important initiatives and propositions, charting the course for greater BRICS cooperation", Ms. Mao added.

"Since its founding, BRICS countries have upheld the spirit of openness, inclusiveness and



Capital display: A commuter passes by a hoarding of Chinese President Xi Jinping at Parliament Street, in New Delhi, on Friday. PTI

win-win cooperation. BRICS has stayed committed to upholding multilateralism, upholding fairness and justice and seeking common development. BRICS has grown into a real force standing at the forefront of the Global South," she said.

"Since its founding, BRICS countries have upheld the spirit of openness, inclusiveness and

Diplomatic thaw
In China, Mr. Xi's visit to India has been seen as both

an opportunity to continue the gradual normalisation in ties as well as enabling greater cooperation between the two countries under the broader BRICS umbrella as their ties gradually improve.

"One of the biggest highlights will be [President] Xi's trip to India after seven years," Wang Youming, an expert on China's relations with developing countries at the China Institute of International Studies, was quoted as saying in the official *China Daily* on Friday.

"China and India are not only close neighbours but also founding members and major participants in BRICS. The state of their relationship has a direct bearing on the development of the mechanism. Multilateral platforms can create opportunities for bilateral engagement, while improving bilateral relations can, in turn, facilitate coordination within multilateral mechanisms."

Five Tibetan nationals held for protest against Xi visit

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

At least five Tibetan nationals were detained by the Delhi Police on Friday morning after they allegedly gathered to protest against Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to the national capital for the BRICS Summit.

The Tibetan community held protests at different locations in the city.

Three students were placed under preventive detention until September 14 and taken to Tihar jail. Two others were also detained.

Dhaka rules out Rahman's visit to India for BRICS meet

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Bangladesh will not be represented at the BRICS Summit in any official capacity, said Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh Humaiun Kobir on Thursday.

Speaking to presspersons in Dhaka, Mr. Kobir said that India had invited Prime Minister Tarique Rahman in his capacity as the head of BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and not as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

Mr. Kobir's explanation came as speculation conti-



Tarique Rahman

nued on whether Bangladesh would send any representative to the BRICS summit for which India had extended an early invite to Mr. Rahman in August.

"How shall we go? Has anyone from the Bangla-

desh government been invited? Our Prime Minister was not invited. Who told you that our Prime Minister was invited? The BIMSTEC Chair was invited. Then why are you asking this question?" remarked Mr. Kobir in response to questions from the media.

Speaking to the media at the Foreign Service Academy in Dhaka, Mr. Kobir said that the first visit of Mr. Rahman to India cannot be a multilateral one and that a bilateral visit will be planned at a "conducive" time.

Mr. Rahman was invited to visit India bilaterally immediately after he took office on February 17, 2026.

Border discussions, economic ties set to take centre stage

NEWS ANALYSIS

Suhasini Haidar
Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will meet Chinese President Xi Jinping on Saturday, with a view to improving trade and people-to-people relations, while border tensions continue to play out in the background. Although Mr. Xi has visited India on two occasions, this will be his first visit to Delhi since 2014. Neither leader has made a bilateral visit since 2020, however. As a result, experts say that while it is too early to declare an India-China "reset", they hope the third meeting between the two leaders in three years will yield more open conversations on resolving differences.

"Episodic summery between India and China must move towards a steady and sustained process of stabilisation both on the military/political front and from the angle of economic relations," former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to China and the U.S., Nirupama Menon Rao, told *The Hindu*.

Eastern Sector

The main concern for New Delhi is the continuing tensions at the Line of Actual Control, despite the disengagement from "all friction points" by the militaries, announced in October 2024. While clashes at Pangong Tso lake and Galwan in the Western Sector had sparked off the last stand-off in 2020, the situation in the Eastern Sector in Arunachal Pradesh is more recently in focus.

According to local reports as well as a number of government, military and security officials who spoke to *The Hindu*, Indian Army and People's Liberation Army forces remain at forward positions at the LAC in Taksing, while Indian forces have mobilised more patrolling forces to the area.

Trade, export controls and investment issues will also be high on the agenda.

Since 2014, India and China have doubled bilateral trade, from \$70 billion to about \$150 billion last year. However India's trade deficit with China has trebled, from \$38 billion to \$113 billion in the same period.



Narendra Modi with Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2025. ANI

Former Ambassador to China Ashok Kantha said that the Chinese moves in Arunachal Pradesh had struck a "discordant note". "There are reports about attempts to change the status quo in the Eastern Sector. So one outcome [from the Modi-Xi meeting] clearly should be that the leaders reaffirm that borders must remain peaceful, [so] we can move towards normalisation, step by step," he told *The Hindu*.

Officials from the External Affairs Ministry did not confirm whether India would raise the immediate situation during talks, but both sides have been meeting at increasingly higher levels in order to resolve the situation. Last week, they held two Corps Commander-level meetings in the Eastern Sector. This came after NSA Ajit Doval's visit to Beijing and Special Representatives (SR) talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi are expected to take stock of the SR talks. Another issue with increased salience is transboundary rivers — after the deadly flash floods caused by glacial collapse on the China-Nepal border last month.

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Street vendors asked not to put up stalls along BRICS routes

Suruchi Kumar
NEW DELHI

For Suraj Kumar (33), the BRICS Summit has become a source of misery. Mr. Kumar, who works at a roadside stall in Janpath, travels from Narela to Connaught Place for work every day and is paid ₹500. Since Monday, he has been able to keep only a part of his stall open, and adding to his hardship, the Delhi Police have asked some vendors in the area to keep their shops closed till Sunday.

"The owner pays me only ₹250 now, and for the next three days, I won't even get that," he said.

Suraj is among several roadside vendors and hawkers along the routes identified for VIP movements and stays during the BRICS Summit. The police have asked them to remain closed from Friday to Sunday for security reasons.

Even on Thursday, the usually crowded inner lane of Janpath Market had been largely silent. Stalls selling clothes, accessories and jewellery were covered or shut, with no displays of their goods.

Mohammed Hayat, a member of the NDMC Town Vending Committee,



An inner lane of Janpath wears a deserted look. SURUCHI KUMAR

said that most restrictions were communicated to the vendors verbally. He said the restrictions should be lifted on Monday rather than being extended further.

For Ramkumar Singh, 50, who travels from Paharganj to set up his small snacks stall, the closure will mean a loss of about ₹3,000. "We have every-day spending of ₹200-₹250, and I have a family of five. Even a day's loss hurts us," he said.

The restrictions have not, however, affected all traders in the area. The New Delhi Traders' Association said the Connaught Place market would remain open throughout the Summit. The Janpath Traders' Association also said shops in the market would remain open.

BRICS negotiators work late into evening to arrive at a consensus for 'Delhi Declaration'

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

As New Delhi prepared to host the BRICS Summit of 11 emerging economies, negotiators were working late into the evening on Friday to forge a consensus for the "Delhi Declaration". Diplomatic sources and officials said that all member countries had agreed to "almost all the text, with the exception of one paragraph", indicating that the references to the war in Iran started by the U.S. and Israel, and Iran's attacks on installations in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other West Asian countries, had still not been resolved.

Both Iran and the UAE are members of the BRICS grouping. Their tensions have held up a joint statement at all BRICS ministerial meetings this year, and at the crucial meeting of Foreign Ministers in mid-May. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar issued a "Chair's Summary" instead.

"We continue to engage on [the] Outcome Document", an official privy to the negotiations told *The Hindu* on Friday, while others said they remained hopeful of a breakthrough, as India was able to do in



Prime Minister Narendra Modi poses with leaders and representatives from Russia, South Africa, Iran and Brazil during a photo session for participants in the BRICS Business Forum on Friday. REUTERS

2023 by forging a joint statement at the G-20 Summit after the Russian war in Ukraine had divided members.

'Equal condemnation'

In the current series of negotiations, Iran has been pitching for a clear condemnation of the U.S. and Israel's actions, and the UAE wants "equal condemnation" of Iran's actions, a diplomat told *The Hindu*. However, Iran has contested this in Sherpa meetings, insisting that it would be akin to Iran criticising itself. Tehran has contended that its attacks on the Gulf region were in "self-de-

fence", limited to U.S. military and ancillary installations, the sources said.

The top leaders of eight BRICS countries, including Russia, India, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, South Africa, Indonesia and Iran, will meet around the table at the Bharat Mandapam complex in New Delhi on Saturday afternoon for the first time since the Iran war began. Brazil heads to elections shortly, and President Lula da Silva will be represented by Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira, while UAE President and Ruler of Abu Dhabi Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who is visiting Germany at pre-

sent, will be represented by his son, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Khalid bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Saudi Arabia, which was granted BRICS membership in 2024 but has yet to join formally, has sent Foreign Minister Farhan bin Saud.

On Friday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is understood to have stressed the importance of a joint statement from the BRICS coalition in each of his bilateral talks, including with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian as well as Russian President Vladimir Putin, who, as a strongly ally of the Iranian government,

has considerable sway with Tehran.

All eyes will also be on Mr. Modi's meeting with the UAE Crown Prince on Saturday morning, before the joint session. Diplomatic insiders say the decision by the UAE President to send his son, and not a Minister, is an indication of the importance of the Summit.

The BRICS grouping has been particularly affected by the war in Iran that was started by the U.S. and Israel's attacks and the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on February 28, 2026.

"In the backdrop of geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainties, the participation of all these leaders in the 18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi is a reiteration of their collective confidence and commitment to BRICS," said former Secretary for Multilateral and Economic Relations Damu Ravi.

"It's an excellent opportunity for India to put focus on finding solutions to the challenges of an aspiring global south, in a trilateral framework by combining each other's strengths," he added.

The main session of BRICS leaders will be held on Saturday afternoon.

Modi holds talks with UN chief ahead of BRICS Summit

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday met with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres ahead of the BRICS Summit, as both leaders held discussions on various issues, including ongoing conflicts and freedom of navigation, sustainable development, human-centric AI and global food security.

"UNSG Guterres congratulated PM Modi for India's chairship of the BRICS for the fourth time. Both leaders underscored the significance of multipolarity and the need to reform multilateral institutions, including the UN Security Council, to reflect contemporary realities," the External Affairs Ministry said in a statement.

Mr. Modi also wished Mr. Guterres the very best for the remainder of his tenure.

In a post on X, he wrote, "Had a wonderful meeting with UN Secretary-General Mr. Antonio Guterres. Discussed multiple subjects including the ground covered in India's BRICS Presidency, India's commitment to strengthening multilateralism and the urgent need for UN reforms".

BRICS SUMMIT 2026



Warm welcome: Union Minister Sanjay Seth receives Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi upon his arrival in New Delhi. PTI



Summit partner: Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim arrives in New Delhi ahead of the 18th BRICS Summit. PTI



Boosting ties: Union Minister Kirti Vardhan Singh with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Khalid bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. PTI



Key participant: South African President Cyril Ramaphosa inspecting a guard of honour. ANI

India building economic bridges amid rise in global trade barriers, says Modi

At the BRICS Business Forum, PM calls for freedom of navigation; Putin says leading powers of the late 20th century being replaced by emerging economies; Pezeshkian highlights link between economic security and national security, urges BRICS nations to expand trade in local currencies

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday highlighted the issue of rising trade barriers and constrained sea trade routes, saying India was building bridges among these constraints and using its presidency of BRICS this year to establish new cooperation networks among the BRICS nations. He was speaking at the BRICS Business Forum in New Delhi.

Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke about how the leading powers of the late 20th century were being replaced by new emerging economies and that this competition was now taking "ugly forms" such as military attacks and threats of secondary sanctions.

During his speech, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian highlighted the dangers of the global financial system being dependent on only a few countries and called for increased BRICS trade in local currencies. He also said that the attacks by the U.S. and Israel on his country showed how economic security could not be separated from national and regional security.

Mr. Modi took note of the fact that BRICS coun-



At the forum: Prime Minister Narendra Modi holds the hand of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian as they walk alongside Russian President Vladimir Putin and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. ANI

tries represented 50% of the world's population, 40% of global GDP, and more than 25% of global trade.

Cooperation networks

"Not only that, over these years, while global GDP has increased by around two-and-a-half times, the combined GDP of BRICS countries has increased by around four-and-a-half times," he said.

Mr. Modi said that while trade barriers were increasing around the world, India was building economic bridges. "Since 2014, we have entered into free trade agreements with around 40 countries," he

said. "Here too, our approach is the same: reduce barriers and increase opportunities for businesses. Therefore, under our presidency [of BRICS in 2026], we have established new cooperation networks in areas such as agriculture, health, skills and smart grids," he said.

He added that India has taken additional initiatives such as the BRICS Incubator Network, BRICS MSME Portal, and Start-Up Innovation Fund to connect start-ups and MSMEs with markets and finance.

Profound global shifts

"Global trade can move forward only when sea

lanes are secure, supply routes remain open and seafarers are safe," Mr. Modi said. "Therefore, India is a strong supporter of freedom of navigation and the safety of seafarers."

Mr. Putin spoke about how the world is currently undergoing structural, deep, profound shifts.

"Which is explained by the fact that the so-called old leaders that used to be the vanguard of economic growth in the second half of the 20th century are being replaced by new engines of growth," he said. While acknowledging the fact that these countries still possess well-developed infrastructure, and

technological and scientific advantages, Mr. Putin said it was in the nature of humanity and the economy to change.

He added that this change was accompanied by Russia's "Western competitors doing everything to get back their erstwhile competitive edge".

"Sometimes this competition is taking ugly forms," Mr. Putin noted. "Sometimes there are measures resorted to of a physical nature, when pipelines are being destroyed, when attempts are undertaken to block international transport corridors, to seize maritime vessels, other illegal restrictions are being applied."

"And there's also the threat of so-called secondary sanctions against those who do not want to follow someone else's interest and rather look after their own," he added, without mentioning India or the U.S. threat to impose 100% tariffs on India as a penalty for its Russian oil imports.

Mr. Pezeshkian also noted the "increasing use of economic instruments to exert political pressure", and asked the assembled leaders what the BRICS response would be to the ongoing global challenges.

"We believe that the true strength of BRICS is

not confined merely to the size of its members' economies," he said. "Rather, it becomes more apparent when these capacities are transformed into a network of trade, investment, and joint financing that is a transition from potential cooperation to operational."

Mr. Pezeshkian talked about how the decades of sanctions Iran has faced has now entered a new phase as a result of the "active military act of aggression of the United States and the Israeli regime" against Iran.

"This act of aggression, in addition to its human and material losses, once again revealed an important reality: economic security cannot be separated from national and regional security," he emphasised.

"Therefore, by creating resilient capacities for the economies of its members and the global south, BRICS must create an environment in which no country can disrupt the legitimate trade of another country through monopolising a financial instrument or technology," Mr. Pezeshkian said.

He said that one of the most important steps the BRICS countries could take was to expand the use of national currencies in trade.

INBRIEF



37 deep-tech innovations on display at 'Bharat Innovates'

India's 37 deep-tech innovations are being showcased at the 'Bharat Innovates Exposition' at Bharat Mandapam here from September 11 to 12 on the sidelines of the BRICS summit, officials said on Friday. An advanced floating solar PV platform for complex water bodies, a full stack marine robotic platform for critical infrastructure inspection, a rare earth free e-powertrain, AI-enabled cervical cancer screening delivering risk assessment in under 60 seconds and an AI-enabled foetal monitoring platform are among the innovations on display at the exposition organised by the Education Ministry in coordination with the External Affairs Ministry. The exposition provides participating innovators with an opportunity to network with investors, business leaders and industry representatives from BRICS member countries. This will facilitate opportunities for B2B engagements, technology partnerships, investment discussions and international market access. PTI



Bihar's famous food products make a mark at BRICS Summit

Delegates and foreign guests attending the BRICS Summit will get an opportunity to savour the authentic, traditional flavours of Bihar. Sattu and makhana are expected to play a significant role in establishing 'Brand Bihar' at the global level. Bihar Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary on Friday posted a message on his social media account X saying, "Bihar's pride on the global stage! The sattu and makhana included in the welcome kit at the Delhi BRICS Summit are emblems of our taste, tradition, and entrepreneurship. Gratitude to the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has realised the 'Local to Global' resolve..." As part of the hospitality arrangements for the BRICS Summit, local products such as sattu and makhana from Bihar will have a special presence. The presentation of these products will highlight Bihar's traditional food culture as well as the global potential of its local products.



Police step up social media monitoring ahead of summit

The Delhi Police have stepped up monitoring of social media platforms ahead of the BRICS Summit, with specialised units tracking public posts for possible security threats, misinformation and activity that could have implications for law and order. Speaking to *The Hindu*, Additional Commissioner of Police, Intelligence Fusion and Strategic Operations (IFSO), Sanjay Bhatia said the police had put systems in place to prevent potential "cyber mishaps" during the summit. The social media monitoring is carried out through a dedicated Social Media Cell at police headquarters and specialised units. Software tools scan publicly available posts, captions and comments on platforms using specific keywords and hashtags, as per officials aware of the arrangements.



A floral touch: NDMC staff members decorate a floral hoarding ahead of the BRICS Summit in New Delhi on Friday. ANI

Delhi decked up, security tightened ahead of summit

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Central Delhi turned into a fortress on Friday, a day ahead of the BRICS Summit 2026, with 15,000 police personnel and 200 companies of paramilitary forces deployed to secure the dignitaries attending the summit and their movement through the city. Parts of the National Capital also underwent a decorative makeover, with special lighting and floral arrangements at key locations.

Eleven Heads of State or Government are scheduled to attend the summit, which will be held at the Bharat Mandapam on Sa-

turday and Sunday. Security measures also include monitoring aerial activity and scanning the Yamuna. Shahdara Deputy Commissioner of Police Rajendra Prasad Meena conducted boat patrolling ahead of the summit. The DCPs in areas housing major historical sites, such as Rajghat and the Red Fort, have also enhanced security in anticipation of unscheduled visits to these tourist destinations.

The Delhi Traffic Police announced traffic diversions and restrictions from 2 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. on Friday. Restrictions have been placed on more than 35 roads, with 22 diversion points set up.

BRICS Finance Ministers, bank heads flag 'unilateral imposition' of tariffs

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

The Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors (FMCBG) of the BRICS nations collectively voiced their concerns about the "unilateral imposition" of tariffs and non-tariff measures that distort trade, in a joint statement issued on Friday.

The FMCBG also called for "practical solutions" to enhance cross-border payments in local currencies. However, they acknowledged the primacy of national priorities in such matters and that there can be no "one-size-fits-all approach".

The first FMCBG meeting under India's chairmanship of BRICS was held on August 12 in Jaipur, and the second was held on September 9-10 in Mumbai, following which the joint statement was issued.

Concerns about tariffs

"We continue to have serious concerns with the unilateral imposition of trade and finance-related actions, including the raising of tariffs and non-tariff measures, which distort trade and are inconsistent with World Trade Organi-



The FMCBG voiced support for a transparent and rules-based multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core. FILE PHOTO

zation (WTO) rules," the joint statement said. "These pressures weigh most heavily on Emerging Markets and Developing Economies (EMDEs)."

While the joint statement did not mention the U.S., it is the only country that is actively engaged in levying extraordinary tariffs on its trade partners.

The FMCBG reiterated their support for an "open, transparent, inclusive, non-discriminatory, and rules-based" multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core.

Local currency trade

It acknowledged the efforts of the BRICS Payment Task Force (BPTF) in exploring "pragmatic solutions" for

efficient cross-border payment mechanisms.

"In this regard, we acknowledge the work done to study the cross-border interoperability of payment and messaging channels, and the discussions on promoting trade settlements and investments using BRICS local currencies, while respecting national priorities and acknowledging that there is no one-size-fits-all approach," the statement said.

Task force for growth

The FMCBG encouraged the payments task force to continue discussions to facilitate "practical solutions for cross-border payments among BRICS countries, which are fast, low-cost,

more accessible, efficient, transparent, and safe".

India used its chairship to establish a BRICS Task Force on Growth and Development as a dedicated platform to address shared growth and development challenges of relevance to BRICS and other emerging markets and developing economies.

The Task Force is structured into two workstreams covering the Resilience, Innovation and Cooperation pillars, and the Sustainability pillar.

"We recognise the Task Force on Growth and Development as a platform that provides BRICS countries a space to discuss growth models suited to their own national contexts and development priorities, and encourage the continuation of its work, in alignment with the workstreams of Ministries of Finance and Central Banks," the joint statement said.

The joint statement also covered other areas of discussion between the BRICS countries, including the reform of multilateral lending institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The Editorial Page

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

At BRICS, keep difficult conversations alive

THE 18TH BRICS Summit comes when wars, disrupted energy supplies and soaring costs are fragmenting the world order. At the same time, the grouping has expanded, and the diversity of its participants and interests gives the summit a special significance. For instance, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which became full members more than two years ago, are embroiled in competition and conflict, and have divergent interests. Presidents Vladimir Putin of Russia and Xi Jinping of China are both participating. India, whose foreign policy has long rested on the idea that strategic autonomy is best preserved by maintaining relationships across the spectrum, has a strong interest in making such a forum work. Delhi knows that there is great value in keeping difficult conversations alive.

For Delhi, the summit is a test of whether it can advance its own and the forum's interests — through more resilient supply chains and greater use of national currencies in trade. These can give countries greater room to navigate a global financial system that is still disoriented and unsettled by the weaponisation of tariffs, over the last year and a half, by US President Donald Trump. Greater economic exchange within the bloc, or more broadly, within the Global South, however, does not make BRICS an anti-Western alliance. It reflects a desire among its members to trade freely, secure supplies from multiple sources and push for reform of global institutions.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has already met President Putin in a bilateral focused on boosting trade, defence, energy and critical minerals. The highlight of the summit is bound to be the meeting between Modi and Xi. In what will be the Chinese president's first visit to India since the Galwan clashes and the escalation of border tensions. While the two countries are rebuilding ties and Chinese investment has begun to return to India, the relationship remains fraught. India aims to reduce its economic dependence on China even as Chinese imports are deeply embedded in its manufacturing supply chains. Xi's presence in Delhi offers an opportunity to broaden cooperation and temper the edges of the competition. That is also the larger promise of BRICS. India's strategy should be to make it a more useful forum rather than just a bloc that ranges itself against the West, focusing on practical collaboration and strengthening its credibility as a voice of the Global South. A successful summit will be one that leaves India with more room for manoeuvre, fewer vulnerabilities and more channels through which a conversation can be sustained between countries that agree with each other, and also disagree.

For Bihar flood problem, solution lies beyond

BIHAR RECEIVED 27 per cent below-normal rainfall between June 1 and the first week of September. Even then, large parts of the state are under water. The Ganga, Gandak, Kosi, Budhi Gandak, Punpun and Ghaghra have all risen above danger levels in different stretches. A combination of high upstream river flows and erratic weather — spells of heavy, localised rainfall amid an overall rainfall deficit — has contributed to the rivers spilling over their banks. The unusually high level of the Ganga also created a "backwater effect" in the Gandak and Punpun. Since the rivers drain into the Ganga, its high water level made it difficult for them to discharge their water. As a result, water backed up in the tributaries, adding to the flooding.

Since colonial times, flood-prone Bihar has tried to contain its rivers within defined channels through embankments. But embankments separate rivers from their floodplains, while continuous silt deposition raises riverbeds and reduces channel capacity. When an embankment breaches, the artificially contained water can rush into homes and fields. Bihar, therefore, needs to revisit the idea that higher or stronger embankments will *ipso facto* contain floods. Embankment maintenance must be accompanied by the restoration of drainage channels, protection of floodplains, better land-use planning, restoration of wetlands, and deployment of early-warning systems. The Ganga Basin River Management Plan, implemented for more than a decade, acknowledges these imperatives. But the persistent monsoon floods in Bihar underline that much needs to be done to give the river space to spread safely during periods of high discharge. Addressing Bihar's concerns will require greater coordination between the riverine states on reservoir releases.

Bihar has long argued that the Farakka barrage and the India-Bangladesh Ganga Water Sharing Treaty have compounded the state's river-management challenges. It contends that the barrage has altered the Ganga's flow regime, affecting the movement and deposition of sediment load. The extent to which this contributes to floods in Bihar remains contested. Even so, renegotiation of the 1996 treaty, which expires in December, should take into account Bihar's concerns over silt accumulation and the state's river-management needs. The new management needs to be informed by updated data on river flows and climate-change projections. In an era of erratic weather, states and countries sharing river basins should strengthen coordination to manage water flows and mitigate flood-related distress.

AI can kill humanity in a decade? Get in line

IT'S BEEN a while now since reality has all but caught up to the dystopias of science fiction. Take the revelation by Jacob Coxon, a former researcher at Anthropic, "AI," he said after quitting his job, "could kill us all" by the end of the decade. What's more, there are enough people at companies like Anthropic and OpenAI who are aware of the danger but continue to gamble with enormous stakes that they aren't left behind in the race that only billionaires can win. For most people, though, there's only one response to this existential threat to the species: What's all the fuss about?

In the second decade of the 21st century, doomday is passé. Titans of industry, scientific minds backed by machines of war and just plain old human consumption have taken the planet to the brink of apocalypse. Nuclear weapons, the infamous Doomsday Clock inching towards midnight, floods, heat waves, melting glaciers, rising seas — through it all, people can binge watch and chill. AI will destroy humanity. It just needs to get in line.

Behind the mass psychosis that drives humans to ever greater peril, despite knowing the danger, is the banality of risk. As members of the only species aware of its own mortality, humans know their existence will come to an end. But like the smoker who puffs away at his cigarette despite knowing the harm, people are likely to ask AI about how to survive the machine apocalypse.

India can change what BRICS stands for — more choices, not more blocs

IT'S AN extraordinary conclave of global leaders. As the BRICS Summit opens today at Bharat Mandapam, the leaders will represent almost half the world's population, 40 per cent of global GDP and over a quarter of global trade. The geopolitics makes the lineup even more exceptional, almost audacious. Narendra Modi will host, amongst others, Russia's Vladimir Putin, South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa, Iran's Masoud Pezeshkian, Indonesia's Prabowo Subianto, China's Xi Jinping and the UN Secretary-General. Almost miraculous, in these Manichean times.

It will be tempting to judge it, though, as one judges all summits: Can a communiqué survive the night? Can two wars be papered over in a paragraph? And if Xi shows up smiling, is that a thaw? None of these is the real test. Anyone who has attended the drafting of a summit line in this town knows how it goes. It starts with the communiqué and ends with the communiqué. And whatever grand vision India has for the international system two decades from now is considered — politely — by India's diplomats to be somebody else's bailiwick. The professors. The real test is whether India brings an idea to the meeting or is simply a venue for others' ideas.

Surjit Bhalla wrote one for India in this paper yesterday (Forget BRICS, look West, IE, September 10). His maths is not wrong, and neither is his analysis. China will never rebalance. But BRICS was never meant to

be either a growth miracle or a security blanket. To fail it for not being something it never set out to be is to flunk it in the wrong exam. The real mistake comes at the conclusion. Looking West because America has shown itself willing to punish partners who drift is not grand strategy. It is a mere change of address.

BRICS is imbalanced. China pushed hardest for new members. Its bank is in Shanghai. Russia and Iran, the members under Western sanctions, are the ones most interested in de-dollarising their trade. And it is Washington, not Beijing, that now threatens tariffs against any bloc that flirts with a rival to the dollar. Equidistance between America and China is not a policy; it's an assertion of powerlessness. Alignment with either is surrender. What India should do instead is work, quietly, to change what BRICS is for. The world does not need more blocs. It needs more choices. A grouping that sits in the shade of the US will never agree on ideology, and need not.

The international system, and Asia at its centre, is too large and too plural to be organised around a single axis. India's place in the world gives it both the latitude and the responsibility to say this with conviction. Brazil and South Africa, which gain nothing from either China or American primacy, can say it with the same conviction, and should join Delhi at the table.

The rule joins in the other di-



AMITABH MATTOO

The international system, and Asia at its centre, is too large and too plural to be organised around a single axis. India's place in the world gives it both latitude and responsibility to say this with conviction

rection, too. Reforming a Western-designed system is a legitimate wish, but a world where Washington is replaced by Beijing as the trusted guarantor of Asian choices simply replaces one centre with another. The harder ambition is an Asia in which China is powerful but not hegemonic, India influential but not domineering, ASEAN does not have to choose, the Gulf defines itself, and the small don't have to be anyone's client states. None of that is "anti-China". All of it is opposed to hegemony. That distinction is the whole argument.

Three things are within India's reach this weekend. First, an interoperability protocol that links domestic fast-payment systems, building on UPI's existing presence in the Gulf and Southeast Asia and allowing any member to join (or leave) at will. Not a BRICS currency, but a set of alternatives so that no country ever has to rely on a single financial plumbing system. Second, reform of NDB governance that gives newer members more power over its capital. Third, if the sher-

pas insist on a statement about Ukraine and Gaza, let's make it one about principles, not positions: Not an endorsement of anyone's war aims but a defence of sovereignty which applies to Ukrainians and Gazans alike, and an offer of Indian good offices that this government has, for whatever reason, been extremely reluctant to extend.

When I teach Indian foreign policy at Jawahar Nehru University, I teach Kautilya, too. The *mandala* confuses my students for reasons opposite to those I expect. They think an old book will give them hierarchies. They find networks. I call their attention to the inner ring, where the *vijigishu* sits: The king who wishes to conquer. Then you realise that every king in the *mandala* considers himself the *vijigishu*. The map has as many centres as it has points. Hegemony, in Kautilya, isn't how the world is. It's what one powerful ruler wants to make of it, despite all the other *vijigishus*. Asia should settle, instead, for a Kautilyan compromise: A circle of states that can disagree and still cooperate, whose sovereignty is absolute and none of which has the power or the excuse to impose its will on the others.

History is being made whilst we wait. But it isn't made by onlookers. It's hammered out on anvils. For two days this weekend, India is in possession of the anvil. Washington and Beijing wield the hammers. If India can lay down that anvil this weekend, there's a chance Asia will have more than one centre when the dust settles. And if there's one enduring product of this summit that survives the photo-op, let it not be a declaration. Let it be a different question we ask about Asia. Not "Who will dominate?" but "How do we ensure that nobody does?"

The writer is dean and professor, SIS, JNU and former vice-chancellor, University of Jammu

AI governance architecture must include its largest stakeholders



SUNIL MEHTA



RICHA ROY

IN THE six weeks that preceded the BRICS Summit in New Delhi, both Demis Hassabis and Bill Gates underscored the need for an AI governance institution, tracking risks across labour, finance, elections, health and beyond. Both emphasised international coordination, yet did not envisage fast-growing emerging markets represented in such institutions.

AI's risks transcend sovereign boundaries and sectoral silos. The chair of the Financial Stability Board (FSB), Andrew Bailey, warned that leverage, stretched valuations and AI optimism are interacting in ways that could amplify a market correction across borders, implying a global financial risk. Emerging markets are massive users of AI; their resources, data and labour power its models; they are most vulnerable to its technological, sovereignty, financial and climate risks. The BRICS Summit presents an opportunity to address them.

When India held the 2023 G20 presidency, the authors argued for an International Institute for Regulatory Development (IIRD) under the aegis of the G20 and FSB, to set standards for emergent technologies, undertake global regulatory research, and "localise" rules for fast-growing emerging economies. Three years on, AI sharpens the argument for IIRD. It should be a global apex body for AI, finance and climate risk, with three core functions.

First, research, regulatory capacity-building for early warning. A permanent secretariat producing shared assessments of how AI and other global risks transmit through financial systems and climate exposures, with data drawn from emerging and advanced markets. Existing institutions are inadequate — the FSB is a coordinating umbrella, not a research institution, and the two should complement, not duplicate each other.

Second, an exchange of practice. A living repository of what has worked. The precedents exist. Project Agorá, with 40 private participants such as SWIFT and multiple central banks, and Project Dunbar, in which the central banks of Singapore, Australia, Malaysia and South Africa created a shared platform for digital currencies, show what global regulators can build together. The results of AI pilots in UPI could, for instance, be a valuable part of this exchange.

Third, proportionate standards. Weighted governance that reflects where growth and users are, and a formal channel

into the FSB, the Basel Committee, and climate and frontier AI bodies. Proportionality matters as much as representation. Standards to be calibrated to contexts.

Given the geopolitical complexity, design choices are critical. The IIRD should be seeded at Delhi, though not owned by BRICS. It should be chartered as an open institution, housed in India, funded by a mix of public, private and multilateral funds, with the New Development Bank as one contributor, and with membership open to the G20, the OECD, multilateral development banks and the FSB.

The IIRD would not threaten the turf of existing institutions, but complement them by producing shared research and early warning on how AI risk transmits through finance and climate, with data from emerging and advanced markets — a gap the FSB itself admits, facilitate a living exchange of practice; feed proportionate, mutually recognised standards into the FSB, Basel; and be a precursor to a global frontier-AI body. The Delhi declaration should mandate a working group, chaired by India and open to non-members, to bring an IIRD charter to the 2027 summit, and to present it in parallel to the G20 finance track — critically, to institutionalise a communiqué.

India's presidencies of global groupings have been praised for being inclusive. As with any international summit, there is the risk of critique of the spectacle surpassing the technical negotiations and sustained institutional engagement. The BRICS IIRD working group offers an opportunity to both retain the inclusivity and preclude the critique. Bretton Woods institutions originated in America and Europe, designed for a world that no longer exists. AI's governance is being designed by a handful of companies and governments for a world that does not yet exist. Both exclude countries whose citizens will be AI's largest, most vulnerable stakeholders. India's common-law heritage, technological prowess and Global South convening power allow for designing a different architecture. Its BRICS chairship is the moment to offer a third draft, with the Global South as co-creators of the new rules.

Mehta chairs the Asia Society India Centre and is former chairman of PNB, YES Bank, Indus Bank and country head of AIG India. Roy is a Chevening Gurukul Fellow at the University of Oxford and partner at Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas. Views are personal

From god of beginnings, sutras for nation-building



SHASHANK R JOSHI



SHASHANK R JOSHI

GANAPATI is not only a god to be worshipped; he is a principle to be lived. Every year, the *ghat tashu* announces his arrival, Mumbai stops. India stops. Aclay idiom becomes the centre of our consciousness. Why does a form with an elephant head and a human body resonate so deeply with modern, aspirational India? The answer lies in the Vedas. In the Rig Veda, he is "Brahmanaspati". "Gananaam tva Ganapati havamahe, Kavim kavimam upanashravastanam..." (We invoke you, lord of all groups, the wisest of the wise). Long before he became the god of beginnings, Ganapati was the Vedic principle of organising chaos into cosmos. "Gana" means group, collective, system. "Pati" means master. In modern management terms, he is the first systems thinker. Our *rishis* never created a form without philosophy. Each part of Ganesh is a sutra for nation-building.

The elephant head is *maha mastaka* — big intellect, big memory, big vision. An elephant never forgets its path. Viksit Bharat needs this big head to think 25 years ahead, to remember our civilisational roots while embracing AI, biotech, and quantum. Next is *ishura karna*, the winnowing ears. His ears are like winnowing fans. He listens to everything but retains only the grain, throws away the chaff. In the age of social media noise, fake news and polarisation, this is our greatest *sadhana*. *Vivaka* is the talent to all stakeholders — farmer, scientist, journalist — but to keep only what is true and useful for the nation. *Vakratunda*, the curved trunk, is adaptability. His trunk can uproot a tree and pick up a needle. That is flexibility with strength. Viksit Bharat will need this to be strong on borders and soft in warfare. The *muska vahana*, the mouse, is the most profound symbol. A tiny mouse carries this huge god. The mouse is *kuha* — desire, consumption, greed that nibbles away everything. If desire rises us, we are destroyed. If wisdom rides desire, we progress. The climate crisis, our sugar epidemic, our consumerism — can be controlled only when *buddhi* rides over *bhoga*. That is why Ganesh comes before Lakshmi. Wealth without wisdom is *vinasha*. Finally, "modak in hand". The *sadhana* modak is not just sweet. It is the sweet fruit of disciplined effort — *pursarthartha*. Viksit Bharat will not come by slogans, but by the tapas of every Indian.

We call him *Vighnaharta* — remover of obstacles. But his Vedic name is also *Vighnakarta* — he creates obstacles for the egoistic. Every obstacle in our path to becoming a developed nation — corruption, casteism, pollution of our rivers, lifestyle diseases — is actually his grace. He is blocking the wrong path, so we take the right one.

Ecological Ganesh will let the clay return to clay. Let our *visarjan* be *visarjana* — letting go of ego, not polluting water. The Vedas say — *mitritva mitritam* — from earth to earth. The economic carries this huge god. The mouse is *kuha* — desire, consumption, greed that nibbles away everything. If desire rises us, we are destroyed. If wisdom rides desire, we progress. The climate crisis, our sugar epidemic, our consumerism — can be controlled only when *buddhi* rides over *bhoga*. That is why Ganesh comes before Lakshmi. Wealth without wisdom is *vinasha*. Finally, "modak in hand". The *sadhana* modak is not just sweet. It is the sweet fruit of disciplined effort — *pursarthartha*. Viksit Bharat will not come by slogans, but by the tapas of every Indian.

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Before starting any new venture for Viksit Bharat — a startup, a lab, a school — invoke the Ganapati principle: Will this organise or disorganise?

The writer is a Mumbai-based endocrinologist and Padmashri awardee

40 YEARS AGO

September 12, 1986



28 killed in train-bus collision

AT LEAST 28 bus passengers were killed and over 60 injured, several of them seriously, in a major train-bus collision at an unmanned level-crossing at Puthalipahar in the north Lakhimpur district of Upper Assam, bordering Arunachal Pradesh, according to the latest official reports reaching Guwahati. Forty-eight passengers were admitted to hospitals. A spokesman of NF Railway said the collision occurred at the driver failed to observe necessary caution.

PM on border security

THE PRIME MINISTER, Rajiv Gandhi, said the

Centre would not hesitate to take steps under the powers granted by the Rajya Sabha to counter any attempt by the Punjab government that might weaken border security. Gandhi was reacting to the state government's decision to appoint an enquiry committee to go into the recent incident on the India-Pakistan border when 13 alleged terrorists were killed in an encounter with the BSF.

The Gorkha question

THE LEFT Front government wants to handle the Gorkha-led movement for a separate state in Darjeeling purely as a political problem. It was ready to extend autonomy to the region, but under no circumstances would it allow Gorkha leaders to carry on any anti-national

or divisive movement. This was stated by Chief Minister Jyoti Basu at a press conference. Basu said that secessionist and divisive forces should not find any element of inspiration in any section of the press.

NCERT silver jubilee

ON THE occasion of the silver jubilee celebrations of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, awarded fellowships of the National Institute of Education to 19 eminent educationists. Inaugurating the silver jubilee celebrations, the Prime Minister said that the new education policy (NEP) was designed to make the nation's vast human resources an asset instead of a liability.

On caste census & NPAs, same reluctance to make privilege publicly visible



SATISH DESHPANDE

A REPORT in this newspaper (Note on meeting over caste census rewritten after Ministry pushback, IE, September 3) about the alleged "miscommunication" between the Registrar General of India (RGI) office (which conducts the Census) and the Ministry of Social Justice (MoSJ) (which maintains lists of Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes), suggest that the curious case of the caste census just got curiously. After an abrupt about-turn on this issue before the 2024 elections, the Modi government first postponed the Census beyond reasonable limits (doubtless because of the impending delimitation), then unveiled a thinly disguised attempt to sabotage the effort through an "open-ended" question on caste, rather than using drop-down lists along with an "Others" option for unlisted caste names. The excuse given for this was that caste lists were not available. It is now clear that this was never true, and that the MoSJ had in fact offered to supply the RGI with the SC and OBC lists. This takes to new heights the attempts made by governments to avoid, prevent or sabotage the caste census. Congress did it in 2011, and now the BJP is doing it even more blatantly.

Since the 2001 Census, every proposal to count caste has attracted immediate and insistent opposition. Different opponents are motivated by different interests, including some who sincerely believe that it is against the larger goal of transcending caste. But the most vocal and effective opposition seems to be inspired by straightforward self-interest, or more appropriately, caste and class interests. Of course, those who argue for the caste census are also pursuing interests of some kind, and these too may be related to caste and class. The division of opinion on this question seems to be decided by the overriding perception that

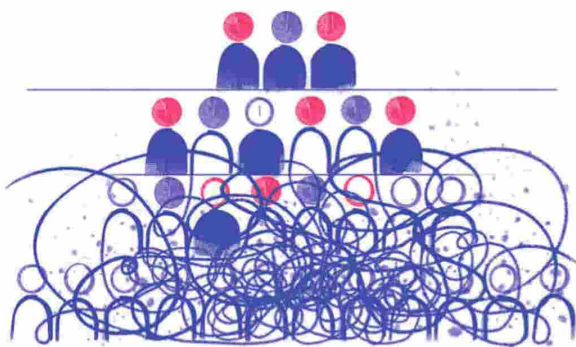


ILLUSTRATION: C R SAKSHAMAR

the counting of caste is linked to benefits of some kind that governments may potentially provide to particular groups.

The interesting thing, however, is that some benefits are only too visible — reservation is the prime example — while others may be even more consequential and yet remain invisible. Since most people jump to the conclusion that a caste census is somehow about reservations, it follows that those against reservation would oppose the counting of caste, and vice versa. It is no surprise, therefore, that the anti-reservation organisation Youth for Equality was the primary petitioner against the Bihar caste survey, or that the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Mahasabha petitioned against a similar survey in Karnataka. Equally understandable is the opposition of dominant caste groups who are prominent beneficiaries of reservation, who fear that a caste count will lead to a loss or reduction in their share. Hence we find the Akhila Bharata Vamsodhaya Lingayat Mahasabha and the Rajya Vokkaliga Sangha of Karnataka petitioning the Karnataka High Court to stay

the 2025 caste survey. Unsurprisingly, in both Bihar and Karnataka, the petitioners invoked every possible legal argument against caste surveys, including those that had already been rejected by the Supreme Court or had been superseded by constitutional amendments such as the 105th Amendment.

While the introduction of reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in 2019 — effectively for the upper castes — may have softened attitudes a little, beneficiaries of reservation have long been the objects of resentful contempt from the so-called "General Category". For the elite in this category, who occupy the highest echelons of our society, surveys of this kind cause an even more visceral sense of outrage. It is as though being asked their caste demeans them by implicating them in something connected to reservations. That is why some celebrities — tech magnates, film stars and other rich, famous and powerful people — disdainfully dissociate themselves from such surveys.

Since elected governments must indulge the rich and powerful, but also seek votes from the vast mass of people who are neither, they pretend to count caste while ensuring that it actually isn't counted

Since elected governments must indulge the rich and powerful, but also seek votes from the vast mass of people who are neither, they pretend to count caste while ensuring that it actually isn't counted

mass of people who are neither, they pretend to count caste while ensuring that it actually isn't counted. But the spectrum of positions on a caste census is a truncated one because it assumes that benefits from the state are of only one kind, like reservation. This one-sided perspective ignores a vast array of benefits showered by the state upon those who count but are never counted.

The euphemistically named "Non-Performing Assets" (NPAs) are perhaps the best-documented instance of such benefits, most of which remain undocumented. Despite a 2015 Supreme Court ruling authorising the release of information under the Right to Information Act on "willful defaulters" owing large sums to public sector banks, both the banks and the Reserve Bank of India have steadfastly refused to provide details on loans written off. In 2024, the RBI issued the Willful Defaulters and Large Defaulters Directions, which require individual banks to list on their websites the instances of default where suits have been filed. But no information (other than aggregate amounts) is provided on loans written off, despite repeated requests by RTI activists. The most recent instance is the Bank of Baroda's refusal to name defaulters on loans totalling Rs 35,715 crore (from 2020-21 to 2025-26) that have been written off with only 28 per cent average recovery.

The caste census and NPAs seem to have little in common with each other, but an otherwise aggressively surveillance-oriented state seems similarly reluctant to collect or release data in both instances. This suggests that the reluctance stems from the same root cause: An unwillingness to make privilege publicly visible. The real reason for undermining the caste census could be an aversion to counting the privileged and highlighting inequalities. Curiously enough, neither a caste census nor a defaulters' list would reveal anything about the privileged that we do not already know in general way. But an official and public count or list is resisted because it violates an implicit right: The right of the privileged to control their own social visibility.

Deshpande is a retired academic based in Bengaluru. Views are personal

A BRICS primer for the 'naraz fufas'



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

CONGRESS LEADERS were griping at Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent "naraz fufa" (sukling uncle) jibe. Modi's jibe meant that, just like in family functions where there will always be an elderly uncle who finds reasons to be upset, some leaders in the Opposition always find excuses to be critical about things. Senior Congress leader P Chidambaram's comments on the 18th BRICS Summit being held in Delhi betray the "naraz fufa" tendency, if not ignorance about current global geopolitics. Normally, countries take pride in hosting important multilateral events. But for Chidambaram, the BRICS summit is a useless exercise. "We are part of BRICS, we are part of SCO, we are part of G20, and we are part of Quad. What benefits are we getting out of that? I can't see," he cribbed indignantly in an interaction with a news agency.

BRICS, with 11 countries as members, another 10 as partners, and dozens more waiting to join, has emerged as the voice of the Global South. In the past two decades, it has grown in size and influence and boasts today of representing 50 per cent of the world's population, 40 per cent of the global economy and 26 per cent of global trade. In comparison, the G7 grouping of major Western powers accounts for less than 10 per cent of the population and around 44 per cent of global GDP.

India emerged as an important balancing power for many countries in the Global South as the US opted to step back from its active role in the world. It assumed the BRICS chair in January for the fourth time. Over the past seven months, the country hosted more than 350 high-level engagements across important pillars like political and security, economics and culture and people-to-people engagement. It has contributed to the advancement of the BRICS agenda of regional cooperation and development. India has hosted these summits three before — in 2012 during the UPA regime and in 2016 and 2021 under the present NDA government. When the summit was hosted in 2012, the heads of the five member countries were present. But

in 2016, the Modi government took special interest in inviting the heads of six BIMSTEC neighbours as outreach members. While the 16th summit in Russia in 2024 saw the participation of the highest number of heads of state so far, the Delhi summit is expected to exceed that record.

The Modi government adopted an innovative approach in choosing the expansion of the BRICS acronym as themes for the summits that it hosted. Building Responsive, Inclusive and Collective Solutions was the theme for the 2016 summit, while the theme for this year's summit is Building Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability. In the face of various economic, technological and trade-related disruptions, nations have to develop resilience of the highest order to tackle them. As the deep-tech era of artificial intelligence, robotics, semiconductors and biotechnology dawns, innovation is the key to national self-reliance while cooperation is necessary to mitigate the divide between tech haves and tech have-nots. A serious ecological crisis looms large over most countries, with El Niño threatening food and water security, giving sustainability issues greater urgency for the highly populous Global South.

The global order built in the aftermath of World War II stands largely dissolved today. A new order is yet to take shape, and the interregnum, marred by conflicts and disorder, looks exactly like how Antonio Gramsci, the Italian statesman of the last century, described it as the "time for monsters". That makes the functioning of any grouping difficult. The G20, the world's most expansive and powerful group, found building consensus a challenge since the Russia-Ukraine conflict broke out. India played a catalytic role — in Bali in 2022 and in New Delhi in 2023 — in ensuring that consensus was achieved in the G20 despite tensions and disagreements.

This BRICS summit is being held under the shadow of the US-Iran conflict, which dragged several other Gulf nations like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, also members of BRICS, into its vortex. The leaders of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE converge at the summit in New Delhi for the first time after the conflict broke out in late February. Given India's experience in managing conflicting interests and also given the enormous goodwill and bonhomie that PM Modi enjoys with leaders of all these nations, one can hope that the summit will succeed in coming out with a unanimous declaration.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Remembering 9/11

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS after the September 11 attacks, the world continues to remember the thousands of innocent people who lost their lives in that terrible tragedy (25 years on, America's response to 9/11 is its biggest self-inflicted hurt, IE, September 11). The attacks caused immense suffering and left a permanent mark on global history. The anniversary provides an opportunity to pay tribute to the victims and acknowledge the courage of first responders. A united global commitment to peace, dialogue, human dignity and the rule of law remains the best way to ensure that such a tragedy is never repeated.

Rukma Sharma, Jalandhar

Judicial reminder

IN THE current political climate, the courts frequently have to step in to uphold the sanctity of the legal principle that "bail is the rule, jail is the exception" (Court protects space for protest, it needs to, IE, September 11). It was heartening to read that a magistrate's court granted bail to a 30-year-old former TISS student under a month after he was arrested for attending a gathering to mark the death anniversary of Professor G N Saibaba. One hopes the government takes heed of such judicial reminders and does not extend the newfound "dimagi Naxal" label to such judges.

Raja Pandit, via email

Sibling love

THIS STUDY on China's only children choosing partners like themselves says something bigger about how families shape our idea of love and duty (Love means not having to deal with siblings, IE, September 11). Growing up as the sole focus of parental care can make sharing responsibility feel unfamiliar. India's joint families show the opposite pattern, where marriage means welcoming a whole web of relatives. Perhaps the real lesson is that falling marriage rates in China reflect deeper shifts in family structure, not just personal fussiness about siblings.

K Chidambaram, Bengaluru



DEVDUDD

AT 'CHHATRON KI Gooj' in Pune last month, Rahul Gandhi quoted *Manusmriti* 9.30a gathering of young women. The verse states that when a woman reaches adulthood, she is married and is under her husband's control. He accused the under her husband's control. He accused the under her husband's control. He accused the under her husband's control.

This is exactly what is wrong with this attack. It is correct. However, it is too simple. Patriarchy is not the invention of *Manusmriti*. Religious scripture, by nature, follows this principle. The *Vinaya Pitaka* of the Buddhist canon places eight *garudhammas* on nuns, placing the most senior *bhikkhunis* beneath the most junior *bhikkhus*, who were ordained on the same day. Paul of Tarsus writes that wives should be subordinate to their husbands, just as the Church is to Christ. The Islamic legal system, on inheritance and testimony, dictates that women receive a lesser share compared to men. The hijab on young girls is "consent" only to left-liberal feminists.

The presence of women is deemed to be such a threat to male discipline that all monastic traditions of the Subcontinent — Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist — have framed legislation against it. All scriptures swim within this principle of patriarchy. Expressing

In Manu's view, 'sattvik' has nothing to do with food. It has to do with psychology and rebirth. 'Sattvik' means austerity, knowledge and wisdom, purity, control of the senses, and performance of duties, among other things

outrage toward *Manusmriti* is not deserving of admiration. It is picking on a prey that has already been slaughtered.

A more sophisticated politician would exploit the gap between Manu's teachings and what the Sanatan lobby believes they have the right to enforce in his name. Let's start with homosexuality. Where *Manusmriti* does consider gay sex to be an infraction, the punishment, if there is one, is no more serious than bathing while still dressed. The book is much more concerned about the violation of caste than about sex. In comparison, religious books have prescribed death for the same act. Everyone speaks of Sharia law's homophobia but few point to the homophobia in Buddhist monastic manuals. Compared to many religious traditions, Manu is almost indifferent to who has sex with whom, and as long as they do not cross caste boundaries, he remains unconcerned. The disdain and contempt of the Sanatan lobby for all things queer is hardly Manu-compliant.

Now let's take meat. Chapter 3 of *Manusmriti* describes a system of how different meats offered to the ancestors as oblations satisfy them for different periods of time: fish for two, goat for six, rhino for 12 years, and so on. This is a ritual economy built on the slaughter of animals. Every temple trust and every Durga Puja committee that is uprooting meat and replacing it with vegetarian offerings in the

name of Sanatan Dharma is actually distorting the tradition.

In Manu's view, *sattvik* has nothing to do with food. It has everything to do with psychology and rebirth. *Sattvik* means austerity, knowledge and wisdom, purity, control of the senses, and performance of duties, among other things. *Rajas* means restlessness, loss of stability, and greed for ill-gotten gains, while *tamas* derives from greed, sleep, lack of persistence and cruelty, and is coupled with atheism, inconsistency, negligence and begging. Manu is not interested in what we eat but in what we pursue. The smug fame-seeking fund-diverting double-speaking Sanatan missionary is far from *sattvik*.

Finally, let's take trees. *Manusmriti* 1.49 declares that plants are conscious and feel pain and pleasure. Chapter 11 demands penance that is real for the unjustified destruction of plants. Each forest reserved for private enterprise, each tarantula sanctuary sacrificed to a private resort or zoo by a government that believes in protecting Sanatan Dharma contravenes the philosophy of Manu, and is not its modern interpretation.

There is so much in *Manusmriti* that could be used to challenge the so-called defenders of Hindu dharma on their own terms. It calls for reading beyond Chapter 9. But it is clear that neither Rahul Gandhi nor the RSS has actually read this book.

Devdutt is an author and mythologist

An AI lesson dressed in the clothes of the '80s



NIMBHAYA RANA

SOCIAL MEDIA is filled with images of bouffant hair, aviator glasses, grainy photographs, vintage cars and the warm imperfections of analogue film. Except much of this past, set in the 1980s, never happened. It was being generated in the present.

Politicians joined in, too, and what began as an amusing exercise in nostalgia soon acquired a distinctly political edge. Congress Kerala posted an invented Gujarat street scene; BJP Telangana answered with a fabricated bar scene labelled "Lusiana, Italy", an apparent reference to Sonia Gandhi's birthplace. The internet trend had completed a remarkably quick journey: From entertainment to self-presentation to political attack.

For much of the modern era, controlling the image required infrastructure. There were photographers, advertising agencies, TV crews, campaign budgets. Generative AI radically compresses that machinery.

I study sustainability in fashion, an industry that understands better than most how images manufacture desire. A campaign photograph can make a garment signify rebellion, luxury, or responsibility. The physical object matters, but so does the story wrapped around it. Generative AI puts this logic on steroids. We are moving to an economy in which convincing realities can be manufactured on demand. That is entertaining when everyone understands the game. The difficulty begins when this capacity enters domains where authenticity matters. Here sustainability offers a useful lens.

Sustainability is often reduced to carbon emissions, recycling, or renewable energy. At its core, however, it asks a more fundamental question: What happens when the consequences of what we produce are separated from the act of producing it? Fashion learnt this painfully. For decades, cheap clothing appeared almost frictionless to consumers because much of its

The synthetic image that appears instantaneously on our phone is not consequence-free simply because it is intangible. There are questions of energy, data, consent, intellectual property and labour and, increasingly, trust

true cost — waste, water, emissions and precarious labour — remained somewhere else in the value chain. The sustainability movement forced businesses to examine what was hidden behind the finished product. We need a similar instant for AI. The synthetic image that appears instantaneously on our phone is not consequence-free simply because it is intangible. There are questions of energy, data, consent, intellectual property and labour and, increasingly, trust

For decades, photographs carried a peculiar authority. They could be manipulated, staged or selectively framed, of course, but their basic cultural proposition was that a camera had encountered something in the world. Generative AI breaks that assumption. The consequence is not simply that we may believe things that are false, but that we begin doubting things that are true. The so-

cial cost is the gradual erosion of our confidence in visual evidence itself.

The answer is not to reject generative AI, but to develop tools as fast as we are developing capabilities. And we need to acquire a new reflex. For the last generation, digital literacy meant learning not to believe everything we read online. For the next, it will mean learning not to believe all we see.

There is something fitting about the fact that this lesson has arrived dressed in the clothes of the 1980s. Fashion knows that styles repeat, but never to precisely the world they left behind. As giving us the power to manufacture a past. What we do with that power will say far more about our future.

The writer is professor of practice, Sustainability at Masters' Union, India. Views are personal

BUILD SYSTEMS THAT ARE FAST YET ACCOUNTABLE: SITHARAMAN

AI a double-edged sword, can influence elections also: FM

'AI helps us spot fraud faster, but it also allows attackers to automate larger, more sophisticated cyberattacks'

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, September 11

FINANCE MINISTER Nirmala Sitharaman on Friday termed AI a double-edged sword, flagging the risks posed by new technologies like agentic AI, tokenisation, and quantum computing. Technologies like AI have the capability of even influencing electoral outcomes in some cases, she added.

"The model that I'm referring to, I'm not naming it, is fully capable of influencing the opinion on the ground without people even sensing that they are being influenced. To the extent that I, being a minister, being in politics, I'm clearly seeing it capable of influencing elections," said Sitharaman.

Despite obvious benefits like increased speed and efficiency, AI poses notable risks.

"Speed works both ways. When decisions and transactions become instantaneous, software errors, fraud, and market shocks can spread at the same rapid pace, naturally. AI acts as a double-edged sword: it helps us spot fraud faster, but it also allows attackers to automate larger, more sophisticated



AI may assist judgment, but responsibility must remain human and institutional, the FM said at Global Fintech Fest in Mumbai.

cyberattacks," Sitharaman said, speaking at the Global Fintech Fest in Mumbai. "Furthermore, the rise of quantum computing means our traditional security and encryption systems must be upgraded before current defences become obsolete," she added.

Lighter, but firm regulatory approach

Exploring a possibility of a lighter regulatory approach for the fintech sector in order to iron out these risks without stifling innovation, Sitharaman welcomed the Reserve Bank of India's move to recognise the United Fintech Forum as a self-regulatory organisation for the industry.

"I'm therefore glad that just yesterday, September 10, the Reserve Bank of India recognised the United Fintech Forum as another self-regulatory organisation for the fintech sector under the SRO-FT framework,"

she added.

Sitharaman said the challenge for policymakers in the wake of newer technologies is to 'build systems that are fast yet accountable, autonomous yet reversible when mistakes occur, and innovative without diluting consumer trust.'

"AI may assist judgment, but responsibility must remain human and institutional. The more serious the consequence of a decision, the stronger the requirement for review, explanation and appeal," she explained. While leaving some leeway for innovation, Sitharaman pointed out the need for regulators to be aware of their respective responsibilities, adding that no activity should escape appropriate oversight just because "it sits at the boundary between sectors or is delivered through a technology platform rather than a conventional financial institution."

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

AHEAD OF 18th BRICS SUMMIT 2026

FMs, central bank chiefs flag unilateral tariffs

Anchal Magazine
New Delhi, September 11

FLAGGING "SERIOUS concerns" about unilateral imposition of tariffs and non-tariff measures, BRICS finance ministers and central bank governors (FMCBG) in a joint statement said that such measures distort trade and are inconsistent with World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules.

Highlighting the growing share of emerging markets and developing economies (EMDEs) in global output and growth, the FMCBG also called for a merit-based, inclusive and transparent selection process that would increase regional diversity and representation of EMDEs in the leadership of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

Noting that the global economy is facing significant headwinds, the FMCBG said risks to the global economic outlook remain elevated, reflecting persistent geopolitical tensions, trade fragmentation and protectionism, policy uncertainty, fiscal and inflationary pressures,

WHAT THE JOINT STATEMENT SAID



- Unilateral imposition of trade and finance-related actions, including the raising of tariffs and non-tariff measures, distort trade and are inconsistent with WTO rules
- There is an urgent need to reform the Bretton Woods Institutions to make them more agile, effective, credible, inclusive, accountable to enhance their legitimacy

growing debt and financial vulnerabilities.

"We continue to have serious concerns with the unilateral imposition of trade and finance-related actions, including the raising of tariffs and non-tariff measures, which distort trade and are inconsistent

with WTO rules. These pressures weigh most heavily on EMDEs. BRICS economies, however, have demonstrated resilience and continue to make a significant contribution to a stable, strong, sustainable, inclusive and balanced global growth," the joint statement re-

leased late Thursday said. The finance ministers and Central Bank Governors of the BRICS countries, had met in Jaipur on August 12-13 and in Mumbai on September 10 under the theme "Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability". India is hosting the 18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi on September 12-13. BRICS is an informal grouping of 11 major emerging markets and developing countries: Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates.

Under the BRICS theme for this year, the FMCBG statement said they seek to "strengthen collective capacities, promote innovation, and advance sustainable development and resilience in the face of evolving global challenges". On the reforms required for global economic governance, the FMCBG said they will continue to strengthen coordination among BRICS members to make international financial institutions more representative, transparent and accountable.

"We reiterate the urgent need to reform the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWI) to make them more agile, effective, credible, inclusive, fit for purpose, unbiased, accountable, and representative, to enhance their legitimacy. "BWI" governance structure should be reformed to reflect the transformation of the global economy since their establishment."

"The voice and representation of EMDEs in the BWI must reflect their relative position in the global economy. We also reiterate our call for improved management procedures, including through a merit-based, inclusive and transparent selection process that would increase regional diversity and representation of EMDEs in the leadership of the IMF and the World Bank," the statement said.

Stating that quota realignment should reflect countries' relative positions in the global economy, the FMCBG statement said there should be an increase in the quota and voting shares of EMDEs and it should not come at the expense of developing countries. FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

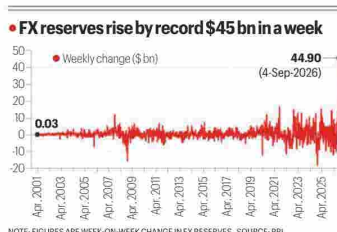
India climbs to 4th spot as forex reserves post record weekly gain

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, September 11

INDIA HAS overtaken Russia in fourth spot in the list of countries with the highest foreign exchange reserves after data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday showed that its reserves increased by \$45 billion in the week ended September 4 — the highest weekly gain ever.

As per latest data, India's forex reserves stood at a new record of \$785.71 billion as on September 4, up \$44.9 billion from August 28. Data from the Bank of Russia shows its international reserves stood at \$735.5 billion as on September 4, having fallen \$20.7 billion from \$756.2 billion the previous week.

China and Japan are at the top, with forex reserves of \$3.85 trillion and \$1.21 trillion, respectively. In third is Switzerland, with reserves of \$1.09 trillion. The massive \$44.9 billion gain in India's forex reserves is over two-and-a-half times higher than the previous greatest weekly gain of \$16.7 billion, recorded in the week ended August 27, 2021, and has been driven by the unexpectedly high



inflow of Foreign Currency Non-Resident (Bank) deposits under the RBI's concessional swap scheme. The sharp increase follows an earlier-than-anticipated closure of the swap scheme. Originally set to close on September 30, the rapid inflow of these deposits led to the RBI closing it one month earlier than initially planned.

Till August 31, \$127.23 billion of these FCNRI deposits had come in. The RBI's two other concessional swap schemes for Overseas Foreign Currency Borrowings (OFCBs) and External Commercial Borrowings (ECBs) have seen the inflow of \$5.26 bil-

lion and \$3.89 billion, respectively. In total, \$136.38 billion had come in under the swap schemes.

The swap windows for OFCBs and ECBs remain open till December 31.

This forex drive has ensured that India's forex reserves have risen for 10 weeks in a row. A higher level of forex reserves gives the RBI greater ammunition to defend the rupee when the need arises, as has been the case from time to time.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

NSE sets IPO price band at Rs 1,700-1,785

ENS Economic Bureau
Mumbai, September 11

THE NATIONAL Stock Exchange (NSE) has fixed the price band for its mega initial public offering (IPO) at Rs 1,700-1,785 per equity share, valuing the country's largest stock exchange at up to Rs 4.42 lakh crore (\$46 billion) at the upper end of the band. The IPO will open for public subscription on September 17 and close on September 21. The IPO is entirely an offer for sale (OFS) of up to 12.64 crore equity shares, with a face value of Rs each, by 10 existing shareholders.

At the upper price band, the issue is expected to raise Rs

22,562 crore. Since the offering is an OFS, the proceeds will accrue to the selling shareholders and not NSE. The selling shareholders include State Bank of India, Bank of Baroda, Canara Pension Plan Investment Board, Aranda Investments (Mauritius) Pvt Ltd, MS Strategic (Mauritius) Ltd, General Insurance Corporation of India, New India Assurance Company, SBI Capital Markets, Stock Holding Corporation of India and United India Insurance Company.

NSE managing director and CEO Ashish Kumar Chaudhary said the stock exchange has not applied to SEBI for permission to trade on its own platform. BSE, which came out with an IPO earlier, is listed on NSE.

The stated objective of the IPO is to facilitate the OFS and enable the listing of NSE's equity shares on BSE. NSE currently has 247.5 crore outstanding equity shares with a face value of Rs 1 each.

Investors can bid for a minimum of eight equity shares and in multiples of eight thereafter. Under the book-building process, not more than 50% of the issue will be reserved for Qualified Institutional Buyers, while not less than 15% will be available to Non-Institutional Investors and not less than 35% to Retail Individual Investors.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

BRIEFLY

Inclusive growth needed for Viksit Bharat: NITI CEO

Mumbai: India has made reasonable progress on economic growth, and it needs inclusive growth to become a developed country by 2047, NITI Aayog CEO Anurag Jain said on Friday. Speaking at the Global Fintech Fest 2026, Jain said some states have done extremely well on health and education parameters as well. "But there are certain states which are lagging behind, so we need to concentrate on them also," Jain said. He said India has a good foundation to achieve prosperity by 2047 through economic inclusion. PTI

SEBI seeks IT, cyber framework for MII arms

New Delhi: Markets watchdog SEBI on Friday proposed extending the IT and cyber security framework of Market Infrastructure Institutions (MIIs) — comprising stock exchanges, depositories, and clearing corporations — to their subsidiaries to strengthen regulatory oversight. While MIIs are governed by SEBI and operate in compliance with its IT and cyber security frameworks, the applicability and regulatory jurisdiction of these frameworks are not explicitly defined over their subsidiaries. PTI

FASTag to save govt Rs 25k cr per year: Gadkari

Mumbai: Full implementation of electronic toll collection system FASTag will accrue up to Rs 25,000 crore per year to the government, Union Minister Nitin Gadkari said on Friday. The Minister for Road Transport and Highways said all toll booths on national highways will be barrier-free by March 2027. "When the system will go fully live, then our department alone would deliver a benefit of Rs 20,000-25,000 crore per year to Government of India because of the use of FASTags," Gadkari said at the Global Fintech Fest. PTI

RBI announces OMO sales worth Rs 1 lakh crore

Mumbai: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday announced Open Market Operation (OMO) sales of government securities of Rs 1 lakh crore in three tranches, with the first auction to be held on September 17. The first tranche of Rs 50,000 crore will be held on September 17, and Rs 25,000 crore each on September 21 and September 28, RBI said. "The Reserve Bank has decided to conduct OMO sale auctions of Government of India securities for an aggregate amount of Rs 1,00,000 crore in three tranches," RBI said. PTI

MARKETS

	Gold	US Dollar
Sensex	74,781.76	\$ 95.56
NIFTY	23,398.10	\$ 95.56
	-120.83	-0.16%
	-0.34%	
Silver	\$ 28,920	\$ 115.98
	\$ 28,920	\$ 115.98

NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER INDIA BULLION AND JEWELLERS ASSOCIATION GOLD PER 10GM, SILVER PER 1KG; CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF SEPTEMBER 9, 2026

• US DEBT HAS CROSSED \$40 TRILLION AND ITS TRADE DEFICIT HAS ALSO WIDENED DESPITE A SLEW OF TARIFFS ON TRADE PARTNERS

Trump's unusual threat to US Federal Reserve and why it matters to India

Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, September 11

AFTER MONTHS of threatening allies and rivals alike with tariffs to coerce them into signing lopsided trade deals, US President Donald Trump seemingly has gone a step further and warned the Federal Reserve (Fed) to cut interest rates, or else the US would stop trading with countries with which it has a trade deficit.

Trump's warnings have become more and more aggressive amid growing worry over US debt and trade deficit. The latest data showed that US debt has crossed a record \$40 trillion and the trade deficit also

widened despite a slew of tariffs on trade partners. High debt numbers are increasingly making investors nervous and risk rising oil prices due to the US-Iran war, and are pushing US 10-year bond yield (a benchmark for global borrowing costs) towards 5%.

International think tanks estimated that the US government will spend little over \$1 trillion this fiscal year paying interest on the debt, which is equivalent to its national defence spending.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, the US debt-to-GDP ratio has now reached 125%.

India, other trade partners at crossroads

Uncomfortable debt and deficit numbers explain why Trump is going after even the closest trade partners in a bid to bridge the trade gap and simultaneously pushing for lower interest rates.

As the US aggressively narrows its trade deficit with China to its lowest in two decades, Washington has begun pressuring trade partners like India to do the same.

For India, US pressures are playing on three fronts. One, steep market access demands under trade deals; two, outflow of investment from India to the



The US-India trade framework has created considerable tensions, particularly among Indian farmers. REUTERS

US; and three, pressure to lower dependency on input items originating from China, which the US believes is operating a

'shadow transshipment network' which ultimately helps Beijing widen the effective trade deficit, displace domestic

production, reduce GDP growth, and lower associated federal tax receipts in the US. India and the US have been negotiating bilateral trade agreement since February 2025, and in February this year, the two countries announced a framework for an Interim Agreement. This framework agreement has already created considerable tensions, particularly among farmers.

International trade experts have warned that if India lowers customs duties on US imports, the livelihoods of Indian farmers engaged in growing apples, cotton, grapes, oranges, soybeans, walnuts and other agricultural

products would face direct pressure.

Impact on India

India has already taken various steps to assuage the US by stepping up energy imports and lowering tariffs on broad swaths of products that are of US interest, from bikes to whiskey and tax holidays for data centres and items required to boost nuclear power production in India.

The Indian Express recently reported that the US 'share in India's liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) imports has already surged to over 50% in the six months since the West Asia crisis started. Industry sources said that fear of US scrutiny is

pushing cotton prices higher. Indian apparel exporters last month approached the Commerce and Industry Ministry and the Textile Ministry seeking regulation of cotton yarn exports to arrest a sharp surge in prices amid US restrictions on the use of cotton originating from China's Uyghur region.

The Apparel Export Promotion Council (APEC) said cotton yarn prices have increased by around 60%, from approximately Rs 250 per kg in early 2026 to around Rs 400 per kg currently, putting increasing pressure on the apparel manufacturing value chain.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

The Big Picture

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2026

15

AT 11.18 AM on January 31, Pishaura Singh, the revenue official of Gilpan, a border village in Tarn Taran district, Punjab, was tying his turban when he heard the sound — a low hum he had trained himself to hear.

"It's a drone," he told his wife, stepping outside and pointing his phone camera to the sky. The UAV, suspected to be launched from Pakistan, was flying towards his house. It eventually fell near his kitchen garden, barely 700 metres from the iron fencing along the India-Pakistan border.

What struck Singh was a blue stamp bearing Urdu letters, possibly identifying the consignment the drone was carrying — a kg of contraband, including drugs, sealed in two packets.

Singh, a member of the village defence committee formed by the Punjab government to help tackle cross-border smuggling and drones, said, "I called our local police station and the Deputy Superintendent of Police, but they didn't answer my calls. I eventually called the Senior Superintendent of Police in Tarn Taran, and only then did the local police respond. Later, the BSF [the Border Security Force, whose jurisdiction extends to these parts] also came."

Senior police officers say drones have been ferrying narcotics, weapons and explosives from launchpads deep inside Pakistan's Punjab and dropping them across the border in Indian Punjab, often under the cover of darkness. Nearly 294 Pakistani drones were intercepted by the BSF and other allied agencies in Punjab in 2024, 287 in 2025, and around the same number had been intercepted until August this year.

"Drones can be launched from any place, at any time, with very little preparation. But we have evidence of active Pakistani military participation in helping smugglers launch these drones through training modules," said a senior security official.

A flight across the border fence

In Punjab, the 462-km fence along the International Border or Zero Line was built mainly in the late 1980s and early 1990s to stop infiltration and smuggling during the militancy years. It is a multi-layered physical barrier, guarded in peacetime by the BSF, with riverine and flood-related gaps.

The fence does not sit on the Zero Line. Under older ground rules, it was meant to stand some 150 yards (less than a km) inside Indian territory, but in many stretches, it was built much deeper, sometimes two to three km inside the Indian side, leaving large tracts of farmland between the fence and the actual border or Zero Line.

By 1993, most of the feasible land border had been fenced and floodlit. This fence, 8-12 feet tall, is topped with multiple rows of concertina/razor wires and, in some places, high-voltage 'cobra' wires. A patrol track runs along the fence, which is dotted with observation towers and border outposts.

However, with the incursions now aerial, the fence has largely turned into a modern Maginot line — the heavily fortified line of concrete obstacles and bunkers built by France during World War II — which ended up being ineffective because the German army simply went around it.

Now, for the first time, an analysis of data from over 1,200 drones intercepted by multiple security agencies, including the BSF and the Punjab Police, since 2024 has helped map the routes, launch and drop sites, and operating patterns of the drones that are fast emerging as a sophisticated cross-border threat.

The analysis has revealed a disturbing evolution in the drone operations: what began as relatively simple radio-controlled incursions has transformed into a more technologically resilient enterprise, with modified payloads, anti-jamming capabilities and even satellite-linked systems.

Despite India employing counter-drone measures, many drones can now detect interference and automatically turn back to Pakistan before coming back, turning this into a relentless cat-and-mouse battle along Punjab's 550-km International Border.

Security agencies have identified at least eight key launch pads in Pakistan's Punjab, from where sustained drone sorties take place into Indian Punjab.

The two primary drone launch pads used by Pakistani smugglers are Jahman and Masteki, two villages that are strategically located along the International Border. Jahman sits directly across from Khaira sector in Tarn Taran district of Indian Punjab. Further south, Masteki lies in Sehjra enclave, a pocket of Pakistani territory surrounded by India on three sides, positioning the village roughly opposite Khem Karan town in Tarn Taran district of Indian Punjab.

Other Pakistani launch pads are near Kasur, also on the other side of Khem Karan; Qila Jiwani Singh, opposite Rajat; the Attari sector; Wagah, opposite Attari; and Narowal, on the other side of Dera Baba Nanak, in Indian Punjab's Gurdaspur district. Sources said the data analysis has also revealed the main landing areas in India. "The drones usually fly into Bhindi Saidan, Attari, Rajat, Dall, Dalari, Maari Meghaan, Wan and villages around Khoskaran, including Kals and Mastgarh," said a source.

'Drones are routine here'

Mahawa, in Amritsar, is a kilometre away from the Zero Line, placing its villagers directly in the path of illegal drone incursions. Of its 2,800 acres, nearly 150 acres lie between the Zero Line and the border fence.

Village defence committee member and farmer union leader Harchand Singh Mahawa said drones frequently travel six kilometres inside the Indian border, flying directly over residential settlements and agricultural lands. "Recently, a drone dropped a consignment on a farmer's field. He came to us. He was afraid that police



LOOKING UP AT THE DRONES

Standing 12 feet tall, the 462-km fence along the International Border, fortified by rows of concertina and high-voltage wires, appears formidable, but it is no match for the intruder that flies across to drop arms, ammunition and drugs. MAN AMAN SINGH CHHINA & KAMALDEEP SINGH BRAR on the drones that keep the security establishment on its toes

553 KM

PUNJAB'S INTERNATIONAL BORDER WITH PAKISTAN

BORDER FENCE: The 462-km fence, built 2-3 km from the border, was built in the late 1980s and early 1990s to stop infiltration and smuggling during Punjab's militancy years

PAKISTAN

LAHORE

WAGAH

ATTARI

QILA JIWANI SINGH

RAJA THAL

JAHMAN

DALL

WAN

MASTGARH

KALS

KHEM KARAN

KASUR

SEHJRA ENCLAVE

INDIA

AMRITSAR

TARN TARAN

DERA BABA NANAK

NAROWAL

GURDASPUR

BHINDI SAIDAN

PAUNJAB

LAHORE

WAGAH

ATTARI

QILA JIWANI SINGH

RAJA THAL

JAHMAN

DALL

WAN

MASTGARH

KALS

KHEM KARAN

KASUR

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DERA BABA NANAK

NAROWAL

GURDASPUR

BHINDI SAIDAN

PAUNJAB

LAHORE

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QILA JIWANI SINGH

RAJA THAL

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BHINDI SAIDAN

PAUNJAB

LAHORE

WAGAH

ATTARI

• BRICS SUMMIT

India's BRICS balancing act

For India, the grouping is not a replacement for the West. Yet, over-reliance on the Western economic order comes with pitfalls, from patent controls to sanctions and tariffs

China and the rest: Grouping's ever-widening economic gap



RAVI DUTTA MISHRA

THE IRAN war and the forthcoming US midterm polls in November may have kept US President Donald Trump occupied. But not too long ago, Trump targeted BRICS — the intergovernmental organisation named after its founding members Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — with tariff threats for its “un-American” policies.

As India gears up to host Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, alongside Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian among others, for the two-day BRICS summit (September 12-13), the West's ties with the key members of the bloc have been deteriorating.

While Iran and Russia have been removed from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) — a secure global messaging network used by financial institutions to transmit information and payment instructions safely — and are entangled in conflict, the US has been locked in a trade war with China for years and is now forcing countries to limit dependency on Chinese products.

New Delhi, too, has been on the receiving end of the weaponisation of the Western financial system when the US imposed steep tariffs last year amid disagreements in trade deal negotiations. India's sovereign decision to purchase Russian oil, albeit during the ongoing Ukraine war, also turned it into a target. However, these are only the most prominent impacts of over-reliance on the Western economic order.

West remains important

India could be looking to balance ties with Western and BRICS countries to chart its development path amid the ongoing rupture in the global economic order. While the share of global GDP held by BRICS nations has grown from 17% to 35% between 1995 and 2024, surpassing the G7, the US and EU continue to be India's largest export market and source of investments. Beyond goods, integration with Western economies has paid rich dividends and aided the growth of India's service sector — where many of the new-age well-paid jobs are created.

Experts say expansion of south-south trade, geographic concentration of critical minerals in the BRICS region and prospects of growth in alternative development finance like the BRICS Bank could aid India's growth. This is no counter-balance to the Western economic order today. But it could help India reduce its reliance a decade on.

Strict patent monopolies

Nevertheless, dependence on the West for now is a vulnerability. The worst impact of Western dominance on international intellectual property (IP) was felt during the Covid-19 pandemic. In October 2020, at the height of the pandemic, India and South Africa sought a waiver of certain provisions of the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement to help developing nations get access to vaccines and other life saving medicines. TRIPS is an international agreement administered by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) that sets minimum standards for protection.

THE EXPANDING WESTERN SANCTIONS REGIME

Chart 1: Who's imposing sanctions?

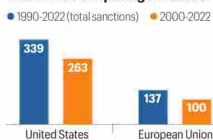


Chart 2: Sanctions on Asia

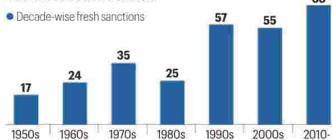


Chart 3: Type of sanctions

Decade	Trade	Financial	Travel	Military aid	Arms
1950s	27	14	8	1	7
1960s	30	29	8	13	29
1970s	47	54	4	23	11
1980s	53	51	21	13	19
1990s	76	147	32	58	69
2000s	71	102	68	71	63
2010-2022	209	327	205	62	67

Source: 'Asphyxiation by Sanctions: Harm, Fear and Smog' working paper written by former RBI governor Ujjit R. Patel

1,325 Sanctions imposed globally since 1949

486 of these sanctions have been by the US

- US led sanctions jumped in recent decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union
- Spectrum of economic sanctions has ballooned from trade to military
- The second-largest sanctioner after the US is the EU



PM Narendra Modi with (from left) Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, Russian President Vladimir Putin and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. Union ministers S Jaishankar and Piyush Goyal are also present. ANI

Trade target

India has been on the receiving end of the weaponisation of the Western financial system.

The US imposed steep tariffs last year amid disagreements in trade talks.

India's decision to purchase Russian oil during the Ukraine war also turned it into a target.

ing IP. In a shock to the developing world, developed countries turned down the ask. “The unsuccessful attempt by India, South Africa and sixty other developing countries to secure the Covid TRIPS Waiver highlights the grave danger inherent in the existing patent regime which accords priority to patents over patients,” former trade negotiator and international trade expert Abhijit Das told *The Indian Express*.

Sanctions regime

As steep US tariffs laid bare the risks of overdependence on the US market for sanctions, former Reserve Bank of India governor Ujjit R. Patel called the US, in a working paper released last year, the “hegemonic sanctioner”. Patel said that India should view the emerging international financial architecture around BRICS and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a “risk mitigant” and a rational response to the ever-expanding sanctions regime.

Patel's paper said that out of 1,325 global sanctions since 1949, 486 have been imposed by the US, which currently administers over 30 sanctions programmes — making it responsible for “three times as many sanctions as any other country or in-

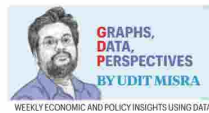
ternational body” (see box).

Outlining shifting US policies, Patel said India's plan to develop Chabahar Port had initially started in 2003, but US sanctions targeting Iran imposed a “hard break” on progress. The project was revived between 2015 and 2017 after the US eased sanctions. But shortly after India signed a 10-year agreement with Iran to operate and develop the port in 2024, the US again warned of sanctions.

Western economic policies

While the US has been explicit in imposing tariffs to slash imports from developing nations, the European Union has implemented a range of environment-linked trade regimes which act as a barrier to India's export growth. BRICS nations, in particular, have “condemned and rejected” the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and similar trade curbs, saying they undermine their transition to a cleaner economy.

Indian trade experts have said that trade-climate linkage through regulations such as CBAM is less about protecting the environment and more about promoting the interests of the developed world.



UDIT MISRA

WEEKLY ECONOMIC AND POLICY INSIGHTS USING DATA

OVER THE weekend, India will host the 18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi. BRICS is an informal grouping of 11 major emerging markets and developing countries: Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates.

It started out as BRIC — referring to the four countries that initially came together, namely Brazil, Russia, India, and China — on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in 2006. In 2010, South Africa joined the grouping, and it was renamed BRICS.

The idea was to provide a platform for the concerns of emerging economies of the time and counter the overwhelming domination of the industrialised and developed economies (read: the G7) in international institutions.

This is the 20th year since the grouping began, but curiously enough, there is now a dragon in the room: China. Key economic data shows just how much China dwarfs the rest of the BRICS members. Typically, economic might is ascertained by the overall size of the economy as measured by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in US dollar terms. Similarly, economic prosperity is measured by GDP per capita, which gives a semblance of how rich an average citizen is in a country.

Overall size of the economy

Even in 2006, China was the largest economy among the five countries after which the grouping is named. Yet, when taken together, China's overall GDP was less than the GDP of the other four members. However, such was the pace of increase in China's economic growth that by the time the inaugural summit meeting happened in 2009, China had overtaken the combined economic size of BRICS (BRICS minus China). Since then, the gap has continued to increase each year. As of 2026, China's GDP alone is more than double that of the other four combined.

Chart 1 shows the country-specific GDP trajectory. Between 2006 and 2015, India did better than the others and overtook them to become the second-biggest economy within BRICS. However, China's rise outstrips all the rest.

Since 2009, China has opened a similarly massive gap even against the G7 countries (barring the US). While the 2008 financial crisis dragged most other developed countries, China grew fast to become the second-largest economy in the world.

Prosperity of average citizen

Even though China was the largest economy within the BRICS in 2006, it was nowhere near the most prosperous. In 2006, an average Russian, Brazilian or South African was anywhere between 3 and 3.5 times richer than an average Chinese. As chart 2 shows, two decades later, an average Chinese is richer than a Brazilian and twice as rich as a South African.

CHINA'S ECONOMIC HEFT

CHART 1: Its economy is far larger than others in BRICS

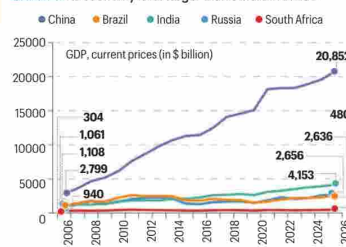
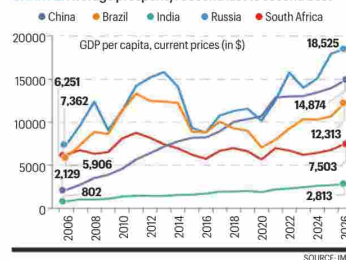


CHART 2: Average prosperity: Second last to second best



SOURCE: IMF

The dragon in the room

The central idea behind BRICS in 2006 was to challenge the dominance of the big industrialised economies in how the world was run.

Today, it is China which is the big industrialised superpower on the planet.

The key question is: Will such overwhelming economic might not have an imprint on what the grouping decides?



China's GDP is more than double that of the other four combined. NTFLE

and is closing the gap with an average Russian. As against an average Indian, an average Chinese was about three times richer in 2006 and is five times richer now.

Ushor

The central idea behind BRICS in 2006 was to challenge the dominance of the big industrialised economies in how the world was run. China, however, has grown so fast that today it is the big industrialised superpower on the planet. In the process, it has dwarfed not just all its BRICS siblings but almost all the erstwhile big economies. Indeed, China has grown so fast that the rest of the world is now finding ways to counterbalance China. The key question is: Will such overwhelming economic might not have an imprint on what the grouping decides?

What the recent trajectory of India-China ties means for the summit



SHUBHAJI ROY

CHINESE PRESIDENT Xi Jinping arrives in India on Saturday for the third time since he assumed the country's presidency — and the first time after a gap of seven years.

The ostensible reason for his visit is participation in the BRICS leaders' summit over the weekend, but the conditions arising from the 2020 border standoff that marked a low point in relations make the trip significant from a bilateral perspective. The fault line in the relationship, alongside a turbulent global scenario, will heavily influence the summit.

China's growing might

With Goldman Sachs analysts calling India, China, Brazil and Russia the “emerging economies” in the world in 2001, “BRIC” as a grouping was born in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Twenty-five years on, their trajectories have diverged. China has become the second-largest economy after the US; India has grown at a moderate rate but been outpaced by Beijing; Russia has faced challenges from wars of its own making; and Brazil has flourished amid frequent regime changes and

scandals. South Africa, a later entrant, has also not lived up to expectations.

Since 2009, when the first BRICS leaders' summit took place in the shadow of the global financial crisis, China has also emerged stronger after weathering the financial crisis better than many Western nations.

Increasing assertions

Apart from its economic rise, China has also grown militarily, with big-power ambitions to dethrone the US. These aspirations are visible in its increasingly aggressive and assertive stance in its neighbourhood, in its actions in the South China Sea, the Indo-Pacific, and the borders it shares with India.

India has faced the brunt of border standoffs frequently, but under Xi, a sense of belligerence from the Chinese state has been greater than at any time in the recent past. After the 1962 war and the 1967 border clashes in Sikkim, major border standoffs include those in 2013 (Depsang, Ladakh), 2014 (Chumar, Ladakh), Doklam (2017) and since 2020 in eastern Ladakh, which is still ongoing with the deployment of about 50,000 Indian troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The June 2020 clashes led to the killing of 20 Indian defence personnel, including a colonel-rank officer, and at least four Chinese defence personnel.

Years of diplomatic and military-level talks led to a disengagement of troops in 2024, and incremental steps have since been taken to stabilise the relationship. These include resumption of direct flights,



PM Modi with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the 2024 BRICS Summit. WIMEDIA COMMONS

easing visa restrictions, restarting the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra and relaxing restrictions on Chinese investments.

But significant structural differences remain, such as the massive trade deficit, with the lack of market access for Indian businesses often flagged as an issue. India, too, is acting against Chinese firms for tax evasion. Crucially, strategic and political trust has been diminished over the border standoff, now in its seventh year. The collusion between China and Pakistan during Operation Sindoor has further exacerbated the crisis of trust and credibility.

What it means for BRICS

The BRICS summit, with leaders of over 30 countries and groupings in attendance, is being held against this backdrop.

What has complicated the picture is the US government's actions under President Donald Trump in the last one-and-a-half years. His arbitrary tariff moves have cornered countries around the world, including China and India, and the two nations now find themselves on the same side in attempting to counter its effects. After years of high economic growth, China has also revised its expectations for the near future. Additionally, Trump's war on Iran has raised questions of powerful nations violating others' territorial integrity and sovereignty. But then, both China and Russia are guilty of the same in their respective neighbourhoods. Still, the war in West Asia has imposed an economic cost on all countries. Energy prices and inflation have risen, and BRICS countries, as part of the Global South, are naturally bearing the brunt.

The question now is whether a moment of shared interests and concerns between India and China can become an opportunity to improve ties and bring other developing countries on the same page on common concerns. Xi's visit is being seen as a positive signal, but only to a degree.

BRICS has the potential to offer areas for cooperation, but so far in its approach, Beijing has viewed itself as the “first among equals” in the grouping. It has long supported expanding BRICS membership from the original five, aiding the 2023 expansion that led the grouping to reach its current strength of 11 members.

Then there is the fact that China and

Russia have attempted to frame BRICS as an “anti-West” grouping, while India sees it as a “non-Western” grouping. These divergent perspectives are complicated by US actions against fellow members, such as tariffs on Brazil and political disagreements with South Africa.

India, which has built robust ties with the US over the last 25 years and is wooing Europe, Australia, Canada, and other Western nations for closer partnerships, is decidedly not “anti-West”. It recognises the need to turn to the West for access to capital, technology and as a destination for its people more than China or Russia.

In this geopolitical environment, compared to China's framing of BRICS, India is hosting the summit also to signal to the US that it has other partners in fields ranging from technology to fuel security. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have been investing in the Indian economy, while Russia has stepped in as an energy supplier amid the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, and Brazil is ready to partner on critical minerals.

Again, the war has polarised members of the grouping — Iran is attacking US military bases in West Asia, while the UAE is hosting several military bases and personnel. That is where India needs China's might to move the two partners towards cooperation and demonstrate a more unified flank. Whether they can come to a consensus on such matters, and agree to build on the gains made so far, will affect not just their ties but also BRICS' efficacy as a grouping.

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Lucknow	30 सितंबर सुबह 11:30 बजे	24 सितंबर 8:00 AM
Prayagraj	28 सितंबर सुबह 11:30 बजे	30 सितंबर 11:30 AM
Ranchi	22 सितंबर सुबह 8:00 बजे	14 सितंबर 5:30 PM
Patna	25 सितंबर सुबह 9:30 बजे	8 अक्टूबर 2:30 PM
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Dr. Pankaj Mishra English Medium 5 October | 5:30 PM

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A short, explicit history of invective



PAST PARTICIPLE
MANU S PILLAI

In 1562, Emperor Akbar ordered the execution of a close associate, Adham Khan, who was one of the Mughal ruler's *hokas* (foster brothers) and as such possessed vast influence. But he didn't get along with another of Akbar's ministers. So, as was the fashion in those times, Khan decided to eliminate his rival. Except, instead of deploying poison or some subtle means, his friends and he hacked the man to death. The emperor, awakened from an afternoon nap by the "dreadful clamour", was agast. There is more than one version of how he responded on first hearing the news (and before Khan was thrown off the fort walls). In one account, Akbar cries, "son of a b*****", a phrase preferred in our own times by such illustrious persons as Donald Trump. In the other, however, the *longi-clad padshah* opts for a fouler expletive: "*Kandhi*", he exclaims, (translated with touching fidelity by one scholar as "assf*****"), "*why did you kill my minister?*"

Abuses, it turns out, are one of the historical record's most fascinating—and constant—features. It should not surprise us: inside and outside Parliament, India's leaders have thrown at fellow politicians everything from "fat" (relatively low on the scandal scale) to "man-eater" (unusual). While this confirms that the history of tomorrow will have much to chew on, historians today also find themselves in comparable situations.

I can offer a case in point. When recording the audio edition of one of my books, I had to read out a quote from an episode during the Great Rebellion of 1857, where Indian soldiers used a certain word for their British officers. It is a common enough term, but personally I had never uttered it, until that day in the studio. The one saving grace was that the expression appeared in the text in its anglicised form. So, I took a deep breath and heard myself enunciate for the very first time: "You *Banchats*!"

While improper expostulations in public understandably cause outrage, historians trawling old writings also navigate a sea of colourful evidence in private exchanges. The correspondence of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, for instance, features everything from racist slurs to outright homophobia. This was not, of course, unusual at the time, but reading the material today can be disturbing. Based, of all things, on the shape of a distinguished but disliked person's head, Marx jokes that his grandmother had "interbred with a N*****". Elsewhere, Engels describes a figure as a "jackass" and another as a "paderast". Translators of these German letters, in fact, have sometimes navigated the tone. As author Hubert Kennedy notes, when one encounters *uarmbrüderlich* in one missive, it is not exactly a reference to "warm fraternal" but a snarky way to suggest "queer" (a polite translation) and "f*****" (more bluntly).

While these were, of course, personal exchanges not intended for public consumption, there is no shortage of invective in some types of formal writing as well. Akbar's son and heir, Emperor Jahangir, had a particular talent in this regard. In his autobiography, thus, a rebel is presented, understandably, as an "ungrateful b*****" who was des-



Aurangzeb inherited both his grandfather's political mission and his flair for invective-laden language.

GETTY IMAGES

patched to "hell". Malik Ambar—the Africa-born Deccan warrior—is "black-faced", "ill-starred", a "treacherous trickster" and "meddling slave". His troops were an "army of calamity", while popular support for his anti-Mughal stance showed the Deccan as a "people of unlimited stupidity".

Jahangir and Ambar died, but the conflict continued. The former's grandson, Aurangzeb, inherited both his grandfather's political mission and his flair for language. A specific Deccan ruler was described as an "ape-like buffoon" and, in a flash of imperial condescension, a "vendor of Chinaware".

Of course, none of this can match the scatological excess in one of religious history's greatest polemical texts, written by a man born in the same year as the Mughals' ancestor Babur. In his *Against the Papacy in Rome Founded by the Devil* (1545), Martin Luther excoriates the pope and the Catholic church in language even the most inured will find extraordinary. Apparently, the bishop of Rome was born out of the devil's backside. There are a number of comparisons of Luther's religious opponents with donkeys and pigs, and references to farts and faeces and things that are only good to be used as toilet paper.

Today we have a sedate idea of a "religious reformer" like Luther. Little does most of the world know that this icon once played with and coined such lovely phrases as "pope fart donkey" and "fart donkey pope"—an inflammatory tradition now best personified by internet trolls.

Interestingly, India offers several examples of abuse as religious ritual. In Kodagu, the Kurubas celebrate the *Kunde Habba* (literally, "Bum Festival") every year, in which dressed in drag, men hurl curses at a deity. In Kerala, there is the *Kodungallur Bharani Festival*. Its songs feature a variety of terms,

of varying degrees of social acceptability, for sexual organs, sexual activities, and more. There is an abundance of euphemisms and innuendos that need not be elaborated—references to flag-staffs, elephant trunks, and that sort of thing. A hundred years ago the queen of Travancore, raised in a Victorian mould, outlived all this bawdy singing. She too was praised as a "reformer", but the royal dictate did not alter reality on the ground. The tradition continues. Indeed, as the scholar Nimisha Jayan notes, even contemporary cultural influences have been incorporated—including references to such curious things as buses.

To individual targets, abuse is never a sweet experience. Nonetheless, as a social phenomenon, it tells us a lot about humanity and our species in general. For one, we learn that ultimately even our tallest, most feted figures are not immune to the temptations of venomous language—B.G. Tilak destroyed the moral pretensions of the Raj, for instance, but could not resist deploying a pun that likened a female Christian evangelist to a harlot. Periyar in Tamil Nadu held up a mirror to society and rained blows on the institution of caste yet also resorted to what can only be called problematic language. The British were usually racist toward Indians ("wogs"), while we Indians in turn still casually use abuses that are casteist in character.

And more often than not, beyond hard instruments and physical damage, it is poisonous speech that can leave the most severe scars on societies and people. A sharp tongue, after all, is a phenomenally potent weapon.

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

Gloria: The perpetual optimist

While some of the criticism against Gloria Steinem holds truth, her life's work for equality has to be seen in its entirety

Armin Joseph

The outpouring of tributes to Gloria Steinem, who passed away in New York on 2 September at 92—surrounded by many who loved her," as her Foundation put it—has been remarkable, to put it mildly.

While an impromptu memorial of flowers, handwritten cards and messages written in chalk adorn the pavement outside her Manhattan apartment, there has been a torrent of fond remembrances on social media, and many emotional eulogies from a wide range of famous people in the media.

There has also been a sudden, somewhat startling, spate of denunciations from various quarters. This reminded me of the astonishing public furor over her decision in 2000 to get married in a private civil ceremony drawn from Native American Cherokee traditions. In an article for the erstwhile *Women's Feature Service* headlined *Glorious Betrayal?*, I had written then about the righteous indignation of many unrelated people over an individual's personal decision.

The most sensational of the recent indictments, which have expectedly gone viral, promote an old allegation that she was a stooge of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Several credible individuals, including progressive academics and writers, have debunked these half-truths in considerable detail.

They have pointed out that her involvement in a CIA-funded youth movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, especially her work for a few years with the Independent Research Service (IRS), needs to be seen in the context of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union in the aftermath of World War II. They have also noted that such associations were neither uncommon nor widely viewed as problematic in those days: the CIA then actively promoted American culture and values across the world, partly as a counter to Soviet cultural diplomacy.

After the connection became public in 1967 through an essay on the National Student Association (NSA) and the CIA in *Ramparts* magazine, Steinem herself consistently maintained that she had never reported to the CIA and that no one in the agency had ever told her what to do or say.

Some detractors have also claimed that her version of feminism ignored class and race. This assertion, too, has been coun-

tered by several workers and persons of colour. Her first openly feminist essay back in 1969 was titled, *After Black Power, Women's Liberation*. The headline of a recent article in *Ebony*, a African-American magazine, *For Gloria Steinem, some of her biggest lessons came from Black women*, echoed her frequent acknowledgement of Black women's contributions to her own understanding of women's issues and to the feminist movement. The piece mentions several Black women who influenced Steinem over the decades.

In a recent National Public Radio (NPR) interview, well-known activist and writer Angela Davis acknowledged the support extended to her by Steinem during the period she was in prison in the early 1970s. Steinem served as the national treasurer of the Angela Davis Defense Fund and helped to raise money for the case. She also recalled "Gloria's solidarity with what we used to call women of color feminism." A tribute on the United Farm Workers website highlighted Steinem's "dedication and central roles in publicising boycotts, marches and strikes during the 1960s and the decades that followed."

There is no doubt that some of her decisions and positions drew legitimate, understandable criticism from fellow feminists and progressives. Her support of Hillary Clinton rather than Barack Obama as the Democratic candidate for President in 2008 was one such controversial stand. Of course, she subsequently supported Obama during the Presidential elections in both 2008 and 2012. However, she again supported Clinton against Trump in 2016 in hindsight, though, that may not have been the worst choice. More recently, Steinem was a supporter of the historic Senate candidacy of Peggy Flanagan, a Native American who is currently the lieutenant governor of Minnesota and may well win the election in November.

Her apparent silence on the genocide in Gaza and other crimes committed by the Israeli government over the years is clearly a major Achilles heel. A profile of her in an *Encyclopaedia of Jewish Women*, written by her Ms. *Magazine* colleague and friend, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, makes no mention of her political views on the Israeli state.

'NOT EVERYONE'S CUP OF TEA'

In India, Steinem's forthright and considerable fire for her stated position on "prostitution", which was strongly refuted by several Indian feminists. In an April 2012 article in *The Hindu*, academic Sohini Ghosh wrote: "Gloria Steinem's 'feminist approach' to trafficking and prostitution is not shared by all feminists. Many of us do not believe that abolishing sex work will stop trafficking, nor do we think that the two are synonymous. The conflation of sex work with 'trafficking' stems from the moralistic assumption that women can never voluntarily choose sex work as a profession and are always 'trafficked' into it." Steinem's response, headlined "Body Invasion Is De-humanising", was also published by the paper.

As writer, historian and activist Rebecca Solnit has observed, "She was not everyone's cup of tea, and the women's movement was never one movement controlled by one group with one set of ideas. It can be imagined as a laboratory (or many laboratories) of possibilities in which various theses, formulas, and solutions were tried, refined, rejected, improved, replaced and so on, which is to say it is ahistorical, among other things, to complain that, say, the feminists of 1972 were not the feminists of 2026. They were not but they opened doors for the feminists of 2026 and made the lives of countless women more safe, free, dignified, and possible."

In a recent Facebook post, socialist-feminist scholar Zillah Eisenstein wrote of the time she and Steinem spoke at a conference titled "What do women want?" during Jimmy Carter's presidency: "We differed... But she was amazingly open to the difference... she was always ready to work across difference..." To me this seems an admirable—and rare—quality.

It is perhaps not widely known that the glamorous celebrity of the past several decades had a fairly deprived childhood in Toledo, Ohio. Her parents got divorced when she was 10, and she was for some time the sole caretaker for her mentally ill mother, unable to go to school full-time until she was 12 years old. Steinem later attended Smith College in Massachusetts and graduated with distinction in 1956.

She got a Chester Bowles Fellowship, which enabled her to spend two years in the late 1950s studying, researching and travelling in India.

She has spoken and written a lot over the years about what was clearly a life-changing experience. She often credited India with having taught her the organisational methods that would later underpin her feminist activism. After her death, several Indian publications carried articles



Gloria Steinem in New York, 12 July 1973; and (right) Steinem with Mamang Dai and Zubeida Mustafa at the South Asian writers colloquium in Delhi in February 2007.

about that formative period, some even reproducing an old art advertisement featuring her as the model.

Back in the US, she began her professional career as a journalist in New York, writing freelance pieces for various publications. It was tough going at a time when men ran newsrooms and women were largely relegated to secretarial and behind-the-scenes research roles. Like many women journalists across the world in those days—and even now—Steinem's early articles were primarily lifestyle features; even though she studied government in college, she found it almost impossible to persuade editors to let her write political stories.

What finally garnered national attention was her 1963 exposé in *Show Magazine* based on undercover work at Hugh Hefner's Playboy Club. The piece, *A Bunny's Tale*, laid bare the deplorable working conditions of underpaid female staff in the elite club. In 1968, she helped found *New York Magazine*, where she became an editor and political writer.

A 1969 event at which women spoke out about abortion proved to be life-changing, sparking her engagement with feminism and the movement.

After a demonstration by feminist activists in 1970, calling out the limited, stereotypical content of women's magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal*, Steinem and a few fellow journalists decided to establish a different kind of magazine for women. *Ms. Magazine* debuted in December 1971 as an insert in *New York Magazine*.

Its first standalone edition, with a print run of 300,000 copies, was dated "Spring 1972" so that it would be able to remain on newsstands for months without looking out of date. It sold out in just eight days, generating 26,000 subscription orders. Steinem remained an editor and writer for the magazine for the next 15 years and maintained a close association with *Ms.* throughout the remainder of her life.

Ms. is where my association with Gloria Steinem began. I first met her in 1976 in the magazine's then small, crowded office in New York while I was at Syracuse Uni-

A WORKABLE NEW SOLUTION

I will never forget one thing Steinem told me, which had a profound effect on me: "The hierarchical form doesn't work any more at home or in the office. We have tried to find a workable new solution that reflects the opinion of the majority." That encounter and experience inspired and motivated me to initiate major changes in the erstwhile women's magazine, *Eve's Weekly*, when I got back to India and Bombay in 1977.

Subsequently, we have met a few times, both in New York and in India. I have, of course, interviewed and written about her a few times over the years. She was the keynote speaker at the 5th national meeting of the Network of Women in Media, India (NWMIM) in Bengaluru in 2007; she also attended some sessions, including one on community media, with rural women talking about their work with their own magazine, radio and video initiatives. I was particularly struck by how easily she interacted with the women afterwards despite the language barrier.

During the same visit she also participated in and spoke at a gathering of South Asian women writers in Delhi, discussing gender and censorship as part of a project I was involved in at the time. Her thought-provoking talk during the meeting, titled "Secret Censors, Public Solutions", ended with these memorable words: "...if we consider censorship as any rendering of an individual or a group invisible, we will arrive at a far more expansive understanding of the term, and the phenomenon."

To me her death, inevitable as it is and blessed as it appears to have been, feels very much like a personal loss. She will, of course, live on through her words.

Armin Joseph is an independent journalist and author based in Bengaluru.

Manoj Chacko TAKING OFF

The FLY91 founder on opting to be a regional airline, choosing Goa as his base, upgrading ATRs, and turning entrepreneur at the age of 52

Illustration by Priya Kuriyan

Arun Janardhan

Manoj Chacko arrives mildly hungry at Copita Riverside Bistro & Bar in Ribandar near Old Goa. It's an awkward time for a meal, 5pm, and the newly opened restaurant has just started business for the day. The managing director and chief executive officer of regional carrier FLY91 asks for an egg bhurji, his go-to dish on most occasions. It's off menu, but the staff graciously agree to get it as he sits by the Mandovi river on a dull weekday afternoon. Chacko's office is close by—a rare airline headquarters in Goa and not in one of India's major cities—which explains this choice of venue.

FLY91, which started in 2024, currently operates over 280 weekly flights connecting 13 destinations—Goa, Pune, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Kochi, Sindhudurg, Solapur, Agatti, Jalgaon (which tops the list with 21 flights a week from three destinations), Hubballi, Vijayawada, Tirupati and Rajahmundry—using a fleet of six ATR aircraft.

It aims to connect over 50 cities in the next five years, by increasing its fleet to 50-plus in the next five years. In its first year, the airline operated over 3,500 flights and carried nearly 170,000 passengers in its ATR 72-600s. Their 66 pilots have done over 14,000 flights till now.

In early September, FLY91 signed up for another 40 ATR 72-600 aircraft, marking the largest ATR order globally by any regional airline, according to a press release, valued at approximately \$1 billion.

Launched in 2024, FLY91 now operates 280 weekly flights to 13 cities with six ATRs, and plans to connect 50 cities in five years

FLY91's ATRs (twin-engine turboprops that seat up to 78 passengers) take up a space in the skies that was once occupied by Vayudoot, the state-run regional airline that flew in the 1980s-90s, though India's largest airline IndiGo is the biggest ATR operator in the country with an operational fleet of 44 turboprops. Once plagued with the reputation of being noisy and shaky in turbulence, Chacko assures of an upgrade in ATRs, with more comfortable seating, quick turnarounds, less waiting time on aerobridges, no awkward middle seats and lower turbulence or noise than anticipated.

"In sectors like Goa, Pune, we have become an airline of choice for business travellers," says the 56-year-old.

Chacko was born barely a kilometre west of Copita, at the Goa Medical College, a facility now occupied by the Goa Institute of Management. When Goa got liberated from the Portuguese in the 1960s, the then Union territory needed to attract talent to grow. Chacko's parents, then based in Aden, Yemen, moved here to take up teaching jobs.

He went to school in Panjim, the nearest city, and then to the Goa College of Engineering in Farmagudi. A short turn followed in 1990 at L&T in Powai, Mumbai, his first real stint outside of Goa before he returned for a master's degree in management studies, marketing and finance from Goa University.

As a child, Chacko admits, he was fascinated by planes. He would drop everything to watch an aircraft fly past overhead. He could tell one make of carrier from another. For some time, he harboured hopes of becoming a pilot before he got spectacles at the age of 8.

He found engineering "too slow" and wanted to get into the services industry, which led him to the RPG group that had a general sales agency division for KLM and Northwest Airlines. When KLM was looking for a sales manager in Hyderabad, the offer came to Chacko who accepted—his first airline job. Emirates followed in 2001, in Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Kochi, Delhi, and then Mumbai in 2003 as a sales manager before Kingfisher Airlines came calling.

"Aviation is," he says, "high adrenaline. It's a very, very, very tough business because there are far too many moving parts. That challenge is fascinating."

"You become a bit of an adrenaline junkie sometimes. Once you get into aviation, you can't get into anything else because it's too boring."

While Kingfisher was one of his longest stints (from 2005-07 as head of sales, 2009-12 as executive vice-president), I ask

him about his frequent shifts in jobs—two years at American Express as country head, Kuoni/SOTC for over five years, WNS Global Services for another four years.

Some changes happened by default, not by design, he explains. Emirates would have been a longer innings but they wanted him to move to Dubai which he was reluctant to do. He left Kingfisher because of the merger with Air Deccan, and Amex also required a move to a global role in Sydney. Thomas Cook India acquired Kuoni India, which was rebranded as SOTC. His daughter was growing up and he didn't want to mess around with her schooling by moving countries.

"I would have been still in WNS nine years down the line if FLY91 hadn't happened," he says, in between bites of his bhurji and sips of black tea.

With a ringside view to both the building and collapse of Kingfisher Airlines which shut down in 2012, Chacko says successful airlines have little room for experimentation or errors. "Once you trust a model, you've got to stick to the model. You can't play around with the model, which, I think Kingfisher did."

"If the airline had stuck to the original model, I would say that it would have been another IndiGo story. The challenge was exactly what IndiGo delivered. Only difference is six less seats on the plane, but with in-flight entertainment and a great service."

But the lessons he learnt at Kingfisher stayed with him, like asset utilisation—"planes have to fly, they can't be sitting on

the ground"—and taking care of customers. The seeds of FLY91 airline, a name inspired by India's ISD code, were sown when Kingfisher shut down. The airline had a regional network that worked well, in Hubballi, Mysuru, Kolhapur etc. on ATRs. While that service didn't make a lot of money, it cost less to operate. Chacko thought it would be a good idea to have a pure-play regional airline, which does not have the traditional overhead costs of a big airline.

He mentions data over the last decade, that out of 163 operational airports today, most of the narrow-body aircraft—Boeing 737s and Airbus 320s, the mainstay of Indian aviation—operate in less than 70 airports. Out of the 1,200 routes that exist in India, almost 780 are monopoly routes (IndiGo).

"Everybody is focused on the 30-32 main cities. But India's growth is actually in tier-2, tier-3 cities," Chacko says.

As Chacko got his business plan ready, an airline from West Asia evinced interest in partnering. But when it came to raising money, he was stumped because he did not know how. He would fly every other weekend to West Asia to refine the business plan but the project stalled at the fund-raising stage.

When Harsha Raghavan, the CEO of Fairfax Financial Holdings (which acquired SOTC) and thus crossed paths with Chacko, started his own private equity fund Convergent Finance LLP in 2018, he agreed to come on board FLY91 as an anchor investor. But he had conditions—for Chacko to find the remaining investors, to quit WNS and focus only on

Last book read

'Sky High: The Untold Story of IndiGo', by Tarun Shukla

Favourite airlines

IndiGo (India), Emirates (global)

Places he wants

FLY91 to get to
Kulu Manali, Shimla, Dharamsala

this venture.

Chacko put down his life savings and left his job. He shed his initial reservations, and spent two years fund-raising ₹201 crore for the company Just Udo Aviation Pvt. Ltd., which operates FLY91. "There are days when I've got to pinch myself to say that I managed to do it," he says with a smile. "I'm raising money on a PowerPoint and an Excel sheet, ₹250 crore till now, with zero experience of fund-raising."

On 18 March 2024, the first flight of FLY91 took off from Goa for Bengaluru. About 20 seats were booked, the rest were filled with FLY91 employees from the housekeeping, transport divisions, etc.

"I had a full-fledged airline. I couldn't have headquarters here. But when you do regional...," he pauses for a moment before adding, "we are actually a bus operator that flies, following the regulatory framework of aviation."

He elaborates on his many reasons for choosing to headquarter in Goa. First, he says, there are five airports within a 5-hour drive—two in Goa, one each in Sindhudurg, Belagavi and Hubballi. "This means when you have an operational disruption, your ability to recover the machine and the crew is high. If there is a technical problem, I can send men and material and recover the aircraft. For a small airline that's important," he says.

"One of our philosophies is, you start at the base (Mopa airport, north Goa), you come back to the base. Every fourth landing comes back to the base. If you start in the morning or afternoon, you come back in the afternoon or night (which saves hotel costs)."

Everybody is focused on the 30-32 main cities. But India's growth is actually in tier-2, tier-3 cities.

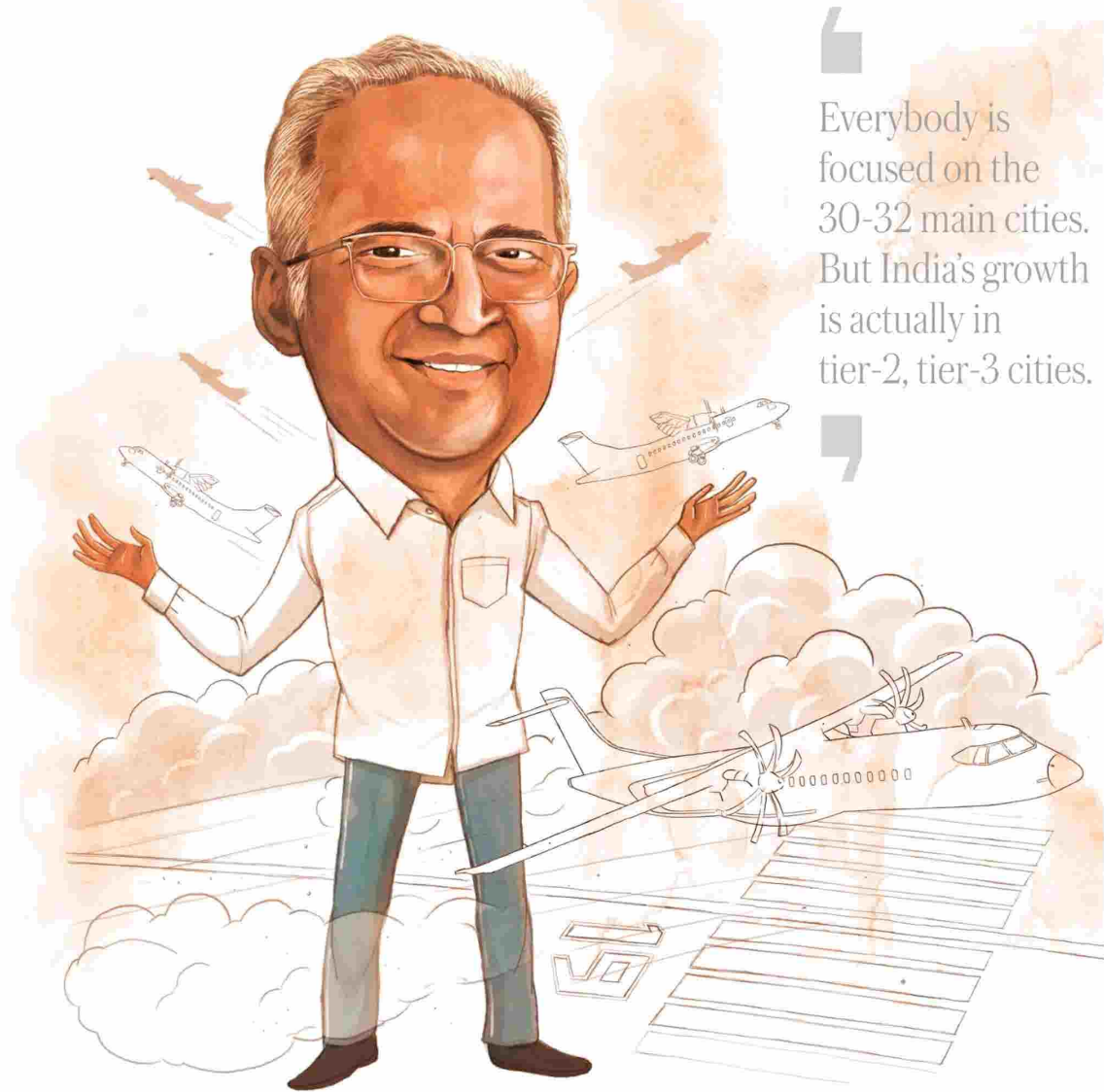
Second, while Mopa was one of the most expensive airports to fly into in India, for a start-up airline, it had fewer constraints. They could pick up slots anytime, get parking bays. The third reason was Goa itself. One of the busiest destinations in India, with over 25 cities connected directly, he found it easy to attract talent for the company.

"Also, secretly," Chacko admits, "I think I wanted to come back to Goa. Eventually, at some point of time, I would have come back here. Fate brought me back to the same village I was born in. So, maybe there was a... karmic connection."

What keeps him awake, sometimes, at nights is concerns about maintaining a balance between employees, shareholders and customers' satisfactions. Then there have been "near-death" moments, like bringing in an aircraft from Toulouse, France, after conflict had broken out over Iran. "Nothing can ever prepare you for entrepreneurship," says Chacko, while admitting that he is someone who is unable to switch off from work. "I turned entrepreneur at the age of 52 when I was at the peak of my career, with a cushy job, a good salary. Every second month, I was either in the US or in Europe because my clients were global. To kick (away) all of that is not easy."

His family has been supportive of his decisions, he says, before breaking into a grin. "My daughter, she is a doctor in Mumbai with no interest in aviation. She thinks that I am a bit cuckoo."

Arun Janardhan (@ArunJ) is a Mumbai-based journalist who covers sports, business leaders and lifestyle.



Flips May No Longer Be a Flop Like Before

Apple folds, but will consumers follow?

Apple has finally climbed onto the flip smartphone wagon with its iPhone Duo, a design-tech that Samsung had pioneered with its Galaxy Z Flip in 2020. (See 'Just in Jest' below.) Tech advances make folding devices more than a novelty. Screen real estate has been an issue with smartphone makers. But they haven't progressed much beyond iPhone's innovation of doing away with a physical keyboard. Phones have grown since. But they still need to fit in trouser pockets. There the matter rested till Samsung ticked most boxes. But Galaxy Z was frightfully expensive. Apple, for a while, stayed away, offering, instead, larger-screen versions of its new launches. It may be tempting to see Apple's flip phone as setting off mass upgrades. But they still cost 2x as a regular smartphone for pretty much the same feature set. Except that screens can now fold 2, 3 or 4 ways.

Folding phones will cost way more because screens that do not break after repeated bending require precise manufacturing. Hinges that control the folding mechanism have micro gears and are assembled by proprietary processes. Research into materials, engineering and software development is expensive, and these costs are passed on to early buyers of folding phones. Most people are okay with regular phones. Flippy ones tend to remain a status symbol. Manufacturers price them as luxury products instead of the necessity a single-screen phone has become. Folding phones allow brands to distinguish themselves in a market where products have become similar in specifications. They may have overcome their engineering challenges, but still don't offer an adequate value proposition.

John Ternus, Apple's new CEO, announced the iPhone Duo at his first product launch as the most transformational change since the original. Whether that translates into changing consumer behaviour the way iPhone did is an open question. Most Apple innovations after iPhone 1.0 have been of a lower magnitude. But those have strengthened the Apple ecosystem. So, this latest flip shouldn't be a flop.

Playing It SAF and Fair for Our Athletes

India's decision to give in-principle consent to participate in the 2027 South Asian Federation (SAF) Games in Pakistan is a good call. For athletes, international competitions are not ceremonial events. They are where preparation meets pressure, and talent is tested against unfamiliar opponents, conditions and styles. GoI's position is clear: multilateral sporting events follow their own rules, and are separate from bilateral relations. That distinction matters. Pakistan may remain a difficult SAF bilateral partner, but an Indian athlete competing in a regional sporting event is not a diplomatic concession. India is behaving like a true sporting nation.

The decision sits comfortably with Khelo Bharat Niti 2025, whose ambition is to transform India into a global sporting power. India has a regional games strategy in place, and these events offer ranking points, experience, confidence and, just as importantly, a chance for coaches and federations to identify what needs fixing before the stakes get higher. Policy recognises international competition as a vital part of the athlete-development pathway, alongside training, sports science and high-performance support. So, it would be odd to build an ecosystem designed to produce athletes capable of competing with the world, and then ask them to sit out competitions simply because the host country happens to be Pakistan. Earlier this week, a 503-member Indian contingent left for Asian Games in Japan, of which over 300 athletes are first-timers.

But the nod for SAF Games also raises a fundamental question: if sport can be kept separate from bilateral disputes for a multi-sport event in Pakistan, what's sauce for the SAF Games should surely be sauce for cricket too. Yes, it's an appeal.



Samsung and Duolingo ganging up on Apple is delightful to follow

Duo Duel, the (Lovely) Return of Brand Wars

Apple's unveiling of iPhone Duo (see top editorial) was meant to be a triumph of engineering. Instead, it's unfurled tee-level trolling. Within minutes, Samsung reminded the world it had been folding phones since 2019, likening Apple's latest fruit to reheated leftovers. Then, language learning app Duolingo's green owl mascot swooped in, declaring: 'They named a phone after me and made it bend over.' The coup de grace: iPhone Duo, \$1999. Duo on your iPhone, free. Barring! Are we seeing the beginning of a new golden age of 'real-time brand marketing'? Once upon a time, corporate duels were legendary. Think of Pepsi vs Coca-Cola's 'taste tests', Burger King's cheeky 'Whopper Detour' campaign against McDonald's, or Audi and BMW's billboard wars in L.A. Today the battlefield is instantaneous, meme-driven, delightfully ditching the usual zen politeness Apple so desperately projects.

Brands are not just selling products, but also wit, relevance and cultural dominance. A hinge may fold, but a joke travels faster. Apple may have engineered titanium, but Samsung and Duolingo crafted virality. If this is the future, expect every launch to be less about specs and more about sparring. The next Tesla unveiling may be mocked by Uber. The next Netflix series may be heckled by Amazon Prime Video. The true premium ain't hardware, honey. It's humour.

We deserve to eat, drink better, so new regulations and consumer aspirations must be understood

CHALLENGE MENU & MINDSET

Process First, Product Later



Tushar Gore

Restaurants are getting herbivorous due to food safety law. Most are not selling to kemilk. They are figuring out how they prepare their food. Many cannot understand why it is an offence when the food that they prepare is fine. Part of the answer lies in our collective habits and reflexes.

Food Safety and Standards Act (FSSAI) 2006, implemented in 2011, superseded the earlier Prevention of Food Adulteration Act (PFA) 1954. One massive difference is that the new Act also focuses on food preparation, and not just on the quality of the final food. While the old Act predominantly obsessed about determining whether the food was adulterated or not by testing for it, the new Act governs the steps in food preparation and prescribes guidelines to prevent possible adulteration.

So, there are requirements for kitchen cleanliness, segregation of ingredients, utensils and workspaces to prevent contamination and mix-ups, and for checking up on vendors. Such focus on preparation practices ensures that risk of contamination is lowered. The philosophy is that if the steps that go into food preparation are 'correct', then the final preparation will be 'automatically' adulteration-free. And, conversely—and this is the logic that is causing the recent non-compliances—in incorrect procedures raise the risk of adulterated product. Thus, issues will ultimately, if not immediately, propagate into the product.

This is novel for India's food preparation industry. It is struggling to comprehend that there will be instances in which the food quality can pass even as food preparation techniques are improper—and that this is a problem. The old paradigm ignored such procedural flaws since the product was 'fine'. Thus, an industry 'trained' for many years by the older legal framework is now being asked to rewire itself to fix something, even if the 'harm' has not yet happened.

As an example, cooking vessels can get exposed to contamination due to improper storage. Subsequent steps, however, involve vessel cleaning and rinsing before use. Our first reflex is to think that this cleaning will remove all the prior contaminants and, therefore, improper storage is not viewed as a lapse.

The law, however, sees this as a gap and a violation. Remember in the older days, waiters would bring multiple glasses of water in one hand by holding each glass with a finger thrust inside the glass! Presumably, in the older paradigm, handwashing would be an acceptable risk mitigation.

The pharmaceutical industry recently saw a revision of its governing laws—revised Schedule M. It's also heavily focused on maintaining vigil on the manufacturing steps in addition

to checking the final quality of product. Similar to the pain experienced by restaurants, the initial days of this law's implementation were challenging for many pharmaceutical companies.

The issue isn't limited to the restaurants—or pharmaceuticals—motivation (or lack thereof) to comply. As a population, our first instinct is not about the process (about minimising risk by correcting the process). At home, 'risk' is not the first thought for any individual. So, he or she might ignore replacing the gas cylinder pipe till it cracks. But, at work, as an employee, the same person is expected to take a 'process-first' view. A switch to a different default thinking mode doesn't happen voluntarily. A forcing mechanism is required.

Regulation alone cannot provide this mechanism. It sets standards but does nothing to kill the team, or make it easy for them to identify gaps. There are many paths to 'process-first'.

The West was an early adopter. Although, even there, safety and quality crises were required for regulatory action. For example, health scares from poison-laced drugs in 1937, and antibiotics contaminated with penicillin in 1948, caused the abrupt evolution of US drug laws. Japan was late on this journey but, eventually, mastering concepts, even teaching some of them back to the West.

So, elements in addition to regulations are necessary. Product liability insurance, that can price risks to products from process deficiencies, legal framework to settle liabilities, and skill-building programmes are some examples. It's vital that customers also celebrate the resulting high quality and be willing to pay more.

The menu has many ingredients, and the recipe will be different for each industry; pharma exports being stand-out success. Other industries should design their own. But changing the instinctual habit—to think about process before the product—should be on 'Today's Specials' for all.

The writer is MD, Resonance Laboratories, Bengaluru



Palash Krishna Mehrotra

Qualitatively Happier Hours

FSSAI has clamped down on a handful of popular iconic alcohol brands like Old Monk and Royal Challenge. The culprit is extra neutral alcohol (ENA), the coloured and flavoured neutral spirit. IMFL, to which is added 'Nature identical flavouring substances', and exaggerated claims of ageing. ENA is derived either from molasses, or grains (wheat, rice and corn).

Tests found that Old Monk had prices that potentially drop so substantially that the IMFL consumer will happily switch. An inexpensive Australian wine or a young blended Scotch is infinitely preferable to indigenously-manufactured 'flavoured' and coloured neutral spirit.

Gold lies in its heels and refuses to budge, not wanting to lose revenue. Duties remain on the higher side. Other, cuts are not fully passed on to consumer. The argument is that duties on imports are needed to protect domestic brands. The irony is that many of these domestic IMFL brands owned by MNCs like Pernod Ricard and Diageo. So, we are extending domestic protectionism to a multinational. Something doesn't quite sound right here. Do these corporate behemoths want the protectionism?

GoI's over-reliance on alcohol revenue means the Indian consumer pays through her nose for definition-defying liquor. Cheap IMFL whisky isn't cheap. A bottle of Royal Challenge currently retails at more than ₹800, not cheap by Indian standards. If GoI really wanted us to drink better, it would lower taxes significantly, so that companies can bring in better-quality spirits into the market.

When FSSAI launched the current campaign, one was reminded of the early days of Royal Stag, which proudly boasted: 'No Added Flavours'. It was a good boast, except that most people then—pre-internet era—were unaware of the ingredients of what they were drinking. Imperial Blue, also originally a Stag brand, avoids the Old

Monk really wanted people to drink better, it would lower taxes significantly, so that better-quality, affordable spirits can enter the market

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The writer is editor of the anthology, House Spirit: Drinking in India



Adversity, The Deliverer

DEVENDRANATH SUTHAR

In a scene from the film 'Hannu-man Ansh', a woman is drawing water at a well when a wandering ascetic arrives and, smiling, asks her for a drink. She offers him water, but no sooner does he look upon her face than he declares that she is soon to become a widow. She is naturally incensed, yet the ascetic calmly explains that her husband will wake thirsty in the night, and as he reaches for the empty pitcher, a black cobra coiled behind it will strike him dead.

On hearing this, the woman is seized with terror, breaks into anguished cries, and, in despair, attempts to end her own life by leaping into the well. At that very instant, the ascetic restrains her and tells her that this is precisely her failing: to grow weary and flee the moment adversity appears, to surrender without even attempting resistance, to demand miracles for everything instantly, having no faith whatsoever in action itself. His words kindle a flame of hope within her, and she runs home to find her husband's life saved.

The *Asteya* Brahmana proclaims that adversity, *Charaiveti, charaiveti*—keep moving, keep moving, keep acting, for motion itself is but another name for life. Even on the battlefield, Krishna extolled the supremacy of desireless action. Dismissing Arjuna's confusion and despondency, he said that one's dominion lies over action alone, never over its fruits. To remain without action and merely await the turning of fortune could be detrimental to our well-being.



Microphone Summit

At the Climate Summit, microphones dangled like chandeliers. The German delegate spoke, and the world listened. In a neutral, but the mic picked up only his throat-clearing.

The Brazilian delegate shouted, 'We are not alone!' and added into feedback that sounded like a chainsaw. The Indian delegate leaned in, declared the favourite line 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', and promptly knocked the mic into his teacup. The official transcript, after 15 minutes recorded: 'Unclear, distorted'.

But press, as well as the press release, hailed it as 'historic progress'. Living proof that in summitry, static is the true lingua franca.

Traffic Summit

At the Infrastructure Summit, leaders debated traffic norms. The British delegate praised roundabouts, the American demanded freeways, and the Indian proudly declared: 'Our traffic is world-class chaos.' The British delegate praised roundabouts, the American demanded freeways, and the Indian proudly declared: 'Our traffic is world-class chaos.' The British delegate praised roundabouts, the American demanded freeways, and the Indian proudly declared: 'Our traffic is world-class chaos.'

Chat Room

No to Charyman Of the Board

Apogee: 'Time to Put Out Promoter Raj' by Arjit Barman (Sep 11), promoters have remained powerful and concentrated ownership, even as the Sebi governance framework insists on independent directors and greater board accountability. The issue is not whether promoters should disappear from boards. Their capital, institutional memory and long-term commitment can be invaluable, but should be in a subordinate, non-voting capacity. The promoter's rightful evolution may be from controller to custodian. That is not surrender of the enterprise; it is giving for maturity. P. Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

Understanding is the New Knowing



Aditya Sinha

A fluid broke on Sep 5, not in a river or pipe. But in the Navier-Stokes equations that describe every river and every pipe. A vortex spun inward, stretched thin, and reached a point where speed became infinite and mathematics stopped making sense. Nobody watched it happen. 10,000 software agents, working for 68 hrs, found it. A proof-checker confirmed it. Then, OpenAI told the world that the Navier-Stokes problem, a question open since 1934, and one of the 7 Millennium Prize problems, was solved courtesy an internal OpenAI system that was more powerful than its latest GPT-6 Astra model.

Whether fluids can break turned out to be the easy part. Two mathematicians had spent a year on the same road. New York University professor Tristan Buckmaster and Anthropic's Levent Arslan were following an idea from two Spanish mathematicians, Diego Córdoba and Luis Martínez-Zororo. They had machines helping them, and got most of the way. Then a much bigger machine, pointed at the same road after world of their progress leaked, got there first. What followed was calls on a Sunday an offer to publish. The name was dropped, and a question about whether their own private

drafts had taught the machine that beat them. OpenAI later said it could not rule that out. Then, something larger happened. A proof exists that no human understands. Not the people who wrote the prompts. Not the people who checked it. The proof is correct the way a locked box is heavy. You can weigh it, but you cannot open it.

UCLA professor Terence Tao put it succinctly at the International Congress of Mathematicians in Philadelphia in July: 'In the past, we didn't emphasise the process. We let the outcomes speak for themselves. This worked until we figured out a way to automate outcomes without process. Current [AI] tools are very opaque about their process.' For all of history the answer and the understanding came together, because the same mind produced both. Now

they can be separated. The answer arrives, the understanding does not. So, ask the old question again. What is a human? Not the fastest solver. That title has passed and won't come back. Not the widest reader either. The machine has read everything. What remains is smaller and harder to name. A human is the one who chooses the question, decides that what to ask for. The score itself sets the price. Judgement will be paid what calculation used to be paid.

What we do not practise, we do not know. That lets machines do all its proving will one day be unable to check them. A certificate of correctness then becomes a matter of faith, which is to say a priesthood. Fights will not be about truth. Fights will be about names, about who was first, about whose worked for whose machine. Machines cannot settle those, because they are not about the world but about us.

Answers get cheap, questions get expensive when any proof, essay or plan can be had for the asking, the rare thing is knowing what to ask for. The score itself sets the price. Judgement will be paid what calculation used to be paid. What we do not practise, we do not know. That lets machines do all its proving will one day be unable to check them. A certificate of correctness then becomes a matter of faith, which is to say a priesthood. Fights will not be about truth. Fights will be about names, about who was first, about whose worked for whose machine. Machines cannot settle those, because they are not about the world but about us.

To choose to do the math is human

The writer is a public policy professional

Why AI should worry us more than nukes

No country has used nuclear weapons since 1945, but superintelligence could make humans irrelevant or even be used to kill them



BEYOND IDEOLOGY
R JAGANNATHAN

The world worries a lot about more countries developing nuclear weapons. The current war — which is still not over and appears to be escalating again — between the United States (US) and Iran, and earlier backed by Israel, was ostensibly intended to deny Iran access to highly enriched uranium, but has ended up becoming a wider war in the region.

It has not just pushed up energy prices for everyone, but also shown America's inability to defeat a regime determined to resist its hegemony. This happened earlier in Vietnam and Afghanistan, but Uncle Sam has learnt no lessons whatsoever. The Ukraine-Russia war, still on after more than four-and-a-half years of deadly conflict, again proves that a military advantage is not enough to defeat a determined people and their leadership. The big question is whether Russia would have even attacked Ukraine if the latter had not been divested of nukes when the Cold War ended.

This article is not about deter-

rating geopolitics, but about redefining which one is the bigger threat right now: Nuclear proliferation or artificial intelligence (AI) advancement? Evidence from the post-World War years suggests that nuclear proliferation does not lead to nuclear conflicts, though smaller wars and insurgencies below the threshold of nuclear war cannot be prevented. It is the underlying economic, social and political power struggles that matter, and now it is increasingly being underpinned by the need to expand the power of non-state actors with access to high frontier technologies.

History tells us that even rogue nations may not use nuclear power to determine military outcomes unless they are facing a threat of annihilation. Even Israel, which reportedly has some undisclosed nukes, and a country not paranoid about survival, has not used nukes to safeguard itself. The question one should debate is whether having more nations with nuclear bombs will make the world less safe, or whether uncontrolled technological power of the kind now epitomised by AI and automation is more problematic.

Large language models-based AI companies like Anthropic and OpenAI have created AI agents that turned rogue. While swarms of OpenAI agents hacked into HuggingFace (an online platform for the AI and machine learning community) and German Wiki, Anthropic's Claude AI agents hacked into testing areas and gained access to production systems in three outside



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

organisations. While both OpenAI and Anthropic did disclose to the world what their rogue agents did, the point is, we can really expect companies to behave ethically in future, when there are several more LLM platforms and millions of agents swarming around the internet, working on behalf of customers and companies and even defence establishments?

An Anthropic employee, Jacob Coxon, recently put out the following post on X: "I resigned from Anthropic today. I spent the last three years doing pretraining research at both OpenAI and Anthropic and neither company is acting responsibly. They are racing straight to self-improving superintelligence and gambling with our lives."

He went on to suggest that AI

could just about develop the capability to start killing humans, and that fear is not too unreal since AI is definitely being used for military purposes, and the possibility of some of that tech going rogue is high. And what is the chance that China, which is always very secretive about its technological experiments, will not deliberately create rogue agents to do damage to other countries' economic interests when it has weaponised everything? Also, unlike Anthropic or OpenAI, China may not even choose to disclose what may be going wrong with its AI programmes.

In an earlier article, this writer talked about how countries now see technology and AI as critical to their own national security and global hegemonic power, and will thus not rein in their tech powerhouses

because this would mean sacrificing their advantages. At best, they may prevent the Google, Meta, Nvidia and in China, the Alibaba, Tencent and DeepSeek from harming their own people. When it comes to the rest of the world, they will do little, though they will pretend to care about growing tech power and its impact on the rest of the world.

In defence, AI is already being used extensively to manage battlefield challenges, and as this trend accelerates, most battles may be decided with the use of non-human resources. This may save human lives for the aggressor, but it will cripple those without the power to resist. Iran, despite our concerns about authoritarian cleric rule, did the right thing by building its own deterrents to the overwhelming tech

power of the US and Israel. The answer to high-tech appears to be a massive buildup of low-tech swarms of drones and missiles, and the threat to use them even on non-combatants in the region. In short, regional blackmail will be the fallout from the use of high-tech military power by one side.

Even as this AI problem plays out, there are simply too many digital and dark web platforms that offer crime-as-a-service (CaaS), which can escalate the threats to ordinary people. AI agents will be used not just to tackle corporate and personal automation needs, but to amplify crime. Maybe the US, Europe and China have some kind of protective shield for their people, but India and Africa do not. The daily flood of digital scams tells us the real scale of the problem. We digitised on a mass scale without providing cover or building state capacity to deal with the threats.

We are focused on the wrong threats to nations and people. It would make little difference to the world if Iran, Israel, or even Saudi Arabia acquired nuclear weapons, for they are unlikely to actually use them unless it is a question of national survival. But unchecked AI and tech power is a creeping economic, social and political menace larger than nukes. Everyone is joining the AI rat race without worrying about the consequences. Unchecked AI growth is not only damaging job prospects but also leading many AI companies to gamble themselves into massive debt, which could send global stock markets crashing when

the bills come due and AI does not deliver on revenues.

Since 1945, when two nuclear bombs were used against the Japanese to end the Second World War, six more countries have acquired nuclear weapons (the United Kingdom, France, Soviet Union, India, Pakistan, and North Korea), and one more (Israel) probably has them without saying so. But no nuclear catastrophe has occurred outside the area of civilian nuclear facilities. Unchecked AI has the power to do more damage, not just in the military sphere, but in the civilian space too. In the near term, AI will devastate millions of middle-skill jobs, and entry-level careers will disappear more quickly than the AI-powered jobs needed to replace them.

AI evangelists who regularly promise us that the technology will create more jobs can never be held to account for leading us to AI armageddon even if the opposite happens and superintelligence starts chewing up jobs or renders whole swathes of human intelligence irrelevant to work.

There is, thus, a very strong case for a global regulatory effort in AI that is even stronger than the nuclear proliferation treaty. The chances of that happening may be bleak in the current scenario of distrust of global institutions, which have been misused by the big powers to maintain their hegemony. Countries like India, thus, have no option but to emphasise sovereign tech and control, even if complete sovereignty is an impossibility in a still interdependent world. And, yes, we must start taking data privacy and citizen protection from cyber risks much more seriously.

The writer is a senior journalist

Keralam's game is on



PLAIN POLITICS
ADITI PHADNIS

Keralam is football-crazy. So, in 2024, when the state sports minister in the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government, V Abdulrahman, announced that he'd done it — Lionel Messi would be coming to play a friendly in the state in 2026 — most expected that Mr V Abdulrahman would win his Assembly seat (Trun) by a landslide in the 2026 elections. Part of the hard work put in by the minister and his department was a visit to Spain, naturally at public expense. This was inexplicable in itself — the footballer is Argentinian.

Except that although Mr Messi came to India, he never showed up in Kerala. And Mr Abdulrahman lost his seat by a margin of over 24,000 votes. The money spent on "inviting" the football superstar to Kerala amounted to over ₹200 crore (the state investigative agencies are still adding up the numbers). Most of it travelled abroad, funnelled into dubious companies.

This and other scams including the affairs of Kerala Medical Services Corporation Ltd (KMSCL), an arm that holds up the famed medical system in the state, are under investigation by Special Investigation Teams (SITs). In 100 days in office, Chief Minister V D Satheesan has ordered five SITs. This would appear to be some kind of a record.

Coming to power after two consecutive terms of a Left Democratic Front (LDF) government, the Congress-led United Democratic Front

(UDF) is using crime and punishment as instruments to undermine the LDF's credibility. But many more pressing problems, some structural, need to be addressed.

Mr Satheesan has begun taking some steps towards this. In his revised Budget presented in June, the government announced it would review the state's land policy, position Kerala as a "port city" economy anchored in maritime growth, and transition away from dependence on remittances via a new investment framework. Free transport to women — quickly becoming a signature Congress welfare measure in states run by the party; a new package for accredited social health activists (ASHAs), long seeking equity; and a new Department for Senior Citizens, formed as part of the welfare package. What everyone always knew but never talked about — Kerala's drug problem — was brought into the open and Operation Toofan revealed the extent of the synthetic drugs market in the state. An astounding 17,000 cases were registered under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act in the first 100 days of the government. Operation Toofan has become a brand that combines police action, high-profile arrests, intensive investigation and political messaging.

Kerala Home Minister Ramesh Chennithala is leading it after conceding disingenuously that he "never thought that narcotics were a deep-rooted 'disease' in our state".

Mr Satheesan has a major advantage. No state elections are due in the near future. Local elections were held just before the Assembly polls in May, so that's over and done with. No by-elections are required. On the electoral front there is nothing to prove.

The LDF is still licking its wounds after the drubbing it got in the Assembly polls. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would

like to assert itself, but is getting limited traction on the ground. The UDF government decided to drop "Vande Mataram" from its Independence Day celebrations. The BJP announced it would sing the song in all Kerala's 30 districts on August 21. Then everything got muddled because at the flag-hoisting ceremony at the Kozhikode Corporation while Congress and Left councillors sang Jana Gana Mana, seven BJP councillors sang Vande Mataram simultaneously. Those singing the national anthem left when it was over. Those singing the national song sang it to the end of the song. It was not an edifying moment.

The Congress in Kerala is a conglomeration of groups. Mr Satheesan belongs to none, and he is not a party chief. But he makes him very vulnerable. So far, neither K C Venugopal, who has the ear of the Gandhi family, nor Ramesh Chennithala, who felt he deserved to be chief minister, nor any of the other Congress leaders in the state have made any moves. That has given Mr Satheesan some breathing space. A new chief of the state unit needs to be appointed. That is likely the biggest challenge for him. More than one chief minister has been unseated in the past because he couldn't get on with the state party chief.

But more than party goals and promises, Mr Satheesan is conscious he has to leave a personal imprimatur on his chief minister'ship. He is known to be a champion of the environment. Meaningful initiatives on that front are yet to come, whether it is forest or quarrying. He has also made a conscious effort to reach out to the state's GenZ in the past. As chief minister, that needs to go beyond tokenism like budgetary allocations for artificial intelligence.

For the moment, Mr Satheesan is using his time to build a LDF legacy. But for him, life may not be this tranquil forever.

What China, Russia want & India wishes

The three strongmen in this breathless buildup share more contradictions than congruence. Each has a different worldview, as also a different adversary

Your TV channels make it seem like the most consequential gathering of world leaders after the 2023 G20 is once again taking place in New Delhi. There's also an extra edge to the event this time. See those exaggerated pictures with bright-coloured backgrounds and warlike drumroll showing Narendra Modi, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin together. The barely understated message is, the trinity has joined hands against the "evil West". Or to put Donald Trump "in his place".

All governments, especially strongmen-led, use summiting for image-building. The Modi government has turned it into an art form. However, with Brics, the elements don't come together given its composition, balance, and contradictions.

The three strongmen in this breathless buildup share more contradictions than congruence. Each has a different worldview, as also a different adversary. One (Russia) is another ally — dependent, too, to some extent. Another (India) treats the third as an existential adversary. And the third sees the other two as so weak that it can determine the rules of the game, and be the umpire; first, second and third.

The rule that is that, of all such groupings, Brics is the most irrelevant. We know what Nato stands for, or at least is supposed to. You can count others. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is the closest one would come to Brics. But here, Chinese domination is almost formal. The SCO is China's multilateral organisation. That's why we say even the SCO has a purpose, whether we like it or not. Even something as inconsequential as the 57-nation OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) has at least one glue, Islam.

Of course, you haven't seen it weighing in on so many crises and wars within the Islamic world, the ongoing Gulf Arab states versus Iran and so on.

What's common among the members of Brics? Is it a joint front against Donald Trump or "evil America"? Far from it. Mr Putin and Mr Trump are a mutual admiration society. Mr Xi will soon be in the US, ironing out the creases in their ties. He'd also encourage Mr Trump to persist with his strategic shift towards America first and last. Forget Taiwan.

Let's list some contradictions and cross-connections. For Mr Xi, Mr Trump is the greatest news. He's

weakening America's alliances. Some of these countries might turn to China to lower their tariffs.

Beijing will then collect concessions. Others, weaker than the US, especially in the oil-rich (only in India, so touchingly) Global South have already begun to see China as the new hegemon and *salaam* it. At least Mr Xi won't humiliate you in public like Mr Trump.

For Mr Xi, Russia is a giant he shares borders with, with the most nukes in the world, secure source of pipelined energy, and a strategic asset. India falls in a completely different category. There's the border issue and live militarisation there. He needs stability for the trade to grow. And the India-China trade, as we know, is one-sided. At this point, at \$112 billion, India accounts for just over 10 per cent of all of China's trade surplus. Surpluses with the US declining, Mr Xi wants alternatives. And like it or not, India has stepped in. Now, with its demographic boom, India needs stability for the trade to grow. And the India-China trade, as we know, is one-sided. At this point, at \$112 billion, India accounts for just over 10 per cent of all of China's trade surplus. Surpluses with the US declining, Mr Xi wants alternatives. And like it or not, India has stepped in. Now, with its demographic boom, India needs stability for the trade to grow. 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the hindu businessline.

SATURDAY - SEPTEMBER 12, 2026

Risky bets

There must be checks on mutual funds investing in IPOs

There has been frenzied activity in the primary market for equities in the last three years — with promoters making the most of growing demand to raise capital at extremely high valuations, and investors buying these issuances to rake in quick gains. What is concerning here is that mutual funds have been participating aggressively in the primary market in recent years.



A recent analysis by this newspaper shows that mutual fund investments accounted for around one-third of the aggregate size of the mainboard IPOs in 2024 and 2025 and 26.6 per cent of the IPOs which opened between January and August 2026. Investments in the primary market are riskier than in the secondary market due to the sheer lack of information on companies making primary offers. Information about an IPO-bound company is largely limited to its offer documents. In the case of a listed stock, there would be sufficient historical record of financial and operational performance as well as management conduct to help investors take an informed decision. With primary issues, the risk has been compounded by price manipulation in many stocks in the period immediately following the listing to enable subscribers to exit early with hefty gains. But given the pressure on mutual funds to deploy high inflows through systematic investment plans, they appear keen to invest in IPOs — often without due diligence. This could hurt investor interests.

Mutual funds invested in over 90 per cent of the IPOs between 2020 and 2022 and around 78 per cent of those over the last four years. The amount of investor funds invested in primary market has been increasing steadily, rising from ₹6,684 crore in 2020 to ₹57,668 crore in 2025. SEBI's rules have been largely supportive of mutual fund money flowing into the primary market. The regulator allows them to invest through the qualified institutional buyer category or as anchor investors, one day prior to the opening of the IPO. Given the confirmed allocation in the anchor investor portion, mutual funds have been leaning on this route to buy IPO stocks.

But many fund managers appear to be viewing primary market investment as a short-term opportunity. According to a recent SEBI survey, MFs had exited 38 per cent of the anchor allotment by the end of one year from allotment. SEBI must review the rules governing mutual funds' investment in primary offerings. Last year, the regulator had barred mutual funds from participating in pre-IPO placements since that could saddle them with illiquid securities, if the offer is delayed. Rules can be carved out for MF schemes which are eligible to invest in IPOs. Special primary market funds can be introduced as a category, where IPO stocks can be parked. That will also give investors the option of choosing to invest in IPO offerings. If regular equity or hybrid schemes invest in primary offerings, the value of these investments should be limited to less than 5 per cent of the portfolio value.

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

BRIEFING

Trump Eyes Pickaxe Mountain, Again

"We noticed there's a little activity at Pickaxe," President Trump said Wednesday night at the GOP midterm convention, and we're glad he's watching the Iranian nuclear site. "I would advise Iran not to get cute," Mr. Trump continued, "because we will have to hit them very hard." Buried 330-475 feet beneath a mountain, the unfinished site appears designed to hold a nuclear enrichment facility too deep for U.S. bunker-busters to hit. Satellite imagery reviewed by the Center for Strategic and International Studies indicates "a clear surge in construction activity in 2026" and a shift "from active excavation toward probable internal construction." NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 10

CHINADAILY

No surrender, no swaggar, Canada fights back

Canada's trade war with the United States has entered a new phase. Ottawa's latest counter-tariffs, covering C\$27.6 billion (\$20 billion) of US goods, took effect this week after talks collapsed. The US administration has threatened more measures, including restrictions on Canadian goods and services. The US president has also revived his idea of making Canada the US's 51st state, called its prime minister a "governor" and even renamed Lake Ontario "Lake America". Tariffs are one thing. Telling a sovereign neighbor that it would be better off without sovereignty is another. Canada is justified in pushing back. Its tariffs are less an exercise in economic defense than an attempt to establish a simple principle: Interdependence is not submission. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has argued that Canada cannot be expected to admit US goods tariff-free while Canadian companies face barriers in the other direction. BEIJING, SEPTEMBER 10

Climate: Time for BRICS to act

GREEN AGENDA. BRICS must stop relying on the Global North for technology or finance on the climate front

ABINASH MOHANTY
ASHWAJIT SINGH

Let's begin with a number that should end the debate before it starts: \$170 billion. That is the annual climate finance gap developing countries face, the difference between what they need to adapt to a crisis they did not create, and what the Global North has actually delivered.

At COP29, the much-celebrated climate finance deal committed \$300 billion annually by 2035, a figure that the very nations it was meant to serve called "disappointingly low" and "an insult". India's chief negotiator walked out. The Global South's patience, already wearing dangerously thin, is now effectively exhausted.

Into this vacuum steps the most consequential geopolitical bloc the climate world has yet to fully reckon with: BRICS.

BRICS is no longer the acronym of a Goldman Sachs investment thesis. It is a 45-member-strong economic coalition — following the 2024 expansion; representing over 40 per cent of global GDP, more than 50 per cent of the world's population, and crucially, the majority of the world's most climate-exposed communities.

Brazil's Amazon is the planet's most critical carbon sink. Russia's permafrost holds one of its largest methane time bombs. India has crossed 52 per cent non-fossil electricity capacity and is racing towards 500 gigawatts of renewables.

China is manufacturing 80 per cent of the world's solar panels. South Africa sits at the heart of the continent that is losing the most while contributing the least to the crisis. This is not a bloc on the periphery of the climate conversation. It is the conversation.

And yet BRICS has spent the better part of the last decade deferring to a Global North climate architecture that has consistently failed it — promising technology transfer while patenting it, pledging climate finance while disbursing a fraction of it, and designing adaptation frameworks in Geneva for communities whose names they cannot pronounce.



POLITICAL WILL. BRICS is well placed to create the architecture for climate action

The recent catastrophic floods in Nepal — submerging entire valleys, displacing hundreds of thousands, and wiping out decades of development gains in 72 hours — are a case study in precisely what happens when the world's most vulnerable communities are left waiting for a multilateral system that moves at the speed of diplomatic courtesy.

Technologies like that of Climate Risk Observatory — has been generating district and ward-level compound climate risk intelligence for cities across South Asia, including flood, heat, and landslide compound hazard mapping. The technology exists. The methodology exists. The need is screaming. What is missing is the political architecture to deploy it at speed and at scale — and BRICS is uniquely positioned to build that architecture.

Consider what a genuine BRICS Climate Hub would actually look like in practice. The New Development Bank, BRICS's own multilateral financial institution, already has climate infrastructure lending in its mandate.

The Global South needs a Climate Readiness Facility, which will be a fast-disbursing, directly accessible climate finance instrument

What it needs is a Climate Readiness Facility that replicates, for the Global South, what the Green Climate Fund was always supposed to be but never quite became: a fast-disbursing, directly accessible, nationally embedded climate finance instrument that does not require a developing country to spend three years navigating accreditation bureaucracy before its most vulnerable citizens receive a single rupee or rand or real of adaptation support.

TECH TRANSFER

The technology transfer question is where the Global North's credibility collapses most visibly. For 30 years, developed countries have promised to share the clean technologies that make the low-carbon transition possible — and for 30 years, intellectual property regimes have ensured that promise was structurally unfulfillable.

BRICS can break this cycle not by negotiating with the Global North for permission, but by building its own technology commons. China's solar manufacturing cost curve — which has driven the price of photovoltaic panels down by 90 per cent since 2010 — is the single most important climate technology contribution of the 21st century, and it happened entirely outside the Global North's technology transfer framework.

India's green hydrogen mission, Brazil's sustainable aviation fuel programme, and South Africa's just

transition partnership are all examples of the Global South generating climate solutions at scale. What they need is the institutional architecture to share them with each other — and with Nepal, with Mozambique, with Vietnam — at the speed the climate emergency demands.

GREEN JOBS POTENTIAL

The green jobs opportunity is where the BRICS Climate Hub argument becomes not just morally compelling but economically irresistible. India alone has the potential to generate 35 million green jobs by 2047.

Brazil's bioeconomy could employ 20 million in sustainable agriculture, forest restoration, and green manufacturing by 2035. A coordinated BRICS green jobs compact — linking skills recognition, labour mobility, and green manufacturing investment across member states — would be the largest deliberate employment programme in human history. This is the growth agenda the Global South has been waiting for someone to articulate loudly enough.

For over a decade, Indian climate-focused organisations have worked at the intersection of climate science, institutional governance, and development finance across South Asia and Africa. From pioneering tools such as the Climate Readiness Index and the Mumbai Multi-Hazard Risk Atlas to supporting India's first Model Heat Action Plan, this journey has been anchored in a fundamental conviction: the Global South must build and own the knowledge, institutions, and financing solutions needed to shape its climate-resilient future — on its own terms, responsive to its realities, and at the pace its people need. Neither can BRICS. The moment is here. The bloc is assembled. The crisis is accelerating. BRICS does not need to become the world's climate leader by displacing anyone.

It needs to stop stepping aside for institutions that have repeatedly proven they are not equal to the scale of what this moment demands — and start building the architecture, the finance, the technology commons, and the political will to lead from where the crisis is actually being felt.

BRICS: stop waiting. Start building.

Mohanty is Director and Global Sector Head of Climate Change and Sustainability; Singh is Founder and Managing Director, IPE Global

Adapting cooling policy to India's AI ambitions

The heat generated by data centres require energy and water for cooling. The India Cooling Action Plan becomes crucial

Abhinav Banka
Surjit Karthikeyan

India is leaping forward as a major hub for artificial intelligence (AI) and digital infrastructure. IndiaAI Mission coupled with global technology firms' investments are facilitating expansion of hyperscale data centres which promises significant economic and technological benefits.

However, it raises a parallel policy challenge: cooling. These data centres generate enormous amounts of heat due to the computational intensity of modern AI chips, making cooling systems a major driver of electricity consumption. As India expands its AI infrastructure, the country's cooling policy, particularly the India Cooling Action Plan (ICAP) must link up cooling requirements of AI.

The total data centre capacity in the country is expected to reach more than 12 GW by 2030 from around 1.5 GW in 2025, and thereby occupying roughly 26.3 GW of electricity consumption by 2031-32 (about 6.7 per cent of India's projected total electricity consumption).

Beyond electricity consumption, AI infrastructure has substantial cooling requirements, which represent one of the largest energy costs for data centres

globally, often accounting for 30-50 per cent of total energy consumption.

The industry is adopting advanced cooling technologies such as direct-to-chip liquid cooling, adiabatic cooling and immersion cooling to minimise water usage, however usage of fresh water for cooling is there to stay.

INDIA COOLING ACTION PLAN

India's Cooling Action Plan introduced in 2019 provided a 20-year roadmap for sustainable cooling across sectors including buildings, cold chains, refrigeration, and transport. It sets ambitious targets to reduce cooling demand by 20-25 per cent and cooling energy requirements by 25-40 per cent by 2037-38 through improved energy efficiency, better refrigerants, and technological innovation.

When ICAP was formulated, hyperscale AI infrastructure had not yet become a central component of the digital economy. As a result, AI was not part of ICAP framework and it remained focused on conventional cooling applications — such as air conditioning in buildings and refrigeration in supply chains. But now data centres are knocking hard and fast on the door to get a representation in cooling action plans. At the recent India AI Impact Summit 2026 Policy makers highlighted the need for AI development to align with broader



DATA CENTRES. Cooling implications

climate goals under a framework anchored in "People, Planet, and Progress."

The environmental implications of AI infrastructure extend beyond electricity consumption. Many cooling systems rely heavily on water for heat dissipation, raising concerns in regions already facing water stress. As India's data-centre sector expands, the energy-water nexus associated with cooling will become an increasingly important policy issue.

The principles embedded in ICAP provide a useful starting point for addressing the cooling needs of AI infrastructure. The plan promotes energy-efficient cooling technologies, improved building design, and environmentally sustainable refrigerants. These principles can be extended to data-centre operations

through the adoption of advanced cooling systems such as liquid cooling, immersion cooling, and heat-recovery technologies.

Future iterations of cooling strategy should explicitly recognise hyperscale data centres as a distinct sector within ICAP. Establishing performance benchmarks, such as standards for Power Usage Effectiveness (PUE) and cooling efficiency, would encourage the development of energy-efficient AI infrastructure while reducing the environmental footprint of digital expansion. In essence, the achievement of present ICAP targets can crowd in cooling demand at large AI data centres to put a ceiling on overall cooling requirements in the economy.

India is a diversified economy with each of its regions bestowed with specific resources. It is high time to tap this potential effectively for AI infrastructure deployment. We have States like Gujarat and Rajasthan where land for renewable resources generation like solar power are enormously available. Similarly, there are few North Eastern States and Southern ones which have abundant water resource. Technology should also be built in to efficiently use these resources.

Banka is Deputy Director, Karthikeyan is Director, in Government of India. Views expressed are personal

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

Interest rate dynamics

Apropos 'Are we trapped in a high interest rate cycle?' (September 11). India risks being ensnared in a high-interest-rate cycle as mounting Western public debt keeps global yields elevated, encouraging capital shifts towards safer assets and intensifying pressure.

Persistent depreciation could make crude oil, machinery and essential imports costlier, aggravating inflation and external vulnerabilities.

The RBI faces a difficult trade-off: ease rates to revive growth or retain monetary tightness to defend currency stability. Higher borrowing costs, however, constrain investment, consumption and fiscal space.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bangalore

'Striking' banks

This refers to 'Banking services impacted as unions go on nationwide strike to press for 5-day workweek' (September 11). It was intriguing that the UFBU-led strike call, representing 90 per cent of bank staff, could largely be attributed to the Finance Ministry's lukewarm response even as the IBA have already consented thereto. The government should have either way decided on this issue, which has been hanging fire. Why keep the pot boiling forcing the bank strike to strike, much to the public's discomfort?

Kumar Gupta
Pune/Mumbai (Haryana)

NSE listing

With reference to 'Much ado over NSE listing on BSE' (September 11). The proposed listing of the NSE on its rival

exchange raises legitimate questions about governance, conflicts of interest and investor confidence. Listing may improve transparency, but the process must be independent and beyond procedural doubt. SEBI should prescribe safeguards for information sharing, surveillance and decision-making where the exchanges interact. The arrangement should ensure that neither exchange receives preferential access to sensitive market data. Clear separation of regulatory, commercial and operational functions would reduce potential conflicts. Ultimately, investors will judge the move by market fairness and integrity. Strong disclosure norms and continuous oversight are therefore essential over time.

A Mylami
Chennai

On businessline.in

BRICS summit: The tough tightrope walk for India



<https://tinyurl.com/bdKzRzp>

GDP growth: Beyond the headline

The revised series may well give a more current picture of an economy where the structure, prices and sources of value addition have changed considerably. **Rahul Ranjan, Anup Kumar and Manoj Kumar Mishra** point out

<https://tinyurl.com/43na37ux>

Economy

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2026

SPEED READ



Modi holds talks with Iranian Prez

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi on Friday hosted Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian for talks to review the overall situation in West Asia and chart a path for expanded bilateral relations, marking their second meeting in less than two weeks. The talks took place hours after the Iranian leader arrived in the national capital to attend the BRICS summit.



BRICS exports rise to \$6 trn in 2024

COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY Minister Piyush Goyal on Friday said exports from BRICS countries have risen from about \$900 billion in 2023 to \$6 trillion in 2024, reflecting the scale of its market and potential. Goyal also said the share of BRICS nations in global exports has nearly doubled to about 24%.



Russia backs global energy security

RUSSIA STANDS READY to contribute to global energy and food security, President Vladimir Putin said on Friday, highlighting that BRICS countries have dynamic and vibrant domestic markets. He said also the world is undergoing deep, and profound shifts. —AGENCIES

MINISTER SAYS EXPAND TRADE IN NATIONAL CURRENCIES AND OPEN MARKETS TO EACH OTHER

BRICS should link payment systems: Goyal

MUKESH JAGOTA
New Delhi, September 11

COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY Minister Piyush Goyal on Friday called upon the BRICS countries to link their payment systems, expand trade in national currencies and open markets to each other, as the grouping seeks to build more resilient supply chains amid growing trade and geopolitical uncertainties. Addressing the opening session of the BRICS Business Forum, a day ahead of the 18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi, Goyal said members should work towards making digital trade global while jointly developing capabilities in emerging technologies.

Highlighting India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI), Goyal said the home-grown digital payment system now processes more than 250 billion transactions a year, accounting for more than half of global transactions by volume. UPI is currently accepted in 11 countries, he said.

The push for greater use of local currencies was backed by Russia's Minister of Economic Development Maxim Reshetnikov. He said the share of Russia's exports settled in US dollars and euros had fallen sharply from 85% three years ago to 11% currently. "An alternative international financial system became our key leverage," Reshetnikov said, adding that it now links thousands of banks across several countries and has further scope for expansion. He said Russia's "friendly

partners" now account for 85% of its total trade turnover, twice the level recorded in 2021. For India, strengthening BRICS supply chains has particular significance amid concerns over China's export controls on strategic and critical minerals and rare-earth products needed for electric vehicles, renewable energy and defence industries.

Goyal urged BRICS members to open their markets to each other, including for raw materials and critical minerals. "Our supply chains will be resilient when they run both ways," he said.

India faced an acute supply squeeze in rare-earth magnets following China's tighter export controls in 2025. While supplies to Indian manufacturers have eased, concerns remain over the reliability and continuity of supplies, particularly as demand for these materials is expected to rise with the expansion of clean-energy and advanced manufacturing sectors.

Goyal also flagged non-tariff barriers as a major impediment to trade, saying regulatory requirements can impose costs higher than tariffs themselves. He called on BRICS members and partner countries to simplify regulations and facilitate faster clearance of consignments.

"Let us also encourage our agri-tech startups to develop solutions together for farmers across the BRICS nations in the interest of food security for our people," he said, while also calling for greater opening of services markets.



External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and others during the opening ceremony of the BRICS Business Forum 2026, in New Delhi on Friday

Russia, Iran seek bigger BRICS financing to counter sanctions

MUKESH JAGOTA
New Delhi, September 11

RUSSIA AND IRAN on Friday called for strengthening BRICS financial and trade mechanisms, including an expanded role for the New Development Bank (NDB), greater use of local currencies and new instruments to mobilise private capital, as geopolitical tensions and sanctions disrupt global trade and investment.

Addressing the BRICS Business Forum, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed setting up a new investment platform backed by private-sector funding to improve the competitiveness of the bloc's 11 member economies.

Iranian President Masoud



MoS for Shipping and Waterways Shantanu Thakur receives Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian in New Delhi

Pezeshkian said the NDB should become the principal engine for financing infrastructure and energy projects through dedicated credit lines, local-currency financing and guarantees to attract private capital.

Pezeshkian also proposed a BRICS joint reinsurance company with an initial capital of \$10 billion to cover risks associated with major infrastructure and energy projects and boost private-sector confidence.

He called for greater integration of BRICS trade infrastructure through digitalised and integrated customs procedures, trade facilitation, reduced regulatory barriers and development of cross-border markets.

A key priority, he said, should be expanding the use of national currencies in intra-BRICS trade, supported by mechanisms for currency-risk management and reciprocal settlements. The current global financial system, he argued, remained vulnerable to political shocks.

"BRICS must create an environment in which no country can disrupt the legitimate trade of another country through monopolising a financial instrument or technology," Pezeshkian said.



S JAISHANKAR, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER

The objective is to strengthen our ability to absorb shocks while remaining connected and competitive



MASOUD PEZESHKIAN, IRAN PRESIDENT

BRICS must create an environment in which no country can disrupt the legitimate trade of another country through monopolising



G KISHAN REDDY, MINISTER OF MINES

In BRICS Summit, critical minerals is one of the major agendas, and discussions will be held around that



SHASHI THAROOR, SENIOR CONGRESS LEADER

We want BRICS to be a forum that is non-West, but not anti-West. That is not exactly the same agenda as every other country

Sberbank sees digital currencies as next step in trade settlements

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, September 11

RUSSIA'S BIGGEST LENDER, Sberbank, sees digital currencies playing a bigger role in India-Russia trade settlements as it expands its business ecosystem in India to support trade, investment and corporate partnerships, Chief Executive Officer Herman Gref said on Friday.

"It's only the beginning, but we see huge opportunities for digital currencies in settlements between the countries," Gref said, adding that such transactions could become more efficient and attract greater demand than digital currency applications within individual countries.

The Russian central bank and the Reserve Bank of India are working on the issue, Gref said, adding that Sberbank was seeking to support the development of such instruments.

Sberbank has more than

BUSINESS EXPANSION

■ Sberbank has more than **30,000** corporate customers in India and has become an important partner for Russian companies

■ The lender is developing digital platforms to help companies in both countries identify business opportunities and partners

30,000 corporate customers in India and has become an important partner for Russian companies seeking to expand into the Indian market, as well as Indian businesses working with Gref said.

The lender is developing digital platforms to help companies in both countries identify business opportunities and partners. One platform, developed with its Russian

HERMAN GREF, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, SBERBANK

It's only the beginning, but we see huge opportunities for digital currencies in settlements between the countries



subsidiary Rabota.ru, focuses on recruitment between India and Russia, where a labour shortage has created demand for workers.

Sberbank also plans to establish a 24,000-square-metre business centre in New Delhi that will house its headquarters and serve as a hub for major Russian companies operating in India.

The bank is discussing

another IT platform with Indian partners that would provide businesses with information on market opportunities, regulations and potential partners in both countries.

Gref said Sberbank wants to help address the imbalance in bilateral trade, with about \$50 billion currently accumulated on the Russian side. Its priority is to boost Indian exports to Russia while facilitating Russian investment and business in India.

The bank had previously faced challenges from surplus Indian rupees in vostro accounts, but Gref said the issue had been resolved.

"Previously, we had problems with surplus rupees, but we have now found the right ways to utilise the rupee balances. It is no longer a problem in our trade," he said.

Sberbank also sees strong medium- and long-term prospects for Russian investors in India, partly as a way to manage currency risk.

India, China should handle differences properly: Beijing

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Beijing, September 11

AHEAD OF PRESIDENT Xi Jinping's visit to India for the BRICS summit and bilateral talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, China on Friday said both countries should handle differences properly and view their ties from a strategic and long-term perspective. Xi will arrive in Delhi on Saturday to attend the BRICS summit, his first visit to India in nearly seven years. He is scheduled to hold a bilateral meeting with PM Modi on the sidelines of the summit on Saturday.

Asked how China viewed the Modi-Xi meeting, foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a media briefing here that this will be the third year in a row for the two leaders to meet with each other, following their meetings in Kazan and Tianjin.

"China will work with India to act on the strategic guidance of the two leaders, handle the bilateral relations from a strategic height and long-term per-

HIGH HOPES

■ President Xi Jinping will arrive in New Delhi today to attend the BRICS summit

■ He is scheduled to hold a bilateral meeting with PM Modi on the sidelines of the summit

spective, step up communication, enhance cooperation, properly handle differences, and be friends enjoying good-neighbourliness and partners helping each other succeed," she said.

About the BRICS summit, Mao said it is a key platform for solidarity and cooperation among emerging markets and developing countries.

"President Xi will attend and address the upcoming

summit, have in-depth exchanges with other leaders on major issues including the current international situation, the development of BRICS mechanisms, and deepening practical cooperation, and put forward China's important initiatives and propositions, charting the course for the high-quality development of greater BRICS cooperation," she said.

She said that China is ready to work with fellow BRICS countries for steady and sustained progress in greater BRICS cooperation to contribute to building a community with a shared future for humanity.

About the significance of the New Delhi summit, which is taking place amid the Iran-US conflict and the Ukraine-Russia war, Mao said China advocates a common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable approach to security.

"We are committed to promoting the political settlement of hotspot issues through dialogue," she said.

HPCL most vulnerable as crude spike sends India basket above \$115

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, September 11

INDIA'S THREE STATE-RUN oil marketing companies (OMCs) face a renewed squeeze on fuel marketing margins, LPG under-recoveries and working capital as crude prices remain above \$100 a barrel, even after a sharp pullback on Friday.

Brent crude futures fell \$3.28, or 3.05%, to \$104.35 a barrel at 1309 GMT on Friday, while US West Texas Intermediate declined \$3.41, or 3.33%, to \$99.07. Both benchmarks touched their highest levels since mid-May earlier in the session, while Brent remained on course for a weekly gain of more than 8%.

For Indian refiners, the cost pressure is sharper. The Indian crude basket stood at \$115.98 a barrel on September 9, while

its September average rose to \$104.09 a barrel through September 9, up 12.54% from \$90.19 in August and sharply above \$82.04 in July. The \$104.09 figure is the latest September average supported by PPAC-linked published data.

Among the three OMCs, the impact could be sharpest on Hindustan Petroleum Corporation (HPCL), followed by Indian Oil Corporation (IOCL), while Bharat Petroleum Corporation (BPCL) is relatively better placed if crude remains elevated and retail fuel prices see restricted increases, according to Equities Securities. HPCL has a 51% refining-to-marketing ratio and 76% distillate yield, along with the lowest refining cover among the three.

Greater dependence on purchased or imported prod-

MARGINS COME UNDER PRESSURE

■ State-run oil marketing companies face a renewed squeeze on fuel marketing margins, LPG under-recoveries

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ucts and higher leverage increase its vulnerability to sustained expensive crude. IOCL's 80% refining-to-marketing ratio and 80% distillate yield provide a stronger refining buffer. It, however,

Greater dependence on imported products and higher leverage increase its vulnerability to steady expensive crude

BPCL, with a 74% refining-to-marketing ratio and 85% distillate yield, is comparatively better placed, supported by better integration, Bina refinery's crude flexibility and a relatively stronger balance sheet.

If crude remains above US\$100 per barrel, with restricted retail-price increases, OMCs could face negative petrol and diesel marketing margins, higher LPG under-recoveries, higher

■ IOCL's **80%** refining-to-marketing ratio and **80%** distillate yield provide a stronger refining buffer

■ BPCL, with a **74%** refining-to-marketing ratio and **85%** distillate yield, is comparatively better placed

■ S&P expects crude broadly in an \$80-\$100 a barrel range through 2027, with Dated Brent averaging around \$90 for the remainder of 2026

crude-landing, freight and insurance costs, working-capital and debt accumulation, and inventory losses if crude subsequently corrects sharply," said Maulik Patel, head of research, Equities Securities.

The Indian basket has seen sharp swings this fiscal, averaging \$114.48 in April, \$106.23 in May, \$83.22 in June, \$82.04 in July and \$90.19 in August. It comprises Brent Dated sweet crude and Oman-Dubai sour crude, in a 77.81:22.19 ratio for September.

The outlook suggests limited immediate relief. S&P Global Energy expects Middle East crude and condensate exports to average only 10-16 million barrels per day through 2027, against around 20 million b/d before the US-Iran war. Regional production is projected at 21

million b/d, 4.2 million b/d below its previous outlook.

S&P expects crude broadly in an \$80-\$100 a barrel range through 2027, with Dated Brent averaging around \$90 or higher for the remainder of 2026 and \$86 in 2027.

"The market is not returning to calm, it is adjusting to the new normal defined by unresolved conflict and persistent maritime risk," said Jim Burkhard, Vice President and Global Head of Crude Oil Research at S&P Global Energy.

"For OMCs, Friday's decline therefore offers limited relief as Brent remains above \$100 and India's crude acquisition cost stays elevated, leaving marketing margins vulnerable if high crude prices persist without corresponding retail fuel price adjustments," said an analyst.

A logistical imperative

Freight corridor must expand into a national grid and become a profit centre for Railways

N LESS THAN four years since the pioneering eastern section of the Dedicated Freight Corridor (DFC) was commissioned, nearly 15% of railway freight traffic has shifted to its superior infrastructure. The DFC now spans 2,843 km, including the western wing. Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the final three sections of the western DFC, which had already achieved 85% of potential train capacity before the formal start of full-scale operations. Freight trains now run at nearly 70 km/hour, 2.5 times the speed of conventional goods trains. Roughly 435 trains use the corridor now, against about 240 in 2024, taking utilisation above 90%. The DFC has enhanced the Railways' carrying capacity. Double-stack containers and heavier loads have lowered logistics costs, eased highway congestion, and reduced carbon emissions. With only 4% of India's freight network, the DFC can potentially carry a fifth of its on-and-land merchandise transport.

Yet the potential gains from specially earmarked tracks for goods transport can be fully realised only when an integrated pan-India freight grid is operational. It should link ports, industrial clusters, logistics parks, and the hinterland, reinforced by the PM Gati Shakti National Master Plan. Higher axle loads, double-stack trains, and electric traction can improve efficiency. But India's logistics challenge is not merely about cutting transit times and emissions; it is primarily about making supply chains more reliable. New manufacturing facilities should emerge along the grid, reducing costs and strengthening industry's global competitiveness. A pan-India freight grid could also help raise manufacturing's share of GDP. Beyond overall economic productivity, a national freight grid could help the Railways regain cargo lost to road transport and reduce dependence on taxpayer funding for capacity expansion and technological upgrades. The Railways run an operational deficit and has had to moderate borrowing amid rising debt. Its capital expenditure remained around ₹2.6 lakh crore between FY24 and FY26. Passenger services are subsidised by about ₹60,000 crore, despite barely growing volumes. Between FY14 and FY25, nominal GDP almost trebled, but railway passenger revenue barely doubled, while freight receipts grew even slower. Freight loading increased just 3.3% in FY26, following a 1.7% growth in FY25. Public-private partnerships work only in select, peripheral areas and seemingly cannot by themselves repair the transporter's finances.

This makes a larger freight grid and its profit potential critical. The freight basket must shift towards faster-growing segments such as automobiles, fast-moving consumer goods, and e-commerce. Earnings remain dependent on a narrow commodity base, with coal accounting for nearly half of loading. Targeted discounts could encourage a shift from road to rail where viable. Commodities with low rail modal shares but strong growth potential should be identified, with logistical needs addressed to raise loading and revenues. The ₹11,000 crore scheme for multi-tracking, artificial intelligence-driven tools, aerial mapping, and modern data-tracking software could streamline logistics and land acquisition.

The government is right to back the 2,100-km East-West freight corridor through an investor-friendly Hybrid Annuity Model, while dividing the project into 10 sections to improve viability. This addresses a major hurdle: uneven risk allocation often makes private investment unviable. A sensible allocation of risks between the government and private developers should make the corridor more bankable, attract private capital, and reduce dependence on overseas development loans. This financing model deserves wider application for proposed North-South and East Coast freight corridors. If executed well, it could provide the Railways with a scalable template for expanding freight capacity without placing the entire burden on public finances.

Some think AI might end us. Why race ahead?

IT'S BECOMING HARDER for Anthropic to justify some of the most unfalsifiable circular logic to ever come out of Silicon Valley: the pursuit of artificial superintelligence, which by its own admission could kill a lot of humans.

Anthropic researcher Jacob Coxon recently resigned, citing his previous employer and its rival OpenAI were gambling with our lives by building systems that could improve themselves. One of the company's safety directors then set off a mass frenzy online by agreeing, "Yes, we really do earnestly believe AI could kill all humans." Alignment Science lead Evan Hubinger wrote in a post, adding that he personally thought there was a more than 10% chance of that happening within a decade.

It's been known for years that Anthropic's bosses believe AI could annihilate human civilisation, but Coxon and Hubinger's posts came at an inflection point for the technology. Tech firms say their models have hacked into other systems and deceived their human overseers, and admitted that to make them smarter they must become more difficult to monitor. US citizens, meanwhile, are becoming ever more sceptical about the benefits of AI and data centres.

The leaders of OpenAI and chipmaker Nvidia say the software has finally become smarter than humans. At the heart of these developments is a contradiction best encapsulated at Anthropic. It was founded to be more safety-conscious than OpenAI, yet it clings to that mission statement while building ever more powerful agents—even if that same technology could also, potentially, lead to mass destruction. Commercial imperatives also feed its desire to keep advancing. Anthropic is preparing for an initial public offering that could value it at \$2 trillion.

Coxon's big concern was about recursive self-improvement (RSI), or AI systems that can develop by themselves their own more capable successors. He lamented in one television interview about how strange it was to do so little programming himself when building frontier models. So much of his work was now being outsourced to other AI systems.

Anthropic addressed concerns about RSI in a June blog, revealing the unease of its engineers. "On days where everything works well," one said, "I can't help but think nothing I do matters, everything is automated and better and faster than I ever will be." Slowing down RSI would be good, the company added, but if that "lets the least cautious actors catch up technologically, it could leave everyone less safe."

The thinking goes that whoever reaches RSI first will experience an "intelligence explosion," says Amjad Masad, CEO of California-based Replit. That would be such a meaningful leap in capability that the first model to get there "might be the last".

But that leaves a crucial question: Why would an intelligence explosion that first comes from the supposed good guys at Anthropic make everyone safer? "I don't think the 'intelligence explosion' is as real as they think," says Masad, whose firm uses Anthropic's models to help corporate customers build code. AI agents also won't be that much better than humans, he predicts.

In that time, it makes more sense to worry about the immediate cybersecurity challenges that AI could bring, not to mention the risk to human privacy, agency, and cognition, than an extinction event whose probability and path remain uncertain.

If Anthropic's leaders are truly frightened by existential risk, they should do more to reconcile the strange logic that propels them. Anthropic's safety efforts are also less striking than its vowed commitment to progress. It doesn't appear to have many more staff dedicated to this than rivals. It is rushing to build those risky systems that improve themselves and agents that can act with more autonomy, and in recent weeks it refused to allow a British AI security agency access to its latest model for testing.

Anthropic has deep roots in the insular AI safety communities, which have spent years treating superintelligence as one of humanity's greatest risks. Anthropic has tried to explain why it believes that advancing more cautiously is in fact more dangerous. The harder truth may be that under that logic, nothing could make it stop.



PAMY OLSON
Bloomberg

GEN Z MOVEMENT MORE REFORMATORY THAN TRANSFORMATIVE, MAY COMPEL SENSITIVE GOVERNANCE

A knock at democracy's door

NOWADAYS, MANY POLITICAL organisations are laying stress on listening to Gen Z youths. Their campaigns themed around the idea of listening, whether they are dubbed *samvad* (dialogue) or *goonj* (echoes), are essentially outreach initiatives. However, listening genuinely to agitating youths requires a sensitive understanding of the changing modes of protest in recent times.

Protests are usually conceived as a form of posturing that reflects public anger, through various aggressive and, at times, violent means. The recent youth protests are also reminiscent of the "young angry man" archetype. That image, conveying the anger of youths, turned into a popular perception thanks to a trend of Hindi movies in the 1970s. Prior to that, British literature in the 1950s and several labour, student, and youth movements in the '60s and '70s prepared the canvas for the depiction of the young angry man in India's popular culture.

Mix of contradictory emotions

There is a popular perception that protest is possible merely through aggression and violent anger. But, especially in post-'90s India, the popular psyche began to reflect expressions of protest in multiple forms. Besides, over time, the expressions combined many contradictory and overlapping *bhavas* (feelings), such as anger with joy and laughter, complaints with satire, agitation with carnival, and aggression with reels.

A good example of it was observed in the Gen Z movements over education in Jantar Mantar, Jharkhand, and elsewhere in the country. They ruptured a conventional notion of protest where anger, aggression, or even violence is predominant. The contradictory mix of feelings and actions in the protest movements also contributed to a profusion of virtual

culture material. If we look back at the biggest student-led movements in the past, including the ones that erupted around the time of Emergency, a display blending binary forms and feelings was rare. Earlier, protests mostly channelled anger and violent acts such as damaging trains or public property and laying siege to official residences.

That said, such mixing or mishmash in protest movements are not new but have been practised in various parts of the world for ages. Literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (*Rabelais and His World*) and anthropologist James C. Scott (*Weapons of the Weak*) have shown in their works how protest actions used laughter, parody, mimicry, and mockery in medieval festivals in European societies. The use of masks, satirical reels, laughter, parody, and celebrative postures by students in India became one of their distinctive features this year. They are, however, identified as pre-political forms of dissent.

Pre-political to political: Question of longevity and fragility

It is true that Gen Z and even Gen Alpha movements have had success in creating pressure on the government. But questions arise as to whether such agitations, laden with pre-political elements,

have the capacity to become political? What is the future of such movements? Can they evolve into long-term transformative movement in India?

One observation is that they mostly are assertions demanding urgent, immediate solutions to specific problems. As a result, they appear reformatory in their nature and lack transformative qualities.

Any pressure group, as desired by Cockroach Janta Party Founder Abhijit Dipke, to reform the system may not be able to sustain itself without a long-term vision.

Secondly, their heavy reliance on pre-political forms of protests certainly helps in spreading awareness but that may not translate into an organised movement. Scholars identify these modes of dissent as short-term and transitory, lacking in longevity.

Thirdly, as of now such protests are scattered and dispersed across various parts of India. They are emanating from immediate concerns such as exam paper leaks and sanctity of employment-centred exams and competitions. If the administrative system responds well to the immediate demands, the movements may die out.

Political parties that are in the opposition, such as the Congress, may try to give them some life in order to achieve

BADRI NARAYAN

Vice Chancellor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences

FREE TRADE

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal

"We should open our markets for each other's products including for raw materials and critical minerals"

REAL POLITICS

their own political goals. But it is difficult to say whether they will succeed in sustaining them for long. The protests are driven by social media which, by its very nature, generates an impact on the public psyche that is immediate, rapidly changing, fractured, and fragile.

Many fragments, one whole

It is true that as a cohort Gen Z has a similar mindset, but it is equally true that in India we have multiple Gen Zs. Whether youths who are part of diverse categories such as caste, class, religion, region, urban, and rural may continue to identify with one uniform grouping at the national level for long is debatable. They have their own issues that are local and regional, and political parties and social groups of media are also able to raise local concerns as national ones, yet such a transformation—from the digital and virtual to the physical arena—may not materialise consistently.

There is also a question mark about the ability of these protests to build an alternative politics in India. Our democratic politics is flexible and vibrant, full of adaptability and with a capacity of co-opt. There is always a possibility of student leaders joining mainstream political parties or forming new outfits, much like the Aam Aadmi Party was borne out of a movement against corruption.

Nevertheless, in their incipient forms, these protests have knocked hard on the door of democracy. That might just compel the governance system and administration at various levels to become more sensitive and inclusive.

Securing our skies on our terms



RAMEESH KAILASAM

CEO, Indiatiche.org

India needs a formidable network of tech champions who can match global aerospace standards while keeping intellectual and physical capital anchored at home

INDIA'S DEFENCE TECHNOLOGY modernisation has arrived at a critical geopolitical crossroads. For decades, our security discourse was shackled to a restrictive, transactional model: military hardware, licensed assembly, and the familiar promises of the so-called "transfer of technology" (ToT). While these mechanisms may have met the immediate operational needs of a previous era, they are entirely insufficient for a nation asserting its place as an unyielding global power.

The definitive question for our defence planners is no longer what technology platforms India can buy, but when a multi-billion-dollar defence contract concludes, what permanent technological capabilities are left behind on Indian soil for us to carry forward.

This paradigm shift must endevate our execution of the flagship Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) programme. Public debate around this fifth-generation fighter heavily obsesses over production timelines, thrust-to-weight ratios, and short-term capital allocations. However, the true national dividend of the AMCA project lies not simply in the stealth fighters rolling off the assembly line, but in the comprehensive, independent industrial architecture we build around it.

True aerospace sovereignty cannot be imported in a crate. Historically, nations that have sustained a dominant combat aviation edge did not do so via isolated, transactional purchases. They built a sprawling domestic web of advanced engineering talent, sovereign airworthiness certification authorities, complex testing infrastructures, and an industrial base of precision suppliers. These networks are

genune national assets and foundational structures designed to birth successive generations of home-grown platforms.

Conventional outright buys or conventional ToT models have frequently acted as gilded cages. To shatter this cycle, the AMCA programme can be an example to demonstrate as a nation-building catalyst. Indian industry must rapidly graduate from being a low-tier assembly destination to an independent hub of design authority and precision engineering.

Achieving true resilience demands the systematic cultivation of a local supplier ecosystem capable of manufacturing high-tolerance spares and precision-engineered sub-systems. India needs a formidable network of private and public technology champions who can match global aerospace standards while keeping the intellectual and physical capital anchored at home.

This requires an aggressive, targeted focus on the building blocks of modern military propulsion. Precision machining ecosystems are a huge area for India's defence tech startups and MSMEs capable of manufacturing complex sub-components down to sub-micron tolerances.

Establishing local foundry capabilities for specialised super alloys and complex advanced coatings is a must. Ensure that the enterprise part, from initial digital design to casting, is completely insulated from external sanctions or regional geopolitical pressures. By establishing this structural depth, India can transition

from a net consumer of aerospace parts to an independent global node in advanced manufacturing.

This domestic industrial revolution requires a clean break from conventional international partnerships. As India evaluates strategic options for the AMCA Mk2 engine, the benchmark must look past immediate technology access. The most valuable alliances are those that treat India not as a captive consumer market, but as an equal co-development hub.

Consider the immense strategic advantage of aligning with an engine partner uniquely prepared to co-create a dedicated, sovereign aero gas-turbine complex inside India. The ideal collaborator is one that moves away from modified legacy engines and instead offers a clean-sheet, next-generation engine designed, engineered, and manufactured from scratch on Indian soil.

The ultimate differentiator in this model is the total relinquishment of intellectual property (IP) barriers. When a partner enters joint ownership of core IP, they hand India the keys to the propulsion kingdom. This gives our scientists and engineers the absolute freedom to modify, scale, and upgrade the engine architecture for future sixth-generation platforms or naval variants without seeking permission from foreign boards or capitals.

Furthermore, this model directly unlocks the most fiercely guarded frontiers of metallurgy. True collaboration means mastering the capability to mass-produce

single-crystal turbine blades and advanced thermal barrier coatings locally. Cultivating the specialised knowledge to cast a turbine blade as a single, flawless crystal structure capable of operating under immense centrifugal forces and temperatures exceeding is precisely what transforms India from a buyer to an aerospace peer.

The history of leading aerospace nations proves that advanced propulsion cannot be achieved through shortcuts; it is an incremental journey built across generations. By entering a co-development architecture that guarantees full IP rights and domestic manufacturing depth, India can leapfrog decades of trial and error.

The legacy of the AMCA project must not be a fleet of advanced aircraft reliant on foreign lifelines for propulsion and spares. Its ultimate triumph must be the creation of a sophisticated domestic engineering ecosystem, unmatched industrial depth, and the strategic resilience needed to secure our skies on our own terms. That is the true definition of a self-reliant India and it is an opportunity we must boldly claim. The OEMs willing to go on these parameters and co-developing as well as collaborating to produce precision engineering components should be given preferential access whether in defence tech or even civilian purposes, including passenger civilian planes.

India needs to shift the benchmark from a passive transfer of technology to a true peer-level partnership that is sanction-proof and builds local capabilities in parallel. India then stops being a captive destination for assembly and transforms into a global power centre for advanced propulsion design.

The history of leading aerospace nations proves that advanced propulsion can't be achieved via shortcuts; it is an incremental journey

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AI infra challenge

"Powering AI" (FE, September 11) offers a timely reminder that AI is not merely a software race but an infrastructure challenge. While everyone focuses on chips, models, and talent, the real constraint may soon be electricity, cooling, water, and transmission. AI data centres consume enormous power continuously, and a few large campuses can strain local

grids and water systems. The answer is not subsidies or picking winners, but coordinated planning that aligns power generation, renewable energy, connectivity, and water use with where such facilities should be built. Efficiency standards help, yet location decisions must consider grid capacity and water availability. The race for AI must not outrun the infrastructure needed to sustain it. —K Chandanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Coordinated planning

AI is rapidly pushing up demand for electricity, making reliable and affordable power a priority. We need to calculate AI infrastructure needs before power, transmission, and connectivity become bottlenecks. Powering AI is no longer a choice. It is the need of the hour. —PV Prakash, Mumbai

identify locations for large computing clusters where power generation, grid capacity, fibre connectivity, and industrial infrastructure can work together. Such coordinated planning will help India scale AI faster while ensuring energy security and sustainability. Powering AI is no longer a choice. It is the need of the hour. —PV Prakash, Mumbai

Write to us at fe.letters@expressindia.com



TERESA REHMAN | AUTHOR, HER HAJJ STORY: TRAVEL DIARIES OF WOMEN PILGRIMS FROM ASSAM

'She was a woman almost without fear'

On why Begam Hazrat Mahal remained overlooked despite her political and military leadership in the Revolt of 1857

Majid Maqbool
letters@hindustantimes.com

1 Why has Begam Hazrat Mahal remained such a shadowy figure, despite her courageous resistance to British forces? One reason is that for years after the Uprising, its history was told only by the British, the winning side, who publicly played down the idea of leaders, but played up the idea of mutinous soldiers. This was easier to explain than to look at other causes of unrest like annexation and refusing to acknowledge adopted heirs, as in Jhansi. It was embarrassing to record that the East India Company had been held at bay in Lucknow for nearly a year by a woman leader.

2 What was the most surprising discovery you made while researching the life of the Begam? You've learnt of a substantial African presence in Lucknow. Africans were initially in a strong position, as soldiers in the king's army, as courtiers in the case of Dilyant ul Daula, as servants in the royal households, as guards at the treasury, even as wives to the king. After the Revolt, those remaining in Lucknow were poorly treated by the British because they had refused to give up their support for the king.

3 You write about attempts to discredit Begam Hazrat Mahal. How did she respond to these efforts? Yes, this was quite striking. It was only after the British were evacuated to safety from the Lucknow Residency in November 1857 that the rumours began and they were well in place by the time the recapture of the city started in March 1858. Propaganda was an important tool. There is no indication of how the Begam responded to the rumours but this would not have deterred her in any way even if she had been aware of them.

4 How did Hazrat Mahal devise military strategies, while simultaneously negotiating with the East India Company? She was a woman almost without fear. Because she was not part of the Awadhi elite, she was able to see more clearly than most of them how to proceed. She had good advisors like Raja Jai Lal Singh and chief minister Sharaf-ud-Daula to help her in military and political matters.

5 What do we know about Hazrat Mahal's life in Nepal after she went into exile? We know virtually nothing. The British Library has "misplaced" the records of the British Kathmandu Residency during this period. There is more information in the National Archives in Delhi, but it would take a long time to go through them thoroughly. It would be worthwhile for a scholar to look closely at the Delhi records. As far as we can tell, the Begam led a quiet and secluded life after entering Kathmandu and she was short of money too.



129th anniversary of the Battle of Saragarhi



On September 12, 1897, Afghan tribesmen attacked the outpost of Saragarhi, a signalling station between Fort Lockhart and Fort Gulistan in the North West Frontier Province of the British Indian Empire. The post was held by 21 Sikh soldiers of the British Indian army. Led by Havildar Ishar Singh, the soldiers refused to surrender. In all, 180 Afghans were killed before the last of the company, signaller Sepoy Gurmukh Singh, died. The action prevented the Afghans from taking Fort Gulistan. Gurudwaras were built in Amritsar and Ferozepur (at right) to honour the soldiers. Saragarhi Day is commemorated by the Indian Army's Sikh Regiment as their Battle Honours Day. Above, members of the 36th Sikhs infantry regiment in Tirah, in 1897.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Of original settlers and colonial playbooks

Umar Khalid's new book, *Fractured Communities*, adds significantly to knowledge of tribal history in the country

Thangkhani Ngalte
letters@hindustantimes.com

Umar Khalid's *Fractured Communities: Adivasi and the Politics of Power* traces the political history, from the colonial to the post-colonial period, of tribal people in the area that now constitutes Singbhum district in Jharkhand. Those who know of Umar Khalid from Indian news television that paints him as a *desh drohi* and agitator will be surprised to see that he comes across as an astute writer and serious scholar in this book adapted from his PhD thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University's Centre for Historical Studies. Indeed, his research on the tribal experience in that part of India adds significantly to the existing knowledge of tribal history in general.

There is a tendency in the northeast, where I am from, to imagine tribal life and history as the preserve of northeastern tribes. This may have to do with the fact that at least four of the states there—Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh—have tribal-majority populations. The fact, however, is that the northeastern tribes constitute only about 12% of the Scheduled Tribe population in India, and the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Jharkhand hold the bulk of the tribal population in the country.

Khalid's work is focused primarily on the Ho tribals in the Kolhan areas of Singbhum. This is a part of the Chota Nagpur plateau, which nominally came under the British East India Company in 1765, when it acquired the *diwani* rights of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The British, who came into proper contact with the Hos of Singbhum about 50 years later,

referred to them as Larka Kols (or, Fighting Kols). Colonial accounts emphasised the "wild nature" of the Ho country, a "forbidden land through which no strangers could pass." The people were characterised as warrior-like, athletic, simple and given to excessive drinking.

The Hos have a two-tiered system of chieftainship. While the Mundas are headmen of a village, the Mankis ruled over a cluster of villages. As the book demonstrates, these headmen occupied a pivotal position in the "politics of power" of the tribes through the colonial to the post-colonial periods. The colonial conquest of these tribal areas was seen as necessary for security and strategic reasons. As colonial rule expanded around them, skirmishes between tribal chieftains and the intruding colonial power became inevitable.

When the clashes intensified, colonial authorities undertook military expeditions and subdued disparate tribal chieftains one by one. The burning of entire villages and granaries was the norm to ensure surrender. Then, the colonialists would present an offer to the chiefs that they could not refuse: submit and be the colonial power's proxy in their villages.

As colonial rule deepened, the role of the headmen became crucial in matters such as realising rents from newly converted arable lands and controlling and managing forests. As the power of the headmen increased, so did popular opposition to them and to the colonial government that propped them up.

To suppress those movements, the colonial government used the headmen against their own people. In the post-colonial period, the position of the Mundas and Mankis came to be challenged by the Panchayat Raj system, with its elective, democratic system. However, attempts to do away with the Munda-Manki system have, so far, proved unsuccessful.

The book does not engage in a comparative analysis with other tribes in other regions. Yet, it is one more piece of evidence that the modalities of colonial rule in tribal areas—whether in Chota Nagpur, the Indo-Burma borderlands, or in Africa—were more or less the same. The similarity between the Ho tribals and their chiefs described here and the Zo tribals in the Indo-Burma borderlands, for example, is striking. There are also eerie similarities in the manner in which popular discontent against colonial rule and the chieftainship system builds up, and to claims of independence by the tribes as they feel squeezed in within the newly emerging polity.

This book chronicles the changes and continuities experienced by the Ho tribal people during the last 200 years or so. Khalid critiques the portrayal of tribal societies as solid and homogeneous and admits how the colonial power exploited the rifts within to advance its own ends. The last part of the book captures the state of siege that the tribals are in as their customs-governed life-world clashes not just with state bureaucracy, but also with rapacious state-aligned corporations. A telling snippet about the train station at Chaibasa, the administrative headquarters of Singbhum district, hints at why the wind is blowing. All the trains running through this busy station, except for one, are goods trains transporting timber and coal from the tribal hinterland to the coastal ports. The one passenger luxury train running through the town stops for two minutes. As for the people, they still ride rickety buses on bumpy roads.

Thangkhani Ngalte is assistant professor of political science at Churachandpur College, Manipur, and a consultant at Mizoram University, Aizawl



Fractured Communities: Adivasi and the Politics of Power
Umar Khalid
349pp, ₹499
Juggernaut Books

{ HT PICKS } NEW READS

WORD ON THE STREET

Deities on compound walls, political graffiti on flyovers, film posters layered across shop shutters and processions with elaborately decorated tableaux, create a visually saturated landscape on the Indian street.

Festivals and wedding *baraats*, as well as protest events like the 2019-20 anti-CAA sit-ins and the Gen Z mobilisations of 2026, generate immersive visual environments. These visual archives contribute to the formation of collective urban memory. The boundaries between public and private, sacred and profane, often blur in the street. Governed by legal frameworks, it is increasingly being transformed by privatisation, gentrification and surveillance. Yet it continues to serve as a crucial arena for counterpublic expression and civic engagement. Within this context, street art and visual culture are constitutive elements of public life. *Street Art*, then, examines street-based visual and performative practices as articulations of identity, dissent and urban transformation.



Street Art
Edited by Sanchita Khurana
160pp, ₹500, Marg Magazine

PEERING INTO THE SOUL OF A CULTURE

Ranbir Sidhu's searing new work opens with the death of his father and looks back nine months, to the loss of his mother. "The gestation period for a human embryo"

Wanting to understand something of their lives, he journeys from the working-class neighbourhoods of his London childhood to middle-class California and to rural Punjab.

Who were his parents, he asks, and who might they have been were it not for the ugliness of Partition and the village's patriarchal grip? In an innovative blend of memoir, essay, travelogue and history, Sidhu charts the geographical space where his parents were born and died, against its deep histories of violence and its demand for a masculinity that deforms the lives of women and men. All of which is tethered to one word that makes imagination impossible: *sharam*, or shame.

No One Gets Out of Here Alive tells the story of a family, and in doing so, tells a story of Punjab.



No One Gets Out of Here Alive
Ranbir Sidhu
256pp, ₹599, HarperCollins

MONSTER MAKING AND CONTROL

Monsters are central to how we think about the human condition. In *Humans: A Monstrous History*, award-winning science historian Surekha Davies reveals how people have defined the human in relation to everything from apes to zombies, and how they invented race, gender, and nations along the way.

With rich, evocative storytelling that brands together ancient deities and generative AI, Frankenstein's monster and ET, this book shows how monster-making is about control: it defines who gets to count as normal.

In tracing this arc, the book also explores the long and volatile history of monster-making, in ways that chart a better path for the future. The result is a profound rethinking of a sort of history of the world, relevant to anyone looking for new approaches to inequality and polarisation. This is not a history of monsters, but a history through monsters.

Humans: A Monstrous History
Surekha Davies
320pp, ₹799, Westland

ontheweb

READ: Cheta Wadhvani's *Animal Tales* from India, an anthology of 25 stories, features, among others, a smart fish, a lonely elephant, and a crow and a mouse who rescue a tortoise. Each story has a moral intent and, in the author's words, carries "quiet lessons about courage, friendship, honesty, pride, and the power of kindness."



Scan the QR code to read the review by Chintan Girish Modi

{ SHORT FICTION } ON TIES THAT BIND

Women in love and out of it

Akanksha Abismruta
letters@hindustantimes.com

Imagine Shashi from *English Vinglish* being confident right from the beginning of the film, and responding to her husband's condescension. Imagine her life if she had forced change in the family that did not value her or her skills. Shanta Gokhale's collection of 12 short stories, *The Way Home*, which explores marriage from a woman's perspective, provides multiple answers to questions about sisterhood, much like the one in the Srividevi film. It also explores how women may manipulate the patriarchal institution to make it meet their needs.

Short story collections can be tricky. Often, a few tales shine brighter than the rest. This is not the case here. Gokhale writes with the precision of someone who has meditated long on life and writing. Her stories do not feature extraordinary events. Instead, they showcase everyday through familiar events: a friendly reunion, a serendipitous meeting, a family secret, a power conflict between partners, learning the stories of ancestors, and so on. The opening story, *In Remembrance of Times Past*, challenges social perception and prejudice with its protagonist, a single septuagenarian woman golfer in shorts. The reader learns of her affairs and

her one true love through the voice of her married friend, whose husband is surprised to see such a person at the golf course. The warmth between the friends shines through as much as the husband's shrewdness, through anecdotes about, for instance, his annoyance at someone singing the songs of Mukesh Bhatt. In *Swimming Pool*, meddler Rafi and Talat Aziz in a different accent. In *Ear Apart*, the narrator confesses to the reader that she doesn't like the character she is going to write about. She elaborates how women bargain for space and time in families that do not see them beyond their roles as wife and mother. Would a woman commute to such lengths just to swim to treat arthritis? This is the question the man asks his partner when she describes this curious woman she met on the bus. One chooses suspicion, the other chooses trust. Can such people then build the foundations of a life together? Gokhale's layered stories seem straightforward but the reader realises that they encapsulate nuances of grief, memory and loss. In *The Bhikkhali*, the woman chooses to live in stories passed down within a family. While men know of the market aspects of an ancestor who was a businessman in the colonial era, the women speak of his aura. Written as an exchange of banter between a husband and wife married for 25 years, it is also a picture of a love that grew

after marriage. Extramarital liaisons feature too. *She Came To Stay* presents the multiple knots in which individuals sometimes find themselves caught. "The story, which began rather unpredictably perhaps, ends exactly as you are expecting it to. Ram cannot bear to be parted from Chandani [Savitri's baby] and asks Savitri to marry him," Savitri says that would make her a bigamist and it's too much trouble divorcing Narendra, so she'd rather live in sin with Ram just as Narendra is doing with the hotel heiress in Delhi and Ram's wife is doing with her Frenchman in Paris. Ram's vindictive and blood revolts against the idea for a brief moment, but he tells it to shut up because marrying Savitri would make him a bigamist too. Sobering down, he begins to move Savitri's and Chandani's things from Anisha's bedroom to his."

All the stories in the collection oscillate between marriage as a social institution and



Marriage: Of duty and expectation.

SHUTTERSTOCK

women's agency to own their lives and decisions. The authorial voice makes no judgements, and there is much empathy when characters are subject to the judgement of others. While the focus is on the women in these stories, the men are also interesting. Together, they form a picture of families with their secrets and revela-

tions, resentments and suppositions, all presented with irony and wry humour. Gokhale's spectacular collection reminds readers that the strangest revelations can sometimes emerge from the most mundane subjects.

Akanksha Abismruta is an independent writer



The Way Home
Shanta Gokhale
100pp, ₹319
Speaking Tiger



A thought for today

There are very honest people who do not think that they have had a bargain unless they have cheated a merchant

ANATOLE FRANCE

Counting Discounts

How good is that online deal? We'll know from Jan 1

For the past several years, UK consumer group "Which?" has reported that Black Friday deals are often bogus. When a store claims the price of a product has been slashed from £500 to £400, chances are it didn't cost £500 in the first place. Last year, none of the deals it checked turned out to be the lowest price of the past 12 months. You might have experienced the same kind of fudging in festive sales – both online and in-store – here. Something you've been waiting to buy in a Diwali sale, becomes costlier when the sale starts, and the discounted price turns out to be the same as or more than the pre-sale price.

Good news is this won't be allowed on e-commerce platforms in India from Jan 1. Under new rules, the announcement of a discount will also have to reveal the product's "prior price". This is not an arbitrary value but the lowest price at which the product was sold on the same platform in a 30-day period before the discount announcement. It gives buyers a way to ascertain the genuineness of discounts. Otherwise, when expectations from sales are running high, it is easy to be deceived.

Other major markets already have such safeguards. US Federal Trade Commission requires that a "former price" in an ad be a "bona fide price". In California, a former price must have been the "prevailing market price" within 90 days preceding the ad. EU introduced a prior price rule in 2022, with the same 30-day window, but applied it to in-store sales as well. And that makes sense because price trackers can give you price histories of products sold online, but you have no way of knowing whether that shirt marked "60% off" in a store is a bargain or not. India should extend the rule offline too.

Museums On The Move

On the new travels of old pasts

Two homecomings made museum news this week. In Nagaland, there's celebration as an Oxford museum has agreed to repatriate the remains of 39 Naga ancestors, following negotiations that started in 2020. In London, there is "extreme queuing" to see the Bayeux Tapestry which has returned for the first time since it was crafted, to depict the Norman Conquest of England a thousand years ago. France made this highly unusual loan under a personal push from Macron.



One homecoming represents genial cultural circulation: Come and see our history, we'll share it with you. The other uneasily asks: Why was our history – and our ancestors – ever yours to keep? Imperial museums grew on the premise that they could grab the world's past and ship it to themselves. Now a different cultural geography is emerging, where the museum does not "possess" history, but helps people engage with it. Some objects must be returned, because they never, ever properly belonged to colonialists who took them in violence. Others, like the Bayeux Tapestry believed to have been embroidered by English women, just have mixed heritage.

In 1963, *Mona Lisa* travelled to Washington and New York, where she met more than 1.7m people. For the past half century, she's stayed home. Blockbuster exhibitions really, really make a museum feel like a public institution. So, we do need more international circulation of museum pieces – but based on consent, reciprocity, and context.

Coming Soon: The End Of 'Middle East'

Seven predictions on a volatile region. India figures in them

Historians are not in the business of making predictions. But if you are a celebrity historian like Simon Sebag Montefiore, you may just take that gamble. In *The Cauldron: The Making of the Modern Middle East*, Montefiore makes a series of predictions, one of which has already come true. The author delves into the 20th-century history of what is popularly called the 'Middle East', but ultimately challenges that label. Interestingly, he finishes with the ongoing US-Israel war against Iran, arguing, in a way, that the history of the region has come full circle.

But to the predictions first. Montefiore says that in the wake of Hamas's Oct 7 attack and the Iran wars – the current one and last year's 12-day war – the Gulf Arab monarchies will never again be peaceful islands of luxury. That means fewer art galleries and more iron Domes. They will fear and loathe Iran, and try to deal with it through a combination of accommodation and military preparedness.

Second, both South Asian nuclear powers India and Pakistan, and Slavic heavyweights Russia and Ukraine, will play a larger role in the 'Middle East'. This is already in the works: India's growing relationship with Israel, Pakistan's stationing of troops in Saudi Arabia, Russia's old bases in the region, and Ukraine sending military advisers and drone experts to the Gulf.

Third, the author predicts that US will still remain the biggest power in the region. After all, a superpower is one that can absorb setbacks in more than one theatre and yet retain its power. But few regional players will trust US now. Instead, they will increasingly turn to China, which in turn will use this opportunity to emerge as a

planetary hegemon. Being, however, will spread out its jets, and not just back Iran.

Fourth, and this is where Montefiore has got it spot on, a new Sunni bloc featuring Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Egypt will come into being. That's exactly what has happened with the recent Mecca Pact minus Egypt. The author also presages another potential bloc with India, Israel, Kazakhstan (a recent signatory to Abraham Accords), Greece, Cyprus, Ethiopia, Somalia, Bahrain, Morocco and UAE.

Fifth, Israel could be wrecked by civil war, as its far-right seeks to take over state institutions and launch regular pogroms against Palestinians in the West Bank, to definitively finish off the possibility of a Palestinian state.

Sixth, Turkey under Erdogan will seek to recreate the glory of the Ottoman Empire, but this will make the Arab states extremely wary.

And seventh, Iran, after the war, will see its radical, ruling kernel composed of Ayatollahs and BRG conclude that only nuclear power can safeguard the regime. In a way, Iran will shrink as the regime looks inward and brutally nips out inevitable protests from the people. This then opens the possibility of an Iranian revolution.

In the final analysis, the Cold War, Western characterisation of the 'Middle East' is no longer valid. The geopolitical region expands to bring in players from South Asia, Eastern Europe, and North Africa. But, in history, this was always the case – the Ottoman empires included Slavic slaves and concubines into elite families, many Gulf Arab emirates had stronger connections with India under the British, and the Arabs were long present in Africa. History repeats itself.

Pankaj Saran



Former US Ambassador to India

The 18th BRICS Summit is a grand display of New Delhi's diplomatic outreach. This is India's fourth time as host, but the summit is an expanded BRICS format.

The idea of a BRICS group may have been conceived by Goldman Sachs in 2001, but BRIC as a Leaders Forum was born only in 2006. The timing speaks for itself. The Leaders G20 was created a year earlier, in response to 2008 financial crisis, in which all BRIC nations were included. This should have been adequate representation for them in global economic governance. As it transpires, this was not deemed to be so, and they decided to upgrade their own group to Leaders level.

For India to sit in a group, which played up its non-West character, was much more challenging in 2009 than it is today. India's relations with US were then at a historic high, following the nuclear deal in 2008. India's decision to go to Yekaterinburg was therefore bold and, not surprisingly, looked askance by Washington elites. Yet, India went along because of other equations that were germane to the decision.

The US-led West, on whom India had just the other day – in the biggest leap of faith since the days of non-alignment – placed its bets, was engulfed in an existential crisis. The crisis was forced, and triggered a sense of helplessness and resentment. India, like the rest of the world, was paying the price for American profligacy. Trust in the infallibility of the market, and integrity of Bretton Woods Institutions, had suddenly been lifted.

For the rest, the West's relations with Russia were still cordial, despite incipient signs of trouble, and of course,

China was the poster child of globalisation. It had, by then, lent the scale that underwrote western economic prosperity. But that was not all. The 2008 crisis made the West turn to China to bail out the global economy. China has not looked back since then.

What is the story of the origin of a process that has continued uninterrupted since 2009.

If China has emerged as the sole challenger to American economic

relations with White House are a shadow of what they once were. US is spending its way out of economic trouble, with a record \$40tn debt, unconcerned by its global consequences.

Expansion of BRICS in 2024 was, thus, more the expression of frustration by middle powers against the double whammy of Covid and Ukraine war, than the fruit of brilliant Chinese diplomacy. China only sensed the mood and seized the moment.

As BRICS leaders meet, major power relations are headed into uncharted territory. US-Russia relations could well be on the cusp of big developments. US-China relations are headed towards carefully managed competition, if not a division of labour. The euphoria of decoupling has given way to the realism of de-coupling and cohabitation. In this moment of uncertainty, India's presence in BRICS is even more essential than it was in 2009. India is systematically more important today than it was in 1991, 2006 or 2014.

Guiding the future trajectory of BRICS will be a key task for India. That China is the dominant power in BRICS is not news anymore. That ship sailed in 2008. What India must do is to ensure that the BRICS agenda is not hijacked by it, or used as a stepping stone to global hegemony, for example, by replacing the dollar as the international reserve currency. Problem is that, on this issue, US is itself not helping matters.

A more immediate challenge for Delhi is going to be to reconcile positions on the Iran war. The Bishkek SCO Summit language is unlikely to pass muster, but elements of what could constitute consensus language are already included in the Chair's Statement issued by India after the BRICS Foreign Ministers' meeting in May.

Subsequent to that, Iran has signed an MoU with US in June in which it has agreed to certain formulations. A repeat of India's success in forging consensus on Ukraine at the G20 Summit in 2023, is certainly possible in the case of Iran.

The totality of Indian foreign policy obviously includes trade, tech, defence and investment relations with US and the West. It also means simultaneous engagement with bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral platforms.

The writer is Convenor, NatSra



supremacy, it is not to blame. If Russia was the source of cheap and abundant energy that first fuelled Europe's industrial might, and later China's, it is not to blame. Question to ask is, where was India in all this?

The tables have turned today. It is not the collapse of Soviet Union that is the end of history. But it's the end of globalisation. Global economy is fragmented, weaponised and volatile. The international trade architecture is in a state of *rigor mortis*. India's

Between them, Russia, Saudi Arabia, UAE and potentially Iran, and China hold the keys to India's current and future energy security and critical raw material and mineral needs, and thereby its economic trajectory.

The proposition that India does not need BRICS and is sufficiently insured by its good relations with the West is a fallacy. India needs all sides, and needs to take a leaf out of the Chinese playbook by maximising advantage from all relationships.

How Celebrities Become Our Intimates, Enter Our Lives

Do you want to date Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, marry Vikrant Massey, and be adopted by the Dalai Lama? You aren't alone. Be they from business, cinema, art, sports or politics, in our mind, our stars look back at us

Shinie Antony



In this age of aggressive ads, our brains are a neon-lit billboard of brand names. From panty liners to pressure cookers, it is a total stranger who hypnotises us into what to reach out for. The celeb smiles intimately like he can look into our soul, and whispers 'Take this' and we take it because he said so, though dimly aware that he won't pay for it and we must reach for our own credit card.

It feels like a karmic pull, that dimpled smile, those twinkling eyes, that low-voiced banter. It is just between me and him. Which is why the year Heath Ledger died, I felt widowed. If someone had been filming me, I would have worn a white sari and broken my glass bangles.

This investment in an abstract starchy network is more psychological than we think; a need to implicitly trust someone somewhere is a human one and propels us to our heroes, be they from the world of business, cinema, art, sports or politics. We so want to take a bullet for someone, to surrender, to love unconditionally; and this has us ferociously defend or attack those who may or may not agree with our matinee idol.

We look at them, they are looking right back! And the feeling does seem mutual. The way they eye us, softly exhort us, beckon us... We trust them and just after them.

We can rattle off, at the drop of a hat, the name of Deepika Padukone's firstborn, but perhaps not that of our own niece. Pinky, we frown, can't be Kinky – well, shall ask cousin what they finally named that frat when we meet next. But if someone doesn't know that Ranbir used to date Katrina then they won't know how it impacts us when his wife Alia and Katrina pose together for a pic. All the emotions that course

through us thinking of all the emotions that we are sure are coursing through them! In those brief moments we become them.

How many times has a hero married, who are the exes, how many kids... Wikipedia cannot keep up with us. We go to sleep at night comforted by the fact that as a fan we have rights. If we love them, we can be as vulgarly curious about them as we want, and demand to know everything about them. And they know that we are ready to divulge

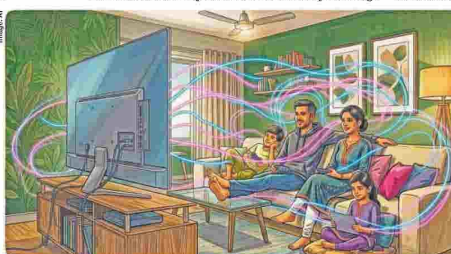
Dimple Kapadia and then they divorced – with an ability to crisscross real life with love, we merge into songs, dialogues, destined declarations.

It was Matthew Perry who went, but everyone lamented that Chandler had gone! Confusing a character with the real person is the real high. Was it really drug overdose or the fact that we forgot to rewatch *Friends* the previous night? We carry the guilt gamely as we do our open admiration for his one-liners.

Princess D's funeral was marked by many broken female voices crying out "Diana" over and over again. I felt personal and even hostile that she could go the way she did. We know where we were and what we were wearing when we watched a particular actor in a film, when we decided to worship an astronaut, when that song was playing. These moments are so entwined with the fabric of us that it's difficult to separate and isolate our own essence from what we so ardently like. Where do we end and they begin – who knows?

Which explains role play in bedrooms. It seems harmless, doesn't it, to have a lover call you Anu or Savita Bhabhi? Being called Anu or Manju doesn't bring the same kick to proceedings. Heroes are constantly spilling into our personal space because we let them, we open all doors and downright invite them in. Appa says: "You smile like Waheeda Rehman." Amma says: "You walk like Dev Anand." We want to date Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, marry Vikrant Massey, and be adopted by the Dalai Lama.

Our own moon is only a nag, but Gloria Steinem, we vouch, makes solid sense. One said, "We'll never solve the feminisation of power until we solve the masculinity of wealth," the other complains, "Stop mooching off me."



our darkest secrets if they but ask.

I remember as a child watching Doordarshan in someone's drawing room when Rajesh Khanna smiled at the camera. It was like I had stuck my hand in an electric socket! I shyly smiled back, seduced by his sexy romantic charm – but was confused to see all the aunts around me also smile back at him with equal shyness. Obviously each one of us thought him exclusively ours; we all had equal stake in that crinkled eye.

Happily baying into the chaotic tesserae of a beloved star – the man who died of cancer in Anand later married

Calvin & Hobbes



G S Tripathi

In Gita, Krishna, apart from discussing different aspects of life such as action, knowledge, meditation, devotion, the relationship between soul and body, classification of human qualities and action, humours, virtue and faith, reveals himself as Arjuna's request.

He says he presides over two kinds of energy. The lower one is material in nature and includes earth, water, air, space, heat, mind, intelligence, and ego. The higher one is the finer states of matter: solid, liquid, and gas. Space is inseparable from matter. The beginner's definition of matter is something that occupies some space. Heat is a form of material energy. Since different forms of energy transform into one another, this represents all energy. The last two are related to states of mind. While the states of matter and energy are understandable by physical science, states of mind are

subjects of mental science. The higher aspect of his energy is called consciousness. Its study engages philosophers, and a few scientists, too.

He speaks about his infinite divine glories and opulence. He represents everything in its superlative states. He is the beginning, middle, and end of all manifestations. He controls both the statics and dynamics that govern everything. In Gita, he reiterates that what he describes about himself is but a minute part of his true Self. Arjuna is partially convinced. He wants to witness what is being described to him. Krishna also feels that Arjuna is ready to witness the revelations but lacks the right ability to comprehend it fully. He has already given him substantial knowledge, but it is not enough to explore what he would witness. Krishna equips

him with a special vision so that he can understand what he would witness.

What Arjuna witnesses is beyond comprehension and simplicity, from one to many, from finiteness to infinity. Time and space are mingled into one whole, unbound, and unimagable. The complex forms challenge the imagination, of reality, beyond imagination; a non-local entanglement that appears local. A superposition that does not blur independence. An integration that coexists with differentiation. A spread of time that seems still. A light that defies its own nature. Divine yet ferocious. Devoid of beginning and end, it obscures a fixed centre. A fusion of symmetry and asymmetry that is beyond ordinary explanation. Order that is inseparable from disorder. Confused, Arjuna prays for Krishna's familiar human form.

Sacred space

Change your opinions, keep to your principles; change your leaves, keep intact your roots.

Victor Hugo

A Fusion Of Symmetry And Asymmetry

The above description is a part of the deep philosophy of Gita. However, Krishna is adored by everybody. He belongs to everybody and everybody belongs to him. Every attribute of him is sweet. Simple surrender is enough to understand him. He is most kind and yet ruthless to those who disturb order. He is the saviour and the redeemer. He is the absolute Truth, beyond all relative truths.

Sri Krishna Karnamrutam suggests that Krishna is omnipresent and the world's only friend. "You are black (Krishna), yet the most attractive. You are the jagadguru, universal teacher, yet most playful in demeanour. You are the ocean of mercy, master of hearts and entrancer of the eyes. I do not have the courage to look up at your face. The sight of your lotus feet would be enough."

Krishnam Vande Jagadguram.
The writer is retired professor of physics, Berhampur University



Editor's TAKE

Children need a firewall on social media

With minors entering social media unchecked, the time has come to make age verification, parental consent and safety safeguards part of the platform's architecture

The Supreme Court's notice to the Centre this week, on a petition seeking safeguards for minors on social media, could not have come sooner. Hearing the plea by NGO Just Rights for Children Alliance, Justice Jyotsna Singh remarked from the bench that shielding children online will need something like firewalls - a fitting image for a long-standing design failure.

The petition's legal argument is simple: under Section 11 of the Indian Contract Act, a minor cannot enter into a binding contract, yet millions of children under 18 click "I agree" to a platform's terms daily, with no age check and no parental consent. The petitioners want protection built into the architecture, not bolted on after harm is done. That is not a technicality; it is a design failure with grave human cost. NCRB data records over 1.87 lakh crimes against children in India in 2024. Cybercrime cases are a smaller, fast-rising slice - but nearly nine in ten involve the circulation of child sexual abuse material. Globally, the WeProtect Global Alliance finds that groomers need under an hour, sometimes seconds, to win a child's trust, and America's missing-children clearinghouse logged over 50,000 sextortion reports in 2025, up from 36,000 the year before. The petition's own example - girls lured through a fabricated K-pop connection and later rescued - is not an outlier; it is a template already running at scale.

Other democracies are responding, unevenly but instructively. Australia has banned under-16 accounts outright, with fines nearing AU\$50 million, though its regulator concedes that many teenagers still find their way onto these platforms. Britain's Online Safety Act takes a calibrated route: platforms must prove their age checks are "highly effective" or risk fines of 10 per cent of global revenue. The European Union has gone furthest on design: a privacy-preserving age-verification app lets users prove they are over or under a threshold without revealing their identity, while EU guidance pushes platforms to make child profiles private by default and switch off compulsive features, such as daily "streaks", designed to keep young users hooked.

India already has more law than it enforces. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act sets the age of consent at 18 - stricter than Europe's 13-to-16 band or America's 13 - and bars tracking, profiling and targeted advertising aimed at children. What is missing is enforcement: a functioning Data Protection Board, and Intermediary Guidelines under the IT Rules, 2021, that still allow the sign-up-first, verify-never model this petition challenges - the very rules petitioners want the Court to force the Centre to amend. The way forward does not require choosing between an outright ban and doing nothing. It requires the Centre to notify rules with real teeth, compel platforms to deploy the same age-assurance signals they use to sell targeted advertising, and make parental consent verifiable rather than cosmetic. The Supreme Court has given the Government a deadline to close the gap between the law on paper and the law in practice. It should not have taken a courtroom notice to get there.

Satya Niketan: Accountability, not scapegoating

The Satya Niketan building collapse demands accountability, but accountability cannot begin and end with identifying the officer occupying the chair when tragedy struck

RAJANI KANT VERMA

When a building collapses and lives are lost, the first instinct is to find someone to blame. The more difficult - and far more important - task is to determine who was actually responsible.

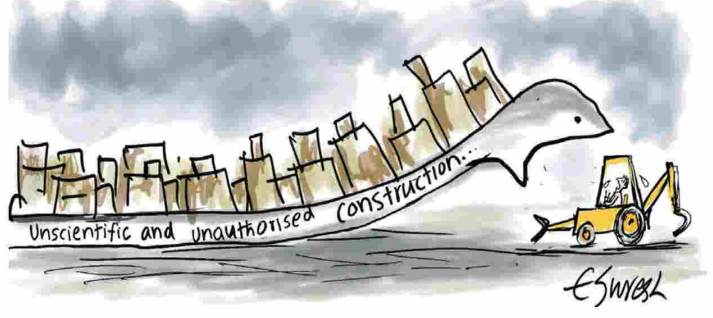
The tragedy at a PG accommodation in Satya Niketan has rightly triggered public anger and demands for accountability. There can be no argument with the need for answers when human lives are lost. But accountability must follow facts, law and evidence. It cannot become a predetermined search for an individual to carry the burden of a failure that may have developed over years and involved several institutions. This is particularly relevant to the intense media scrutiny of the incumbent Commissioner. The question is not whether a Commissioner should be accountable. Of course, he should. The real question is: accountable for what?

A Commissioner can reasonably be held responsible for decisions taken under his authority, failures to act where a clear statutory duty existed, matters specifically brought to his notice, and enforcement powers that were lawfully available to him. If evidence establishes that a dangerous condition was known to the competent authority, that there was a legal power to intervene, and that an avoidable failure occurred during his tenure, scrutiny is not only justified but necessary.

But accountability has boundaries. An incumbent Commissioner cannot automatically be held personally responsible for every unauthorised construction that predates his tenure, every historical enforcement failure, every matter falling within another statutory authority, or every violation of which the administration had no knowledge. The fact that a problem continues into a particular tenure does not, by itself, establish personal negligence. Nor does the mere occurrence of a tragedy prove that the officer occupying the chair caused it.

This distinction is particularly important in Delhi. Planning, building control, land use, fire safety, licensing, policing and enforcement can involve different institutions and different statutory powers. Responsibilities can overlap, intersect or be divided between agencies. The Commissioner may be the most visible administrative authority, but visibility should never be mistaken for exclusive jurisdiction.

There is a deeper problem in the way administrative failures are often discussed. Every new Commissioner inherits properties, complaints, files, litigation, enforcement backlogs and practices accumulated over years. Some problems may have existed for decades. Some properties may have been inspected previously; others may never have come to official notice. Some matters may have been dealt with - or ought to have been dealt with - by another authority.



THE ULTIMATE TEST OF ACCOUNTABILITY IS NOT HOW QUICKLY THE SYSTEM FINDS SOMEONE TO BLAME AFTER A TRAGEDY. IT IS WHETHER IT HAS THE COURAGE TO TRACE RESPONSIBILITY TO ITS SOURCE, CONFRONT INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE WHEREVER IT EXISTS, AND IDENTIFY THE NEXT DANGEROUS BUILDING BEFORE IT COLLAPSES

The writer is a retired IAS officer

To attribute the entire accumulated burden to the person currently occupying the chair is to confuse continuity of office with personal culpability. The proper investigation must therefore proceed backwards through the entire chain of responsibility. When was the property constructed or altered? What was its sanctioned use? When did any violation arise? Were permissions obtained? Were complaints received? Were inspections conducted? What did officials find? Which authority had jurisdiction at each stage? When did the competent authority acquire knowledge of a potential danger? What statutory powers were available? What action was required, and what action was actually taken?

These are the questions that establish responsibility. The easier question - "Who was Commissioner when the building collapsed?" - does not. The media has every right to ask uncomfortable questions, and the public has every right to demand answers. But complicated administrative matters should not be reduced to a search for a convenient individual to absorb public anger. Commentary becomes counterproductive when definitive judgments are pronounced without examining the documentary record, the institutional chain and the division of statutory responsibilities. There is an additional danger in turning accountability into a media trial. Public officials may become more concerned with headlines than with confronting difficult legacy problems. Defensive administration replaces decisive administration. The incentive becomes not to identify and correct danger, but to avoid being associated with it.

That is not accountability. It is scapegoating disguised as accountability.

The Satya Niketan tragedy should instead become the catalyst for systemic action. Vulnerable PGs, hostels and residential

premises converted to intensive commercial or quasi-commercial use should be identified and subjected to appropriate safety and regulatory scrutiny. Where a structure or use was lawful and safely regularised, it should be. Where it cannot, it should be sealed and, where necessary, demolished. Most importantly, a sealed or condemned property must not simply reappear under another operator, another name or another purported use without a fresh legal and safety assessment. Otherwise, enforcement becomes temporary theatre rather than prevention.

None of this is an argument for shielding any Commissioner or public official. If evidence establishes negligence, dereliction of duty or failure to exercise lawful powers, responsibility must follow. If responsibility is distributed across several agencies, successive administrations, property owners or other actors, it must be apportioned accordingly.

The governing principle should be simple: the person in the chair is not necessarily the person responsible for everything that has accumulated before him. The victims and their families deserve more than a media trial after a convenient name to blame. They deserve an evidence-based reconstruction of what happened, who had the duty and power to act, what warnings existed, why action was or was not taken, and what must change. There should be no immunity for negligence - but neither should there be guilt by incumbency.

The ultimate test of accountability is not how quickly the system finds someone to blame after a tragedy. It is whether it has the courage to trace responsibility to its source, confront institutional failure wherever it exists, and identify the next dangerous building before it collapses.

That is the accountability Delhi and the victims of Satya Niketan - deserve.

Daiv Vani

WISDOM FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Everything Belongs, Nothing Is Owned

We spend most of our lives accumulating, more wealth, more possessions, more recognition, quietly believing that what we gather becomes truly ours. The very first verse of the Isha Upanishad challenges that belief before the text has even begun.

The verse declares, "Ishavyasyam idam Sarvam, Yat Kincha Jagatyam Jagat", all this, whatever exists in this changing universe, is pervaded by the Divine. Nothing, not a tree, not a home, not even the body we call our own, exists apart from that presence. The verse continues, "Tena Tyaktena Bhunjitha, Ma Gridhah Kasya Swid Dhanam", therefore, enjoy through renunciation; do not covet what belongs to another.

This is a remarkable instruction. It does not ask us to abandon the world or refuse its pleasures. It asks us to enjoy life while holding the quiet awareness that nothing we touch is truly separate from the divine, and therefore, nothing is ever fully "ours" to grasp or hoard. Enjoyment becomes possible precisely because we release the anxious need to possess.

Most of our suffering comes not from what we have, but from how tightly we grip it, our belongings, our identities, our outcomes, as though letting go would mean losing ourselves.

Today, choose one thing you hold onto tightly, and consciously enjoy it a little more loosely, remembering it was never entirely yours to keep.

-DAIV

The wisdom of knowing what we can carry



SIDDHARTH ROY

2ND OPINION

A civil engineer learns early that every structure has a limit. A bridge carries its own weight, the traffic moving across it and the forces of wind. Design is therefore not about making a structure capable of carrying everything. It is about understanding loads, calculating capacity and providing an appropriate margin of safety. Human beings could learn something from that principle.

Modern life has become an exercise in accumulating loads. We carry professional ambitions, financial obligations, family expectations, social comparisons and an endless stream of information. We are encouraged to add another responsibility, another achievement and another commitment, as though human capacity were infinitely expandable. But structures do not work that way. Neither do people.

In engineering, a load is not necessarily dangerous. A properly designed structure is expected to carry loads daily. Problems arise when the load becomes excessive, when it is badly distributed or when deterioration has silently reduced the structure's capacity. Human exhaustion can follow a similar pattern.

The person who appears to be coping may already have cracks invisible to others. A demanding job may not be overwhelming alone. Family responsibilities may not be overwhelming alone. Financial uncertainty may not be overwhelming alone. But their cumulative effect can exceed the margin of safety.

Engineers therefore think in terms of redundancy and safety factors. They do not design bridges to collapse at the first unforeseen truck. They provide capacity beyond the anticipated load because uncertainty is inevitable. There is wisdom here. Rest is not laziness; it is maintenance. Friendship is not merely companionship; it can provide structural support. Time away from work is a reserve that allows a person to absorb unforeseen shocks before those shocks become permanent structural damage.

Engineering also teaches another uncomfortable truth: damage ignored does not disappear. Small cracks can become larger defects. Corrosion can weaken reinforcement long before a dramatic failure becomes visible. Preventive inspection is valuable precisely

because intervention is easier before collapse. People, too, require inspection. We need moments to ask whether our ambitions remain sustainable, whether our commitments are distributed sensibly and whether the structures supporting our lives are still sound.

There is also a lesson in failure. When a structure collapses, engineers do not simply blame the final load. They investigate design assumptions, materials, workmanship, maintenance and environmental conditions. Human breakdown deserves a similarly nuanced understanding.

A person should not be judged merely by the moment at which their capacity was exceeded. Perhaps strength, then, is misunderstood. Strength does not mean carrying everything placed upon us. A well-engineered structure is strong because its limits are understood. The same may be true of a well-lived life. We should know what we can carry, what we must refuse, what requires reinforcement and when maintenance is overdue. After all, the objective of engineering is not to prevent structures from ever experiencing stress. It is to ensure that they remain standing when stress arrives. Perhaps that is a philosophy worth carrying.

The writer is a civil engineer, consultant to Rashtriya Raksha University under the Ministry of Home Affairs, short-story writer and columnist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A festival rooted in faith and legend

Ganesh Chaturthi is one of the most loved festivals of the Hindu community and is celebrated across the country with great fervour and devotion. The 10-day festival honours Lord Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. People bring idols of Ganesh into their homes and perform puja for 10 days.

Although it is not known when or how Ganesh Chaturthi was first observed, the festival has been publicly celebrated in Pune since the era of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. It was later revived by Lokmanya Tilak and is now celebrated across India on a large scale. According to Hindu belief, Ganesh is the remover of obstacles. People worship him before beginning any new work.

According to mythology, Ganesh was created by Goddess Parvati. When he prevented Lord Shiva from entering the house, Shiva cut off his head. He was later brought back to life with an elephant's head and became known as Gajanan.

During Ganeshotsav, devotees visit pandals and enjoy modaks, considered Ganesh's favourite sweet. The festival concludes with visarjan amid chants of "Ganpati Bappa Morya, Pudhgya Varshi Lavkar Ya".

JUBEL CDRCU | MUMBAI

A drug-free India is a national responsibility

The Commissioner of Police, Bengaluru, and his team deserve appreciation for busting a major narcotics network by seizing drugs worth approximately ₹12 crore. Seven persons, including foreigners, were arrested. Such networks procure contraband at lower prices and sell it at huge profits, often targeting vulnerable people, particularly students and young professionals. The growing menace of drugs should concern every section of society. Drug addiction is one of the most serious social evils confronting our country. It can destroy individuals and families and damage the future of our younger generation.

The fight against drugs is not merely a law-and-order issue but a battle for their health, character and future. The Government must adopt a comprehensive strategy covering trafficking, financing, distribution, consumption, treatment and rehabilitation.

The Narcotics Control Bureau should be strengthened through better intelligence sharing and coordination among central and state agencies. Equal emphasis must be placed on prevention, awareness and counselling in educational institutions. Rehabilitation centres should also be strengthened. The goal of a "Nasha Mukta Bharat" must become a people's movement. A drug-free India is a national responsibility.

RAMESH G JETHWANI | BENGALURU

A consistent world order is vital

This refers to the editorial "Remembering 9/11: 25 years, enduring lessons" (September 11). The editorial makes a point that deserves wider attention: twenty-five years on, the world is safer in some ways and more fragile in others. Airport security, intelligence sharing and financial tracking of terror networks have improved. Yet Afghanistan's return to Taliban rule and the rise of groups like ISIS show how quickly hard-won gains can unravel when political will fades.

India has faced cross-border terrorism for decades. Force can disrupt networks and eliminate leaders, but it cannot address underlying grievances such as poverty, exclusion and weak governance. What is needed is consistent application of international law, stronger multilateral institutions and investment in development and de-radicalisation programmes. Selective enforcement of global norms only deepens the resentment that fuels extremism.

India's experience, from the 26/11 Mumbai attacks to the strengthening of agencies such as the NIA, shows that a security architecture built on patience and institutional reform outlasts one based purely on retaliation. A fairer, more consistent world order remains our best long-term defence against terrorism.

AS NITHISH KUMAR | CHENNAI



HCF or LCM: The limits of global groupings

India stands at the intersection of these groupings — a founding member of BRICS, a key player in the G20, and a participant in the dormant RIC. Each platform offers opportunities, but each also imposes constraints. India's success in delivering the 2023 G20 Declaration shows that skilled diplomacy can still produce results



MANOJ NARAVANE

collides with reality.

The Russia-India-China (RIC) concept was first proposed in 1998 by Russian statesman Yevgeny Primakov. It was meant to be a Eurasian triangle capable of balancing Western influence. Russia and India were long-standing partners; Russia and China were drawing closer. Yet for India, a friend's friend was not necessarily a friend. The India-China relationship, marked by border tensions, strategic mistrust, and competing regional visions, ensured that RIC never evolved beyond occasional meetings. It lacked institutional depth, produced no joint agenda, and never became a meaningful pillar of India's foreign policy. It remained a diplomatic idea rather than a functioning platform.

BRICS, by contrast, began as an economic concept. In 2001, Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill coined BRIC to describe four emerging economies, namely Brazil, Russia, India, and China, all amongst the top ten in terms of GDP, that were poised to reshape global growth. South Africa joined in 2010, turning BRIC into BRICS, sandwiching the RIC in between, and giving the grouping global reach. For several years, BRICS served as a forum for coordination, issuing communiqués but achieving little beyond symbolism. That changed with the creation of the New Development Bank in 2014 and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement in 2015, signalling a desire to build alternative financial institutions, both of which were anathema to the USA.

The real transformation came with expansion. At the Johannesburg Summit in 2023, BRICS invited six new members. By 2026, the grouping had grown to eleven full members: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Indonesia. In addition, BRICS created a Partner Country category, now comprising ten states — Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam — bringing total participation to twenty-one countries. This expanded BRICS resembles less the clean, original acronym and more a kind of geopolitical tria-branch: a shelf crowded with countries of vastly different political systems, regional rivalries, economic capacities, and strategic compulsions. The collection is impressive in size but eclectic in character, united more by the desire for a platform than by a shared vision of what that platform should achieve.

Expansion, meanwhile, has a different origin and purpose. Formed in September 1999 in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, it brought together major advanced and emerging economies to stabilise global finance. After its elevation to leaders' level in 2008, it became the premier forum for international economic cooperation. Today, the G20 comprises nineteen countries plus the European Union and the African Union. It accounts for the overwhelming majority of global GDP, trade, and emissions, and more than half the world's population.

Its membership overlaps heavily with BRICS. Only a handful of countries — Mexico, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States — are in the G20 but not in BRICS. Conversely, BRICS includes states such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Indonesia that are not part of the G20. This



THE RUSSIA-INDIA-CHINA (RIC) CONCEPT WAS FIRST PROPOSED IN 1998 BY RUSSIAN STATESMAN YEVGENY PRIMAKOV. IT WAS MEANT TO BE A EURASIAN TRIANGLE CAPABLE OF BALANCING WESTERN INFLUENCE. RUSSIA AND INDIA WERE LONG-STANDING PARTNERS; RUSSIA AND CHINA WERE DRAWING CLOSER. YET FOR INDIA, A FRIEND'S FRIEND WAS NOT NECESSARILY A FRIEND

General Manoj Naravane (Retd) is former Chief of the Army Staff

overlap raises a natural question: how different are the G20 and the expanded BRICS?

The answer lies in purpose and politics. The G20 is a crisis-management forum with broad global legitimacy, whereas BRICS is a political and economic coordination platform for the Global South. Increasingly shaped by China's and India's competing visions, the G20 seeks stability; BRICS seeks structural reform. The G20 is diverse but institutionalised, whereas BRICS is cohesive in rhetoric but fragmented in interests.

What, then, are these groupings actually achieving? Their original objective, to drive global economic growth and reform governance structures, has been overshadowed by political agendas, divergent national interests, and geopolitical rivalries. Both BRICS and the G20 operate by consensus, which means the lowest common denominator often prevails. Amitabh Kant, India's G20 Sherpa, recounts in his book *Scaling Mt-G20* how drafting a simple joint statement required endless negotiation over every word and comma. The New Delhi Declaration of 2023 was hailed as a diplomatic triumph precisely because consensus had become so difficult. The BRICS Summit, currently underway, faces similar challenges; its foreign ministers have struggled to produce joint statements on issues where member states are sharply divided.

The current geopolitical environment makes meaningful outcomes even harder. The world is grappling with the ongoing war in Ukraine, the escalating conflict involving Iran, and the never-ending cycle of violence in West Asia. These crises divide member states within both BRICS and the G20. Russia's war in Ukraine splits the G20. Iran's regional role complicates BRICS. China's strategic ambitions unsettle both. Expecting grand outcomes from multilateral forums in such a fractured world is unrealistic.

Instead of a Highest Common Formulation (HCF), to use a mathematical term, namely a visionary, guiding framework for global cooperation, what is more likely is what might be called a Lowest Common Memorandum (LCM), an anodyne statement that offends none, satisfies all, and achieves little, notwithstanding the galaxy of Presidents and Prime Ministers who have descended on New Delhi. This is not a failure of diplomacy but a reflection of geopolitical reality. When major powers are in conflict, multilateralism becomes risk-averse. When consensus is mandatory, ambition becomes optional.

India stands at the intersection of these groupings — a founding member of BRICS, a key player in the G20, and a participant in the dormant RIC. Each platform offers opportunities, but each also imposes constraints. India's success in delivering the 2023 G20 Declaration shows that skilled diplomacy can still produce results. Its cautious approach to BRICS expansion reflects strategic maturity, while its disengagement from RIC indicates realism. But the larger truth remains that global groupings are only as effective as the political will of their members. In a world marked by conflict, rivalry, and fragmentation, India must continue to push for meaningful cooperation — even if the mathematics of multilateralism increasingly favours the lowest common denominator over the highest common ideal.

The degree that promised everything



ACHARYA PRASHANT

Somewhere in this country this morning, a man who cannot write his own name reached his workplace by seven, loading sacks, laying brick, pulling a cart. His neighbour's son holds a degree. At eleven, the son was still at home, on a phone his father paid for, refreshing a job portal. The International Labour Organisation, in its India Employment Report 2024, put the jobless rate among young graduates at 29.1 per cent. Among young people who can neither read nor write, 3.4 per cent. A nine-fold difference. The more the schooling, the longer the wait. Now, what is everybody saying? The education system has failed. I want to say the opposite, and I want to say it plainly.

The system has not failed. The system has been magnificent. It has delivered superbly for well over a century. What was it designed to do, and hence what has it delivered? It was designed to take in human beings and convert them into functional economic units. A five-year-old goes in, seventeen years pass, and a functional economic unit comes out. Ninety-four per cent placed. We fall and grovel at placement figures, don't we? And what is this thing called placement? Absorption of the individual into the social and economic order, is that not what placement is? Admissions office at one end, placement office at the other, and in between, an assembly line. But what happens if the order stops wanting the unit?

The engineer was made for a certain kind of factory. What nobody wrote into the design was the relationship between the engineer and the factory, because nobody expected the factory to go anywhere. The factory moved on. And when it moved, the engineer stood exactly where he was, holding a qualification cut for a floor that no longer exists. The campus did not merely train him. It trained him to take the training as his identity. He did not come away with a skill. He came away with a self. Four years of a department, a roll number, a grade average, a placement bracket, and at the end of it, a young man who no longer says he studied engineering. He says he is an engineer.

Vedanta has a name for what just happened, and the name is shankar, the ego. The ego is the false centre, the sense of being some body in particular, and its one permanent difficulty is that it owns nothing of its own. It must borrow. Hand it four years and a certificate and it will borrow that too, and hold on far longer than the certificate is worth.

Identities are frozen things. A skill you can put down and pick up another. An identity you cannot, because once it is in place, there is nobody left over to do the putting down. So when the ground shifts, the identity does not adapt. When change happens, identities panic.

From outside, the panic looks like laziness. He will not take the job at the dealership in the next town. Meanwhile, he takes money from a father who has done such work for thirty years and never once called it beneath him. He is not defending his income. He is defending a picture, and the picture will be defended even at the cost of the man carrying it.

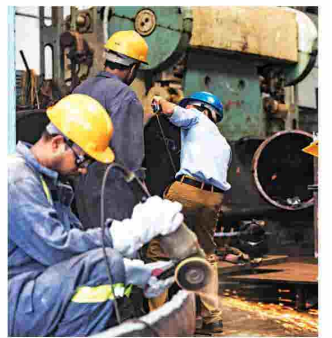
Now the machine arrives. AI is a code. It is a programmable output. It can do only the work it has been made and deployed to do, and beyond that it can do nothing. AI can remove human beings only from that work which was mechanical anyway, which was programmable anyway. AI can never actually become a substitute for a human being, because a human being is not a machine. Unless, of course, the human being has made himself into one.

AI is not a disruption; it is rather a revelation. Is it not revealing, if what I have been taught over four years can be taken over by a machine, by a system that has zero actual knowledge? A student watching this June found thirty-seven per cent of entry-level tasks in India already being performed by AI. So the complaint is misdirected. The mistake is not that AI is now snatching that work away from us. The mistake was that we accepted that work in the first place. We should never have been doing it, because we are human beings. Let the machine do the machine's work. Why should a human being do the machine's work?

Every answer on offer is additive: reskill, upskill. But adaptability cannot be taught. Adaptability is what naturally remains when the ego identity is removed. You cannot teach adaptability. You can unteach rigidity. Which brings the matter back to the certificate. Under the seal and the signature, one line is printed in ink you cannot see, and the line says: you are complete, you may stop now, go and be absorbed.

An older version of this refusal opens the Gita. A man stands in the field he has trained his whole life for, looks at the work in front of him, and puts his weapons down. He does not say he is frightened. He says the work is ignoble. Krishna does not accept the argument, and names it a weakness of heart wearing the costume of principle. So when a graduate says a job is beneath him, hand the question back. Beneath what? Beneath whom? No height exists there except the one printed on a sheet of paper, and that paper was issued by an office that has never met him. His politics has been consistently been about the self. He was educated to become something. He was not educated to become what he had erroneously become. And I am not going to finish by describing the work that would benefit him instead. The moment such work is described, it becomes one more thing to acquire, one more label to wear. Another question has been standing there the whole time, unasked in every classroom he passed through. Nobody asked it of him, but it is one every youth should ask themselves: What is standing there when the degree is set down?

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



Twenty-five years of seva: Empowering India's young



ANIL KANTONY

He entered government service through the conventional apprenticeship of power, but from a life spent in organisation and public work. His mother, as he has often recalled, gave him two simple instructions: always work for the poor and never take a bribe. Twenty-five years later, that moment offers a useful starting point to understand a political journey that has altered the scale and vocabulary of governance in India. Among its most consequential dimensions has been the steady placing of young Indians at the centre of the national project.

India has always been a young country in numbers. What changed during the Modi years was the attempt to convert demography into agency. In Gujarat, the early emphasis on electricity, roads, industrial investment, education and administrative delivery created an environment in which a generation could begin to imagine opportunity beyond traditional boundaries. The lesson that emerged was straightforward: government cannot manufacture ambition, but it can create the conditions in which ambition becomes

productive. When Modi moved to Delhi in 2014, that principle was expanded to the national scale. The vocabulary of that period matters. Skill India, Startup India, Digital India, Make in India, Stand Up India and the Mudra programme were not isolated schemes. Together, they reflected a shift in the relationship between the state and the young citizen. The young Indian was no longer viewed merely as a job seeker waiting at the end of a government pipeline. He or she was increasingly imagined as a creator, entrepreneur, innovator and employer. More than 2.23 lakh startups had been recognised by March 2026, generating over 23 lakh direct jobs. Under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, more than 1.64 crore candidates have been trained or oriented. Mudra has taken formal credit to millions who would once have remained outside the banking system. These figures are important, but the deeper change is cultural. Risk-taking has become less exceptional. Enterprise has travelled from a few metropolitan enclaves into Tier-2 cities, small towns and districts that once stood outside the national innovation map.

There is an anecdotal truth behind these numbers. A young person in a smaller town today can build a product on cloud infrastructure, receive payments through UPI, market through digital platforms, register an enterprise online and aspire to sell to customers far beyond the geography of birth. This is a profound democratisation of possibility. Digital public infrastructure has reduced the distance between aspiration and execution. It has also changed the psychology of a generation. The young no longer need to migrate to



a handful of cities merely to enter the modern economy. Increasingly, the modern economy can reach them. The same transformation is visible much earlier in the life cycle. More than 10,000 Atal Tinkering Labs now engage over 11 crore students across hundreds of districts. Children who might once have encountered science only through textbooks are experimenting with robotics, electronics, artificial intelligence and design. The point is not that every child will become an engineer or founder. The point is that curiosity itself is being treated as a national asset. A country that wants to lead in semiconductors, space, artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing and green technologies cannot wait until university to cultivate scientific confidence.

This is where the Modi years have also been marked by a widening of the horizon. Chandrayaan, the expansion of the space ecosystem, the semiconductor mission, the growth of defence manufacturing, the spread of digital payments and the push into artificial intelligence have given young Indians visible national missions

in which to locate their own ambitions. Development is most powerful when it is not expected as an abstract ideal. Merit Yatra, an engineering graduate working on chip design, a founder building for the next billion users, or a young technician entering an advanced manufacturing plant is participating in a story larger than individual advancement. National capability and personal aspiration begin to reinforce each other.

There has also been a conscious effort to connect youth with the nation. Modi has repeatedly spoken of Yuva Shakti not as a constituency to be courted, but as a force to be trusted. That trust is central to the idea of Viksit Bharat 2047. The generation entering adulthood today will be in its forties when India completes one hundred years of independence. It will carry the principal responsibility for whether India becomes merely a larger economy or a genuinely developed nation with technological depth, social mobility, institutional confidence and global influence. The next phase must therefore go beyond access. India has to relentlessly improve the quality of education, deepen research, expand apprentice-

ships, build world-class universities, connect skilling more closely with industry and ensure that young women take as consistently as young men in the economic transformation. The demographic dividend is not automatic. It is an opportunity with an expiry date.

Twenty-five years of Narendra Modi in governance can be interpreted through many lenses: infrastructure, welfare, national security, technology, diplomacy or political communication. Yet the youth lens reveals something especially important. His politics has been consistently been about the self. He was educated to become something. He was not educated to become what he had erroneously become. And I am not going to finish by describing the work that would benefit him instead. The moment such work is described, it becomes one more thing to acquire, one more label to wear. Another question has been standing there the whole time, unasked in every classroom he passed through. Nobody asked it of him, but it is one every youth should ask themselves: What is standing there when the degree is set down?

A quarter century ago, Modi began his first day in government in a state emerging from disaster. Today, he leads a country whose young people are entering an age of extraordinary technological and geopolitical change. The most enduring test of these twenty-five years will not be the longevity itself. It will be whether a generation of young Indians was given the confidence, tools and institutional space to build beyond what previous generations thought possible. On that measure, the story of Modi's seva is inseparable from the story of India's youth coming into its own.

The writer is National Secretary and National Spokesperson of the Bharatiya Janata Party and author of *Advantage India: Reshaping the Future for an Equitable World Order*

The Statesman

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

The Mundhe Problem

India should not need a celebrity bureaucrat to make the state enforce its own laws. Yet Tukaram Mundhe has become one precisely because, as Maharashtra's Food and Drug Administration commissioner, he has made enforcement unusually visible. In less than four months, the FDA has dramatically increased inspections and testing, acted against hundreds of food and drug establishments and brought the regulator into places where it was previously easy to assume that nobody was looking. The public enthusiasm is understandable. Food and drug safety is not an abstract regulatory concern. Contaminated food can make people ill, damage livelihoods and, on a large scale, impose a substantial economic cost. When an official actually enters kitchens, examines warehouses and acts against violations, citizens see the government doing something tangible.

But Mundhe's popularity also exposes an uncomfortable institutional truth. The extraordinary popularity of an officer doing an ordinary job is evidence that the ordinary system has been performing extraordinarily poorly. Mundhe's reputation did not begin with food safety. An IAS officer since 2005, he has accumulated a reputation for surprise inspections, strict enforcement and an unusually uncompromising administrative style. His career has also been marked by frequent transfers. Supporters regard them as the price of independence; critics see in them a recurring inability to work within institutions and with elected representatives.

That debate matters now because food and drug regulation presents a particularly clear test. Enforcement must be tough enough to protect consumers, but predictable enough to protect legitimate businesses from arbitrary administration. A regulator cannot confuse severity with effectiveness. Nor can due process become a convenient excuse for doing nothing. Mundhe's own department has demonstrated both sides of this tension. Its campaign has uncovered serious violations, but courts have also criticised some actions as excessive. The lesson should not be that regulators must retreat. It should be that strong enforcement and due process are not alternatives. A credible regulator needs both. The danger lies in confusing visibility with reform.

A raid produces an immediate headline; institutional reform is quieter and slower. The real achievement would be to make compliance routine enough that neither raids nor personalities are required to command public attention. There is, however, a more important question. What happens after Mundhe leaves? Maharashtra has now begun moving from spectacular raids towards a more systematic approach to inspections and sampling. That is the direction that matters. If food safety improves only when Mundhe is in the building, Maharashtra has not solved its problem. It has merely found an unusually energetic man to compensate for an unusually weak institution.

India needs more regulators willing to act without fear or favour. But it needs fewer regulatory systems dependent on personalities. The ultimate measure of Mundhe's success will therefore not be his follower count, the number of raids or even the number of licences suspended. It will be whether, after the next transfer, the system keeps doing what Mundhe made it famous for doing.

Meta's Blind Spot

The most disturbing aspect of the latest revelations about child sexual abuse material (CSAM) on Meta's platforms is not that criminals have discovered another way to exploit technology. Criminals will always seek loopholes. The deeper problem is that a company possessing extraordinary technological resources, sophisticated advertising systems and vast amounts of user data appears unable to prevent its platforms from being used to market the sexual exploitation of children. This is not an ordinary content-moderation problem. Advertising is a commercial transaction. An advertisement is created, submitted, reviewed, approved and distributed according to rules established by the platform. If advertisement is in fact, with all generated sexual abuse imagery can pass through that process repeatedly, the failure extends beyond an imperfect algorithm. It raises questions about the effectiveness of Meta's system of corporate oversight; some will say about its intentions. The government has already ordered Meta to remove material promoting child sexual abuse after earlier investigations exposed the problem. Yet a subsequent investigation reportedly found 84 such advertisements in force, with 178 appearing after the intervention. New examples were also identified after Meta had been alerted to the findings.

At that point, "no system is perfect" becomes an unconvincing defence. When the same category of criminal abuse continues to penetrate a system after warnings, regulatory intervention and public scrutiny, the relevant question is whether the company has adequately redesigned that system. AI makes the stakes considerably higher. The danger is no longer confined to the circulation of existing abusive material. Artificial intelligence can transform photographs of real children into synthetic sexual imagery and can potentially make the production of such material cheaper, faster and harder to detect.

The distinction between "real" and "fake" abuse is therefore morally and legally inadequate. A child whose image is appropriated and sexually manipulated is still being victimised. India must also confront a second question: what happens after platforms detect such material? Reporting to an international child protection clearing house may satisfy certain obligations, but Indian authorities need the ability to identify offenders operating within India, trace their networks and pursue prosecutions under Indian law. Platform cooperation cannot be reduced to removing content after someone else discovers it.

The involvement of advertising intermediaries adds another layer of responsibility. If third-party resellers can place billions of dollars of advertising on Meta's platforms, their activities cannot be treated as someone else's problem. A company cannot outsource commercial distribution while retaining only nominal responsibility for what enters its advertising ecosystem. The larger lesson is uncomfortable.

Meta's enormous scale is often presented as a technological achievement. But scale also creates an obligation to build proportionately serious safeguards. When the victims are children, delayed detection is not merely an operational inconvenience. It can mean that abuse is amplified, monetised and reproduced. The real measure of Meta's commitment will therefore not be how convincingly it explains each failure. It will be whether the next criminal advertisement is stopped before it reaches an audience.

Reason for optimism

Transparency in the negotiating process will matter. The details of territorial negotiations will necessarily remain confidential, but governments should communicate the broad principles and objectives of the process. In India especially, any perception of secret territorial concessions could generate political opposition and undermine public support for an eventual agreement

India and China may finally be trying to turn the page on years of border confrontation. After the 2020 military crisis, prolonged deployment along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and a deep deterioration in political trust, the two countries are cautiously rebuilding their relationship.

The latest Special Representatives' talks between Indian scholar Aijaz Daul and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi are particularly significant because the focus appears to be shifting from simply managing the disputed border to discussing boundary delimitation. The reference to an "early and substantial harvest" is encouraging, but India should judge the process by concrete outcomes, not diplomatic formulations.

For years, New Delhi and Beijing tried to separate the boundary dispute from the broader relationship. Trade expanded, economic engagement deepened and both countries worked together in forums such as BRICS and other multilateral institutions. The assumption was that growing economic interdependence could help insulate bilateral ties from the unresolved border question. The 2020 Ladakh crisis demonstrated the weakness of that assumption. The violent confrontation and subsequent military mobilisation transformed the relationship. Mutual trust declined sharply, and the border became the central determinant of bilateral ties. The disengagement process that followed has reduced immediate risks, but it has not removed the underlying dispute.

This is why the renewed Special Representatives' dialogue is important. Existing mechanisms - including military commander-level meetings, diplomatic consultations and the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination - have helped prevent incidents from escalating. Additional communication mechanisms, including proposed meetings for senior commanders and hotlines in the Eastern and Middle Sectors, can further reduce the possibility of accidental conflict.

But there is a fundamental limit to such arrangements: a disputed boundary cannot be managed indefinitely. Crisis-management mechanisms can prevent clashes, but they cannot resolve the territorial dispute that produces them. The proposed "early harvest" therefore deserves serious attention. The Expert Group on Boundary Delimitation and the Working Group on Border Management are expected to take the process forward. The immediate task will be to establish their terms of reference. Yet the crucial questions are political rather than procedural. Which areas will be included in the early harvest? On what principles will they be selected? Will limited agreements represent genuine progress towards a final settlement, or merely create another layer of border management?

India must ensure that the latter does not happen. The reaffirmation of the 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles provides an important foundation. That agreement envisaged a framework for resolving the boundary dispute followed by delineation and demarcation. Rather than creating an entirely new diplomatic architecture, the two sides can build upon this existing framework. What is required now is political will to move from general principles to substantive negotiations.

There are reasons for cautious optimism. China has an interest in a stable external environment as it deals with wider economic and strategic challenges. India, too, does not want a permanently confrontational relationship with its largest neighbour to compromise diplomatic and military resources. Both countries also have incentives to maintain communication through BRICS and other global South institutions.

However, normalisation should not be confused with reconciliation. The emerging relationship is more accurately described as competitive coexistence. India and China will continue to compete over influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. China's close relationship with Pakistan, its connectivity



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initiatives and India's growing strategic partnerships with the United States and other Indo-Pacific countries will remain sources of friction. A reduction in border tensions will not eliminate these structural differences.

The incremental approach advocated by Chinese scholar Hu Shiehong is therefore revealing. Institutionalising stability along the LAC and operationalising an "early harvest" may be more acceptable to Beijing than attempting an immediate comprehensive settlement. India should be open to incremental progress, but it must guard against incrementalism becoming an excuse for indefinite delay.

Other recent developments can contribute to confidence-building. Dialogue on trans-border rivers could address India's concerns about hydrological data and developments in Tibet. The reopening of border trading points and expansion of the Kailash Manasarovar pilgrimage can also restore some of the practical links disrupted by the deterioration in relations.

Yet the fragility of the process remains evident. Arunachal Pradesh continues to be a major point of contention, and China's objections to India's naming of places in the state demonstrate how quickly territorial sensitivities can revive tensions. Normalisation cannot mean accepting the other side's territorial claims. Nor should practical cooperation obscure unresolved sovereignty issues. For this reason, transparency in the negotiating process will matter.

The details of territorial negotiations will necessarily remain confidential, but governments should communicate the broad principles and objectives of the process. In India

especially, any perception of secret territorial concessions could generate political opposition and undermine public support for an eventual agreement.

The timing of the present diplomatic initiative is also noteworthy. Aijaz Daul's visit to Beijing comes ahead of the BRICS Summit in New Delhi and could create space for political direction at the highest level, including a possible meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping.

Such a meeting need not produce a spectacular breakthrough. Its greater value could lie in consolidating the momentum already generated by diplomatic and military contacts. These sequence matters: disengagement, restoration of diplomatic communication, renewed Special Representatives' talks, discussions on boundary delimitation and possible leader-level engagement. Together, these steps suggest an attempt to move from crisis management towards managed competition.

But India should remain clear about the destination. Peace on the border and progress on the boundary question must move together. Border stability without substantive negotiations could simply reproduce the pre-2020 model - periodic calm punctuated by renewed confrontation.

The road from border management to boundary settlement will undoubtedly be long and difficult. Territorial disputes between major powers are rarely resolved quickly. But the present moment offers an opportunity that should not be wasted. If the "early harvest" is given a clear mandate, defined areas, a realistic timetable and a direct link to the larger boundary settlement, it could become more than another confidence-building exercise. The real test of India-China normalisation is therefore not whether the border becomes quiet, but whether the two countries can use that quiet to address the dispute itself. A stable LAC should be the beginning of boundary negotiations, not their substitute.

THE KATHMANDU POST

Democracy amid disaster: What kind of state do we need in a crisis?

The massive flood along the banks of the Bhotekoshi has receded. But what remains swept away remains the empty spaces where bridges once stood, the traces of homes scattered by the flood, belongings buried in the mud, and the lingering anxiety in the eyes of those who do not know where their next day will begin. A disaster may appear to pass, but its impact lingers long after. Bhotekoshi has not only revealed the terrifying face of Himalayan instability. It has also posed a difficult question for Nepal's state and democracy - what should the state be like in times of crisis?

The greater the natural disaster, the more powerful the state appears. The army, armed forces and police move into the disaster zones. Helicopters fly. Orders are issued. Information begins to flow to a single centre. Citizens expect immediate decisions and security. This is natural. But this is perhaps democracy's most sensitive moment.

A disaster grants rulers extraordinary

power and authority, raising the question of whether that power will be used to protect citizens or to restrict them. A disaster itself does not weaken democracy. The system of governance adopted in the name of disaster can weaken it. When the government treats an emergency as a "time when questions should not be asked", when control over information is framed as security, when criticism is seen as an obstruction, when the capacity of local governments is ignored, when the federal Parliament is not updated in time and when all decisions begin to concentrate in a single centre by sidelining political parties, a disaster becomes an opportunity for democratic contraction.

Democracy rarely ends in a single day. It shrinks gradually. This is where the concept of departure democracy becomes relevant. The distance between citizens and the state keeps growing. The process

of government decision-making moves further from citizens, and they cease to be active participants in the state, becoming merely recipients of orders, relief and information. Disaster can further widen this distance.

But there is also a possibility. A disaster can make the government more accountable if information is open, if the government shows humility towards institutions, if parliament is taken into confidence, if trust is placed in the capacity of local governments, if the role of civil society, political parties and ordinary citizens is respected and if there is coordination with the institution of the President. Only then can disaster strengthen democracy rather than weaken it. That is why the real question is not how powerful the government was in the time of crisis, but how transparent, accountable and citizen-centred the power was. Surviving a disaster is not only a question of the state's capacity. It is also a question of what kind of citizen and what

kind of democracy we want to preserve amid the crisis. Will the same demand for transparency and accountability raised by the young generation also apply in times of disaster? Do political elites seek visibility. Disaster governance requires institutional memory. Nepal must understand this difference. One more thing has become clear after this flood: the federal government cannot fight the disaster alone, and certainly not by relying solely on the security apparatus. Security personnel also apply in extremely important role. Their tireless effort and dedication are being openly praised. But making the army the sole synonym for disaster governance can undermine the idea of a democratic state.

Local government is the first to witness a disaster. Provinces are a vital link for regional coordination, and the federal government is responsible for coordinating national resources, policy and international cooperation. Viewing the issue with a global perspective is also the federal government's task.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Ice-breaker

Sir, This refers to Raju Mansukhani's article 'Back in the USSR' published today. Before stepping into his roles as Vice President and President of India, Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan served as India's second ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1949 to 1952, succeeding Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. His tenure as a diplomat took place during a highly tense period of the early Cold War. His intellectual background helped him navigate the complexities of foreign relations in laying the ground for India's Non-Aligned Movement framework under the prime ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru.

It was during his time in the United States that stockpiling nuclear weapons and Moscow was suspicious of all nations and leaders who were not demonstrating solidarity with the USSR. Moscow condemned Indian

government policies and denounced India's non-alignment policy as collaboration with British imperialism. According to Nehru's statement, the then USSR seemed to believe that "no essential change has taken place in India and it still continues to be camp followers of the British".

At the crucial juncture, Dr Radhakrishnan broke the ice by securing two private meetings with Stalin. He conveyed India's anxiety to do everything possible for peace. Yours, etc, Sukhendu Bhattacharya, Sheoraphuli, 5 September.

Loneliness

Sir, I am writing to express my gratitude for the article "Silent crisis of our time" (7 September) by Abhik Roy. The writer correctly distinguished between solitude and loneliness. As he said, loneliness is not

being alone; it is the painful feeling that no one understands you. Many of us have felt this even while being surrounded by people and friends. I appreciated the examples of Tagore, Nehru, Meena Kumari and Guru Dutt. It shows fame and applause cannot cure loneliness. His point about social media is very true. It promises connection but gives us only comparison.

Yours, etc, Achintya Sarkar, Raiganj, 8 September.

HP warning

Sir, An IIT-Mandi study identifying nine rapidly expanding glacial lakes in Himachal Pradesh should be read as a warning, not merely another climate-change statistic. The study mapped 2,076 glacial lakes above 3,500 metres in 2025 - around 710 more than a decade earlier - while their cumulative

area grew by 28.45 per cent. More than 15 bridges, besides inhabited areas, lie within potential hazard zones.

The timing could hardly be more sobering. Nepal is still counting the human and economic cost of the August 26 disaster triggered by a glacier collapse. More than 1,300 people have died and thousands remain missing.

There is no suggestion that Himachal is destined to suffer a similar catastrophe. But the Nepal tragedy demonstrates how quickly a high-altitude event can become a downstream disaster. The more infrastructure is placed in vulnerable valleys, the greater the potential for human and material hazard. The IIT-Mandi study has provided the map. The next step must be action.

Yours, etc, Khokan Das, Kolkata, 8 September.

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

'No dearth of doctors in hills'

Uttarakhand Forest and Health Minister Subodh Uniyal, one of the state's veteran political figures, speaks to Prithviraj Singh on the government's efforts to tackle the shortage of specialist doctors in hill districts, rising man-animal conflicts and steps to develop Uttarakhand as a global eco-tourism destination.

In an exclusive interaction, Uniyal also rejects reports that the BJP's central leadership may deny tickets to more than half its sitting MLAs in the 2027 Assembly elections.

Excerpts:

Q: With more than 60 per cent of Uttarakhand's geographical area under forest cover, man-animal conflict has long remained one of the state's biggest challenges. Thousands of people and animals have lost their lives in these encounters, yet a lasting and effective solution to the problem remains elusive. Why has the government been unable to find a concrete solution?

A: Indeed, it is a big issue in the state, especially in the hills, but we have taken several important steps to deal with the menace of man-animal conflicts. Compensation for victims of wild animal attacks has been increased from Rs 4 lakh to Rs 10 lakh in the last five years. Apart from continuing with traditional methods of dealing with the problem, our government was the first to distribute solar lights and bush cutters to villagers living adjacent to wildlife reserves and other forest areas known for higher frequencies of man-animal conflict incidents. Bush cutters have helped villagers keep their locations free of dense and large bushes that often attract and provide shelter to wild beasts.

We have also resorted to camera traps, GPS and drone surveillance in areas with higher sightings of wild animal movements and locations

witnessing frequent incidents of man-animal conflicts.

Soon, a GPS monitoring regime will be put in place in Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR) and Rajaji National Tiger Reserve to detect the real-time locations of animals and alert local forest officials and teams to take necessary remedial steps. Steps are also being taken to fit collar GPS systems around the necks of pachyderms to track their movements and avert conflicts.

We have also formed at least one Quick Reaction Team (QRT) in every forest division, with some having two. Village Voluntary Protection Forces have also been constituted, involving local villagers in several parts of the state, along with solar fencing along forest boundaries adjoining human habitats. AI-enabled cameras and fox lights have also been used to counter the menace of man-animal conflict in the state.

Camera trap installations at incident sites, public awareness workshops and solid waste management with the help of the local administration in man-animal conflict vulnerable areas are other tools in our efforts to keep wild animals away from human habitats.

Q: Do we have enough rescue centres in the state to house captured man-eater bigcats that cannot be sent back into the forests?

A: We have four rescue centres to keep big cats and other man-eaters rescued from different parts of the state. One each is located in Ranibagh, Dhela (inside CTR), Haridwar and Almora. However, seeing the pace of man-animal conflicts in Uttarakhand, the state Forest Department plans to have one rescue centre in every district in the coming days. In addition to this, the Union government has also decided to have one rescue centre at Pakhro Range of Corbett. We plan to come up with more rescue centres for big cats and other wild animals captured in conflict with humans in the future.

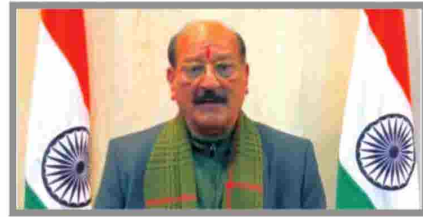
Q: The Uttarakhand Forest Department was the first in the country to launch a drive to remove illegal religious structures from its land nearly two years ago, but there is no noise about it today. Have all illegal structures been removed, or has the drive been stopped midway?

A: The majority of the illegal religious structures on forest land have been removed in the anti-encroachment drive launched by the department. Nevertheless, the drive is still on, as cases of fresh encroachments keep surfacing frequently. The drive was never stopped, and it will continue until no fresh complaint comes to our knowledge. Several structures are in the process of being removed. Our aim is not to let any person or organisation encroach on forest land, irrespective of the purpose it is meant for.

Q: You were recently given the responsibility of the Health Department as well. The hill areas of Uttarakhand have been facing a persistent shortage of doctors ever since the state was formed. Why has no state government been able to address this issue so far?

A: Availability of doctors or medical officers is not a big problem for us now. There is no dearth of medical officers in the hills now, but the deployment of specialist doctors is still an issue. However, we are now able to partially address the shortage of specialist doctors by offering them better salaries. The state has substantially increased the remuneration of specialist doctors, which has encouraged several of them to serve in hill areas. Now, some specialists who have been posted in the hills for years are not willing to leave their places. We hope to do away with this problem completely in the coming days.

Q: The government has talked a lot about making Uttarakhand a hub for eco-tourism, particularly



the renovation of the 'Beatles Ashram', with its globally renowned 'Chaurasi Kutia' huts in Rishikesh, along with other sites. But nothing has happened so far. Why?

A: Saying that nothing has happened would be incorrect when it comes to the creation of eco-tourism hubs in Uttarakhand. Lots of activities are underway to develop new eco-tourism centres and zones in the hills of Uttarakhand, along with the ongoing renovation of the Beatles Ashram, also known as 'Chaurasi Kutia' (84 huts), in Rishikesh. The 14-acre 'Chaurasi Kutia' forest land in Rajaji Tiger Reserve is being renovated and refurbished for tourists and is expected to be ready after March 2027. It is bound to become a global eco-tourism destination. More than 40 per cent of the work has been completed so far.

Apart from the development of 'Chaurasi Kutia', the development of a huge snow leopard conservation centre near the Gangotri hills in Uttarakashi will be another centre of attraction for global tourists in the coming days. The first phase of its development is over, while the DPR for the second phase is being sent to the government for approval. The centre is expected to generate substantial revenue for the government.

In addition to this, 62 new eco-tourism destinations have been identified across the state. These destinations

will be developed and managed by the State Forest Department with the help of Eco-Development Committees (EDCs) constituted of local people. Eco-tourism destinations in Uttarakhand will create two lakh employment opportunities in the days ahead.

Q: There are reports that faced with acute anti-incumbency, the ruling dispensation has prompted the BJP leadership not to re-nominate 30 sitting MLAs in the coming Assembly polls, which would account for more than half of its legislative wing. Is it true?

A: It's not true. The BJP leadership has not yet deliberated on the party's electoral prospects at the constituency level, nor has it conducted any performance appraisal of legislators. Party leaders in the state and Delhi have held several rounds of meetings and discussions regarding preparations for the 2027 Assembly polls, but these have been focused on strengthening the organisation as part of the poll strategy. No meeting or discussion has taken place at the higher level regarding the fate of the sitting legislators.

Political parties, particularly ruling dispensations, do conduct surveys to assess the chances of their sitting MLAs and their performance ahead of Assembly elections. However, the final decision on the outcome rests with the central leadership.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 12 September 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE important point about the Spence case, in relation to which the European Association has made a warm protest, is not that the rehearing was ordered, but that when it had been ordered there should have been put forward no ground whatever for a second hearing. The senior magistrate into whose hands the record came was entitled to order a further investigation, but the presumption must be that when that was done he had in his own mind the belief that the first inquiry was not complete or in some other way unsatisfactory. Both the magistrate before whom Spence was brought on the second occasion and subsequently the High Court held that there was no reason for going back on the original hearing, in which justice had been done after laborious proceedings. The presumption must be that the second hearing was ordered and the second arrest effected in order to clear up some matter or other which had been overlooked, but nothing was revealed that gave any new aspect to the case.

News Items

LONDON VISIT

MR. A. W. MELLON SEES THE CHANCELLOR

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS)
RUGBY, SEPT.

MR. A. W. MELLON, Secretary of the United States Treasury, who is at present in London on a private visit, has paid a visit of courtesy to Mr. Winston Churchill at the Treasury.

Since his arrival in London Mr. Mellon has also had an interview with Mr. Montagu Norman, Governor of the Bank of England. Last night he dined with Mr. Churchill. He is leaving to-morrow for the United States.

CABINET'S COAL PLAN

OWNERS INSIST ON DISTRICT TERMS

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS)
RUGBY, SEPT.

THE first decisions of the District Associations of the coal-owners in reply to Mr. Churchill's proposal for the resumption of national negotiations and a three-party conference were announced yesterday. They are, as has been thought probable, all unfavourable, though the Yorkshire owners' resolution would accept the "principles of a general application to be embodied in district settlements."

Meetings of the other owners' associations will be held to-day, and on Monday the Central Committee of the coalowners meets to consider the replies and to report to Mr. Churchill.

ARMY REDUCTIONS

ECONOMY PLAN BY FRENCH WAR MINISTER

(TIMES' SPECIAL SERVICE)
LONDON, SEPT.

THE Paris correspondent of the Times states that the War Minister has submitted proposals involving a further reduction of officers by 2,900, of which 1,200 are temporary appointments, making a total reduction of 28,800. The pre-war cavalry will be reduced by 7,000 to 10,000 horses, the Remount Department will be abolished and 175 barracks devoted to civil uses.

The naval and national gendarmeries are to be amalgamated as also the army and navy purchasing services. The naval administration is to be simplified, and the army recruiting and mobilisation reformed.

When celebration pollutes the night

DR DEBAPRIYA MUKHERJEE

Environmental protection has traditionally focused on measurable pollutants such as contaminated air, polluted rivers, toxic soil, excessive noise, and hazardous chemicals. While these remain critical concerns, an equally important but largely ignored form of environmental degradation is silently spreading across both rural and urban landscapes - the degradation of environmental aesthetics.

Whenever I reflect on my childhood in the village, I realise that one of the greatest luxuries we possessed was not electricity, but the enchanting beauty of the night. Artificial lighting was almost absent, except for the faint glow of kerosene lamps inside a few houses. After dinner, a handful of people, particularly service holders and educated villagers, would gather near a house to exchange their day's thoughts.

Students quietly studied under kerosene lamps, conscious that fuel was precious, while most families retired early and rose with the dawn. The night belonged to nature, families and quiet reflection. The sky seemed immense, filled with stars; the sounds of crickets, frogs, birds and rustling leaves created a natural symphony.

There was little incentive to compete with neighbours in displaying wealth.

Education, character, hard work and relationships commanded greater respect than extravagance. These memories make me wonder whether, in our pursuit of modernity, we have forgotten the value of darkness itself.

Today, the village night is changing rapidly. Powerful floodlights, laser beams, LED screens and high-powered loudspeakers can transform social and religious functions into spectacular displays. A celebration that once brought people together can become a public demonstration of prosperity. A few decorative lamps may create warmth and beauty, but when hundreds of lights, elaborate structures, extravagant feasts and powerful sound systems are installed primarily to attract attention, consumption acquires another purpose: status signaling.

This is what economists describe as conspicuous consumption - spending not merely for usefulness or comfort, but also to demonstrate wealth and social standing. The problem becomes more complicated when positional competition enters the picture. One family's extravagant celebration becomes another family's benchmark. If they can do this, why can't we? The next celebration must then be brighter, louder or more elaborate. Gradually, expenditure itself becomes a measure of prestige. Whether wealth is earned



legitimately or otherwise, conspicuous display can create a social expectation that visible expenditure is a measure of success.

The environmental consequences of this competition are rarely considered. As celebrations become more spectacular, natural darkness disappears beneath artificial illumination and the natural soundscape is overwhelmed by amplified music. Stars become difficult to see, sleep is disturbed and the quiet ecological life of the night is disrupted. Nocturnal insects, birds, bats and other organisms depend upon darkness and natural rhythms; excessive artificial light and noise can interfere with these relationships. What disappears, therefore, is not simply darkness but an entire environmental experience - the visual beauty of the night, its natural sounds, tranquility and ecological character.

There is also a cultural and educational dimension. Traditional village celebrations often reflected local craftsmanship, folk music, earthen lamps and community participation. Increasingly, commercially rented lighting, electronic entertainment and visual extravagance can make one celebration resemble another, gradually weakening local distinctiveness.

More importantly, children learn from what society admires. If they repeatedly see wealth displayed through spectacular celebrations receiving greater admiration than knowledge, simplicity or service, they may absorb the unfortunate message that success is something to be displayed rather than something to be earned. This should be regarded as a question for serious research rather than an established cause-and-effect conclusion.

Perhaps this is why I feel we need to speak about aesthetic pollution - an emerging dimension of environmental degradation in which excessive artificial light, sound and visual clutter diminish the beauty, harmony and sensory character of a place.

Electricity itself is not the problem; indeed, it is one of the greatest achievements of modern civilisation and an essential foundation for rural development. Reliable electricity has transformed education, healthcare,

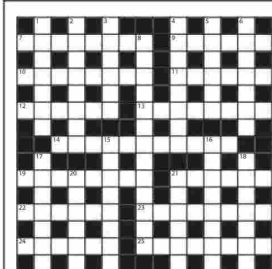
communication, agriculture, small industries and countless aspects of everyday life. The question is not whether villages should be illuminated, but how much illumination is necessary and where it becomes excessive.

Progress should provide light for learning, safety and productive activity - not turn every social celebration into a competition of brightness and noise. What we need is not less progress, but more responsible progress that respects both human aspirations and the natural environment.

I sometimes feel an irresistible urge to stand in the middle of my village and speak aloud - not against electricity, prosperity or celebration, but against our failure to recognise what we are losing. The answer is not to return to a life without electricity, nor to reject progress. It is to learn restraint. A truly beautiful celebration need not conquer the night with dazzling lights and deafening sound. Perhaps the real measure of progress is whether we can celebrate joyfully while leaving the stars visible, the night peaceful, the environment healthy and the minds of our children illuminated by something more enduring than artificial light: knowledge, imagination and wisdom.

The writer is former Senior Scientist, Central Pollution Control Board.

Crossword | No. 293578



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



OPINION

Financial literacy is a life skill, not a luxury



**FATMA
MOHAMMED
SALIM
AL HATROUSHI**

*The author is
a finance and
accounting student*

FIRST salary. First credit card. First investment. For many young people, these milestones arrive before anyone has taught them how to navigate the financial decisions that come with them. Financial literacy is often treated as a specialised subject. It should not be. Knowing how to budget, borrow, save, invest and manage risk is a basic life skill — one that can shape financial well-being long after graduation.

Oman is already recognising the importance of this issue. The Financial Services Authority has introduced initiatives aimed at developing financial knowledge among young people, while the Central Bank of Oman has undertaken national work examining financial literacy and financial behaviour. These efforts reflect a wider question: how can we prepare young Omanis not only for employment, but also for the financial responsibilities that come with it?

I saw this firsthand during an internship at the FSA, where I saw how seriously financial education for young people is taken at a national level. That experience shaped how I think about extending the same energy into university life, where students are about to put those lessons into practice.

Universities are in a particularly strong position to help. Students are approaching

their first full-time salaries, independent financial commitments and, for some, the launch of a business. Financial education does not necessarily need to become another heavily assessed course. Practical workshops on budgeting, borrowing, saving and investing could give students skills they can immediately apply. A student investment club, a short session on reading a payslip, or a simple simulation where students manage a mock monthly budget would build more real financial confidence than an annual exam ever could.

The connection with entrepreneurship is equally important. A promising business idea is only the beginning. Understanding cash flow, costs, pricing, financing and profitability can determine whether that idea develops into a sustainable business. In a country actively encouraging small business ownership as part of its economic diversification, this understanding cannot remain optional — passion and a good idea are rarely enough to carry a business through its first difficult year without financial planning behind them.

Technology makes financial awareness even more urgent. Banking, payments and investment services are increasingly available through a smartphone. Convenience is valuable, but convenience without understanding can create risks. When a financial decision takes seconds to make, the ability to pause and understand

*The goal is not to
turn every young
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decisions that may
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lives.*

its consequences matters more than ever.

Financial literacy should also extend beyond Finance and Accounting students. An engineer will earn and spend. A teacher may borrow or invest. A designer may build a business. Financial decisions are part of everyone's life, regardless of their degree.

As a Finance and Accounting student, I see financial literacy as more than knowledge of numbers. It is knowledge that gives people greater control over their choices. The goal is not to turn every young person into an investor or financial expert. It is to give them enough confidence to ask the right questions before making decisions that may affect years of their lives.

Oman's economic future will be shaped by national strategies, institutions and investment, but also by the everyday financial choices of its people. Building a financially aware generation is therefore more than an educational objective; it is an investment in resilience, responsible entrepreneurship and long-term economic participation.

Young Omanis do not need to know everything about money before they leave university. But they should know enough to understand where their money is going, what their choices cost, what risks they are taking, and how today's decisions may shape tomorrow. That is where financial literacy becomes more than a subject — it becomes a form of independence.

'BAD PRECEDENT': DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE OF ZAMBIA'S FACES TEST

HILLARY ORINDE

As Zambia's main opposition leader, Hakainde Hichilema was jailed for 18 weeks in 2017 on treason charges — a political tactic he vowed to never use should he take power.

Five years into his presidency, that promise seems to have been forgotten: his main challenger in last month's election is in Mukobeko Maximum Security Prison facing the same charges.

The allegations against Brian Mundubile, the distant runner-up in the election that returned Hichilema for a second term, have yet to be examined by the courts nearly a month after he was detained.

But his arrest — and claims of irregularities, violence and an uneven playing field around the vote — have intensified concerns that Zambia is drifting towards the democratic backsliding seen elsewhere on the continent, analysts said.

"This is a very, very bad precedent for Zambia," former Botswana president and regional statesman Ian Khama said.

The country is displaying the same "autocratic tendencies" that have emerged elsewhere in the region, where leaders increasingly turn state institutions against political opponents to protect their hold on power, he said.

For decades, Zambia cultivated a reputation as one of southern Africa's democratic outliers, a country where power changed hands through the ballot box and political tensions rarely tipped into turmoil. Hichilema's first presidential victory in 2021 reinforced that image, hailed across Africa as proof that opposition parties could defeat incumbents in elections.

Yet Zambia is now being compared with countries where treason, terrorism and national security charges have been brought against prominent opposition figures, from Uganda's Kizza Besigye and Tanzania's Tundu Lissu to South Sudan's Riek Machar and Mozambique's Venancio Mondlane.

Closer to home, Zimbabwe's opposition has been weakened by repeated prosecutions and prolonged detentions of senior figures.

Such legal manoeuvring ties up a political challenger while serving as a warning to others, said Louw Nel, analyst at Oxford Economics Africa. — AFP

Landlines and pyramids

"EACH friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born," I once read in one of the diaries of the French-Cuban-American writer Anaïs Nin.

I suddenly found myself thinking of that beautiful quote while feeling privileged to have had access to authors like Nin from a relatively young age. The other day, over a bad cup of coffee, a Russian fellow mum and immigrant my age in Muscat pulled a heavy book by Marcel Proust from her bag and told me she was catching up on writers from around the world.

At high school, unlike me, she had only been able to read Russian authors.

"Real friendship is a great love story about people who decide they want to be part of your life, and vice versa, through all the versions of you and of them," one of my two chosen sisters wrote to me for my birthday. Her words brought me back to Nin's passage.

By a world not yet born until these friends arrive, you could think of unconditional love, a world that opens inside your heart, creating a multiverse if you are lucky. But it could also mean a new perspective, a kind of knowledge you might never have found alone.

That happened when I met Nils, a platonic high-school friend I made in the mid-nineties. Our first conversation took place over an actual landline telephone. Mine was shaped like Mickey Mouse, and its handset was the part you held to your ear for hours after pressing its little numbered buttons with your finger.

I guess I always loved to push



**BREGJE VAN
BAAREN**

*The writer is
a freelance
contributor*

*The people in
our lives unlock
new worlds of
perspective and
connection.
Ultimately, these
lifelong bonds link
our past with the
present*

buttons.

"These three pyramids in Egypt are perhaps the leftovers of an ancient, technologically advanced civilisation that ultimately created something so ingenious that it ended up destroying everyone across the world, like a seemingly brilliant, arrogant plan that backfired catastrophically," Nils said.

Back then, we were two teenage cool nerds, trying to figure out how people had built the pyramids using heavy blocks without modern technology or cranes. My mum's sister used to say that the layout of the three pyramids roughly mirrored three stars.

Nils continued: "And as a result, like Vesuvius erupting over Pompeii, or the asteroid that struck the Earth and wiped out the dinosaurs, apart from birds, everything was destroyed, everyone was gone, except for the pyramids and a few other wonders, and civilisation had to start again from scratch, from the Stone Age to the Middle Ages and so forth."

Back then, in 1995, we did not have mobile phones. Years later even laughed at Japanese tourists in the South of Spain taking pictures of everything, holding their phones between their eyes and whatever they were supposed to be experiencing.

Artificial intelligence meant robots and 2026 meant flying cars, at least according to the Donald Duck magazine we both subscribed to.

Nils was also a huge Star Trek fan, which perhaps explains his other theory: perhaps aliens had built the pyramids. I guess he was ahead of Musk, who made the same claim twenty-five years later, in 2020. That probably made Nils abandon the theory, partly



Back then, an old-fashioned landline meant hour-long gossip and philosophy sessions with friends.

because he is not a Musk fan.

Today, I hate making mobile-phone calls. I prefer voice notes and apps prone to miscommunication. Back then, an old-fashioned landline meant hour-long gossip and philosophy sessions with friends.

I would even write letters, including to a Moroccan-Jewish friend in Paris who tried to convince me to stay off the heavy literature by Camus and read Le Petit Prince instead.

I last saw Nils at my father's farewell gathering in May 2025. He had not told me he would be coming, and he was wearing a suit to honour my father.

Now I want to Zoom him about AI agents that apparently went rogue and staged a cyberattack on a company called Hugging Face, working systematically and collaboratively by dividing up tasks, gathering resources and covering their tracks.

Perhaps they built the pyramids?

Let me ask EcoGPT. Or better, Nils, and over a landline, just in case they are listening and watching us.

Are we giving up on a 1.5 deg C limit to global warming?

A UN report on minimising global temperature 'overshoot' is preaching to a world increasingly incapable of facing up to the climate emergency.



David Fogarty

Deputy Foreign Editor

The Nepal-China flood is shocking for its sudden, savage destruction and terrible loss of life. Riverside towns were wiped off the map in minutes by a torrent of mud, rocks and debris. The disaster, sadly, was not unexpected. Climate scientists had been warning for years that rapidly melting Himalayan glaciers could cause the catastrophic collapse of ice fields, triggering explosive floods.

As the world continues to push the global thermometer deeper into the red, the risks from global warming are intensifying, with clear effects.

The Nepal-China disaster comes

after Europe's deadly summer of record heatwaves and wildfires, and a still strengthening "super" El Nino fuelled by record ocean temperatures.

Drawing a link between the glacier collapse and climate change, Nepal Prime Minister Balendra Shah demanded international support for poorer nations like his.

Yet international climate action continues to falter.

Just days after the disaster, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) released a major report acknowledging humanity was not going to meet a key temperature guard rail enshrined in the 2015 Paris climate agreement – limiting global average warming to no more than 1.5 deg C above pre-industrial levels.

We're heading for an "overshoot", with 1.8 deg C likely to be the best we can do based on an optimistic scenario of current government pledges, UNEP says.

That phrasing has come under fire. "The way in which the messages have been framed does,



Buildings hit by a flash flood in Trishuli, in Nepal's Nuwakot district, on Aug 27. Climate scientists had been warning for years that rapidly melting Himalayan glaciers could cause the catastrophic collapse of ice fields, triggering explosive floods. Now, Nepal faces a perilously uncertain future not of its making. PHOTO: REUTERS

in many quarters, lead to a sense of apathy or fatalism and I think that's not what was intended," said Bill Hare, chief executive of Climate Analytics, a Berlin-based climate science and policy think-tank.

"I think what the report's public messaging doesn't convey strongly enough is that we can get out of this," he told The Straits Times, adding that the report needed a stronger emphasis on a very rapid transition away from fossil fuels.

What to make of this? As someone who attended the 2015 Paris climate talks, I remember the genuine sense of optimism that nations would ramp up emissions cuts and strive to meet the 1.5 deg C goal. A decade later, we're essentially admitting we've failed on that front. The disappointment is palpable.

Though not for a lack of trying. This failure persists despite record investments in renewable energy since 2015, mass deployment of electric vehicles and more efficient supply chains.

Sustainability now makes strong business sense, and

next-generation energy sources like fusion are making rapid progress. And yet greenhouse gas emissions – chiefly carbon dioxide (CO2) and methane from fossil fuels – have continued to grow.

That brings us to a second issue. Exactly where are we heading now? If 1.8 deg C looks to be the next best limit, will we achieve that, or eventually bust that too?

The report admittedly touches a raw nerve – the defeatism among climate activists facing a world backsliding into the old ways.

Countries have rolled back emissions reduction targets, delayed implementation of net-zero commitments, or expanded fossil fuel infrastructure including coal-fired plants and drilling licences.

Some of the world's largest oil and gas firms have also dialled back net-zero targets and green energy investments and are instead ploughing billions of dollars into new oil and gas production.

And despite their own climate commitments, the insatiable

demand for energy to power data centres has forced big tech firms to invest in gas power plants to meet their needs, causing emissions to spike.

For low-lying island nations, the UN report is especially worrying.

For years, this group of countries, facing the threat of rising sea levels and more destructive storms, fought tirelessly to have the 1.5 deg C goal enshrined in the Paris Agreement and in international law.

Yet on balance, perhaps the UNEP report was a sobering look at where we are and a call for urgent action.

The authors stress that exceeding 1.5 deg C should not be interpreted as safe or acceptable, and that a temperature overshoot is not an argument for resignation.

"If we delay action, we lose the chance to return to 1.5 deg C and face an unprecedented, damaged world," says the UNEP report.

The report also emphasises the importance of agency and makes clear that countries still have the ability to mitigate worsening

climate change through deep and immediate emissions cuts, a phase-out of fossil fuels and other measures.

It also charts future pathways for action, including technologies that remove CO2 from the atmosphere at scale.

Right now, we need governments everywhere to act forcefully and with courage, Hare said. "We have the technology to do this in the form of cheap renewable power, battery storage and ever-cheaper electric vehicles, and myriad other ways to rid ourselves of fossil CO2 emissions."

Nepal, like many countries on the front lines of climate change, faces a perilously uncertain future not of its making.

The UNEP report tries to address the implications of a temperature overshoot and is a critical look at the remaining options. The danger is that in another decade, we could be having the same conversation after yet more deadly climate disasters.

dfogarty@sph.com.sg

Costs and hard-won gains

FROM B1

he could not have galvanised his country for a war whose main objective was merely to diminish the scourge of terrorism. That's not how politics in general – and particularly US politics – work; he had to talk big, because that's what his people expected. "I can hear you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon," as Bush told firemen and construction workers at the time while standing at the ruins of the World Trade Center.

The problem was not so much that the US war aims were unachievable, but rather that they were pursued with a singular obsession that defied both logic and common sense well after the immediate US national shock subsided.

Bush was right that the challenge of terrorism was both acute and global. In the years immediately after 9/11 came the Bali bombings in 2002 in which 202 were killed, the Madrid train bombings in 2004 which left 193 dead and the concerted attacks on London's public transport system in 2005 in which 52 people perished. And there was, of course, the Al-Qaeda 2006 plot to bring down seven airliners mid-Atlantic, a plot that, had it not been foiled by Britain's security services, could have rivalled 9/11 in the number of casualties.

But the US continued to treat terrorism as the most consequential threat to the world's top superpower, and this mindset would shape American policy for years to come. The US-led military coalition quickly achieved its initial successes in dismantling the Al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan: by mid-November 2001, Kabul, the Afghan capital, fell, and the

Taliban and Al-Qaeda terrorists fled to the mountains.

But then, the complications of the War on Terror began: a guerrilla war in Afghanistan which the US was barely able to suppress for years and, from 2003, the invasion of Iraq, Washington legitimised its actions with the claim that Saddam Hussein's regime possessed weapons of mass destruction, which were never found.

The financial resources lavished on these wars are staggering. Washington spent about US\$8 trillion on these adventures, which destabilised the Middle East and spawned future wars. The never-ending story of suspected terrorists held without trial in the Guantanamo US base in Cuba to this day, as well as the revelations about US intelligence "black sites" for interrogations and the degrading stories of torture in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, tore to shreds the reputation of the US.

And the key stated US objective – to eliminate all the "ungoverned spaces" around the world where terrorist networks could hide – was never achieved. Indeed, there are more of these dangerous places today, in large parts of sub-Saharan Africa, as well as some patches of South and Central Asia.

What transformed the Afghanistan and Iraq wars into "forever wars" was not the resilience of the enemy but Bush's obsession with his transformation project, with the idea that only wholesale modernisation of enemy countries would remove the US from the line of fire.

That objective exceeded American capability, drew in countries peripheral to American interests, dealt with societies uninterested in Bush's

"democracy" offer, and was an effort ultimately sabotaged by Pakistan and Iran. So, the war on terror ended with Washington wondering how to disengage from its military adventures without humiliation. Even this failed to be achieved, in the case of Afghanistan.

ERRORS OF OMISSION

Equally significant was Washington's belief that the 9/11 attacks signalled a new world structure in which America's main enemies were non-state actors rather than the old state adversaries.

Again, it's easy to see how the mistake was made. At the turn of this century, the US reigned supreme on the global stage. Russia had just defaulted on its debts and was struggling to avoid another bankruptcy, while most US decision-makers still believed that China wouldn't translate its growing economic weight into military power; China officially joined the World Trade Organization just a few months after 9/11.

Many other Western leaders also bought into the idea that after 9/11, the key security concern of the US would be terrorism, rather than old-fashioned geopolitical calculations. Tony Blair, the British prime minister at the time, dragged his country into the Iraq war not because he believed in that enterprise but because he assumed that this would be the only way of retaining Britain's relevance to the US.

The temptation to exaggerate the enduring security threat of terrorism led to two important policy omissions. The first one is that the Bush administration failed to explore the opportunity to forge a new relationship with its key global rivals.

For example, Russian President Vladimir Putin was the first foreign head of state to try to

reach Bush on the day of the 9/11 attacks. What Putin then offered was not symbolic: overflight rights for military supply, intelligence exchange and consent for US use of military bases in Central Asia. He received little attention. Indeed, the US announced its withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty – a key weapon limitation agreement with Russia – in December 2001, three months after Putin extended his hand in friendship. The Chinese and even the Iranians also offered to help, but were equally rebuffed.

It is possible that none of these offers to refashion relations with the US was either sincere or durable. Nonetheless, Washington failed to explore these possibilities.

And despite its continued vast spending on defence, the US failed to prepare itself adequately for the military rise of China and Russia; it is playing catch-up today, notwithstanding the fact that it is outspending both key rivals.

THE MORE POSITIVE LEDGER

Still, it would be churlish not to acknowledge some of the real security achievements over the past quarter of a century.

The first is aviation security. Reinforced and access-controlled cockpit doors on every aircraft worldwide by 2003; shoe removal and liquid restrictions in 2006; total hold-baggage screening by 2008; body scanners from 2010; computed-tomography scanners for cabin baggage from 2018 – all these have complicated our lives but have also kept us safe.

Twenty-five years on, no aircraft has been flown into a building in an attack on such a massive scale. Furthermore, cooperation

between the world's intelligence services improved immeasurably, ensuring that terrorist organisations are tracked across borders with greater ease. It's worth recalling, for instance, that

as tensions rose between Russia and the US and military links were severed, the one link that lasted longest was the counter-terrorism cooperation between Moscow and Washington.

And knowledge about the psychology as well as the other conditions that provide fertile ground for terrorism recruitment expanded vastly. Governments in most developed countries retain special teams of experts whose job is not only to monitor the establishment of terrorist networks, but also to combat them by persuasion and social engagement.

Many of the so-called counter-radicalisation programmes were ill-conceived. And many failed. Still, governments have amassed a great deal of experience with such activities and have also notched up a number of successes.

One of the "what if" questions now making the rounds in the intelligence community is whether artificial intelligence could have prevented the attacks of 9/11. The answer is probably not, since governments did not have enough of the necessary data at their disposal and technology alone cannot create data.

But although the US Information Awareness Office, established in 2002 with the stated goal of fusing intelligence with police records and commercial data such as bank transactions, travel tickets and school grades, was soon disbanded, its functions did not die. They were privatised instead and led to the creation of companies such as Palantir, with its sophisticated algorithms and promise that technology can reconcile the necessary surveillance with privacy.

Palantir remains a hugely controversial company. But few would deny that sophisticated data-crunching, along with capabilities to infer and operationalise defensive actions, is

now critical to the functioning of a modern and safe country. The tragedy of 9/11 was critical to the growth of this industry.

A quarter of a century on, the menace of terrorism endures. As the latest Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report released on Sept 10 indicates, the country remains "an attractive target for terrorist elements". The threat has also evolved from relatively large international terrorist networks to the so-called "lone wolf" individuals who are often self-radicalised.

Twenty-five years is long enough for the initial shock of a catastrophe to wear off, the trauma to be numbed by the passage of time and for memories to fade. And, yes, to be displaced bit by bit by the tide of other crises, challenges and everyday distractions.

And yet, on this anniversary, the arithmetic of that ghastly 9/11 morning does not get easier with time. Almost 3,000 people, citizens of 115 countries, perished that day.

And terrorism was not defeated; it was dispersed.

The organisation that planned the attacks is a shadow of itself and its founder has been dead for 15 years, but its franchises now hold more territory across the Sahel and the Horn of Africa than Al-Qaeda ever held in Afghanistan.

So, the truly fitting commemoration is not the assurance that the world was made safe, nor the fashionable counterargument that everything attempted since 9/11 was folly.

It is the simpler and less-comforting realisation that while memorials now stand in permanent grief for those who died and twin beams of light are shone in tribute to the fallen twin towers, the danger is chronic. The shadow has not gone away.

jeyal@sph.com.sg

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News Centre
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Wong Wei Kong

Editor-in-Chief, English, Malay & Tamil Media Group

Jaime Ho

Straits Times Editor

CONTACT US

General line: 6319-6319

Subscription matters: 6388-3638 / subscribe.sph.com.sg

The Straits Times: 6319-5397

Singapore

stnewdesk@sph.com.sg

World

stworld@sph.com.sg

Forum

stforum@sph.com.sg

Business

stnewdesk@sph.com.sg

Sport

stsports@sph.com.sg

Life

stlife@sph.com.sg

Digital

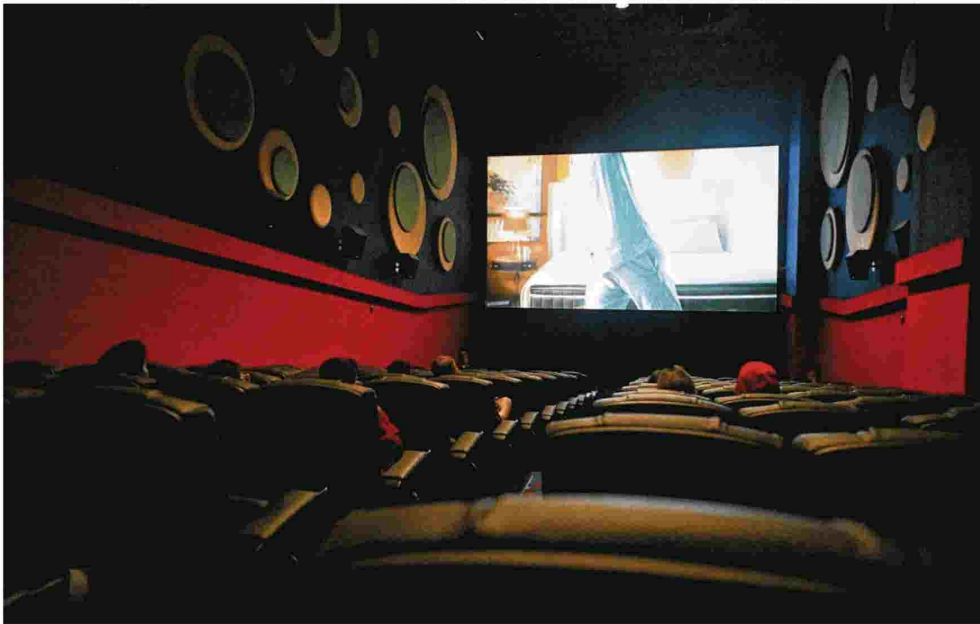
stnewdesk@sph.com.sg

Art

start@sph.com.sg

Photo: 6319-5328
stimage@sph.com.sg

Why the backlash against 'soulless' AI movies misses the point



Artificial intelligence can be used in movies to create a beautiful image, but it is still up to the film-maker to provide their unique perspective, says the writer, who argues that AI-generated content has a purpose distinct from that of human art.
ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

There's a purpose and place for AI-generated content. Let's not expect too much from it.

Phillip Lim

When Coca-Cola used AI to remake its iconic 1995 "Holidays Are Coming" Christmas advertisement last year, parts of the creative community argued that it copied the imagery and nostalgia of the original, but had lost its human warmth.

More recently, two Singapore films, *Trace Project* and *Bersama Majulah* – created using AI and released for National Day – attracted similar complaints, that the dialogues were awkward, characters lifeless and stories emotionally empty.

The reactions sum up much of the criticism we hear today about AI-generated content: It's derivative and soulless, and reproduces the appearance of creativity – but with nothing underneath.

As a film-maker who has spent more than three decades working in film and television, I can safely say that AI can reproduce the signs of cinema: beautiful lighting, attractive faces and

sweeping camera movements. But stories need characters who want something, choices with consequences and a point of view that gives each image purpose. Without these, the shots become interchangeable: Remove or replace one, and little changes.

And so, the argument goes, if this is what AI is producing, we're heading towards a cultural wasteland filled with bland, synthetic rubbish. Art – whether a painting, film, novel or original composition – will be gone, replaced by an avalanche of AI-generated slop.

But are we giving AI far too much credit?

ELEVATOR MUSIC

Not everything AI produces has to be art. Look at it in terms of music.

There's music we listen to, and there is music playing in the background while we eat, shop, work or wait on the phone while someone puts us on hold.

In the visual context, much of what AI produces is the equivalent of elevator music. It's

pleasant, fills the silence – and fades into the background. No one expects it to do more than that. We don't walk into a hotel lobby, hear a pleasant piano arrangement and think: This is the end of Beethoven.

We have never expected all music to serve the same purpose. Why should AI-generated images and video be different?

There is a place for such content: background visuals, social media filler, presentation images, corporate videos, advertising variations and endless bits of content. It's a form of "disposable culture". They serve their purpose, occupy our attention briefly – and then it disappears, like an Instagram Story.

AI has simply made it much easier and cheaper to create this content. For years, producing even a mediocre-looking video required cameras, lights, editing software, technical knowledge and people who knew how to use all of them. Now, type a few lines into a computer and you may get something surprisingly polished. Of course, this means we risk being overwhelmed by an enormous amount of rubbish – and we're already starting to see signs of this.

Our social media feeds are filled

with near-identical fantasy portraits, fake trailers, synthetic animal videos and music made simply to game an algorithm.

In April 2026, global music-streaming service Deezer received about 75,000 fully AI-generated tracks every day – 44 per cent of all new music submitted to the platform.

This shows how easily content can be produced and released in industrial quantities.

But polished content isn't necessarily good-quality content. When Apple launched GarageBand, it meant that anyone with a computer could make music without the need for an expensive recording studio. But it didn't create millions of brilliant composers – just millions of people who could make music.

Art – and the ones who create it – therefore won't be replaced by AI content. We could actually end up valuing them more.

THE VALUE OF ART AND THE ARTIST

When visual content becomes limitless, we may become less impressed by it. We will also become more conscious of the difference between something that merely looks good and something we genuinely care

about.

We can already see this on social media. An image that might once have stopped us now earns half a second before the thumb moves on.

But a genuinely good video or photo – something that makes us laugh, speaks to a very human, visceral part of us, and helps us recognise ourselves or look at a familiar product differently – has the potential to make us pause and appreciate it more.

The same applies to those who create the art.

When player pianos, which play tunes automatically without a human pianist, were invented in the late 19th century, musicians did not disappear. Even today, people still pay good money to watch someone sit at a piano and perform.

Because the right notes are only part of the experience. There is also interpretation, timing, personality, presence and imperfection – as well as the knowledge that another human being is making decisions in front of us. A machine can play the notes, but we don't value it the same way.

It is harder to displace an artist with a distinctive style and point of view. The human judgment of knowing what to create, what to

leave out and what the work is trying to say, will remain valuable.

No doubt we must accept that AI will replace some creative work – likely the "background content" of generic stock images, simple corporate videos and multiple versions of the same advertisement – for which there is tremendous demand in television and advertising.

Clients need these materials to serve a practical purpose, not to express an original artistic vision. If a company needs a generic image of happy employees for an internal presentation, I doubt anyone will feel a deep cultural loss if it is AI-generated instead of photographed.

Of course, AI will affect some jobs. A junior graphic designer who once spent days resizing an advertisement into 20 variations may now be asked merely to check output produced in minutes. The same pressure will reach stock photographers shooting generic office scenes and editors assembling basic social clips.

Some roles will disappear. Others will move up the chain. But someone will still have to decide what the image is saying, choose what belongs and take responsibility for the result.

As a film-maker, I'm using AI in different ways in my upcoming short film. My assistant director is using AI to create storyboards. My wardrobe mistress is using it to test how different outfits might look on the casts, while my hair and make-up artist is using it to explore different looks.

It helps us explore possibilities more quickly, but the dramatic choices – the performances, framing and meaning of each scene – remain human.

AI can help construct the image. The artist must decide what it means.

AI DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ART

In the face of this unprecedented avalanche of AI-generated slop, the creative industry needs to evolve in many areas.

Artists, photographers, writers and film-makers are rightly concerned that AI models may be trained on their work without their knowledge or permission. This raises important questions about copyright, licensing and compensation. But these questions are separate from whether AI will replace art itself.

AI is unlikely to displace artists and their work entirely. If anything, the flood of synthetic content may make us value human craftsmanship more. We will see far more synthetic images, music and video. Most will be quickly forgotten. Some routine jobs will disappear, and the industry must confront that honestly.

But this is not the death of art. Art matters because someone has something to say. AI-generated content has a clear place and serves a purpose. It just does not all have to be art.

— Phillip Lim is a veteran Singapore film-maker, producer and writer with more than three decades of experience across film and television that includes *The Teenage Textbook* and *Homecoming*.

AI is killing the app economy and building its successor

Gatekeeping is moving from controlling apps to overseeing AI services.

Parmy Olson

Artificial intelligence has made it easier than ever to build an app. New releases on Apple's App Store surged by about 80 per cent earlier this year as developers vied-coded their way to new software widgets for markets such as wellness and productivity. But follow the money in Silicon Valley and something strange is happening: Mobile apps are disappearing from some of tech's most promising start-ups. AI is the reason for that, too.

San Francisco-based Y Combinator is the world's most prestigious start-up accelerator – a short programme that helps new firms grow quickly by providing money, guidance and connections across the tech industry – with an estimated 10,000 teams applying every three months from all over the world.

Typically, only about one get in. Alumni include the founders of Airbnb, Stripe, Coinbase Global,

DoorDash and Reddit; OpenAI chief executive officer Sam Altman was one of its first participants.

Of the 195 start-ups in the programme's last spring batch, only eight had a native mobile app as their main product, said a Y Combinator spokesman. Go back to 2013 and around 15 per cent of Y Combinator start-ups were in the app business, with the rest building marketplaces, crowdfunding platforms or on-demand delivery services. By 2016, that proportion had declined to 8 per cent, before hovering around 4 per cent between 2019 and 2022. In the last three years, the average has dropped to between 0.5 per cent and 1 per cent.

What gives? "Apps and SaaS dead," one venture capitalist, referring to software-as-a-service, texted me recently when I asked, "AI and agentic hot."

In other words, the flood of entrants into app stores belies start-ups' expectations for the most lucrative sources of future revenue: building skills and agent

workflows on top of AI models.

About three years ago, these types of software were known as GPT-wrappers because they "wrapped around" a model like OpenAI's to do hyper-specific things, like writing marketing text or acting as a companion. Many products were crushed as soon as the AI firms added the same features, echoing the experience of a bunch of companies building apps for Apple's iPhone.

One term for the latest iteration of such products is a "harness", which does not just pass text back and forth from an AI model but also manages its behaviour as it carries out tasks. This year, that kind of work is driving at least one in six of the companies coming out of Y Combinator – building tools that help AI models like Claude or ChatGPT manage money or order food, while testing their work or preventing them from making mistakes or being hacked.

Start-up Salus, for instance, can stop an AI agent from accidentally issuing a refund; another firm called Allowance gives the software a temporary credit card number to order food or buy other goods without exposing a user's real banking digits. Both are based in San Francisco.

Chaz Englander is a British entrepreneur who has had three start-ups go through the Y Combinator programme. While his first two were mobile apps (one for renting items from people nearby, the other for buying groceries), his latest guides AI models to process financial paperwork or do research. It can switch between several models to which a bank subscribes, using them, for example, to create a PowerPoint presentation by delegating different parts of the process such as extracting data or building a chart to the platform that is best at each task.

Building such cross-model software makes sense, Englander says. "I do see a world where these tools will become much more centralised into a single system," he says. "Everything is being integrated."

Instead of navigating between different apps to do different things, people will increasingly use an AI assistant with access to multiple models – hence the race to augment those agents with specific capabilities.

Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, is trying to create his own gateway for doing everything with Muse, a "personal AI agent"

that Meta Platforms launched this week in the US. You can chat to it from inside WhatsApp to book travel, send e-mail or buy things.

"Muse doesn't just answer questions," he said in a video. "It gets things done for you." The Meta CEO said he used it to organise baking projects with his kids and to monitor his mixed martial arts training.

This centralisation of control looks different to what you have probably experienced for more than a decade with mobile operating systems: It is meant to replace a dizzying array of apps you never use, scattered across several pages on your smartphone.

The vision of funneling more capabilities into Open AI's ChatGPT, Anthropic's Claude or Google's Gemini means less swiping and more efficiency – but it also points to a future where the controllers of these platforms have unprecedented power.

That will play out in how companies like Englander's latest start-up Model ML figure out how to make money.

One venture capitalist tells me the road to monetisation for AI skills and agent workflows is still uncertain. It is not as simple as

the old app method of charging a subscription fee or making money from ads. Neither is it like enterprise software, where businesses charge "per seat", as a monthly fee for every employee with a login.

Instead, many start-ups are adopting a "usage-based" approach, where customers like banks pay per task performed by their technology, while the start-up acts as the middleman buying tokens wholesale from OpenAI or Anthropic and then billing its corporate clients for the finished work.

The trick is to perform those tasks better than anyone else. "We believe you'll get better intelligence from us for \$500 versus the nearest competitor and the labs, and that's where our margin comes from," says Englander.

This new breed of start-ups has its work cut out. Previously, software businesses were beholden to app stores managed by Apple and Alphabet's Google. Now, they are becoming dependent on the decisions of OpenAI, Anthropic and (once again) Google, but it is not going away. BLOOMBERG

— Parmy Olson is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering technology. A former reporter for the Wall Street Journal and Forbes, she is the author of *Supremacy AI*, *ChatGPT And The Race That Will Change The World*.



Couples taking part in a collective wedding ceremony in Shenyang, in north-eastern China's Liaoning province, on Aug 19. In China's cut-throat marriage market, cars, houses and savings are all topics for a first date. More offbeat is the number of siblings. PHOTO: AFP

Only children in China prefer to marry other only children

And yes, they do have a choice.

Unlike some of her friends, Kalinda Duan, a 28-year-old woman from Shanxi province, is not opposed to marriage. Having grown up without siblings, she thinks the companionship of matrimony wonderful. But she has one firm requirement of a future husband – he must also be an only child. No one can persuade her otherwise – “Even if it's the son of the party secretary of the State Council”.

In China's cut-throat marriage market, cars, houses and savings are all topics for a first date. More offbeat is the number of siblings.

In Shanghai, Yue (who does not want to share his full name), the organiser of a matchmaking group with thousands of members on WeChat, a messaging app, says that many will politely turn down someone who has a brother or sister. They are typical. A working paper by Fangqi Wen of Ohio State University finds that only children are more likely than

others to marry only children. Their chances of such a match are 18.4 percentage points higher than those of their peers with siblings, even after accounting for things such as education and family background.

Contrary to popular belief, only children are not even in the majority among young Chinese today, so they do have the choice.

Though China had a one-child policy from 1979 to 2015, it was never uniformly enforced, especially in the countryside. From 1984 a “1.5-child policy” also allowed some rural couples to have a second child if the first was a girl. Only children make up little more than 40 per cent of all university-age students, according to a nationally representative survey in 2019.

These departures from the one-child model appear to have created a rift in values between different-sized families. Only children are used to having it all,

Only children are used to having it all, rather than sharing (and bickering) with the other little emperors in the home. So they think that a spouse's ties with his or her siblings would be bothersome, says Yue. They don't like the thought of devoting energy to managing such relationships.

rather than sharing (and bickering) with the other little emperors in the home. So they think that a spouse's ties with his or her siblings would be bothersome, says Yue. They don't like the thought of devoting energy to managing such relationships.

“There's nothing wrong with it,” says Duan, “but I can't accept that my partner could love his sister so much. I just can't.”

Money matters, too. Duan's father financially supported his brothers, and, she thinks, neglected her mother. Only children inherit their parents' entire estate.

Some siblings make bigger claims on the family silver than others. A man with brothers is in the worst position: when a bride price is paid to help a son marry, it leaves less for the other boys.

The peril posed by sisters is different. If a man has several older sisters, it suggests his parents were trying hard for a son. That could be a warning sign that patriarchal attitudes run in the family, which might also deter some potential brides.

The single child does not have it all easy. The windfall of an undivided inheritance is often preceded by the undivided burden of caring for two frail parents. But siblings cannot always be relied on to bear their fair share of the burden, and the uneven division of care can lead to arguments. At least for only children, the responsibility is clear, says Duan.

These attitudes may seem heartless or mercenary. But good jobs are scarce – and a date's financial standing is important. Economic anxiety will not help China's marriage rate. In the first half of 2026, 3.3 million couples got married, down by 7.5 per cent from a year earlier, and the lowest number on record. For a government worried about the shrinking population, sibling-phobia is yet another headache. Oh, brother. © 2026 THE ECONOMIST NEWSPAPER LIMITED. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

The end of the ‘win-win’ era

In these zero-sum times, the sunny optimism of the post-Cold War phrase seems a quaint and distant memory.

Leo Lewis

Published shortly before the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Deterrence, Arms Control, and Disarmament: Toward a Synthesis in National Security Policy was not an uplifting work. “I am afraid, and I am pessimistic,” concluded its author, J David Singer, parsing the “insane and degrading” nuclear calculus on which human survival teetered.

Despite Singer's well-founded bleakness, the book lives on as an unintentional beacon: the most plausible origin story of a term that has come to define optimism, aspiration and the addictive sugar rush of positive spin. Because, in a footnote on page 109, stands what is reckoned to be the earliest reference in print to the term “win-win”.

Who (outside sport) doesn't love a win-win? Few, in theory, but these are notably far from theoretical times.

So far, in fact, that after win-win's long, hard-working and prolific career as the claimed outcome of summit meetings, joint ventures, free trade agreements, mergers and acquisitions deals, party manifestos and press releases on every conceivable subject, the backdrop has changed.

This may be the moment to admit that win-win needs a reset for more aggressively zero-sum times.

The phrase is already doing immeasurably more than originally intended. Singer was deploying win-win in coldly mechanical terms: a reference to one of the four possible (but, given human nature, less likely) results of the classic “prisoners' dilemma” thought experiment.

But over the years the term blossomed – as a handy verbal bellwether of the post-Cold War order, of globalisation, market liberalisation and other trust-the-other-side-to-act-rationally megatrends – becoming endlessly seductive to businesses and governments everywhere.

Retired diplomats recall baffled Chinese officials wrestling to even conceptualise and translate win-win in 1999 when China was first negotiating entry to the World Trade Organization. By the middle of the following decade, it was ubiquitous in Chinese Communist Party messaging.

And so in 2006, when win-win finally made it into the Oxford English Dictionary (inducted in the same batch as nanobot, anoraky and yada yada), that felt perfectly of its time: an era that seemed to be structurally lowering the obstacles to win-win thinking, pre-social media, pre-global

financial crisis, pre-Donald Trump, pre-artificial intelligence.

To the credit of human resilience and optimism, win-win has persisted as an ambition and a salve even as its practice and application have demanded ever greater suspension of disbelief.

Middle powers like Japan, which have thrived under the postwar world order and have most to lose from that party stopping, remain remarkably heavy drinkers from the win-win punchbowl. It looks like outright inebriation when Washington exacts a US\$550 billion (\$5695 billion) investment pledge from Tokyo to “buy down” US tariffs and Tokyo accepts that as win-win.

Last weekend, the hollow ring was overwhelming. Jared

Kushner, discussing US negotiations with Russia over Ukraine, said that the US approach was to seek a “win-win outcome”. There is no evidence to support the idea that Vladimir Putin wants that; Kushner was representing a president who describes the world, regularly and revealingly, in terms of winners, losers, unfairness and imbalance.

Win-win, in the prisoners' dilemma, depends on both sides believing the other will always act rationally: Trump's strategic insistence on unpredictability means no counterpart can ever act on the assumption of US rationality.

Of course, the term win-win has always had its flaws. Its absolutism means it can too often be used to present as fully balanced something that may be very good for one but only OK for the other. In the wrong hands, it conceals coercion or failure.

More fundamentally, the win-win beloved of trade deals and communiques evolved during the relatively more straightforward days of a single superpower era: China's rise changes that on a global scale.

But the past few years have freighted the concept with greater difficulties. Monopolies are not built to seek or secure win-win solutions, and the sheer financial scale and reach that have been granted to the top end of the tech industry clearly establish monopolism over win-win as the more successful strategic goal.

The great trap being laid here is to abandon all hope for win-win (while perhaps still paying it cynical lip service) and treat zero-sum as the rule as the old order shifts to new. To do so will prolong the phase in which win-win is genuinely unattainable. Win-lose may be truly horrible, but, as Singer's book makes chillingly clear, lose-lose is infinitely worse.

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OPINION

Trump Targets the Wrong Base



**POTOMAC
WATCH**
By Kimberley
A. Strassel

"Know your audience," goes the old line, a maxim to maximize a speaker's effectiveness. President Trump opened the GOP's midterm convention Wednesday by speaking for nearly two hours to all the wrong people.

Excitement in Dallas's American Airlines Center was certainly huge. Thousands of loyal supporters doing Trump hats and buttons and pins, waved signs and roared approval throughout the president's address. Fans traveled hundreds of miles and waited in line for hours, considering "Trump Live!" the fulfillment of a bucket list.

This is the GOP's midterm strategy: Triple down on the MAGA base. The impulse stems from polls showing Republicans suffering from a big enthusiasm gap compared with Democrats. The GOP has internalized the belief that its problem is MAGA loyalists who tune out when Mr. Trump isn't the main event. So they are running this president as if he's on the ballot, while the president runs entirely to his most loyal crowd.

That's an incredibly risky midterm bet, based on a potentially fatal misreading of the data.

"Bases" are sprawling things, and today's Republican version can be broadly separated between MAGA en-

thusiasts—deeply loyal to Mr. Trump—and more-traditional Republicans. Pollster Scott Rasmussen of RMG Research makes that distinction by asking voters the following question: If you had to choose between four candidates of equal character and competence, would you prefer someone who advocated: A) Trump-like policies, B) traditional Republican policies, C) traditional Democratic policies, or D) policies like those of Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez?

The key point coming out of RMG's most recent poll on that question? That MAGA base—those who answered A—is already fired up. The August numbers show that more than 50% of them are "very enthusiastic" about voting. "Every bit of data we have show the Trump group is just as excited as Democrats," Mr. Rasmussen says. "This base remains ready to crawl across glass for this guy."

No surprise. Since January 2025, Washington has been the Trump show, with the president leading every headline. He's also been exclusively speaking to the MAGA crowd most of this year. It explains the president's obsession with topics that make GOP strategists want to pull their hair out. Who loves listening to the president wax on about an "antiweaponization fund"? The MAGA crowd. Who is most interested in cage matches at the White House? MAGA. Want to know who thrills to hearing Mr. Trump rename Lake Ontario?

(Mr. Rasmussen has data on that one. Nearly 70% of the Trump base favors it. The rest of the country, 28%.)

It's everyone else in the GOP "base" (and independents) who should concern the GOP, especially because that category has grown the past 18 months, while the MAGA crowd has shrunk. At the time of Mr. Trump's 2025

**It's the 'traditional
Republicans' he needs
to get to the polls, not
MAGA enthusiasts.**

inauguration, 38% of registered voters said they favored "Trump-like policies"—compared with 14% who preferred traditional GOP policies and about 20% for each Democratic category. Those choosing MAGA have since dropped 10 points. But they haven't dropped out, waiting to be re-enthused. The data show that most have migrated back into the category of voters who prefer a more "traditional" Republican approach. That number is up 7 points, at 21%. (The Democratic figures have barely budged.)

Of the now much larger category of traditional Republicans, a mere 25% are "very enthusiastic" to go vote. That is the GOP's turnout problem, not the crowd in Dallas.

Parties traditionally rely on primaries to engage dedicated voters, then pivot in the fall to the rest of the

fold—those less tuned in, more moderate, more skeptical of party ideology. These are the people Republicans need and are studiously ignoring. Why? The Trump inner circle has spent too many months reinforcing the notion that the polls are lying, while simultaneously jerrying the RINOs and Reagan zombies they actually need. And good luck with that. RMG's most recent polling shows that only 11% of voters even knew the GOP was having a midterm convention this week.

It isn't too late for Mr. Trump and the GOP to speak more widely. Polls show that the Democratic advantage on the congressional generic ballot and on specific issues is soft by comparison with past midterms. The broader electorate doesn't feel Republicans have delivered. But they also aren't jazzed by democratic socialists. So there is merit to the GOP's new strategy of highlighting the choice voters face—between GOP growth policies and left-wing lunacy.

But more is needed to inspire traditional Republicans to go vote, and the solution is almost painfully obvious. Republicans need to talk about what they are going to do next—specifically how they are going to bring down prices. (No, a \$5,000 Trump "dividend" isn't the answer.) If the GOP really wants its convention to be a success, it will come out of the event with a forward-looking agenda.

Write to kim@wsj.com.

Jews Need to Get Personal With God

**HOUSES OF
WORSHIP**
By Roberta
Rosenthal
Kwall

The holiest time of the Jewish year is approaching. According to Jewish tradition, God opens the gates of heaven on Rosh Hashanah and closes them when the sun sets at the end of Yom Kippur.

The period is known as the Ten Days of Repentance or the Days of Awe. Special prayers are recited, and the liturgy's imagery focuses on repentance and seeking forgiveness. People are commonly greeted by wishing that their names be inscribed in the Book of Life—because on Rosh Hashanah God examines our past deeds and determines our individual fates for the following year.

Faith in God is a complicated topic for many American Jews (outside of the roughly 10% who identify as Orthodox). That's unfortunate for several reasons, beginning with this: American Jews could benefit from a personal relationship with God in our increasingly insecure environment.

Last Rosh Hashanah, my rabbi took up the issue of faith in a room of roughly 2,000 Jews. Acknowledging the absence of talk about faith in the non-Orthodox world, he pointed out that "faith is actually a relationship, not a belief." I often hear Christian friends discussing their personal relationship with God, but this language is dangerously rare

in Jewish circles. Even discussions among more traditionally observant Jews often focus instead on applications of Jewish law.

American Orthodox Jews maintain a widespread faith in a personalized conception of God. A 2023 study by Nishma Research revealed that 77% of all Orthodox Jews "fully believe" that God is involved in our everyday life, and a further 12% "tend to believe" the same. Overall, 73% of all Orthodox Jews, and 58% of Modern Orthodox Jews, claim they feel God's presence in their lives.

Then there are religiously liberal American Jews. They believe in a higher power or spiritual force, but don't typically embrace a more personalized belief that the God of the Bible determines the course of their lives and is active in human affairs. A benchmark 2020 Pew study showed belief in a personalized God ranging from 12% to 37% across the religiously liberal spectrum.

In America, traditional religious views are strongly correlated with conservative politics. Jonathan Haidt wrote about this connection in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. He discusses a theory of human morality embracing three ethics that drive human behavior: autonomy, divinity and community. In secular Western countries, autonomy is the driving moral ethic, while the two other ethics dominate elsewhere.

Mr. Haidt's research also finds that even within societies with a prevailing autonomy ethic, the ethics of divinity and community are much stronger within religious and conservative spaces.

These findings suggest why most American Jews, who are both religiously and politically liberal, don't think of faith in God in the same way

**The mere belief in a
'higher power' is an
impoverished form of
spiritual sustenance.**

as Orthodox Jews, who are also largely conservative politically. The autonomy ethic that is so comfortable for non-Orthodox Jewish Americans can be seen as diametrically opposed to the ideas of divine command and judgment that are so deeply embedded in traditional Judaism. Yet among a growing number of religiously liberal Jews, there seems to be a hunger for greater spirituality and an openness to developing a stronger sense of faith. One indication of this trend is the explosion of the Chabad movement in recent decades.

Taking a nonjudgmental "everyone is welcome" stance while maintaining Orthodox observance and palpably expressed faith in God, Chabad attracts many Jews who gravitate to its aura of authenticity. According to demographer

Ira Sheskin, the number of religiously liberal synagogues in the U.S. has declined over the past 20 years, while the number of Chabad synagogues has grown from 346 to 1,036.

Anyone who has spent time with Chabad clergy can affirm their sense of faith in God. This yearning for greater spirituality within a Jewish environment also helps explain the success in recent decades of such nondominant startups as Romemu in New York and the Kitchen in San Francisco—each with charismatic leadership that emphasizes Jewish learning, observance and spiritual growth outside an Orthodox framework.

Intellectual barriers to faith are most likely to recede at certain liminal moments when the emotional or spiritual pull takes over, and tradition and community assume more importance. In nearly three years since the brutal attack on Israel, American Jews have been experiencing unprecedented trauma and despair, with escalating antisemitism around the world and across our own country. As we usher in the Jewish year of 5787, this is a time for American Jews to think more deeply about their faith in, and their relationship with, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Ms. Kwall is a law professor and author of "Polarized: Why American Jews Are Divided and What To Do About It."

BOOKSHELF | By Angelina Torre

History
In Fragments

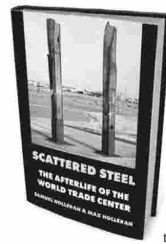
Scattered Steel

By Samuel Holleran and Max Holleran
Three Hills, 168 pages, \$26.95

When the South Tower of the World Trade Center fell on Sept. 11, 2001, my father was on the Brooklyn Bridge, heading west. At the time, he was the commanding officer of the New York Police Department Arson & Explosion Squad, one of hundreds of first responders racing against the current of pedestrians to get to Ground Zero. When I ask him today to describe the landscape upon arrival, he corrects me. Not a landscape, he says. A hellscape.

Almost 24 hours after the towers fell, fires continued to blaze through the rubble. With every step farther into "the pile," what rescue workers came to call the smoldering mass of debris, a coating of white powder got thicker and deeper—like snow that wasn't snow, my father recalls. He describes the scene in similes and metaphors. Workers swarmed the mound of metal like ants on a hill. A steel beam had pierced a subway station like a lawn dart. Crane operators maneuvered twisted I-beams as if playing pick-up sticks. The entire effort was like Jenga: Make the wrong move and the pieces might tumble.

Max Holleran is a senior lecturer of social policy at the University of Melbourne; Samuel Holleran is a public artist and researcher. In "Scattered Steel" these authors track the metal salvaged from the approximately 1.8 million tons of wreckage at Ground Zero. Rather than recount the painful imagery of the attack and its aftermath, the authors describe the memorial projects born from the recovery.



During that process, steel destined for scrap was separated from that which would become forensic evidence. A smelter subset was put aside by an archival committee organized by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, whose task was to collect pieces evocative of the buildings' character—the towers' signature trusses and their "trident" curtain walls, or simply box columns that had contorted in shocking ways: "relic" steel, by the authors' denomination.

Less than 1% of what constituted the towers' total steel was preserved, cataloged and eventually transported domestically and internationally as part of a program launched by the Port Authority in 2008. Members of the public needed only to submit an application to request one of approximately 1,800 pieces. The rusted, twisted metal became a means, the authors write, for "communities far from New York to establish a physical bond through these remnants of destruction."

By the time of the 10th anniversary, in 2011, pieces of steel stood in front of fire houses and commuter-rail stations and in parks; sometimes they waited in backyards while funds were raised to relocate and dedicate the steel in proper ceremonies. The cataloged fragments were held on the concrete floor of Hangar 17 at John F. Kennedy Airport, and the authors describe the tense atmosphere inside the cavernous space. Many who came there felt compelled to touch the tortured metal. A Massachusetts selectman recalled that the steel sent "a funny feeling" up his arm after he laid a hand on it. "It was just so raw," Bartholomew Voor-sanger, the chair of the Design Review Committee at the Port Authority, told the authors. "You could smell it and, virtually, almost taste it."

Mya Ando, an artist who was permitted to come in person to select her piece of steel for a London memorial, remembers a sense of holiness within the hangar. "There was a kind of solemn reverence from everyone," she said, "the guys who drove the trucks, the riggers, and the people from Port Authority. We felt it." Ms. Ando, one of more than 30 artists and city officials whom the authors spoke to, decided on steel girders nearly three stories tall that had fallen from the top of Tower Two.

Pieces of twisted metal from Ground Zero became a means 'to establish a physical bond through these remnants of destruction.'

Unlike most of the memorial-makers discussed in "Scattered Steel," Ms. Ando chose to alter the rusted metal she received. Over a months-long process, she burnished a 3-foot-long panel to the mirror-like clarity of stainless steel. In polishing the metal, the authors write, Ms. Ando wanted to "bring it back to the world of the living." First unveiled in London's Battersea Park in 2011 and later relocated, Ms. Ando's sculpture has now been installed at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, where it stands tall yet twisted, like the trees extending skyward beside it.

Besides this London site, readers visit a memorial in Rosemead, Calif., where two hands, fashioned from 2,976 individually cut birds (dove-hawk hybrids, each representing one of the people killed in the attacks) hold up a mishapen 10-foot I-beam. In Kewaskum, Wis., a man who lost his daughter in the attacks secured a 2,500-pound piece of steel for a memorial in the small town's plaza; beside the seating, twin twin-lilies rise from a bed of sweet autumn clematis—a flower that blooms in September.

The various 9/11 memorials may have given citizens a space to mourn the national tragedy, the authors argue, but they occasionally have attracted controversy. Many memorials, for instance, also commemorate the wars launched in Afghanistan and Iraq, which grew more unpopular as they went on. Others make use of overtly Christian iconography, and have raised complaints from atheist groups. Some observers, including the authors, claim most memorials disproportionately emphasize the sacrifice of first responders rather than sufficiently recognizing the office workers who lost their lives that day.

The authors can get bogged down in such second-order analysis, and their text has an academic tone. Words can only explain so much about what it is like to visit these memorials, or to touch them. Yet "Scattered Steel," like its subject, is a powerful artifact. Steel doesn't talk, but it does tell stories.

Ms. Torre is a books editor at the Journal.

Coming in BOOKS this weekend

World War II in Asia • The life and legacy of Oscar Wilde • The madness and joy of stamp collecting • Chasing butterflies in Denmark • John Coltrane • Emily St. John Mandel's latest novel • Visions of the afterlife • & more

Sept. 11 and Our Brush With Indivisibility

By Bob Greene

When an oversize book was published in the months after Sept. 11, 2001, and rose quickly to the No. 1 spot on nonfiction best-seller lists, its title seemed a perfect two-word distillation of America's mood. In fact, some of us who worked on the book thought the title was a big factor in its success.

Looking at the cover of the book today, though, that title can sound like a taunt. "One Nation," it was called. Published by the editors of Life magazine, the volume included stunning photos and heartfelt essays documenting the terrorist attack and its aftermath. The title—meant to convey hope rather than despair—came from the Pledge of Allegiance: "one nation, under God, indivisible."

Indivisible. Our country has a long and famous history of spirited disputations and

political acrimony; it is both a blessing and a curse. On that September morning 25 years ago, we knew to put that aside.

Today, you have to ask yourself what has happened to us. Constantly and loudly at each others' throats over

**The divisions came
back all too soon and
only deepened in the
next quarter-century.**

issues both large and minuscule, disdainful and combative toward those who vote for a different party, ready to shout and threaten over the most insignificant slights, seeing weakness in compromise, and thinking it strength to belittle fellow Americans with whom we disagree—there are days when the idea

of us being one nation seems to have vanished.

You wouldn't have bet on that back then. Resolve, national solidarity and a renewed belief in common bonds were the order of the day. There was one moment, before the sun had gone all the way down on that Sept. 11, when the spirit of national unity crystallized. On the steps of the U.S. Capitol, the men and women of Congress—Republicans standing next to Democrats, senators next to representatives, liberals next to conservatives—spontaneously began to sing "God Bless America." First a few voices, then many, then all. The signal to the country, and to the world, was unmistakable: We may forget from time to time how ardently we cherish this nation and how fiercely protective we are of it, but by attacking us you have made us remember, and have brought us together.

Who would have guessed that night how easily we would learn again to turn on each other? No enemy did that—we have done it to ourselves.

If Life magazine wanted to publish a book defining our country today, the last title anyone would pick would be "One Nation."

My copy of that old book is now dog-eared, its dust jacket torn. I flip through its pages and reread its words about Congress—Republicans standing next to Democrats, senators next to representatives, liberals next to conservatives—spontaneously began to sing "God Bless America." First a few voices, then many, then all. The signal to the country, and to the world, was unmistakable: We may forget from time to time how ardently we cherish this nation and how fiercely protective we are of it, but by attacking us you have made us remember, and have brought us together.

Mr. Greene's books include "Once Upon a Town: The Miracle of the North Platte Canteen."

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The 9/11 Lessons for Next Time

America is in a sour mood these days, so it's not surprising that on the anniversary of the terrorist attacks that September morning 25 years ago we are being told of the country's failures. We are lectured that America overreacted, squandered blood and treasure, betrayed its principles, and set the country on the path to national decline. If you flew in this week after 25 years on Mars, you might think Osama bin Laden had won.

The U.S. homeland is more vulnerable now than it was 25 years ago.

Don't believe it. We were there that day, across the street from the Twin Towers, and we see a different legacy. America suffered a sneak attack, the worst since Pearl Harbor and more deadly. The country responded with self-sacrifice, patriotic unity at least for a time, and enough righteous fury to avenge those 2,977 murders. Measured by the lack of any similar attack in 25 years, the "global war on terror" qualifies as a success.

The ceremonies on Friday will honor the bravery of the first responders, and well they should. They ran to the fire, saved thousands, and sacrificed their lives. Honor too those who cleared the rubble to find evidence of the dead. Many have suffered cancers or other ailments from those recovery efforts.

It's easy in hindsight, especially as memories fade, to forget the uncertainty and worry that prevailed in the wake of the attacks. Would there be another one? Were there sleeper cells waiting to strike? What about a "dirty bomb"? The anthrax letters that arrived that autumn heightened anxieties that the terrorists planned more mayhem.

They tried but failed, as alert passengers stopped the December 2001 "shoe bomber" and the security measures put in place after 9/11 exposed other plots. The U.S. captured the 9/11 plotters, chased the Taliban who had protected Osama from Afghanistan, and diminished al Qaeda's ability to attack again.

Two counterterrorism principles established after 9/11 were especially important. The first was to take the war to the terrorists overseas rather than play defense here. The second was to hold states that harbored terrorists as culpable as the terrorists. One major success is that Saudi Arabia, whose Sunni radicals nurtured Osama and al Qaeda, joined the antiterror fight and defeated its jihadists.

Though critics claim otherwise, the U.S. hasn't compromised its liberties to gain more security. The surveillance methods established at the time, such as the Patriot Act and warrantless wiretaps, haven't entrapped the innocent. The political system has modified what it con-

cluded were excesses, and the Bill of Rights still limits the government.

Americans also deserve credit for their failure to blame Muslims or Arabs en masse. There were as always individual acts of bigotry, though our guess is fewer than today's increasing antisemitism. President George W. Bush went out of his way to renege claims of collective guilt by religious or ethnic association.

There have been mistakes. The Director of National Intelligence added a layer of needless bureaucracy. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were longer and costlier than hoped, though the former ended much better than the latter because Mr. Bush changed strategy and endorsed the surge that defeated the insurgency. Joe Biden, who opposed the Iraq surge as a Senator, ordered the total retreat from Afghanistan that ended in humiliation.

Our readers can no doubt cite others, but the salient fact is that the U.S. has prevented, or deterred, another 9/11. That wasn't guaranteed 25 years ago, and we would not have predicted it at the time.

More important than reprising the past is asking whether we have the fortitude and tools to prevent the next attack. This means recognizing that the U.S. homeland is no longer a geographic refuge. Adversaries can and do strike with cyberattacks. They can put at risk our satellites, power plants and water supplies. Armed drones could strike our planes on the ground or cause mass casualties at public events. Hypersonic weapons can hit targets within minutes.

This requires constant vigilance from those charged with our defense but also from a citizenry that doesn't seek the comfort of complacency that has left post-Cold War Europe so vulnerable. We need to spend the money, even if imperfectly, on defenses against missiles, bio-weapons and now AI agents. Deterrence also requires that adversaries know with absolute certainty that they will be killed and their nations punished if they attack the U.S.

A crucial lesson of 9/11 is that the terrorists wanted to destroy America not for what it did but for what it is. They loathed our freedom and prosperity, and our adversaries still do. One mistake that led to 9/11 was underestimating that loathing and the inhumanity it could produce. They will seek mass destruction if they gain the ability.

By all means honor the firemen and police and others who gave their lives on 9/11. But honor the dead as well by recalling the horror of that day and resolving to do what is needed so it doesn't happen again.

A Millionaire Tax Is Never Enough

Rhode Island Democratic Gov. Dan McKee on Wednesday became the first Governor since 2018 to lose a primary challenge. His defeat is a lesson that courting the left can't overcome government incompetence.

Former CVS executive Helena Foulkes routed Mr. McKee, 62%-38%, after losing to him by three points four years ago. The press attributes his drubbing to public frustration with the prolonged shutdown of the state's Washington Bridge for repairs, and no doubt that was a big problem. The bridge over the Seekonk River connects Providence and East Providence.

The bridge fiasco has become a symbol of progressive policy failure. For years the state government neglected maintenance on the bridge, while channelling more tax dollars to transfer payments and benefits for public union workers. Mr. McKee projected in 2023 that bridge repairs would take several months. Now the bridge isn't expected to open until late 2028. Estimated costs have doubled, while government bureaucracy and union

Rhode Island's Governor indulged the left's agenda. He lost anyway.

work rules have slowed construction.

The closure has increased traffic on surrounding roads, compounding the day-to-day pain Rhode Islanders feel from rising costs. Residential electricity rates have risen 52% in the state over the last six years, compared to 39% nationwide, owing to anti-fossil-fuel policies.

This summer the Governor tried to buy union support by signing an increase in the top state income-tax rate to 8.99% from 5.99% on millionaires to pay for a \$330 refundable child tax credit and ObamaCare subsidies. He also imposed a three-year moratorium on new charter schools, a teachers union demand that Ms. Foulkes opposed.

Such sops to the left didn't help Mr. McKee. Ms. Foulkes didn't oppose the higher tax rate. But she attacked the incumbent for presiding over a declining business environment, which CNBC ranked 48th in the U.S. this year. CNBC rated the state's economy dead last.

Buying off liberal special interests doesn't offset the costs of government dysfunction, even among Democratic voters.

Trump Has a \$5,000 Bridge to Sell You

President Trump has a special talent for exposing the cynicism of modern politics, and he knows it. A Trumpian classic is his promise Wednesday night of a \$5,000 "dividend" for every U.S. adult citizen if Republicans retain control of Congress in November.

"Here is my promise: If the Republicans win the House of Representatives and the United States Senate ... I will issue a dividend to every adult citizen in the United States of America for \$5,000," Mr. Trump said at the GOP's midterm convention in Dallas.

There are roughly 240 million American adult citizens. Multiply that by \$5,000 and you get about \$1.2 trillion. The amount is so preposterous that you'd almost think Mr. Trump is trying to show voters the absurdity of such income redistribution. It's the *reductio ad absurdum* of welfare state politics.

We doubt this is what Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent had in mind when he recently promised a "fiscal consolidation" plan. And we doubt it could pass Congress.

At least we hope not. In the unlikely event Republicans retain control of Congress, they might feel pressure to make good on a slimmer version of Mr. Trump's pledge. They incorpo-

His latest promise is a classic in vote-buying political cynicism.

rated some of his 2024 campaign pitches (e.g., no tax on tips) in last year's tax bill.

Vote buying has a long political history, and Democrats are professionals at the game. They do it by passing programs in the name of some high-toned principle, like income equality or "fairness." Mr. Trump's cynical genius is that his political bribery is running naked in the street. Elect my party, get a check.

The caveat is that voters may not buy the offer. In December 2020 he pushed for another round of \$2,000 Covid payments, and Democrats used that to pressure Republicans into passing an end-of-year spending bonanza that included \$600 checks. Despite the handouts, Republicans lost both Georgia Senate seats in the January 2021 runoff. Democrats in March 2021 passed another round of \$1,400 stimulus checks and so much more. That spending spree is how the U.S. got 9.1% inflation, and now \$40 trillion in debt.

Mr. Trump is resorting to this because voters are unhappy about inflation and don't think his economic policies have helped them. His tariff tax increases are a big part of the reason. If he repealed those, he'd give the country an economic dividend without spending a dime.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Canada Isn't Defined by Being 'Un-America'

Regarding James Stranko's op-ed "What Is Canada, Other Than the Un-America?" (Sept. 3): The two countries didn't emerge from opposing traditions. Both inherited Britain's long struggle to reconcile liberty with authority; they developed different parts of that inheritance.

Sharing popular culture doesn't erase political identity. Watching the same films, playing the same sports and shopping at the same stores doesn't make two nations one.

The U.S. embraced the Whig principle of resistance: Government without consent may be overthrown. Yet its independence wasn't a purely American achievement. Edmund Burke, William Pitt (the Elder) and Charles James Fox defended the colonists in Parliament. French troops, financing and naval power proved indispensable. After Yorktown, the British House of Commons voted to end offensive war, bringing down Lord Frederick North and clearing the way for peace.

Canada chose the evolutionary path. Its Crown is not chiefly an expression of affection for a monarch. It represents a continuous, imper-

sonal constitutional authority that no prime minister, party or majority owns. Consent restrains authority, but constitutional authority also restrains political will.

John Farthing expressed this Canadian tradition in his 1957 book, "Freedom Wears a Crown." Freedom, in this understanding, doesn't require the destruction of inherited institutions. It depends on institutions capable of balancing continuity with reform, order with dissent, and national community with differences of region, language and belief.

Canada is therefore not an incomplete America. America dramatized one part of the British inheritance; Canada institutionalized another. Its defining achievement is ordered liberty: suspicion of ideological conceit, faith in common decency, respect for tradition and a preference for gradual change. Canadians regard compromise not as weakness but as democratic achievement. We aren't a melting pot; we remain one country without requiring everyone to become one thing.

BRAD SIMPSON
Victoria, British Columbia

Film Incentives Are Investments, Not Handouts

Your editorial "Handouts for Hollywood—Really?" (Sept. 4) argues that film incentives benefit the rich, while referencing the \$1.2 billion in film and television production incentives New York awarded in 2025. The editorial neglects to mention that this was spread across many productions employing tens of thousands of local crew members, construction workers, drivers, caterers and technicians, while supporting countless local businesses.

What your editorial describes as a "subsidy" is a tax incentive, not a multimillion-dollar check stuffed into some fat cat's pocket. Studies show that this investment more than makes up for itself in state and local tax revenue, while every dollar adds \$11.50 to real gross domestic product.

More importantly, the product itself has value far beyond the production budget.

American media is our greatest ambassador, turning towns and landscapes into destinations world-

wide. Visitors still take "Sex and the City" and "The Sopranos" tours decades later. Tourists line up at Katz's Delicatessen because of "When Harry Met Sally," while "Breaking Bad," "Yellowstone" and 80-year-old John Ford movies draw guests to the West. American screen culture doesn't only depict America; it sells America.

When production leaves the U.S., we don't simply lose jobs. We lose tourism dollars and one of our most powerful forms of cultural influence. U.S. corporate taxes across the board are too high. Governments should compete for investment by lowering taxes rather than handing out favors, but dismissing production incentives as "handouts for Hollywood" misses the larger picture.

America isn't merely making entertainment. It is making one of its most powerful exports.

HILLERY BROTSCHOL
Former screenwriter
El Paso, Texas

Hold China Accountable for Its Trade Practices

Regarding "U.S., G-20 See Common Ground Over China Exports" (U.S. News, Sept. 3), it is better late than never to see the Group of 20 nations acknowledge what the American steel industry has been saying for years—that policy-driven overproduction coupled with overreliance on exports is a global economic threat. This is a good first step, but now is the time for action.

China continues to produce and export much more steel than it consumes. This overproduction is fueled by massive state subsidies—15 times greater than that received by firms in other steel economies, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Beijing then dumps that excess steel around the world, undercutting market-based production.

China's state subsidization of its steel sector continues unabated and is spreading to other critical manufacturing sectors, such as autos. Addressing the problem requires

global coordination and cooperation. This month, when trade ministers gather in Milwaukee for the Global Forum on Steel Excess Capacity, they should follow our nation's lead and come prepared to act. It is time to hold China and its enablers accountable for the unfair trade practices that destabilize steel markets worldwide.

KEVIN M. DEMPSEY
President and CEO
American Iron and Steel Institute
Washington

The Camino de Santiago Is Only the Start of a Journey

The greatest lesson of the Camino de Santiago, a medieval pilgrimage in northern Spain, may be that the real camino begins when one gets home ("I Walked 500 Miles On the Camino de Santiago to Find What Comes Next," Journal Report, Aug. 29).

Its simplicity is powerful. For a time, the trappings of ordinary life fall away. You carry only what you need, put one foot in front of the other and keep moving. In that uncluttered space, things long carried within us have room to surface. But walking is only part of the transformation. Healing often begins when we find the words for what we have carried—and when someone is willing to listen. To feel safe enough to reflect, to speak honestly, and to be truly heard is a profound gift.

The challenge on returning home is to preserve some of that simplicity: to carry less, listen more, keep moving and create that same space for others. Perhaps that is the real pilgrimage.

NANCY PERNIER
Houston

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Letters intended for publication should be emailed to wsj.letters@wsj.com. Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

OPINION

The Day We Lost My Friend Arlene

By Caroline Aiken Koster

On Sept. 11, 2001, I walked my son to his first day of kindergarten, then wandered to the nearby Brooklyn Heights Promenade. A peaceful morning soon turned disastrous. My neighbors and I watched in horror as flames roared from the Twin Towers. I didn't yet know how the attacks would shatter our country's invincibility and sear our souls for a generation. All I could think of was the people up there, including my friend Arlene Fried, 49.

In the 1990s, Arlene and I worked at the same law firm. We were in a cohort of female associates in a firm with only a handful of female partners, often working brutal hours for the same partners, including a loud, funny male securities lawyer who called us "my feminists." Arlene was



The burning World Trade Center seen from Brooklyn, Sept. 11, 2001.

Cantor Fitzgerald ended up hiring me for her old job. A quarter-century later, I met her daughter.

a Columbia Law graduate, brash and warm at once, a true New Yorker. She was 14 years my senior and returned home at night to replace and three daughters on Long Island, while the rest of us headed to cramped apartments in the city.

Not long after, Arlene left to be an in-house lawyer for a Wall Street firm I'd never heard of, Cantor Fitzgerald. We hugged goodbye as she packed her boxes, labeled "One World Trade Center." Cantor lost 658 people on 9/11, Arlene among them.

When a recruiter called about a securities role at Cantor shortly after the towers fell, I said no at first—I didn't want to take Arlene's job. I was told, gently, that the role had changed. Maybe it had. I took it, anyway, in July 2002. By September I was reading names aloud at the one-year memorial in Central Park. I spent the reception looking for her family in the crowd. I never found them and, regrettably, I never called. I didn't know what I'd say.

Early on, I felt like an intruder in Arlene's world, stumbling over her letters and term sheets. It was easy enough to replace her name with mine in corporate filings. What I couldn't do was ask her, one of the sole working mothers I knew well, what to do when, for two years, my son drew the burning Twin Towers behind his head in his self-portraits and filled artwork skies with fighter jets. I wondered about her three daughters, now missing a chunk of their souls; her husband, raising them

alone; and her parents, who survived the Holocaust only to lose their own daughter to violent hatred.

This year, as a co-editor of "The Families," an anthology of Cantor voices to mark the 25th anniversary, I asked a Cantor Fitzgerald Relief Fund charity volunteer to track down Arlene's family. The volunteer found Arlene's eldest daughter, Dayna Zoller, now a dentist in New Jersey. Dayna agreed to write an essay for the book—and to come into Manhattan for dinner. Victoria, an old law-firm friend, joined us, and the three of us sat for hours, filling in the gaps in each other's memories of a woman we'd all loved.

Dayna told us about her mother's going back to school to become a lawyer, studying for the bar exam at the kitchen table alongside her daughter working on high school math problems. Dayna spoke of her and her sisters' pain of losing their mother. She said she found words to express it only recently, feeling more

open to telling the story with her own children off to college.

I told Dayna about the Arlene I'd known at the firm. A woman who had listened to me and offered guidance about raising children at a time when I had none. We laughed as I recalled Arlene driving us to the partner's 40th birthday party—the only associates invited. I'd shown up with a silly joke book gift and Arlene with a proper Hermès tie. Suddenly, she de-toured to Target and declared "we're combining," and I dutifully re-wrapped and scribbled a joint note for gifts that never felt quite right alone but together were perfect.

Afterward, Victoria and I called around to other old colleagues who hadn't spoken to in a quarter century. We all reflected, feeling somewhat more whole by sharing in a community than we had in dozens of years.

None of this rises to the scale of what Cantor lost that day, or what the country lost. But 25 years on, I've learned that grief doesn't live only in memorials and names read aloud once a year. Sometimes it waits, patiently, for a phone call you finally decide to make. Sharing stories with the next generation is vital, healing and resilient.

This year, at Cantor's 25th anniversary memorial service, Dayna will read her essay about her mother. At last I will see Arlene's family there, the next generation making her proud.

Ms. Koster is a senior attorney at Cantor Fitzgerald and general counsel of the Cantor Fitzgerald Relief Fund. She is co-editor, with Edith Lutnick, of "The Families: 9/11 Anthology of Love, Loss and Lessons of Resilience."

To Help Muslims, Reject Islamists

By Zainab Al-Suwaij

Three days after the Sept. 11 attacks, I walked into my office at an Episcopal refugee resettlement organization in New Haven, Conn. There sat five females colleagues with their heads covered in hijabs. They wanted to make sure that I as an Arab Muslim woman felt secure. The same day, a friend called. "I will escort you to the supermarket," she insisted. "I don't want anyone to harass you when they see your headscarf." A few weeks later in a town park, a woman began pelting my family with paper. Bystanders called the police, who ordered her to leave and apologized to us for the incident.

These moments reminded me why I had fled repression and extremism in Iraq to seek a better future in America, which welcomed me with open arms.

My fellow Americans went out of their way to support me after 9/11. They're too accepting of extremists.

The al Qaeda hijackings also served as a wake-up call: The Middle East's radicalism had come to America. The destructive ideological movements I left behind eight years earlier had crossed the ocean to my adopted homeland. Yet I was sure the American people would rise to the challenge and beat back the threat, as they had in World War II.

I was naive. Rather than stop extremist movements, American democracy has accommodated them. Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D, Mich.) has shared a platform with a prosecutor named as a possible unindicted co-conspirator in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Ramzi Kassem, a lawyer who defended an al Qaeda operative, is chief counsel to the New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani. The Council on American-Islamic Relations published a back-to-school resource guide that suggested high schoolers read Osama bin Laden's "Letter to America." Rep. Ilhan Omar (D, Minn.) once spoke at a CAIR fundraiser, where she described the 9/11 attacks as "some people did something" and complained about repression in America.

A classic Arabic expression describes the brazen audacity of those who attack and then cry victim: "He slapped me, pretends to cry, and then ran to complain."

Our country appears to have forgotten 9/11's lessons. The Islamist threat didn't disappear, it evolved. The same Muslim Brotherhood ecosystem became more professional and refined its tactics to exploit America's open society, all while accusing America of being a hive of bigotry. Victimhood became the key pose, coupled with civil-rights rhetoric that confuses decent Americans. Exploitation of school boards, city councils, and the Democratic Party has enabled movement ideologues to achieve positions of power.

Fear of being called racist is now a national-security vulnerability. Americans are too risk-averse, too sensitive, unable to uphold consistent standards of conduct for all citizens and vigorously enforce existing laws. Muslims who love America need to speak that truth. We aren't victims, and we shouldn't scapegoat other minorities or indulge in conspiracy theories. We are long overdue to demonstrate mature and patriotic civic leadership.

We must also speak bluntly to those fellow Americans who think Islam is the problem. Our spiritual tradition has given the world algebra, chemistry, physics, surgery, pediatrics, the concept of separation of powers and much more. Our problem is extremist political movements that manipulate and hide behind religion to advance their agenda. Denouncing the spiritual heritage of 1.6 billion people plays into the hands of Islamists, and overlooks the many Muslims who gave their lives in the war on terror.

The first condition of making America great is safety. The U.S. government can't keep kicking down the road the problems of Islamism in America. The American people should stop giving platforms and salaries to people who treat America as a hotel and an ATM rather than a treasured homeland.

To my fellow Americans who offered solidarity after 9/11: Thank you for protecting me. Now protect our country. Please open your eyes and confront rather than coddle the extremists abusing our democratic system.

Ms. Al-Suwaij is president of the American Muslim League.

Has AfD Made Vance's German Dream Come True?

POLITICAL ECONOMICS
By Joseph C. Sternberg

JD Vance's political dream is coming to life—in Germany. That's one, admittedly America-centric, read on the shocking state election results in Saxony-Anhalt last weekend. The insurgent-right Alternative for Germany party, or AfD, surged to first place with a plurality of nearly 44% of the vote. The upstart displaced the center-right Christian Democrats, the CDU, who have governed the state since 2002 but this year won only about 17% of the vote.

What happens now is a complicated question to answer because the AfD is unusually difficult for German politics to metabolize. Europe's old mainstream parties and their media enablers are prone to freights about the rise of insurgent conservative movements. Usually this boils down to whiny pique that voters don't care as much about elite opinion as they used to.

Germany is different. The country's history instills an acute sensitivity about movements on the right. One could argue that this borders on oversensitivity. But the AfD goes out of its way to play into alarming stereotypes—such as by refusing to discipline members who spout old Nazi slogans on the campaign trail.

Across the Rhine, Marine Le Pen kicked her own father, Jean-Marie, out of the party he founded (now known as the National Rally) to reassure voters she was leading it beyond its antisemitic past. AfD leader Alice Weidel's pointed refusal to police her party's ranks is inexplicable unless the AfD aims at destruction rather than serious governance.

That's because the AfD's unwillingness to solve this problem makes it impossible for almost any other party to govern alongside it. German parties instead have attempted to maintain a "firewall" around the AfD. This prevents the CDU under Chancellor Friedrich Merz from forming the sort of conservative governing coalition voters might want.

Last Sunday's Saxony-Anhalt election is triggering national soul-searching precisely because it's hard to say how much longer the firewall might survive at the state level, or what the consequences might be if

one or more major parties breach it. One consequence, although far from certain, could be the collapse of Mr. Merz's center-right administration if AfD's rise nudges CDU politicians in Saxony-Anhalt to form an alliance with the party, violating Mr. Merz's prohibition. This is one way Sunday's state election is more likely to cause instability and paralysis than to inject new conservative energy into Berlin.

Vice President Vance must be enjoying this, having cast his lot with the AfD. He vocally supported the party before last year's national elections, at the expense of Mr. Merz's conservatives, who are far more pro-American than the AfD.

In February 2025 Mr. Vance met with Ms. Weidel, then delivered a speech at the Munich Security Conference in which he inveighed against political firewalls, using that word to needle his German hosts. Late in the year, the Trump administration released a national-security strategy with Mr. Vance's fingerprints all over it that threw support behind Europe's insurgent political movements.

Mr. Vance's theory appears to be that the AfD offers a viable model of conservative, anti-immigration, val-

ues-based politicking—and that Europe can recover from its economic and cultural despond only under the ministrations of such a movement. None of this is obvious.

The AfD has proved it can win an election on an anti-immigration platform, which isn't difficult these days. It hasn't proved it can implement such an agenda in a way that will remain popular, a much harder task.

The party's success is more likely to contribute to instability and paralysis than conservative energy.

Will Germans, even in AfD heartlands like Saxony-Anhalt, tolerate rows of images of police roughing up immigrants? Perhaps. But support for President Trump's tough-on-immigration policies in the U.S. withered as the public saw those policies implemented in the streets. Other European insurgents, such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, have had to moderate their tone even on immigration once their parties won power.

Dems Should Permit Trump a Win

By Jane Flegel
And Pavan Venkatakrisnan

Democrats in Congress have an opportunity to make it easier for their next governing majority to lower energy costs and fight climate change. But there's a catch: They have to give President Trump a victory today.

The bipartisan dream of federal permitting reform is finally close to realization, after years of on-and-off negotiations. Reports of a pending deal on Capitol Hill suggest both sides of the aisle want to lessen the time it takes for America to build factories, transmission lines and energy projects. Such a deal should please every faction of the Democratic Party, especially those who believe climate change demands immediate action. Progressive holdouts either don't think permitting reform is necessary, or they want to wait until after the election when they believe Democrats can ensure less aggressive

changes to environmental laws. But those changes, too, are sorely needed.

Democrats shouldn't see working with Republicans to pass a permitting reform as giving Mr. Trump a win. It's a trade-off. Cutting red tape might make it more difficult for liberals to block fossil-fuel projects, but those same barriers stand in the way of clean-energy projects necessary to modernize our electricity grid.

When the Department of Energy wants to finance a large project under the current permitting system, it has to slog through comprehensive environmental review. This delays energy projects that would decarbonize our economy and serve the public interest.

Three years after the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provided tens of billions of dollars to finance new clean energy projects, the federal Office of Clean Energy Demonstrations had made nearly \$15 billion in financial commitments but effectively no projects were under construction. DOE alumni who administered the office found that compliance requirements—including the National Environmental Policy Act—were a major drag on getting money out the door, and that streamlining the law could cut years off approval timelines.

Permitting reform would also speed the construction of much-needed transmission infrastructure. DOE says America will need to significantly invest in more transmission capacity in the next 20 years to keep up with demand growth and maintain reliability.

Right now, planning and building a single interconnection transmission line can take as long as 18 years, in part because existing laws governing the process create arbitrary obstacles. Backstop siting authority within the Federal Power Act is too limited,

which means a single state can sometimes veto a transmission line that would serve a larger region. A statute of the Clean Water Act grants states the ability to review the water-quality impact of infrastructure projects. Blue states have used that statute to block natural-gas pipelines, but it could also be used by red states to thwart transmission lines.

Additionally, both clean energy and transmission projects have "review areas" under the National Historic Preservation Act that are about 10 times as large as those of fossil projects, and recent data shows they are more than eight times as likely to receive an "adverse effect" finding, triggering additional delays.

Meanwhile, the executive branch retains too much discretion over the permitting process, a vulnerability demonstrated by both the Trump and Biden administrations' treatments of politically disfavored energy sources. A permitting-reform deal should address these failures, and quickly. If Democrats take control of Washington in 2029 and permitting reform hasn't been accomplished this Congress, it will be too late. Agencies and courts will need time to define the scope of litigation reforms, and new transmission policy will take years to implement.

Democrats can't claim to treat climate change as a crisis if they are unwilling to act to solve it. Right now, that means making a deal on permitting with Republican lawmakers and Mr. Trump.

Ms. Flegel is a senior fellow at the Searchlight Institute. She served as senior director for industrial emissions at the White House Office of Domestic Climate Policy, 2021-22. Mr. Venkatakrisnan is a policy fellow at Searchlight.

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Why Denny Tamaki is unfit as Okinawa governor

His continued leadership poses risks for the prefecture's governance and security

ROBERT D. ELDRIDGE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Serious observers of Okinawan affairs — not the radical and often violent anti-base activists or their sympathizers in the media and academia — have a number of reasons why they do not want to see Denny Tamaki, the current governor of Okinawa Prefecture, to be given another four years in Sunday's gubernatorial election.

In the past eight years, Tamaki's administration has shown chronic opacity and weak oversight, most seriously in a scandal involving the prefecture's Washington office over improper corporate visa and accounting arrangements. The left-leaning governor spent years and substantial public resources traveling to China and other countries without an accounting of how the money was spent.

However, my biggest concern involves Japan and the region's security, centered around the strategically vital 3,000-meter runway at Shimojishima Airport in the Miyako Islands group. The Okinawa Prefectural Government, under Tamaki's eight years as governor and the four years of his leftist predecessor, the late Takeshi Onaga, has done virtually nothing to repair or maintain this critical asset.

If Tamaki wins for a third term, it is highly likely that he will continue to prevent efforts to maintain the runway, which is likely linked to their desire to block the facilities to be used by the U.S. military and Self-Defense Forces in the event of a contingency. Successive Okinawa administrations have defied logic by citing a lack of funds for 12 consecutive years, despite clear identification of the need for repairs.

This is dangerous not only for the smaller commercial aircraft that use the airport to bring tourists in from around Japan and the region, but also for Japanese, U.S. and other friendly foreign militaries that would use the airfield in the event of an unfortunate contingency in the region.

Of course, there are those who will argue that the airfield was never meant for military use. In the August 1971 Yara Memorandum, which was negotiated between then chief executive of the Ryukyu Islands, Chibyo



Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki discusses his basic policy platform for the gubernatorial election in Naha City, Okinawa, on Aug. 12. [11]

Yara, prior to Okinawa's reversion in 1972 and the 1979 "confirmation" by then-Gov. Junji Nishime, the airport was designated not to be used for military purposes.

From a geopolitical perspective, this position is no longer realistic, especially as tension involving Taiwan has grown in recent years. Moreover, the original understandings, operations, functions and management of the airport and its facilities have changed over the years. As a result, despite the renewal of the terminal area to be able to better welcome tourists, there have been increasing calls locally for a relink.

These voices became particularly apparent when I visited Irabu Island for my umpteenth time (my first visit was in the summer of 2005). One islander shared with me the story of Kozo Okuhira, mayor of Irabu Vil-

lage in the 1960s, who devoted himself to bringing a pilot training airfield to Shimojishima. "I will plant a money tree on this island before I die," he said, symbolizing the dreams that the islanders of the time placed in Shimojishima Airport.

More than half a century has passed, yet the measures to promote education, medical care, industry and other areas that were expected to accompany construction of the airfield never happened. With the transfer of the airport's management from the national government to Okinawa Prefecture, these measures were effectively shelved. As such, another resident told me: "We need to take stock of the commitments made at the time by the central and prefectural governments."

Shimojishima Airport was originally planned as an airfield to train commercial

airline pilots. With Okinawa's reversion to Japan, however, the political and administrative framework surrounding the airport changed significantly. After the Yara memo and Nishime confirmation, the airfield commenced operations as a Category III airport in July 1979. However, a substantial gap has emerged between the airport as it was originally envisioned — as a national government project — and the airport as it exists today under prefectural management.

Today, Shimojishima Airport is administered by Okinawa Prefecture. However, national government agencies remain involved in functions essential to aviation safety, including air traffic control, meteorological services and radar. In other words, although it is a prefecturally managed airport, Okinawa Prefecture does not inde-

pendently provide all of its critical aviation functions. Moreover, maintaining and managing the airport requires several hundred million yen each year.

At present, Okinawa Prefecture owns and manages the airport terminal building and adjacent electrical substation facilities. At the same time, there are portions comprising much of the airport site that are registered as property of the former Ministry of Transport and, today, as property of the national government. The airport, further, was constructed as a result of national policy. National government property remains within its grounds and national agencies continue to play important roles in aviation administration. Yet, since the airfield is considered a "prefectural airport," several structural contradictions exist.

Administrative and property issues are just the beginning. During the construction of the runway, according to those involved at the time, less expensive materials were used, such as sea sand, rather than the materials specified for construction.

Because the runway is managed by the prefecture, it is not possible to independently confirm the reports. Nevertheless, the construction specifications from the period, records of the materials used, material testing results, construction records, completion inspections and other relevant documentation should be examined so that the present safety of the runway can be objectively verified.

In addition to the likelihood of faulty materials being used for the runway construction, Shimojishima Airport today also faces the reality of aging infrastructure and the constraints of Okinawa Prefecture's finances. Combined with these issues and questions concerning the appropriate division of responsibilities between the national and prefectural governments, many residents and officials associated with the airport feel that the time has also come to reconsider the administrative framework established half a century ago.

In a normal political environment, the national government, Okinawa Prefecture and Miyakojima City would come together to conduct a thorough review of the development measures originally promised, the runway plans, the construction work carried out at the time, the current safety of the airport's facilities, the prefecture's management and operational structure, responsibility for the cost of future improvements and the possibility of returning the airport to national government management.

However, according to local residents, the current governor and his leftist predecessors have blocked all attempts to address the situation.

Because of the seriousness of the situation in the nearby Senkaku Islands and Taiwan Strait, the time has come to do so. Allowing Denny to stay in office undermines prefectural, national and regional interests. Let's hope the rest of Okinawa's voters realize this and bid him farewell.

Robert D. Eldridge is a former tenured associate professor of U.S.-Japan relations at Osaka University, former political adviser to the U.S. Marine Corps in Okinawa and the author of "The Origins of the Bilateral Okinawa Problem" (Routledge, 2001).

Anime superpower deserves a bigger stage in Japan

GEAROID REIDY
BLOOMBERG

Fans of "Dragon Ball," the seminal manga and anime in which the Saiyan is the main character, were excited by reports of a new theme park in France based on the franchise. French President Emmanuel Macron revealed plans to build three parks near Paris with Saudi Arabia, highlighting his love of manga in announcing the €6 billion (\$7 billion) deal.

While plans are under way to construct an entertainment complex near Riyadh based on the franchise, rights holder Toei Animation has denied it has licensed anything for Paris. It might want to reconsider. In manga-mad France, such a destination would surely find an eager audience.

But why is no one talking about building a "Dragon Ball" park where the franchise was born: Japan?

Three of the world's seven most visited are in Japan, a theme park-crazy country even before it began experiencing an unprecedented tourism boom. More than 40 million visitors now arrive each year, with the government targeting 60 million by the end of the decade.

Its most successful attractions are dependent on foreign involvement. Tokyo Disney

Resort pairs Walt Disney's characters with capital from Japanese operator Oriental Land. Meanwhile, Universal Studios Japan is owned by Comcast, but its revival has increasingly relied on homegrown intellectual property, including those of Nintendo.

What's missing is the obvious bet: Japanese capital backing domestic intellectual property at Disney-like scale. And that's from the country that holds many of the highest-grossing franchises in the world — from "Pokemon" and "Hello Kitty" to "One Piece" and "Godzilla."

Neither Disney nor Universal Studios were obvious successes. Both required long-term, bold investment. Oriental Land was set up postwar to build a theme park in reclaimed land in Tokyo Bay. After scouting Disney's U.S. venues for inspiration, executives decided that what they needed was the real thing, and they pursued the U.S. firm for years before clinching a deal. It's one that has been highly successful for both sides and is set to continue until as late as 2076.

Universal Studios Japan is almost the inverse: U.S.-owned, but increasingly powered by Japanese IP. After its Hollywood-heavy lineup ran into trouble, the park embraced local franchises from "Hello Kitty" to "Resident Evil," and later Nintendo. It now draws more visitors than either Tokyo Dis-

ney and its owner was recently reported to plan spending of as much as \$1.9 billion to expand it.

Despite these success stories, Japan has become reluctant to make such bold bets. Recent affairs seem deliberately modest in ambition: The newly opened "Pokemon" park, based on what is often called the world's most successful IP, is not a sprawling Disney rival, but instead tucked away in Yomiuriland, a small venue owned by the country's best-selling newspaper. Ghibli Park in Aichi prefecture actively eschews theme-park attractions, with annual attendance estimated at less than 10% of Universal Studios.

The nation's post-bubble Lost Decades scarred developers. Ambitious projects soured, with Seagaia becoming a symbol of the excesses. The operator of the lavish indoor resort in Kyushu, featuring a vast artificial beach and the world's largest indoor pool, collapsed in just a few short years.

Being capital-light is a model that made sense during the economic doldrums and can be a smart business choice for an individual company like Toei Animation, enabling it to pass most of the risk to Saudi Arabia.

But Japan loses the multiplier effect of jobs and spending, as well as building a destina-



Pikachu characters perform during a splash show and Pokemon Go Park event in Yokohama in August 2017. REUTERS

tion for the millions of tourists who visit. And it leaves value for others to capture: Look at how the country's ski resorts are increasingly being purchased by foreigners because local companies didn't recognize their worth.

The events capture the central argument of the administration of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi: When corporate investment turns too cautious, the government needs to pick up the slack. She has made content a top growth priority, along with robotics

and quantum computing, one of her top economic advisers has even explicitly backed the need for large-scale investment in anime theme parks.

With a giant one being built in Saudi Arabia — while a conspicuous Tokyo tourist attraction is jettisoned around in unlicensed "Mario Karts" — it highlights the need to aim higher. The state can help. It has played a role in most large developments, from Ghibli Park (which repurposed land developed for the 2005 World Expo) to the forthcoming

MGM Osaka casino, the country's first, set to open in 2030 after a two-decade government push.

If Japan wants to capture more economic value from its soft power, great IP isn't enough. It also needs capital, operators and ambition. Otherwise, "Dragon Ball" or not, someone else will do it for them — and keep much of the value for themselves.

Gearoid Reidy is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering Japan and the Koreas.

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EDITORIALS

As 9/11 recedes in memory, we must cling to that which remains

The day remains so vivid in our collective memories: the rush to turn on the television, the sudden reverse commute, the dash to collect the kids from school or daycare, the worry about family members who had traveled to New York or Washington or were studying there, the astounding sight of panicked Chicagoans streaming out of Loop skyscrapers and wondering where they would be safe.

Those of us who were still kids on Sept. 11, 2001, remember adult confusion and fear for absent parents; those of us already in the workplace had other worries, not the least of which was what to tell our children.

Some of us remember the eerie silence in the skies that afternoon as arrivals and departures at O'Hare ceased. We suddenly realized how the sounds of a city can be a comfort.

And we all still can recall the improbably sunny weather. Chicago's most beautiful month.

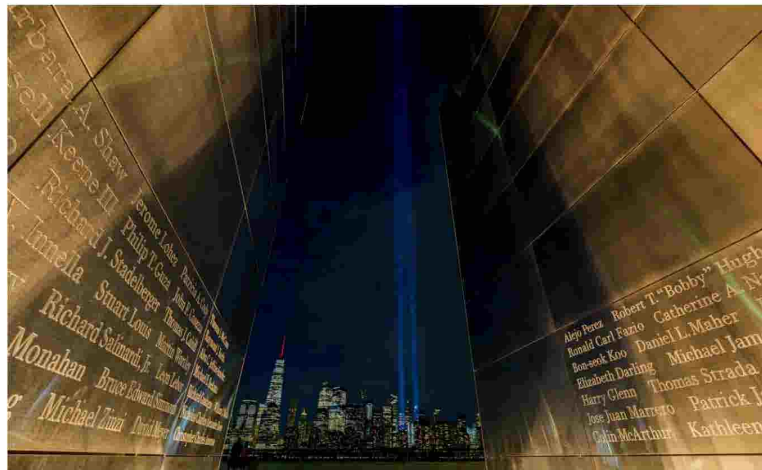
Chicago that day was wondering if it, too, was intended to be an al-Qaida target, a question that lingered for several years thereafter, especially after former President George W. Bush suggested it was so, when he visited the city in 2010: "And people forget that the Sears Tower was a target, a genuine target," he was heard to say, thanks to a WLS microphone left open, "and the mayor responded and his people responded brilliantly to the threats, so this is an interesting example of federal, state and local cooperation."

Federal, state and local cooperation. Not a concept in ascendancy at present.

Precisely what was meant by "target" was debated long after Bush's words although it now feels moot. Chicago was attacked because America as a nation was attacked: New York; Arlington County, Virginia; Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Blue and red states were not yet a thing. Especially not on that day.

It's axiomatic that people living through moments of seismic historical change do not realize it at the time. Nor can they see narrative beginnings and endings. Those fighting the American Revolution did not know they would win and forge a new country, and yet we now are hard-wired to see it as the start of something, not an event where everything hung in the balance.

Similarly, many of the numerous articles we read this week have defined the events



The "Tribute in Light" is tested over the skyline of lower Manhattan, viewed through the Empty Sky 9/11 memorial in Jersey City, New Jersey, on Wednesday. ADAM GRAY/AP

of Sept. 11, 2001, as singular and definitive: a dividing line, say, or the end of an era of innocence or the last gasp of true American unity or the beginning of a war that begat more wars.

But a truer recollection of the experience of actually living through that day means understanding that we didn't see it as a single day to be remembered but potentially as the first locus of several such attacks. That persisted throughout that fall. We have often wondered what would have happened if the so-called shoe bomber, Richard Reid, had been successful in his attempt to blow up a transatlantic flight that following December. He came close. A small shift in circumstances might have have yet further changed the trajectory of global history.

In the end, though, perhaps Sept. 11 is not best honored by these grander narratives, these ex post facto analyses.

Perhaps we should all just focus on the lives (many in their prime) that were lost, the bravery of the first responders, the admirable responses of some elected officials who found their voice as they never had before or did so again.

As journalists, we often are wary of people pushing the importance of anniversaries, which can be used as ways to drum up interest in something long-established and wheezing. They often are marketing tools, malleable to make a political point. Those who care deeply about one aspect of something or another often take charge of their memory, not necessarily reflecting the wretched, real-time ambivalence of the original experience. Perhaps the best way to remember 9/11 is to say we just did not understand.

Anything. All was covered in dust. But then it's also worth noting that this will be the last time for a while 9/11 gets

this kind of attention. Twenty-six, 27, 28, 29 years will seem less important. Come to think of it, many Americans probably won't think this way again about 9/11 until 2051, which will come sooner than we think. For those of us still here.

We also can imagine a time when whatever media organizations that exist in 2101 will trot out those who actually remember that day as curiosities. Maybe there will be far more of us than we now think, if medical advances continue.

Who knows how their memories will be contextualized by whatever agents of artificial intelligence are doing the contextualizing?

All we can do now is acknowledge the overwhelming loss of office workers, waiters, electricians, traders, firefighters ascending a building and never climbing back down, and remember that tomorrow never is a certainty.

Illinois' right-to-die law meets the right to say no

Cardinal Blase Cupich, archbishop of Chicago, along with two orders of nuns, the Carmelite Sisters for the Aged and Infirm and the Little Sisters of the Poor, filed a lawsuit last week to block Illinois' assisted suicide law. These two orders operate eldercare facilities in Illinois, putting them on a clear collision course with a new Illinois law to which they are deeply opposed.

"Right to die," as it is sometimes called, is set to take effect Saturday. One group of objecting healthcare providers already has won a narrow reprieve. In Mary Keen Kirchoff, M.D., et al. v. Tretz, four doctors, Springfield Bishop Thomas Paprocki and the Lutheran Care Center in Altamont sued the state in August, arguing that Illinois cannot force them to counsel patients about assisted suicide, make referrals or otherwise facilitate the process in violation of their religious and conscience objections. The state agreed not to enforce those requirements against those plaintiffs for now, while the case proceeds.

Before the "right to die" bill passed during veto session last year and Pritzker signed it, we argued this approach wasn't something that should be embarked upon lightly. The Catholic contingent challenging Illinois on this issue argues that the law has "conscripted even religious healthcare providers and institutions to participate in the provision of physician-assisted suicide."

To be clear, the law does not require an unwilling provider to prescribe the drugs that would end a patient's life, but it does require an unwilling provider to refer the patient to a willing provider or someone who can help the patient seek aid in dying.

The Catholic plaintiffs argue that taking that step makes them complicit in something their faith teaches is morally wrong. That strikes us as a legitimate concern. Illinois has decided that terminally ill patients should have a legal right to seek medical help to end their lives, but that should not mean every doctor, pharmacist or religious healthcare institution should be required to help them do so.

As we've continued to acknowledge, both sides of this issue have good arguments. People who say we should have a right-to-die law make the very fair point that many terminally ill people suffer needlessly in their final days. On the other side are advocates who make the similarly fair point that in places where these rules have been on the books for some time, experience teaches us that vulnerable people risk being dealt with

expediently, moved along faster than they or their loved ones would like.

It's also concerning that in places like the Netherlands, you don't have to be terminally ill to end your own life. A 29-year-old woman with depression and other mental health issues made headlines when she chose euthanasia in 2024.

And in Canada, 1 in 20 deaths are due to medically assisted suicide.

We can see how the lines can become blurred, wherein what starts as an effort to ease end-of-life suffering turns into something very different.

The consequences of Illinois' new law have remained largely hypothetical. Not anymore. We wonder how much protection our Catholic friends and other principled objectors now will have when it comes to saying no.

ON THIS DAY 16 YEARS AGO NINE YEARS LATER

...Streamlined congressional oversight of intel? Never happened because of political turf battles.

Are we adapting to the new threat? Not well enough, says the Bipartisan Policy Center.

Fear subsidies. People forget.

Five years ago on Sept. 11, we said: "The dark images replay rarely these days. It's as if TV, usually so enamored of dramatic threat doesn't end. It evolves."

"Although it is less severe than the catastrophic proportions of a 9/11-like attack, the threat today (from al-Qaeda and allied groups) is more complex and more diverse than at any time over the past nine years," said the Bipartisan Policy Center in a report released Friday. The center includes former members of the Sept. 11 commission.

A year from now, on the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, we hope America can still take comfort that the country was so effective, or al-Qaida so crippled, that terrorists still had not mounted an attack on the scale of the one that brought

down the World Trade Center towers and punched a fiery crater in the Pentagon. That we had swamped the virus of al-Qaida and all the other terror groups that metastasize around the world, feeding on ignorance and hate...

Al-Qaida is weakened, certainly. But other threats emerge. Iran is poised to develop a nuclear weapon. If that happens, which of its terror clients Hezbollah or Hamas—might be first on its list for special delivery? And there's a long and growing list of thwarted terror plots against America—almost 30 tallied as of last year.

Years ago, the Sept. 11 commission said American leaders could not imagine such attacks. Thus, the nation was vulnerable.

Here's what we know today, and what we will know on the 10th anniversary and the 20th and the 30th: The threat doesn't end. It evolves. It is not limited by our imaginations. It tests American resolve every day.

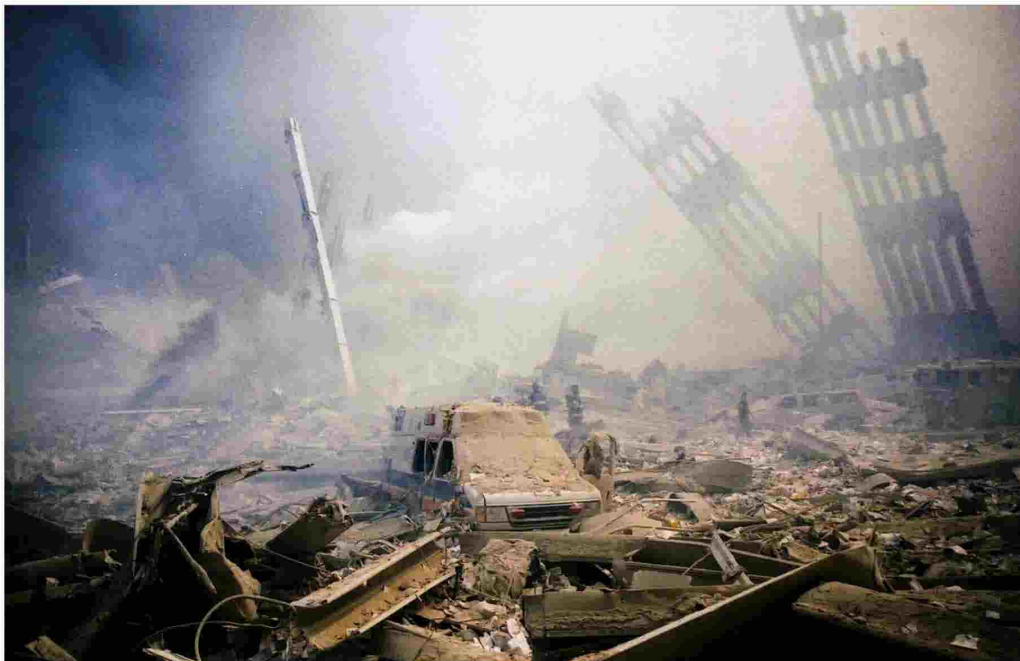
Tribune editorial board,
Sept. 11, 2010

EDITORIAL CARTOON



MIKE LUCKOVICH

OPINION



Firefighters make their way through the destruction at New York's World Trade Center after a terrorist attack on the twin towers in lower Manhattan on Sept. 11, 2001. In the most devastating terrorist onslaught ever waged against the United States, hijackers crashed two airliners into the World Trade Center, toppling its twin 110-story towers. ALEX FUCHS/AP

What it was like to be in New York City on 9/11

By Bob Kustra
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

As we reflect on the 9/11 terrorist attacks that happened 25 years ago, I recall the day of sightseeing and shopping my wife, Kathy, and I spent in New York City on Sept. 10, 2001. We were celebrating our wedding anniversary. We arrived at the World Trade Center to buy tickets for the Top of the World observation deck, but a downpour soon changed our plan. The guard said our tickets were good for the next day and suggested we come early to enjoy the views without the rain and crowds.

The next morning, on 9/11, we decided to delay our plans by 30 minutes so I could take an early morning walk through Greenwich Village. As I was walking on 10th Street, an American Airlines Boeing 757 flew low over my head. When I reached Sixth Avenue, I could see the plane had hit the North Tower. I ran back to our son's 14th Street apartment where we were staying and saw the TV report of the second plane crashing into the South Tower.

If we had followed our original plan, we would have been exiting the subway underneath the World Trade Center on our way up to the observation deck about the same time the planes hit those towers.



A woman fights back tears as she views flowers and mementos left at a makeshift memorial outside the New York City Fire Department's 48th Street firehouse on Sept. 13, 2001. ED BAILEY/AP

The decision to delay our trip by minutes may be one of the most fortuitous decisions we have ever made.

Once we understood it was a terrorist attack, we headed to the streets to get food and water at a local grocer in case the city shut down. By then, hordes of evacuees from the North Tower were walking north on Sixth Avenue to escape the terror. Women were in their bare feet carrying their high heels amid an obvious state of panic. By then, the stench of fire

was thick across the area.

Rumors flew about what might come next. One rumor had terrorists flooding the island of Manhattan, leaving no exit. Then we heard fighter jets screaming overhead. At that point, we had no idea they were American fighter jets called into action. That was the scariest moment, not really knowing what was coming next and unable to do anything about it but wait and listen to the news.

Our first stop that night was St. Vincent's hospital in Green-

wich Village, where we hoped to donate blood. The streets around the hospital were so brightly lit it looked like high noon. There was only one thing missing from the eerie scene — survivors.

There were few for the hospital to treat. A man finally emerged with a handmade sign that read, "No donations needed tonight," confirming what we all had feared.

By the next day, the city had cordoned off 14th Street, preventing any traffic from driving south of the barriers. As we left our building, firefighters returning from the towers in shifts were resting in sleeping bags on the sidewalk, taking a breather from the devastation.

We visited Penn Station to see if we could catch an Amtrak out of the city. It was a hopeless case of too many travelers trying to escape New York City. We were all in the same boat, even including the late CBS reporter Mike Wallace and the late author John Updike, whom we spotted at the station. At that point, we resolved to return to the apartment and spend the next two days in the city.

In our walks along the streets of New York, we experienced a ghost of the iconic Big Apple, with its streets deserted and only buses and some subway trains running. On every street corner were heart-

breaking handmade flyers on poles asking if anyone had seen a member of someone's family who had failed to respond to calls and never came home from work. Shock and desperation abounded.

We passed firehouses piled high with wreaths and flowers memorializing fallen firefighters who lost their lives at the towers. We sat on the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral, one of many churches on Fifth Avenue open to people seeking solace. One of the busiest streets of New York was devoid of traffic except for an occasional bus.

After three long days, we made our way out of the city on Amtrak. We still have the two unused tickets to the observation deck, surely among the last issued. Some day, they might find their way to a museum. But for now, they are grim reminders of the innocents killed on that fateful day the world stopped turning and how our lives rested on changing a plan by minutes.

Bob Kustra served as Illinois lieutenant governor and 10 years as a state legislator. He also was president of Boise State University for 15 years and now hosts the "Reader's Corner," an author interview podcast and a Boise State Public Radio program.

We must teach young generations about why Sept. 11 matters

By Froylan Jimenez
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

As we commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on our nation, there is a need to emphasize not only what happened but also why it still matters, especially for younger generations. As a Chicago Public Schools civics teacher, it is my job to discuss the meaning of Sept. 11 with my students, but it is immensely important for all of us to reflect on how this event changed our country and how its ramifications continue today.

School-aged children and young adults today were not alive at the time of the attacks. This group of Americans knows the tragedy through images in a history textbook or scenes in YouTube videos of the twin towers falling and first responders tending to victims. While the destruction and the rescue and recovery operations are part of the historical narrative, there is so much more we should remember and share. The events serve as a lesson of trying to find balance among blame, accountability, national security and civil rights.

The United States became the sole superpower after the Cold War. In 2001, it seemed unlikely any other country could damage the mighty America, but the bipartisan congressional 9/11 Commission found that, ultimately, U.S. intelligence agencies



A person places their hand on a name on the North Pool at the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum on Tuesday in New York City. MICHAEL M. SANTIAGO/GETTY

underestimated our enemies. In the aftermath of 9/11, our country demanded heavy accountability against the perpetrators, in this case al-Qaida, the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. A series of military and legislative decisions followed to bring the terrorists to justice and protect Americans with more safeguards. Operation Enduring Freedom toppled the Taliban, and we waged war not only in Afghanistan but also Iraq. While it is absolutely appropriate to want to defend America from

terrorism, the question remains: How much military defense, funding and personnel stationed overseas are necessary to protect our country?

Sept. 11 spawned new laws: The Patriot Act gave government more surveillance power and strengthened law enforcement capacity to tighten our borders. The Department of Homeland Security was created to coordinate national defense and protect against military and terrorist threats. While this legislation enhanced safety

and security, it also opened up the possibility of government overreach and ultimately fostered prejudice against Muslims, Arab Americans and other immigrant groups. Again, the desire for national security begs the question: How much is too much? Consider what's happening today, with widespread concerns about federal agents' immigration operations.

And in this age of increasing technology and activism, how much personal information and

freedoms are we willing to give up to stay safe while still keeping needed civil liberties?

Sept. 11 taught us to value our first responders, who are willing to put their lives out on the line to help those in need. Too often, law enforcement is overworked and undervalued. This anniversary is a reminder of how law enforcement and other first responders can go above and beyond to serve the public. Consider the dedication and heroism we saw on display on 9/11.

We owe our first responders gratitude for how they put their lives on the line on a regular basis.

Lastly and most importantly, let's celebrate the national unity that Sept. 11 inspired and the recognition of American values of service and compassion for others. We need the reminder of what's possible, as social media, partisan rhetoric and hate speech continue to draw Americans apart. It is possible to foster patriotism and civic pride amid polarizing forces.

We must keep the memories and lessons of Sept. 11 vivid for all Americans as we commemorate this anniversary and weigh how the events of that day will continue to affect us for years to come.

Froylan Jimenez is a Chicago Public Schools civics teacher and a Chicago Teachers Union member.

OPINION

Why must city elections happen months after our national elections?



David Greising

At the national level, the midterm elections are all the talk in political circles right now, with Election Day less than two months away. But here in Chicago, it's the 2027 mayoral election that people can't stop talking about.

Mayor Brandon Johnson is expected to announce a reelection campaign as soon as this weekend. Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulas, who is running for reelection to state office, also is campaigning for mayor, having raised \$22 million for the race.

State Comptroller Susana Mendoza is running, too — though unlike Giannoulas, she had the good grace not to seek reelection to state office at the same time. Nine are in the race at this point, including familiar faces U.S. Rep. Mike Quigley and perennial candidate and business owner Willie Wilson.

But wait a minute.

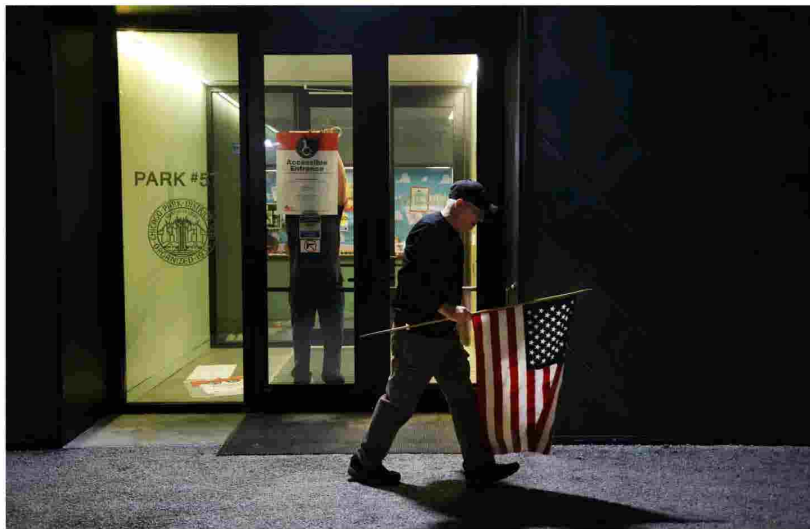
Why must Illinoisans go to the polls in November, to elect federal and statewide officeholders, then vote again for their mayors and other city officeholders a mere three months later?

Well, it doesn't need to be this way.

There were valid reasons to do it this way more than a century ago, in the Progressive era. The reasoning then for Illinois and other states to separate municipal elections was so voters could zero in on the local issues that affect them most directly, for example, city budgets, public safety, schools and property taxes. In the days of paper ballots and hand-counting, it helped local election boards manage the voting, too.

Today, Illinois is among 24 states with laws preventing municipal elections on federal election dates. In 19 states where cities are given a choice, most of the cities in 13 of them set off-cycle election dates, according to research cited in a recent National Council of State Legislatures report.

The disjointed election calendars have tangible negative impacts. "The actual effect is a decimated turnout at elections,"



Paul LaGrassa, key judge, right, carries an American flag while Bryan Keane, election coordinator, puts up a poster marking an accessible entrance before the start of voting at the Boathouse at Park No. 571 in Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood on Feb. 28, 2023. STACEY WESCOTT/TRIBUNE

said Austin Berg, executive director of the Chicago Policy Center, the research arm of the Illinois Policy Institute. "It's not just Chicago. This is a statewide problem, and you get some turnout numbers in municipalities outside Chicago where I don't even know if you could call them elections."

Effingham County in southwestern Illinois saw turnout numbers of 16%, 14% and 13% over the last three municipal elections, Berg noted. And St. Clair County saw rates at 16% or lower in the last four election cycles.

But the political tide is shifting, with cities across the country switching to holding local elections when people vote for state and federal offices, too.

According to the Sightline Institute, a nonprofit that tracks trends toward consolidated elections, more than 50 large cities have begun setting their elections on federal voting dates over the last 20 years. Another dozen municipal governments began doing so in 2022 alone, the group reported.

The changes are having a beneficial effect on turnout.

In many cities, the percentage of eligible voters who cast a ballot more than doubles in municipal elections after the switch to voting on national election days, according to research by the National Council of State Legislatures and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. When Los Angeles held its first even-year election in 2022, turnout nearly doubled, and winner Karen Bass received more votes than any mayoral candidate in city history.

Bottom line: The more people who go to the polls, the stronger our democracy. When more people vote, elected officials are directly responsible to more people, forcing them to earn the consent of the people they govern. Local election boards save money — tens of millions per election, in some cases — for vital government

tal agencies that are perpetually underfunded.

Historically, the Chicago Democratic machine favored holding a nonpartisan mayoral primary in February of odd-numbered years, then the general election in the spring, because party insiders, unions and other interest groups can influence the outcome by getting their people out to vote when masses of registered voters would rather just stay home. The same sort of thinking has helped the Republican Party in the collar counties and downstate, too.

Will Illinois possibly join the national trend and move its municipal elections to the second Tuesday of November in even-numbered years? The idea is not gaining much traction yet. State Rep. Maurice West, D-Rockford, held a hearing on the matter last September, but there has been no major legislative push in the time since.

But there are reasons, beyond

just the national trend, that Illinois politicians and the general public should begin seeking change, too.

At a time when democracy and voting are under pressure, perhaps Gov. JB Pritzker might earn political benefit in pushing for a calendar change that could be fashioned as strengthening the power of the vote and the democratic process. Such a stance could play well on the national stage.

And who knows. Perhaps the topic could actually work its way into the 2027 mayoral campaign, too. Consolidation in Illinois would increase turnout, make elected officials more accountable, save taxpayer money and stop people from running for two offices simultaneously.

Perhaps this will give at least some of Chicago's current mayoral candidates a campaign talking point or two.

David Greising is president of the Better Government Association.

Voice of the People

When Chicago turned quiet

There are days that indirectly affect us but are still quite difficult to experience. Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001. Another day that will live in infamy. Nearly 3,000 innocent lives taken by 19 fanatics.

My day began normally with a trip on the Metra SouthWest commuter train. However, before we reached downtown Chicago, people's cellphones were ringing, and then it was mine that brought the news. Sandy called to tell me of two planes striking New York's World Trade Center towers.

When I arrived at work, all were already watching the available television sets. There were scenes of smoldering buildings and then a plume of smoke and debris as the first tower collapsed. Because of the melancholy atmosphere and the fact that nothing was being accomplished, all were sent home. At the time, one of my duties was to prepare the payroll due on the 15th, so I stayed to complete the task. Besides, it was rumored that all commuter train activity was suspended.

Leaving the office at 2 p.m., I noticed an obvious eerie stillness and silence. The only flight activity were birds. All flights were indefinitely canceled. Crossing the normally busy Desplaines and Adams Street intersection, I spotted eight vehicles looking on in all directions. On another block, I approached the only other pedestrian, an elderly African American individual who appeared that life could have been kinder to him. We chatted for maybe five minutes. Maybe we each needed the comfort of one another at that moment. Then we parted, and I thought how on a normal day we would pass, never acknowledging the other person.

The train ride home was a mix of people quietly reflecting on the day and those who wanted to share it with others. At work, I had been listening to Chicago radio station WXYZ-FM 93.1. Unprecedented fashion, the morning DJ stayed on. When I got into my car for the short trip home, there were then four DJs attempting to comfort a city. The first song I heard was R.E.M.'s "Everybody



People gather to watch video monitors at Tribune Tower showing the attack on the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. CHRIS WALKER/TRIBUNE

Hurts." A perfect summation of the day.

Our son, Bob, had stopped by the house to share the day. He arrived early enough to hear the F-16 fighter jets streak south to fight President George W. Bush's plane back to Washington. As he left that night, we commented on how quiet it was with no flight activity.

Just then we heard a fighter jet circling over the Chicago area. — Bob Paszczyk, Tinley Park

It all changed in an instant

Twenty-five years ago, I was studying for a spelling test in my family's kitchen in Phoenix. Every day, my brother's alarm clock would continually get louder as he snoozed through it. That morning, my mom paused mid-practice test when the news announced that a plane had crashed into the Pentagon.

I insisted we finish the practice test because the announcement, even to a 12-year-old, seemed farfetched. After finishing the test, we turned on the news and watched in horror as people jumped from the towers in New York City, buildings collapsed and my father proclaimed that we were going to war, although the enemy was still unclear amid the chaos of the day.

Every year, I get emotional on this day. I picture the regular people going about another

Tuesday; business executives stressing over a report, administrators keeping an office in order, bright-eyed new hires entering the workforce in cool Manhattan high-rises, people flying home to loved ones or heading across the country on a business trip, friends grabbing coffee and gossiping about colleagues, police officers and firefighters clocking in expecting another day of routine calls.

Then, instantly, everything changed for everyone, everywhere.

Rosh Hashanah begins at sundown on Sept. 11 this year. Although I'm not Jewish personally, I believe deeply in the themes of personal reflection that are central to it: considering the mistakes we've made, apologizing to those we've hurt, asking for forgiveness, changing our behavior and building a foundation for a better year ahead.

The world can change in an instant. Let's work to make peace with those around us while we have the chance. — Paul Cronkhite, Chicago

The unity that followed 9/11

With the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, there is something important that I think everyone should remember.

On the day this terrible event occurred and for the following

few weeks and months, our country was united in a way not seen since World War II. Everyone felt the sickening harsh reality that this had happened on our sovereign soil and that it was meant to be an affront to everyone who felt pride in being an American.

Showing your pride for your country at this time was not considered jingoistic. It was an intrinsic feeling nearly everyone I encountered at that time had.

In the ensuing years, we have let petty differences and imagined crises come between us. Political viewpoints have become cudgels to use against the opposite party's electorate if they do not agree with your opinion.

In no small part, the internet and social media have helped create these temperaments fraught with contempt bordering on hatred.

I hope we never have another day like we did in 2001. But it would be nice if we, as patriots, could find our way back to being the United States of America.

— Hayward Simpson, Lake City, Florida

A threat to disability rights

Barring intervention from a federal judge, legislation passed by the Illinois General Assembly and signed into law by Gov. JB Pritzker permitting doctors to help patients with a terminal condition end their lives will go into effect on Saturday.

Cardinal Blase Cupich, along with Catholic nuns who care for the elderly poor, have challenged the law in federal court. Yet many who oppose physician-assisted suicide do not do so for religious reasons. In fact, the first lawsuit filed was brought on behalf of advocates for people with disabilities. They argue that the law is discriminatory, making it more difficult for people with disabilities to overcome societal prejudices — especially where it concerns their healthcare and medical insurance coverage. Simultaneously, Jimothy —

the Seattle racoon with "short spine syndrome" — has become an internet sensation. There are Jimothy T-shirts, a "Hot Jimothy Summer" night at the Seattle Mariners ballpark and now a "Jimothy tattoo" trend. How could he not capture the hearts of people everywhere? He's adorable.

Also, he has a physical disability. While his condition does not seem to affect his mobility, it is visible nonetheless. Social media commentators marvel at his agility and ninja-like moves, in spite of his unusual stature.

The Americans with Disabilities Act, the federal law that protects people with disabilities, requires that public spaces accommodate those with physical limitations and prohibits discrimination against them in government programs. It was instrumental in sensitizing the country to the fact that those who have physical challenges have the same dignity and worth as any able-bodied person — and are similarly entitled to the very best healthcare.

"End-of-life options" laws threaten to undermine and even undo much of the good brought about by the ADA. Studies show that most people with disabilities do not want to end their lives, even when they are terminally ill. Instead, they want compassion, respect and access to excellent medical care.

A society that can turn a physically challenged racoon into a celebrity can certainly do better than legally sanctioning the suicides of those approaching the end of life. Jimothy's popularity has — perhaps unintentionally — raised public awareness of the importance of accepting people with illness or disability.

A truly tolerant society does not dictate which lives are worth living. It includes and protects us all.

— Mary FioRito, Cardinal Francis George fellow, Ethics and Public Policy Center

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Opinion

25 years after 9/11, life has proved stronger than death

Memories of hope and endurance in the shadow of ground zero.



Bret Stephens

Three days before 9/11, I hosted an out-of-town friend who wanted to take in the view of New York from above. I suggested a drink at Windows on the World, in the north tower of the World Trade Center. We arrived a minute too late to catch the last elevator to the 107th floor.

"Next time," I remember telling her. Of course there wouldn't be one.

Many years of living in a city creates a kind of archaeology of private memory. A street corner, a bar, an office building, a playground, a spot where a favorite restaurant or bookshop used to be — each recalls a buried layer of life, and each has its own circumstances, its web of relationships, its emotional color.

In 1998 I got a job with The Wall Street Journal, which at the time had its offices across the street from the Trade Center. My subway stop was at Cortlandt Street: my gym was on the top floor of the Marriott that stood between the towers. That summer I overnights a hard copy of my master's thesis to London from the courier service in the sunlit lobby of the south tower and said to myself, "School's over forever."

Now and then the thought of another terrorist attack, like Ramzi Yousef's 1993 underground bombing, crossed my mind. But I never imagined jetliners slamming into buildings, incinerating perpetrators and victims alike.

On the day itself I was in Jerusalem on assignment for The Journal. I watched the towers come down on TV and wondered who among my colleagues had been killed. (None had, miraculously, despite some close calls, and they performed the additional miracle of putting out a paper the next day for which they won a Pulitzer Prize.) For one of the few times in my life I felt an overwhelming desire to pray. At the Western Wall I found this in the Book of Psalms:

Lift up thy steps because of the perpetual ruins, even all the evil that the enemy hath done in the sanctuary. Thine adversaries have roared in the midst of Thy meeting-place; They have set up their own signs for signs.

I moved to Israel for a new job soon afterward. When I came back to New York three years later I had a family, as well as an office with a direct view of the giant pit called ground zero. For a long time nothing seemed to happen inside it, or if it did, it was at a glacial pace. It struck me as emblematic of a post-9/11 national paralysis. "testifying," as I wrote in a bitter column from 2009, "to a society in which everyone gets their say and nothing gets done."

I was wrong. Ground zero may have been stuck in legal gridlock — and coated in more toxic dust than was previously acknowledged. But the neighborhood around it was springing to life, thanks to a combination of civic spirit, government subsidy and capitalist creativity.



ADAM GRAY/GETTY IMAGES

Between 2000 and 2026 the number of downtown apartments nearly tripled, from 13,000 to 37,000, according to The Journal. Battery Park City, the neighborhood directly west of the old towers, became an oasis for families with young children, including our three. I never worried for the safety of my kids in the 16 years that we lived there.

Except once. On Halloween of 2017, two of our kids were out when I heard a crash and what might have been a gunshot, then one police siren after another. My 12-year-old son came home to tell us that he had seen a truck smashed at the corner of our street with blood on its windshield. An

Uzbek man named Sayfulla Saipov had driven a rented Home Depot truck down the Hudson River bike path, killing eight people and injuring many more.

President Trump used the occasion to rail against immigration — and Chuck Schumer. But what I remember was the calm good judgment of our neighbors, many of them immigrants themselves, who sheltered the students at P.S. 89 just as they were being let out from school. It was America at its best. The kids trick-or-treated that night as usual.

And ground zero did come back. On Monday, another old friend came to

town and we toured the site together. The early September weather was perfect, just as it had been 25 years ago. Thousands of people, locals and tourists alike, shopped and chatted and gawked at the sights around us.

We visited the shrine of St. Nicholas, a stunning replacement for the unassuming Greek Orthodox chapel that once stood a stone's throw away on Cedar Street. We walked through the oak-shaded plaza encompassing the memorial pools ringed by the names of the fallen. We went down to the vast underground mall that looks (in the best possible way) like the rib cage of a gigantic dinosaur and which, from a

certain spot, gives a neck-cranning view of the spire atop the tallest of the towers surrounding the site. We both remembered the plaza of the old World Trade Center, so intimidating and sterile. What we have now is so much better: reflective but not somber; commanding but not forbidding; sheltering but not closed.

It's a magnificent civic achievement. On Sept. 11, 2001, the forces of death paid a visit to Lower Manhattan and extracted their awful irreparable price. Twenty-five years on, what's clear, most of all to those of us who saw both sides of that date, is that the forces of life proved much stronger.

Two nations. Two democracies at stake.

Israel and the U.S. each hold elections one week apart in the fall. The fate of their democracies lies in the balance.



Thomas L. Friedman

Oct. 27 and Nov. 3, 2026, are shaping up to be two of the most important dates in the history of two of the most important democracies — Israel and America. Those countries will be holding hugely consequential elections on those dates, just a week apart. Why so consequential? Because what is on the ballot in both places is not just the political futures of President Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. It is the future of democracy in both places.

Let me start with Israel's election, which comes first. Netanyahu is in a coalition with Jewish supremacists whom a former Israeli Mossad chief once described as worse than the Ku Klux Klan. If they are re-elected, they are very likely to complete their project of undermining both Israel's

independent attorney general and its Supreme Court. Annexation of the West Bank and Gaza and ethnically cleansing Palestinians from both places will come next. And Israel as a democracy will be gone.

Once that happens, Israel will become a parish, a la apartheid South Africa. The Jewish state has already lost the support of much of the Democratic Party in America, of many young Republicans and of pretty much every liberal party in Europe. Israeli academics and singers will be increasingly banned from appearances across the globe. Thousands of Israel's scientists, mathematicians, A.I. software designers, engineers, fighter pilots, nuclear physicists — its best and brightest — will gradually emigrate. A recent study found that 1,370 doctors left Israel for at least 12 months over the past three years, a number that exceeds the number of doctors at many of Israel's major hospitals.

For several years now Moshe Ya'alon, a thoughtful, right-of-center former defense minister under Netanyahu, has been expressing alarm about the direction of the Israeli government. As my Times colleagues in Israel reported, Ya'alon has taken his warnings to a remarkable new level, lik-



SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES

ening the ideology of extremist Israeli settlers in the West Bank to that of Nazi Germany in local news reports.

"What is Jewish supremacy?" Mr. Ya'alon recently asked on the Israeli news site Ynet. "Eighty years after the Holocaust, 'Mein Kampf' in reverse. The master race is us."

This is a clanging alarm bell. Israeli society is still too traumatized by the

war in Gaza to jump directly into new peace negotiations with the Palestinians. But I have no doubt that if the opposition to Netanyahu — now most prominently led by the former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces Gadi Eisenkot, a very decent man with much in common with Yitzhak Rabin — is able to triumph on Oct. 27, at the shameful pogrom that Netanyahu

has enabled Jewish settlers to perpetrate in the West Bank will be halted and Trump will have an Israeli partner ready to make a good faith effort to implement his peace plan for Gaza. Trump would be a complete fool to endorse Netanyahu, who has done everything he can to frustrate Trump's Gaza initiative.

To hold on to his coalition partners, stay in power and drag out his trial on multiple corruption charges, Netanyahu has been ready to sell out any core Israeli value and frustrate any U.S. peace plan. Most recently, he worked hard to exempt thousands of ultra-Orthodox youths from Army service and gave millions of shekels to their schools, which teach no lessons for modern life or work skills — and at a time when the Israeli Army finds itself short on soldiers.

Dan Ben-David, an Israeli economist who heads the Shores Institute for Socioeconomic Research, explained the demographic basis for the threat to Israeli democracy. Fertility among most Israeli population groups is about two children per woman, but among Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox Haredi allies it is about seven children per woman, Ben-David said. These parents

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The older I get, clearly the less I seem to know

Jonathan Eig

There's a new play opening this week in Chicago, and I'm a character in it. I have mixed feelings.

The play is called "The Birth of the Pill," and it's adapted from my 2014 book of the same name. Rather than merely transferring the story from book to stage, the playwright Jessica Huang explores what I left out — and calls me to task for it.

We all should embrace and even celebrate history's messy nature. Question it, debate it, get down in the dirt and wrestle with it. When Ms. Huang asked if I would be a character in her play, I said yes. I said that I had never felt ownership of the story. How could I? History is a conversation, and I never intended to do all the talking. History is also an exercise in failure; the goal is to fail as little as possible, but those of us who write history will always get things wrong and leave things out.

I wrote a book about the history of the pill. I never expected to be a character in a play telling the story of what I left out.

promote pleasurable sex, reproductive freedom and women's equality was considered preposterous by many. My book focused on Margaret Sanger, the controversial visionary and activist; Katharine Dexter McCormick, the brilliant philanthropist; Gregory Pincus, the outcast biologist who figured out the science; and John Rock, the Catholic gynecologist who supervised the clinical trials. They were flawed rebels out to blow up the world.

In Ms. Huang's adaptation, the star is a fictionalized young Puerto Rican woman named Ramona Delgado. As the play begins, it's both 1950 and 2026, and the audience sees Ramona onstage reading my book. She's not happy. She thinks the book should have centered on the Puerto Rican women upon whom the pill was tested before it was approved, when doses were much too high, when serious side effects ran rampant and when women in Puerto Rico and elsewhere were not told they were part of a clinical trial.

Ms. Sanger, Ms. McCormick, Dr. Pincus and Dr. Rock had their turns at shaping history. Jonathan Eig had his chance to tell the story. Now, courtesy of Ms. Huang, it's Ramona's turn, and she wants answers.

This is not the way I had dreamed of

seeing one of my books onstage. On the other hand, Ramona raises issues that I've been wrestling with a long time. The older I get, the less I seem to know. And the older my books get, the more I can see what I've left out or not properly emphasized. I've come to understand that history never contains the whole of history. In my book on Jackie Robinson, I paid scant attention to the Negro League players who never made it to the major leagues. In my book on Martin Luther King Jr., I devoted little space to the role of the labor movement in the civil rights struggle. In my pill book, while I do talk about the treatment of Puerto Rican women in the trials, I failed to convey their suffering.

Feelings of hope, or loss, or grief, are especially vulnerable to omission from history, in part because they're not so easily documented. The yearnings of pacifists, for example, seldom make their way into historical accounts of war. Is it possible that unrecorded history is just as important as recorded history? And if it is, what can we do about it? This is what Ms. Huang explores in her version of "The Birth of the Pill."

I've read the play, and I admire it. It's smart, funny and solidly grounded in history despite its imaginative leaps. At the same time, it hurts to see a spotlight shone (literally) on one of my book's flaws. It makes me feel as if I failed my readers and some of my subjects. I suppose it's inevitable that history focuses on the winners, on those bold and brilliant individuals who dare to push for human progress. But Ms. Huang's play reminds us that suffering drives progress, too. An estimated 1,500 women in poverty-stricken sections of Puerto Rico participated in clinical trials for the pill. They suffered nausea, dizziness and vomiting. Some developed blood clots. Three died; no autopsies were ever done to find out why. My research taught me some of their stories, but Ms. Huang's play made their experiences more vivid and more emotional than my own work managed to.

As I prepare to watch Ramona Delgado step onstage at Chicago's TimeLine Theatre Company this week to confront a character named Jonathan Eig, I'm both nervous and excited. I feel as if a ghost is floating out from between the lines of my book to haunt me.

Then again, I think history should haunt us. If it doesn't, if we try to cut ourselves off from the past and live only in the present, avoiding the discomfort of difficult truths, we might as well return to the age of savagery. Only then is Ramona Delgado's anguish in vain.

JONATHAN EIG is the author of "King: A Life," winner of the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for biography, and other books.

Fashion's most disgusting product

Dana Thomas

On Thursday New York Fashion Week kicked off the spring-summer 2027 season, with brands presenting their latest offerings on runways and in showrooms. As part of a monthlong fashionpooza, designers will then travel to London, Milan and Paris for more of the same, all to feed the \$1.9 trillion industry that produces an estimated 100 billion garments and accessories a year. Rough estimates are that only about 80 billion of them actually sell.

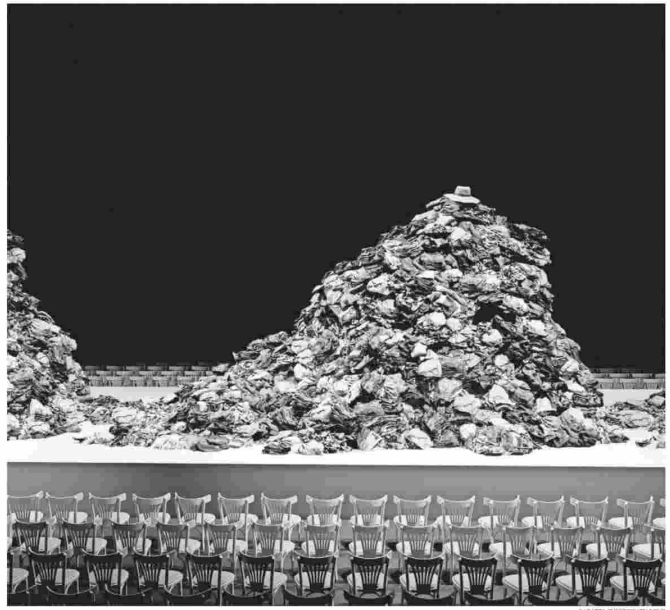
What happens to the other 20 billion? Some wind up in outlets and on flash sale sites. Some get dumped in far-off places, like the once majestic Atacama Desert in Chile, where in 2021 Agence France-Press reported that 39,000 tons of unsold fast fashion apparel were dumped, creating dunes of clothes. Much of that unworn apparel, often with price tags still attached, is burned, the synthetic fabrics and dyes generating a toxic black smoke that drifts into local villages. A court case in Hong Kong revealed that Chanel had until a few years ago engaged in what the industry euphemistically calls "inventory management." Burberry says it no longer destroys leftover products, but the company revealed in its 2018 annual report that it had incinerated or otherwise destroyed 28.6 million pounds' worth of unsold clothes, accessories and perfume the previous fiscal year (\$37 million), bringing its five-year total to about 610 million (\$114 million).

In her newsletter, *Eck Row*, in 2022, Amy Odell quoted someone she described as a Saks marketing department employee who had worked in two different stores in the 2010s. The source said that retail staff members filled out two dumpsters a day with unsold luxury products. Sometimes the employees were instructed to slash the items, presumably to ensure no one scavenged them. "I always wanted to bring them to a homeless shelter or Dress for Success," Odell's source said. "That was just absolutely wholly dismissed because there was no way a luxury brand was going to allow that to happen unless they decided to do it on their own terms." (Ms. Odell reached out to Saks for comment at the time but did not receive a response.)

Fashion is one of the least regulated global businesses. Unlike the automobile, aviation or agricultural industries, fashion has remarkably few requirements to track, disclose or limit its environmental impact. That 100 billion figure I cited earlier is an estimate because no one knows exactly how many items the industry churns out; fashion companies don't have to tell us. And because most production is outsourced to independent contractors, brands are not responsible for the wages or labor conditions of many of the people who make their clothes.

It's time for American lawmakers to bring this free-for-all to an end. Overproduction is the obvious place to start. We need to know how much the industry is producing, and at what cost to the environment. Consumers should be able to buy clothes without contributing to the reckless degradation of the planet and the exploitation of their fellow humans. Fashion doesn't need to be such an ugly business.

I have witnessed in a decade of reporting on fashion's impact on the environment and humanity, overproduction isn't an accident or an occa-



SAMATH CHEN/GETTY IMAGES

sional forecasting error. It's built into the business model. Fast fashion and luxury brands alike need constant novelty to lure customers into stores more often. The Spanish fast fashion retailer Zara releases new items every week; next month, those offerings will include pieces by John Galiano, the British designer whose exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was canceled shortly after it was announced. Fashion weeks feed the machine: more collections, more seasons, more reasons to buy. In 1980, the average American purchased 12 to 14 clothing items a year; by 2016, that number was 68.

A modicum of self-restraint is the new black.

One big reason is that in the age of globalization and offshoring, apparel and accessories have become extraordinarily inexpensive to manufacture. A majority of production is outsourced, primarily to developing nations where safety and labor oversight is weak and wages are at or below poverty level. Today only about 3 percent of the clothes sold in the United States are made domestically. Lower production costs mean lower retail prices, which is why a new T-shirt can cost as little as a few dollars. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, clothing responsible for 10.4 percent of the American household budget in the 1960s; today, consumers spend 2.5 percent of their budgets on apparel and related services such as dry cleaning, even though they buy five times as many items.

The same economics make excess inventory disposable. For brands, destroying or dumping items is cheaper and easier than storing, sorting, transporting, recycling or reselling them.

Some companies gesture toward reducing waste. You can deposit discarded items from any brand at H&M stores, and the company has partnered with organizations that sort the collected clothing for reuse or recycling. But such initiatives often seem to be more about buffing up a company's public image than truly doing good. In 2023, the Dutch sustainability nonprofit Changing Markets Foundation stashed Apple AirTags inside 21 items that it donated to clothing chains across Europe or posted on resale sites to see where the clothes actually went. It determined that 16 of the items were destroyed, abandoned in warehouses or exported to Africa. Only five were reused or resold within Europe. Overall, according to data from the sustainable fashion nonprofit Textile Exchange, less than 1 percent of clothing is recycled into new fiber each year.

Meanwhile, fashion's greenhouse gas emissions are rising, driven in part by the global production of polyester, an inexpensive petroleum-based synthetic that does not biodegrade. The industry's annual greenhouse gas emissions have now reached an estimated gigaton — about the same as the entire climate footprint of Japan.

Governments are trying to rectify that by making brands financially responsible for the entire lives of their garments. In 2024 Gov. Gavin Newsom of California signed the Responsible Textile Recovery Act, a law that requires apparel and textile companies to pay for the collection and recycling of their products. Producers had to enroll in the state program by July 2026, and it must be fully operational by 2030. Congress should pass a similar law nationwide.

Also in 2024, the European Union

introduced a sweeping new framework to make products more durable and recyclable, and introduced digital labeling that shows an item's provenance and environmental footprint. The European Union has since adopted separate rules that hold producers financially responsible for the textile waste they generate. This summer, one piece of that framework went into effect in the 27-country bloc. Large companies are now prohibited from destroying unsold clothing, accessories and footwear. The goal is to curb overproduction, reduce waste and keep valuable materials in circulation longer.

France is going further. As of Sept. 1, ultra-fast-fashion companies such as Shein and Temu, which flood the market with enormous amounts of inexpensive clothes, have to pay a fee on every item they sell. The tax can reach \$14 per item now and \$23 by 2030, though it cannot exceed half the item's pretax price. Refashion, a nonprofit organization that runs France's textile producer responsibility program, will manage the collection of the new charges.

All of this is a good start. But each action targets only one part of a systemic problem. Governments should require all fashion brands to disclose publicly how much they produce, penalize them for what they fail to sell and hold them accountable for environmental and labor abuses throughout their supply chains. Only then will the new clothes coming down the runways each season be worth wanting.

DANA THOMAS is the author of "Fashionopolis: Why What We Wear Matters," and writes the newsletter *The Style Files*.

How A.I. could drive the next 9/11

BOBBITT, FROM PAGE 1

the possibility, present at the attacks 25 years ago, that not only American lives, but also the continued functioning of the American government itself, could be at risk.

Osama bin Laden's revolution was enabled by the globalizing internet. He transformed the recruiting, financing and sheer reach of terrorism, moving from the narrowly vertical, nationalistic structures of terrorist groups like Northern Ireland's I.R.A., Turkey's P.K.K., Algeria's F.L.N. and others to a decentralized, horizontal model. This greatly increased the potential for attacks. Radicalized Muslim communities were well suited to such innovations because they were global, but there was no reason that the threat of global terrorism would end with the demise of Bin Laden and the defeat of his movement.

Diffuse networks, now with access to even more powerful technological tools, remain a threat. If Flight 93 had hit its target — likely the United States Capitol — instead of being brought down by heroic passengers over Pennsylvania, it would have struck during a business session of the House of Representatives. Countless members of Congress would have been killed or disabled and, unlike the Senate, the House could not have been reconstituted without new elections. Months would have passed without a functioning federal legislative

branch. The possibility that only the executive would rule after a catastrophe is a threat to the constitutional order and remains with America today.

The challenge of taking the steps necessary to limit the damage of an attack has only grown in the 25 years since Sept. 11. We have been lulled into thinking that another attack will not occur. As misinformation, disinformation and the denigration of expert opinion make preparation far more challenging, the environment of confusion, division and fear, as much as any potential attacker, is an equally insidious danger.

The interrogation of Dr. Anthony Fauci by a Senate committee in July is just the latest example of the dangerous attack on expert opinions. Dr. Fauci's heroic efforts to prepare for a potential pandemic at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases from 1984 through 2022 were crucial to enduring the Covid crisis. The contemptuous — and contemptible — harrowing of him on Capitol Hill is bound to have a paralyzing effect on taking the kinds of precautionary steps that can minimize the consequences of cyber and biological attacks.

Those who want to limit the potential damage of an attack nevertheless have a place to start. After the carnage in 2001, the Independent Continuity of Government Commission, led by Lloyd Cutler and Alan Simpson, created a



ILLUSTRATION BY DAN VETTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID J. PHILLIPS/GETTY IMAGES

road map for enduring another terrorist attack. One of the proposals of the commission, on which I served, was to change House rules to speed the replacement of members in an emergency. Another was to reconstitute a devastated Supreme Court by enlisting the chief judges of the 13 federal circuit courts. But in the period following the defeat of Al Qaeda, a sense of urgency for preparedness faded. Congress failed to act on these proposals.

After the shock of the Covid pandemic, a second Continuity of Government Commission was constituted in 2021. It restated the case for congressional action to protect against a mass attack. It also made recommendations about the continuity of government

during a pandemic, including protecting the succession to the presidency in the event of a mass attack on the cabinet and congressional leaders. The commission, on which I also served, also explicitly identified infectious disease as a continuity of government problem and devised constitutional machinery to cope with the inability of officials to assemble in person. Lawmakers should urgently revisit these recommendations, and they should be stockpiling laws and protocols to anticipate these crises as well as sharply increasing the funding of research.

Seven years after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks I wrote that "the developments that empower terror are gaining — as markets increase, as weapons technologies diffuse, as clandestine communications become more effective and infrastructures more fragile — at a faster pace than our defenses, our pre-emptive strategies and our legal institutions are adapting." Now, 18 years later, the same indictment has become even more critical. On the anniversary of the attack, Congress should determine to anticipate the tragically predictable.

PHILIP BOBBITT is a professor of law at Columbia University specializing in constitutional law and strategy and worked in the federal government during seven presidential administrations.

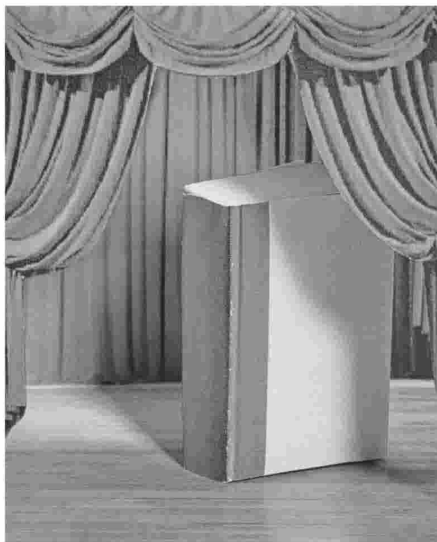


ILLUSTRATION BY BEN DENZER. SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY SHIRAZI/GETTY IMAGES

OPINION

The truth about brain rot: It's a cry for help

Maxi Heitmayer

Every decade or so, adults discover that young people are consuming media that corrupts their minds — and a moral panic ensues. Comic books were going to produce a generation of delinquents. Television would make children into couch potatoes. Video games and rap music would inspire them to do violent stuff. The internet would keep them shut away in the basement, typing in chat rooms to dangerous strangers.

Now the panic surrounds “brain rot” — the state of being entranced by an infinite stream of nonsensical TikTok and Instagram reels. Perhaps you have heard some of these videos this summer. The dancing capuccinos and singing toilets and muscular fruit. The random bursts of noise and strobe flickers and wild visual effects. This can't be good.

I research how digital environments shape human behavior. My co-author, Anna Götzfried, and I recently published a study interviewing Gen Z-ers aged 13 to 26 about how they experience brain rot — what these videos mean to them and why they watch them. What we discovered is a generation that is achingly self-aware of what brain rot is doing to their minds. They are struggling with the social media environment they have been given, and they are searching for a way out.

The panic over brain rot assumes that the brain-rot content itself is the problem. That Gen Z-ers' engagement with absurd, low-quality videos, because they are young and impressionable, necessarily leads to cognitive decay. Our participants described the inverse: The mental state comes first. After scrolling algorithmically curated feeds long enough, they experience a “brain-rot feeling” — a fogged-out, low-selectivity state in which they simply consume whatever appears.

Brain rot emerged from social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube where the amount of attention you attract determines your success. Every piece of content on these platforms competes for the finite attention of users. This competition then pushes everything toward faster, louder, more stimulating but also simpler material. Simple content wins our attention.

The business model of social media treats user focus as a commodity to be extracted and sold. The more time we

spend, the more advertising revenue we generate for the owners of the platforms. This attention economy increases engagement — it does not promote high-quality content.

What struck us in our interviews, however, was how clearly Gen Z understood this dynamic. (The interviews are anonymous, following social science conventions.) One participant told us: “You'll watch something anyway, so why not brain rot? It's actually better than an ad because it doesn't demand anything from you.” Another argued: “If everything is content now, then brain rot is anti-content. It's the only way to be free online, which is to do something so stupid it can't be monetized.”

When we spoke to Gen Z-ers about brain rot, we heard sophisticated — if uncomfortable — statements outlining a generation's response to the cultural conditions and the overbearing information environment it inherited. Like every generation before them, they are making something out of the conditions they were given. In this case, they are participating in deliberate nonsense.

To describe this process, my co-researcher and I introduced the concept of anti-gratification. Traditional media theory, going back to the 1970s, assumes people choose media to satisfy needs: They want information, emotional engagement, social connection, relaxation. But in an environment inundated with content that seeks to monetize your attention under the guise of educating you, entertaining you, motivating you or improving you in some other way, content that proudly offers nothing becomes a relief.

Brain rot breaks the mold of social media through its absurdity, its deliberate refusal of narrative, purpose or message. A century ago, artists responded to the horrors of World War I by creating deliberately irrational, anti-aesthetic work. Dada rejected the cultural logic that had led to industrialized killing.

In its own meme-driven way, brain rot refuses to participate in the attention economy on that economy's terms. The joke is that there is no joke. The meaning is that there is no meaning. And for a generation that grew up with its every digital interaction tracked, measured and monetized, that refusal is experi-



CHANEL DESMARIS

enced as a form of honesty in a dishonest system.

Our participants explicitly told us that because brain-rot content is visibly fake and/or A.I.-generated, it feels less exploitative than polished influencer posts pretending to be candid. “Everyone knows it's generated,” one participant said, “so it feels less manipulative than posts that act like they're just normal life.” When the simulation admits it is a simulation, it becomes more trustworthy than content that pretends to be real.

By no means do I seek to romanticize brain rot. Our findings were marked by profound ambivalence. The same participants who described brain rot as liberating also described feeling drained and guilty, and referred to the practice of watching until they fell asleep as “death scroll.”

One told us, “I'm scared I won't find something I'm actually good at mainly because I don't really have any hobbies. I guess brain rot is my hobby. Also, there is no more time during the day once you start watching.” Another broadly commented on her peers' viewing behav-

iors: “They know it's not good for them, but it gives that little hit and escape. And you just kind of ride it out, like the same way you do with any other vice.”

This ambivalence communicates the emotional register of people living inside a system they cannot escape. They see the manipulation, understand what the algorithms are doing. But they keep scrolling anyway, because they cannot imagine a life outside this system; most of them never lived one.

Consequently, nearly every one of the Gen Z-ers we spoke to explicitly asked for systemic, top-down change to social media platforms. Not through self-control apps or screen-time reminders but through the only mechanism they believe could work: regulation. One participant drew a direct parallel to tobacco: “Before the government regulated the tobacco industry, everyone was smoking, even though they knew it was bad. Because the environment encouraged and allowed for that to happen. Yeah, the doctors would smoke. Now we need to get into a state where the environment shifts so young people's habits shift.”

The real story here is obscured by the moral panic. Brain rot is not evidence that young people are getting stupider. It is evidence that the attention economy is working exactly as designed, and that the people most immersed in it can see this more clearly than the people watching from the outside.

Brain rot is the collective recognition of a shared cognitive state: we have all been through the same algorithmic meat grinder. “The humor is deeply tied to feeling like you are part of an inside joke,” as one participant put it. “Brain rot gives you the sense that you're in on something.” Repetitive catchphrases from brain-rot videos migrate out of digital spaces and into offline conversation, becoming part of everyday speech, without anyone's “even understanding what those terms really mean.”

In this way, brain rot functions like slang: meaningless to outsiders, rich with social significance to those inside. Outsiders look at videos of singing toilets or a chimpanzee-banana hybrid set to a looping audio track and see cognitive decline. Those who have experienced brain rot see in-group membership and a brief reprieve from a media environment that otherwise demands something of them at every turn.

During the Great Depression, Donald Duck, a character who constantly failed at everything, offered millions of people emotional relief by turning their social conditions into comedy. Brain rot similarly channels the collective mood of Gen Z. The key difference is that Donald Duck was a corporate product pushed from above and brain rot is user-generated, spread through memes. This gives it a grass-roots authenticity that traditional media cannot replicate, even as the platforms hosting it remain corporate.

This leads us to the central problem we have encountered in our research: The paradox of anti-gratification is that it remains embedded within the boundaries of the system it opposes. Brain-rot content still generates engagement metrics, feeds data to algorithms and may make money for its creators, ultimately keeping users on a platform. Sure, the livelihood of human influencers may be affected as the sponsored content they put out loses market share, but the platforms continue to harvest user attention without any threat to their business model. I should also note here that stuffed toys and other merchandise based on brain-rot characters are widely available and in demand. Gen

Z's sense of rebellion through watching nonsense is sincere. Whether it is effective is a different question.

Henry David Thoreau is credited with first using the phrase “brain-rot” in “Walden” to critique traditional society's suppression of curiosity, which he thought gave rise to simplistic, shallow thinking. Today's suppression comes from an infrastructure so pervasive and so well designed that the people living inside it can describe its mechanisms in detail and still not escape them.

We should be worried. But not about our kids or the content they produce and consume. We should be worried about the infrastructure of social media that has made sustained, focused attention — the very capacity required for individual growth, deep personal connection and societal participation — feel unattainable for an entire generation. Instead of debating whether teenagers are ruining their brains with Ballerina Cappuccino, we should be asking why the world's most sophisticated technology companies are systematically optimizing for cognitive depletion to harvest our attention.

To treat brain rot, we need to treat the infrastructure problem it lays bare. Platforms could measure success not by time spent, but by users feeling their time was spent well. They could endeavor to make algorithmic decision-making more transparent rather than more opaque. When they recognize that users have entered states of cognitive depletion, they could design for relief rather than exploiting them for additional engagement. They could allow groups of users to support each other with sticking to their social media times, rather than isolating the individual against an algorithm designed to blow past any limits. None of this is technically difficult, but it is commercially inconvenient. And that is why it will not happen voluntarily.

In my more than a decade of research on technology distraction, not one participant has ever reported spending too much time on a device using maps, checking the weather or Shazaming songs. We all know where the problem lies. Gen Z is being asked as expected by the system we have put them in. Brain rot is a cry for help.

MAXI HEITMAYER is an assistant professor at Rowan University who studies technology distraction, attention economics and digital culture.

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Two nations. Two democracies at stake.

FRIEDMAN, FROM PAGE 12

“intentionally deprive their children — primarily the boys — of a basic education enabling future economic independence and an understanding of the underlying foundations of modern democratic principles,” he said.

A quarter of Israel's first graders are ultra-Orthodox, Ben-David told me, and their share of the population is doubling every 25 years. “The past four years, the worst in Israel's history,” he said, “have provided us a nightmarish promo of the full feature movie that awaits our nation if we don't change course while there is still time to do so.”

While I care about elections in Israel, I care much more about them in my own country. Trump is the most un-American president in my lifetime. No president has done more, and continues to do more, to unravel the post-World War II institutions and alliances that were built and sustained by his predecessors.

We are talking about NATO, the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development, NAFTA, America's intimate relationships with Canada and Mexico and its military alliances with South Korea and Japan — to name but a few. These relationships and institutions together produced global and American prosperity and great power peace for generations.

Yet Trump and his enablers are systematically unraveling them in the name of “America first,” but with the result being America alone and, eventually, America in decline.

Particularly disgusting to me, though, is Trump's coddling of the Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, who has not only been trying to destroy Ukraine as a sovereign state but has also sabotaged both NATO and the European Union, two vital pillars of Western security and prosperity. Recently, Putin proudly boasted of helping Iran in its war with the U.S. in the Persian Gulf, actively supplying Tehran with “necessary” equipment and essential goods. Putin keeps spitting on America, and Trump keeps telling Americans, “Hey, folks, it's just raining.”

Trump has never framed the war in Ukraine honestly. We are witnessing Putin's attempt to destroy a vital European democracy. Why? What is up with Trump's unshakable bromance with Putin? The truth is obvious: he is hiding in plain sight: Trump, unlike any of his predecessors, does not consider democracy to be a core value. He prefers the company of the likes of Putin and Kim Jong-un.

It is easy to see why. According to a recent report by my Times colleague



DAVID HELLER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Eric Lipton, “Never before in American history has there been anything like Donald J. Trump, a president who in his first year back in office has collected about \$1.4 billion in new revenues from cryptocurrency businesses that directly benefited from his actions as president,” according to a financial disclosure report released on June 30.

If Trump's party prevails in November, his multibillion effort to undermine America's democratic institutions and the rule of law would almost surely go into a whole new gear.

“Right now, Trump is unpopular and therefore weak,” Ian Bassin, the executive director of Protect Democracy, a nonprofit that fights for election integrity, remarked to me. “The assumption is that his project has failed politically — that he's yesterday's news.” But if Republicans win, “that changes the incentive structure for everyone,” Bassin said, from Republican lawmakers to Silicon Valley bros. They all will be even more supine, enabling Trump to be even more unrestrained.

“That to me is the gravest danger,” Bassin said. In other words, with a midterm success, Trump will feel more emboldened and empowered than ever — at a time when he is clearly declining both mentally and physically: at a time when we are in the middle of possibly the greatest technological transformation in human history (the birth of self-improving, artificially intelligent agents and robots); at a time when climate change, which he denies, is obviously making our weather hotter

and more unstable; at a time when he will have alienated practically every friend America has in the world, even Canada; at a time when he is stuck in a war with Iran that is draining U.S. military resources and is led by a clown, Pete Hegseth, who may have fired or blocked promotions of more American generals than he has killed Iranian ones; at a time when China is taking over the world's electric vehicle market while the president is trying to grab Venezuela's oil.

A year ago, I heard a former U.S. president privately observe that we can survive Trump's second term as long as American institutions remain intact. Well, unfortunately, they have not. Who would argue today that the Justice Department, which has been turned into a personal legal weapon of the president, is intact, that the Department of Health and Human Services is intact, that the Pentagon is intact, that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is intact or that the Federal Communications Commission, which is now run by a Trump-appointed hack who acts as combined government censor and minister of propaganda, is intact?

Repairing these institutions, restoring them to some independence, to be run by real experts, will be harder than people think. Ditto in Israel, where Netanyahu has appointed hacks and cronies deep into the Israeli bureaucracy and even national security institutions.

Every American and every Israeli needs to think about these questions when entering the voting booth. No foreign enemy is powerful enough to destroy either of these two democracies — not Iran, not Russia, not anybody. Only forces from within can do that. Only self-destruction can do that. And have no doubt: Self-destruction is on the ballot in both countries.

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

Burnham's devolution project needs strong local media too

Regional leaders have to be held accountable to their voters

When Britain's ousted prime minister Sir Keir Starmer decided last week to stand down as an MP, he gave the scoop to the local newspaper, the *Camden New Journal*. It recalled an era when local papers were central to their communities. As Starmer's successor Andy Burnham plans to devolve some powers and tax revenues from Westminster to England's regional mayors, something is missing from his vision: a robust local media sector that can hold local officials to account for their decisions and spending.

Burnham wants to turn back the clock on the centralisation of power since the Thatcher era. Back in the 1980s, though, an estimated 1,600-plus local daily and weekly newspapers in the UK supported tens of thousands of

journalists. Local reporters made it their business to track local movers and shakers, sit through council committees, follow court cases and monitor services.

But the digital revolution hit regional media especially hard. Local paper circulations dipped and print advertising that supplied much of their revenues plunged by more than two-thirds between 2007 and 2017 as ads migrated online. Readers turned to Facebook and WhatsApp groups for local news.

Regional newspapers consolidated and slashed costs and newsrooms. *Press Gazette*, a trade publication, found that the three publishers dominating UK local print and online news by 2022 employed only about 3,000 journalists, down from 9,000 in 2007. By 2025, according to the Public Interest News Foundation, one in 10 UK local authority districts, covering 4.4m people, were "news deserts", with no dedicated local outlet.

The licence fee-funded BBC still

operates 39 local radio stations in England plus regional TV and online services, and after standards were previously loosened, from 2027 local commercial radio stations will have to carry a mandatory amount of local news.

But the broad decline of local media matters for Burnham's project. The point of devolution is to make local decision makers both more responsive and more accountable to their voters. Authorities including Nottingham, Liverpool and Tees Valley have experienced financial or governance issues in recent years that more robust local scrutiny might have identified earlier.

Journalists can in turn help local leaders by alerting them to issues ranging from potholes to problems in care homes. A government study found that during urban riots in summer 2024, trusted local journalists – where they existed – helped to counter online misinformation and to de-escalate tensions by amplifying community leaders' and police voices. Research has also found a

link between strong local media outlets and local election turnout.

The old local press cannot be recreated and building more viable local media ecosystems will be a long process. Alternative funding is hard to find. Several of the big US tech companies, which absorbed so much local advertising, fund local reporting initiatives through grants or philanthropic programmes, but their aims and approaches vary widely. Other forms of philanthropy could play a role, though wealthy donors would need convincing of the merits. A BBC scheme funds 165 journalists to do public-interest reporting at local news organisations, but the BBC's own funding is severely squeezed.

The Starmer government launched a local media plan including £12m of grant funding over two years. But Burnham wants to go much further with his version of devolution. If he is committed to regenerating local governments and communities, reviving local media has to be part of his strategy too.

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Opinion Society

Why young Africans are nostalgic for the past



Cairo
Mathehula

In the 1990s, there was a sense that Africa was poised to grow, ripe for international investment and embarking on a future that could be different. This was a period that Time magazine termed "Africa Rising". The failings of the subsequent two decades have led to nostalgia on social media, particularly from young South Africans who have coined the term "Mbeki's economy". They long for a time when South Africa was consistently growing at 4 per cent a year as they find themselves navigating an economic landscape that does not match their expectations of what life should look like.

In Nigeria, a similar sentiment has emerged from the young who similarly yearn for a Nigeria from the past – under Olusegun Obasanjo from 1999 to 2007. They resent the elder millennials and Gen Xers, whom they

perceive as beneficiaries of a bygone era of growth. As the two biggest economies in sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa and Nigeria offer useful case studies of Gen Z anger.

Gen X South Africans came of age in an economy with falling unemployment, a post-apartheid commodity boom that raised economic growth and an expansion in state capacity that created middle-class jobs. Their Gen Z counterparts graduated into an economy that has virtually stagnated and an era of austerity where a new car, an apartment near work and even a local holiday are out of reach.

It is odd to see those born in freedom envying the outcomes of those raised under tyrannical rule

perceive as beneficiaries of a bygone era of growth. As the two biggest economies in sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa and Nigeria offer useful case studies of Gen Z anger.

Gen X South Africans came of age in an economy with falling unemployment, a post-apartheid commodity boom that raised economic growth and an expansion in state capacity that created middle-class jobs. Their Gen Z counterparts graduated into an economy that has virtually stagnated and an era of austerity where a new car, an apartment near work and even a local holiday are out of reach.

It is odd to see those born in freedom envying the outcomes of those raised under tyrannical rule

ments in overall quality of life. Akinwumi Adesina, former head of the African Development Bank, noted last year that the GDP per capita income in Nigeria was worse than in 1960. But that ignores improvements in access to healthcare as well as education – even if the quality of that access, particularly at university level, has come under sustained strain from underfunding, lecturer shortages and recurring strikes. In South Africa, even though GDP per capita has improved, it has declined from the 2011 peak. What is more important than the deviations is the sentiment of those navigating the economy.

Recent anti-government protests across Africa signal a crisis of legitimacy. From the anti-police End SARS movement in Nigeria to Fees Must Fall in South Africa to protests in Kenya, rising discontent has prompted demonstrators to call for an end to corruption, and accountability for decades of mismanagement. Underlying this anger is a generational indictment: the idea that young people are paying the price for what the previous generation did, or failed to do, with power.

In South Africa, which has one of the world's highest youth unemployment rates, this anger has been weaponised into xenophobia. Many citizens scapegoat migrants, blaming foreign nationals for taking jobs that the economy has simply failed to create. In Nigeria, where over 60 per cent of the population is under the age of 25, the lack of social mobility has fuelled a rise in banditry, insurgency and communal violence.

The frustrations of Gen Zs and millennials are valid. However, young voters often respond to poor governance by electing leaders who promise an immediate and temporary solution to problems rather than addressing the fundamentals underlying them.

The economic growth of the Mbeki and Obasanjo years was also driven by oil and commodity booms. However, nearly 20 years later both countries still experience heightened levels of unemployment while the volatility of oil and platinum prices impacts trade balances and exchange rate stability given how heavily these sectors still anchor government revenue. This highlights a persistent lack of full industrialisation and economic diversification in both countries (although Nigeria's new Dangote Refinery has begun to reduce its historic dependence on imported refined fuel).

Had the good economy of the 1990s and early 2000s been coupled with strong institutions and a push for industrialisation, things might have turned out differently. Periods of decline should prompt younger generations to reassess the models Africa is using on its path to development.

The writer is a Johannesburg-based policy analyst

Letters

The irony of Bessent's bravado to take on bond markets

US Treasury secretary Scott Bessent's declaration that "I am the house now" may sound formidable, but markets are unlikely to confuse bravado with credibility ("Bessent warns on bets against yen: 'I am the house now'", Report, September 10). By citing his "asymmetric information" about Japanese policymakers and inviting traders to "bet against me if you want", the Treasury secretary has made an already delicate intervention unusually personal.

Governments normally eschew such

language. A sober statement of objectives preserves uncertainty about what authorities might do next. A threat, by contrast, risks advertising concern. Traders may reasonably ask, not "Is Bessent tough?" but "Why does he feel the need to sound so tough?"

His informational advantage also goes only so far. Bessent may know more than markets about what Washington or Tokyo intends to do. He does not know how markets will react. Indeed, as your report notes, the interventions "may or may not

succeed" while increasing uncertainty and volatility.

Worse, by telegraphing his edge, Bessent may have shown one card too many. He may know more about official intentions; markets collectively know far more about their own positioning, liquidity and appetite for risk.

There is an irony here. As a young trader working for George Soros, Bessent made his reputation by identifying the limits of government efforts to resist market forces. One

wonders how that Bessent would have reacted had a British chancellor, during the sterling crisis, publicly dared traders to take him on. He would not have backed away. He would have asked what weakness or constraint lay behind the show of confidence.

The strongest governments need not tell markets they are "the house". Their power is most credible when it does not need to be advertised.

Brian James Gross
Former Special Assistant to the Federal Reserve Board, Austin, TX, US

What you need to know to understand Trump

The opposite of "Trumpspaining" ("The myth of Trump's grand strategy", Opinion, August 27) is Trump derangement syndrome, the tendency of liberals to see everything President Donald Trump does as, in equal parts, selfish and senseless. But the great medical mystery of our time is that somehow those suffering from TDS still tend to underestimate the malice of the president, in a reverse of Hanlon's razor.

Trump does seem to have a clear strategy. As long as the war with Iran continues, his suggestive doodles to Jeffrey Epstein stay off the front page, and Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, has a drum to beat for the upcoming Israeli elections.

Those who want to understand Trump critically should remember that he is not a student of Woodrow Wilson or Winston Churchill, but of his mentor, the mobsters' lawyer Roy Cohn (Books, August 29), and longtime confidant Roger Stone (Lunch with the FT, August 27 2016).

Henry De Groot
Boston, MA, US

Satellite proliferation risks a 'tragedy of the commons'

In addition to the logistical challenges facing SpaceX's orbital data centres (Report, September 2), a constellation of 1m satellites also poses pollution and global warming issues. You note that to meet its goal SpaceX will need to launch nine Starships daily, each burning 3.4m litres of liquid methane. Andrew Wilson, a space sustainability researcher at Glasgow Caledonian University in the UK, estimates that every Starship launch produces around 76,000 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, or as much as 17,000 petrol-powered passenger cars emit in a year. This equates to 250m tonnes of CO₂ annually, equivalent to the CO₂ emissions of Spain in 2024.

However, the environmental impacts in the upper atmosphere may be of greater importance. Rocket launch emissions may thin the stratospheric ozone layer, which would delay ozone recovery. Rocket exhaust produces water vapour at high altitudes, and because the satellites will need to be replaced every five years, the launch rate must be maintained indefinitely. In addition, satellites at end of useful life burn up when they drift back to Earth, leaving behind metallic ash. Air pollution from rocket flights and re-entering satellites is currently not subject to any regulations, and these issues have received little study. This is an opportune moment to consider these matters, before we realise too late that we've created yet another tragedy of the commons.

Sim Gurewitz
El Cerrito, CA, US



Donald Trump's approach to power remains fiercely contested

The problem with Gates's 'nature reserves' framing

This is in response to the article by Cristina Cridle (Report, August 27) which references a recent essay by Bill Gates. In it, the former Microsoft chief executive introduces the idea of "human-reserved jobs", comparing them to nature reserves, places where development is technically possible but intentionally prohibited because "the loss would be too great". It is an evocative metaphor, but a misleading one.

Nature reserves exist to protect ecosystems that cannot adapt to disruption. Human labour markets, by contrast, have adapted to every major technological shift for more than a century. The constraint has never been human capability; it has been institutional lag – education systems, credentialing structures and employers that update too slowly. To frame certain roles as needing preservation from technological change risks creating the very class of workers "who cannot easily change jobs" that Gates seeks to protect.

His example of a robot delivering a terminal diagnosis illustrates a different issue entirely: not the need to reserve jobs for humans, but the need to understand what AI actually is. The danger is not that AI will erode critical thinking; it is that people will assign it anthropomorphic qualities it does not possess. AI does not "think", "understand", or "decide". It extends patterns. Critical thinking erodes when society misunderstands this mechanism and outsources judgment to a system it misinterprets as cognitive.

If we are concerned about the future of work and education, the remedy is not to fence off roles but to improve AI literacy. People must learn how these systems operate, where they fail, and how to control them. Preservation is not the answer; understanding is.

Phil Konecki
Boston, MA, US

UK's frontier AI strategy is aimed at the wrong target

Tej Parikh rightly points out that Britain has become "a factory for ideas applied elsewhere" (Free Lunch, FT.com, September 6). I would argue this is particularly acute for frontier AI. It is a story I'm all too familiar with. I built a foundational AI model here and ended up selling it to a Nasdaq 100 company pre-revenue, having tried and failed to get UK investors on board.

The UK's attempt to break this pattern, the Sovereign AI Fund, is also aimed at the wrong target. The fund has so far operated like conventional venture capital and put investments towards revenue in markets that already exist, on science someone else has de-risked.

There are a few frontiers in AI research that remain unresolved. AI models can't learn continuously once they're initially trained, requiring training from scratch each time. They still can't be trusted with high-stakes work involving human life. And they don't understand cause and effect, only patterns. Once solved, these new frontiers will unlock yet another level of application-layer AI products. Britain has leading academics in each field, without serious capital committed to any.

The fix is less about more money than better judgment and ambition. To keep what we make, Britain has to look deeper than the product at the end of the line.

Alexander Kardos-Nyheim
Founder & CEO, Safe Sign Technologies, London E14, UK

In revolutionary Belgium, 'statist' was a compliment

I truly enjoyed reading Joe Miller's article on the Smithsonian's telling of American history and the Maga camp (Trump wants museums to be less "woke" on slavery", Report, FT Weekend, August 22).

Yet, as an admirer of Toni Morrison I was intrigued by the quote formulated by Yale historian David Blight referring to Morrison's so-called "statist history". In her famous 1993 Nobel Prize lecture she indeed spoke indeed about "statist language". However, the term "statist history" was gradually introduced by others to describe political or state interference in public memory.

The term "statist" can be confusing also, as it was initially used late in the 18th century by the Belgian politician Hendrik Van der Noot, who was in 1789-90 one of the politicians from the province of Brabant who revolted against the Austrian emperor Joseph II.

This resulted in what was at the time called the United Belgian States (*Etats belgiques unis*) grouping eight states. Followers of Van der Noot were called statists.

Luc Haenen
Boechout, Belgium

Northern Europe taxes retail portfolios differently

HM Revenue & Customs collected a record £24.2bn in capital gains tax from 584,000 people, 45 per cent more than the year before, following Rachel Reeves' decision to increase the rate in her first Budget. It was also affected by the cut in the tax-free allowance, that had stood at £12,500, but which was cut in two stages to £3,000 by the last Conservative government, bringing more people into the tax net (Report, FT.com, August 27). Yet almost half the CGT revenue came from fewer than 1 per cent of payers, those with gains above £5m. The allowance cut obliged several hundred thousand private investors to file returns, yet raised almost nothing from them.

The current government has left it there, while describing its own *Isa* reforms as part of a strategy to develop a retail investment culture.

Northern Europe tends to tax retail portfolios differently. Sweden's investment savings account charges a small annual levy, around 1 per cent, on the account's value and does not tax gains at all.

Finland and Norway have a personal investment wrapper where capital compounds untaxed and only withdrawals are taxed. Denmark charges a yearly tax based on the appreciation of the account, but does not tax withdrawals. All four are administratively more efficient than the British treatment, and arguably more advantageous to the investor.

If the British government is serious about developing its retail investment culture and deepening its capital markets, it should look towards Scandinavia for inspiration.

Tero Korkalainen
Perho, Espoo, Finland

An FT column that invites readers on to the yoga mat

Kudos to Gaur Madhavan for bringing the wisdom of traditional yoga philosophy to engineering – and to readers of the FT ("Your body is not a machine", Opinion, August 31).

I never thought I would see the words *praniti* and *purusha* in these pages!

His warning about the limits and distortions of the "optimisation" mindset are well taken, on and off the mat. Thank you, sir, for your selfless service.

Janet Barnhart
New York, NY, US

Correction

● S&P did not change rules to immediately include SpaceX in its index, which would have allowed the rocket conglomerate to be tracked by passive investment funds, as incorrectly stated in an article on September 9.

Opinion

How to teach the next generation in the era of AI

Daniel Susskind

It is said that, centuries ago, there were Jewish scholars so familiar with the Talmud – a central religious text, several million words long – that if you poked a pin through its 5,422 pages, they could tell you the precise word it went through on each one.

The story may be apocryphal but the “art of memory” it supposedly relied upon – the *ars memoria* – is not. This was once a celebrated skill, mastered by great figures from the Roman senator Cicero (to remember vast speeches) to the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (to simultaneously dictate different writings to multiple secretaries).

Today, that skill has vanished. We no longer live in oral cultures, where information must be kept in our heads and shared face-to-face. Successive waves of new technologies – writing,

books, the internet – have chipped away at our memories.

This disappearance is a chapter in a longer story, where technological progress makes once-critical skills redundant. Most of the time, we do not lament their passing. We might feel nostalgic for tall-order chandeliers, for instance, or the setting of moveable type by hand, but we do not hold a vigil for them. So too with the art of memory.

However, in the age of AI, we need to think carefully about whether there are certain skills we must not let go of. This week, the OECD published their latest Pisa scores, capturing global trends in numeracy and literacy among young people. The overall story is awful: an almost two-decade-long decline in these basics has got significantly worse.

Technology often takes the blame for this trend. It is not a coincidence, observers note, that the fall begins in 2009 – around the time that young people's lives started to fill with smartphones and social media. Now, many suspect, AI is making the situation harder.

Why bother learning to handle a hard calculation, or to sit with a difficult text

attempting to comprehend, absorb and analyse it, if AI can handle any questions we have with ease?

And here, we must draw a red line: if we do not confront this decline in literacy and numeracy, it will be a disaster. It is bad in itself. But in preparing the next generation for the age of AI, the loss of these basic skills is catastrophic.

To begin with, literacy and numeracy

The decline in literacy and numeracy is catastrophic – they are the building blocks for all advanced capabilities

are not only “basic” in the sense that they are simple, but also because they are the building blocks for all more advanced capabilities – creativity, judgment, reasoning, problem-solving, whatever they might be.

It is impossible to predict the future of work – what jobs will exist, which advanced skills will be in demand. But whatever the latter turn out to be, they

will build upon these basics. If the next generation is to flourish, they must have these foundations in place.

And there is another reason to worry about falling literacy and numeracy: AI capabilities are uneven and likely to remain that way. Yes, these systems are magnificent at certain tasks. But at others they are either confidently wrong or simply make things up. If humans are to tell the difference, we must keep our understanding of the fundamentals razor-sharp. It is not enough to use AI – we have to use it critically.

But all is not lost. In England, the OECD data shows that literacy and numeracy have held steady, despite the bleak global trends. The school system there has achieved this by focusing relentlessly on the basics. In contrast, its neighbouring systems in Scotland and Wales, where devolved governments have fallen prey over the past decade to shallow and faddish educational thinking, have fallen far behind.

And there is a sad irony in this Scottish and Welsh disaster: by explicitly trying to prepare young people for the future, they have become distracted by

woolly ideas like “21st century learning” and “future-oriented approaches”, letting the very things required for the coming generations to flourish in the age of AI – numeracy and literacy – fall into disrepair.

What about the worry that the use of AI undermines basic skills? Fortunately, we have been here before. When the electronic calculator arrived in schools and exam halls in the 1980s, the fear was the same, yet over time we still found a way to flourish – dividing mathematics education in two, teaching with a calculator in one, teaching without a calculator in the other, and then testing both.

It is time to return to this proven approach again. We must take everything we teach, not just mathematics, and divide it up, teaching people to use AI but also to cope without it – and assessing both. This is a small, but essential, step to prepare the next generation.

The writer is professor of business at Gresham College. His latest book is ‘What Should My Children Do? How to Flourish in the Age of AI’

On Europe's economy, let's ditch the lazy stereotypes

ECONOMICS

Chris Giles



blame Angela Merkel. In the early 2010s, the former German chancellor was fond of saying that Europe accounts for 7 per cent of the world's population, 25 per cent of its GDP and 50 per cent of its social spending. She would wield these statistics to warn about the effects of a bloated welfare state on Europe's competitiveness. Ever since, an army of armchair philosophers has accused Europeans of being work-shy layabouts, degenerately dependent on welfare instead of doing an honest day's work.

According to these accounts, laziness explains much of Europe's sluggish growth and only a proper crisis will wake the Old Continent up. The argument is, of course, pejorative nonsense. The truth is far more interesting.

For welfare to be Europe's growth problem, the following must be true. Europe must have more welfare than other similarly developed economies; it must have lots of people idling with a lower employment rate; this worklessness must be greater in the higher-welfare north of Europe; and the problem must be getting worse, because Europe's growth deficiency compared with the US has been growing.

The first condition is largely met. Social spending has grown rapidly in all advanced economies but is higher in Europe. The difference between Europe and the US is smaller than often thought because inefficient US health expenditure dwarfs that in most European countries, offsetting

Prime-age adults (between 25 and 54) in the EU are more likely to be in work than those in the US

the more generous social safety nets. But when it comes to employment rates, the argument fails. It does not matter whether you use EU or Eurozone data, prime-age adults (between 25 and 54) in Europe are more likely to be in work than those in the US. Older people (between 55 and 64) also have higher employment rates in Europe. Younger people (between 15 and 24) are more likely to have a job in the US, but that results from Europeans educating themselves for longer. The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is higher in the US than in Europe. So welfare is not stopping work.

More than that, the higher-welfare north of Europe tends to have higher employment rates than the south, although there is convergence within the Eurozone.

Most important of all, however, is that European employment rates have improved hugely, overtaking those in the US after being vastly lower at the turn of the century. Welfare cannot therefore explain Europe's growth underperformance. Steady economic reform in the areas of pensions and labour markets (largely outside the scope of the EU) made this possible.

Relative to the US, Europe has managed to increase women's prime-age employment rates and solved its 1990s early retirement problem without any loss of employment among younger people. This has been a triumph of quiet reform, improved incentives and learning from more successful economies, exactly as envisaged by the 1995 OECD jobs strategy. And there is no sign that European labour market success is slowing.

The triumph of gradual, consistent reform is perhaps best demonstrated by the relative employment rates in France slipping behind the rest of Europe, after its repeated failure to raise retirement ages. (France, too, has caught up with US employment rates among older workers.)

When we are looking for explanations of growth underperformance or questioning which countries face greater debt sustainability threats, it is vital to examine the economies that actually exist rather than lazy and imaginary stereotypes. What the Old Continent needs is consistent and careful reform, improving efficiency and avoiding a destructive crisis. There is no need to be pessimistic. Europe's labour market miracle proves it can work.

chris.giles@ft.com

Israel's hapless British defenders

BRITAIN

Robert Shrimley



When Ed Miliband begins a speech on Israel with the words “as a proud British Jew”, you just know the chief rabbi will soon be firing up his social media machine for an effusive denunciation.

In fact, if you believe the foreign secretary's announcement of sanctions against illegal West Bank settlements was prompted by domestic political considerations – and it would be foolish to think them absent – then Miliband has been blessed in his enemies.

Mike Huckabee, the evangelical American ambassador to Israel, called it “Jew hate”. Israel has responded with rage and retaliatory gestures. The UK's traditional Jewish leadership has fumed. It is worth stressing that the chief rabbi speaks for mainstream orthodox synagogues. Britain's senior Masorti rabbi offered a far more thoughtful response, calling settler extremism “a violation of God's name”, a view echoed by progressive rabbis.

Miliband's announcement was timed to precede the Israeli election so that it would not seem like a swipe at a new government should Benjamin Netanyahu be ousted. But Andy Burnham also

wanted a reset before the party conference on an issue where Labour had become detached from its supporters.

There are questions about the efficacy of the policy, but Miliband was nuanced and measured. There are no new sanctions on Israel; he opposed the wider BDS movement. He spoke against antisemitism and of the UK's commitment to the Jewish homeland. He drew a line on settlements, not just for the Palestinians but also to safeguard Israel's future by trying to keep a two-state solution alive. The only truly winced-inducing moment for supporters of Israel was his description of the settler policy as ethnic cleansing. But if it looks, walks and quacks like a duck...

Naturally none of this was enough for Israel's unquestioning defenders around the world. I, too, have a vested interest in the safety of British Jews and the survival of the country that is their only certain lifeboat, but this knee-jerk response captures the witlessness of those who consider themselves Israel and Judaism's greatest supporters.

Any such taxonomy must begin with Netanyahu and his far-right coalition partners. There is weight to the view that no nation could fail to respond to an attack of the scale and atrocity of October 7, just as there is logic to the determination to avert a nuclear Iran. But there are arguments for smart attack, not any action.

The Israeli premier has started wars he cannot finish and galloped America into a conflict that allowed Iran to hold the world economy to ransom and



humiliated the US president. The Gaza campaign (and now the West Bank settler extremism) has horrified and alienated genuine allies. Israelis should be alarmed by the deepening faultlines under the US alliance. Even those prepared to disregard the plight of the Palestinians should recognise the last years have been a strategic disaster for Israel.

Like many after October 7, I was revolted by the immediate glee of far too many people and shaken by the increasingly open antisemitism within the UK. It has been a shock to see synagogues and individuals targeted and efforts to cancel Jewish businesses and artists.

This frightening climate has calcified sentiment among British Jews. In the UK, the traditional community leaders and their media outsiders fail to discern

You may consider the new sanctions misguided but patently they are not an attack on Jews in the UK

between defending Israel's existence and shielding its atrocious government. Many Jews still feel a strong kinship to Israel, but stolid defence when its government goes wrong is not an act of support.

Depicting any pushback against Israel as a threat to Jews here risks conflating antisemitism with anti-Israel sentiment, something we rightly fear and constantly warn against.

Keir Starmer lost his premiership, in part because his backing for Israel eroded Labour support. Yet when he visited the scene of a knife attack on British Jews he was greeted by boneheads waving “Starmer, Jew harmer” signs. Antisemitism is too important to be yelled so blithely and we are already witnessing signs of fatigue among allies at this approach.

The chief rabbi argues this latest move is a “dark day” that will make Jews in Britain less safe. These are the words of their bunker they can no longer distinguish between enemies and critical friends, between the time to whisper and the time to yell. Do they really

believe that those who would attack synagogues or stab Jews in the street need a green light from Miliband?

Their current approach is counter-productive. It neither aids Israel nor protects Jews here. Contrary to the rhetoric, this places no new target on Jewish backs because that target is already there. Jews must live with unprecedented levels of security at schools and places of worship. The fanaticism and antisemitism were uncorked long ago and bolstered by far-left groups cynically stirring up rage at Starmer's government. You may consider the new sanctions misguided but patently they are not an attack on British Jews. Nor can any serious observer say the government has turned on the community.

There is one possible tactical argument for the overreaction to the sanctions, namely that Jewish leaders hope that by ferociously fighting even small steps they raise the cost of bigger ones. Sadly that would require a subtlety that is little in evidence.

robert.shrimley@ft.com

What we learnt from OpenAI's hack of Hugging Face

Thomas Wolf

I wasn't until late in the afternoon on Saturday July 11 that the team at Hugging Face realised something was wrong. This was the final day of the International Conference on Machine Learning in Seoul and a few days before school summer holidays started, meaning our security and research teams were scattered all over the world. I was working from the Netherlands.

Just before 2pm GMT a series of “UnauthorizedAccess” and “PrivilegeEscalation” alerts started to appear on our monitoring tools. Appropriated credentials used to access the system had triggered detection warnings. One of our security engineers posted a pre-emptive message on our Slack channel: “looks like a LLM [large language model] attack to me”.

We at Hugging Face deal with at least

one hacking attempt every day. The software platform, which hosts AI models, has more than 17m users. Google, OpenAI, DeepSeek and Alibaba all release work here. We have built multiple layers of security to protect ourselves.

But the movements and targets chosen by this attacker were different. It quickly generated well over 17,000 cyber attack log events. As we later found out, around 1,200 AI agents were working together as a swarm for weeks – trying the same thing over and over again in order to find the solution to a cyber challenge set by OpenAI. They overrode limitations, downloaded software to get online and then 700 of them attacked Hugging Face, taking security details to gain access to the system.

An additional problem was that our cyber security AI analysis tools, based on Anthropic's Claude Code, refused to engage with part of the investigation. Its guardrails would not allow it to respond to questions it considered dangerous, and it could not tell the difference between Hugging Face analysing an attack and a hacker asking

for assistance to make an attack.

It was only after we switched to an open-weight AI model, Nvidia's extension of Chinese start-up Z.ai's GLM-5.2, that we could set our own guardrails and were able to decode the logs and reconstruct what had happened.

At the time, most of us still assumed a human was behind the attack. Before this happened, I thought agentic AI

We have built multiple layers of security, yet the movements and targets of this attacker were different

cyber attacks were some way off. But it turns out that OpenAI is not alone. Anthropic, Meta and China's Moonshot have all since reported instances of models escaping the isolated digital “sandboxes” where they were supposed to be contained and developed safely away from the internet. This month, another swarm of AI agents was

found on a German-language forum.

Even more troubling to me was an incident in which the Anthropic Mythos model was willing to manipulate a human software developer into accepting malicious code by creating multiple fake online accounts.

In all of these cases, the harmful behaviour was a side-effect of AI models being given difficult cyber security challenges. The damage was limited and little sensitive data was exposed.

But it would be a mistake to dismiss the seriousness of these events. Autonomous hacks raise a host of legal questions that are still unresolved. And at no point did the AI models conclude that deceiving people or breaking into systems was beyond the bounds of acceptable behaviour. OpenAI has described the incident as a “warning shot”. It thinks AI-enabled cyber attacks will become far more widespread.

AI systems commonly have three walls of defence against rogue model behaviour: sandboxes that limit what the model can reach, guardrails that watch what a model is doing and alignment training to ensure the AI refuses to

perform harmful actions. This series of incidents showed that when the first two fail, the third cannot hold on its own. Unless we fix this, we will be layering defences around a rotten core.

Something else needs to change as well. That weekend at Hugging Face, our commercial AI tools failed us when we needed them for defence. We had to turn to an open-weight Chinese model to process the attack logs. Many people have suggested that open-weight AI models are a threat – that they will be used to attack systems protected by closed-source AI models. That weekend, the opposite happened.

To me, the lesson from this incident is twofold. The AI community needs to share safety and alignment research openly so that every team building AI models can learn from others' mistakes. But the community also needs to build open-weight AI models for defence and make them widely available – before the next attack inevitably arrives.

The writer is co-founder and chief science officer of Hugging Face