

Holding a mirror to GDP numbers



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

AS SOMEONE said, tongue in cheek, people don't eat GDP numbers. People eat food, wear clothes and footwear, send their children to school, buy medicines, use mobile phones, watch television, scroll social media, and want to be safe and happy — measured as Consumption. The aggregate of Consumption (C), Investment (I), Government spending (G) and net Exports (X-M) — after factoring for taxes and subsidies — is Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Measurement of GDP, especially the rate of growth of GDP, is crucial to gauge the health of the economy.

Healthier debate

The MoSPI has released the GDP numbers for Q1 of 2026-27; the rate of growth is 10.3 per cent in nominal (current) prices and 7.8 per cent in constant prices compared to Q1 2025-26. The government and the *sarkari* economists are pleased. The sceptics have raised questions. There is a raging debate on the credibility of the GDP numbers. Rather than debating the desirability of 'one nation, one election' (which will undermine federal parliament-

tary democracy), it is better to debate the GDP numbers and whether the benefits of growth are percolating to the people.

I do not wish to add to the noise. Let's assume that MoSPI's numbers are correct. My calculations of the compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of nominal and real GDP on two different base years are (see Table). Notably, on the

	OLD BASE YEAR (2011-12)		NEW BASE YEAR (2023-23)	
	Nominal	Real	Nominal	Real
Current prices	Current prices	Constant prices	Current prices	Constant prices
2022-23	268.90	161.65	261.77	261.77
2023-24	301.23	176.51	290.73	280.94
2024-25	330.68	187.97	317.99	301.15
2025-26	357.14	201.90	345.37	324.70
CAGR	9.92%	7.69%	9.68%	7.45%
GDP in Q1 of 2026-27		88.26		81.36
Growth over Q1 of 2025-26		10.33%		7.82%

GDP IN LAKH CRORE

old base year and the new base year, the CAGR beginning 2022-23 is *more or less the same*. The growth rate in Q1 of 2026-27 is only marginally higher. Conclusion: the economy has not shifted gears in 2026-27; nor is it in overdrive. Therefore, no boast is warranted.

Pertinent questions

Let's hold a mirror to the latest GDP numbers. The nagging question is, under

Measurement of GDP, especially the rate of growth of GDP, is crucial to gauge the health of the economy

the old base year, the GDP in constant prices is very depressed compared to the GDP in current prices but it is not so under the new base year. Why?

Be that as it may, the growth rate ought to be reflected in the measurable parameters of the economy such as jobs, wages, consumption, trade, investment, etc. Here are some pertinent questions:

- Why is the unemployment rate among youth of 15-29 years at a high of 16.2 per cent? CMIE has reported that the unemployment rate for graduates aged 29-34 years often touches 40-45 per cent; why? According to NITI Aayog, 8.7 crore youth aged 15-29 are 'Not in Employment, Education or Training' (NEET); why?

- Why are real wages growing at dismal rates of 0.5, 1.7 and 3.3 per cent, respectively, among casual, salaried and self-employed workers (source: PLFS)? Twenty per cent of the workforce is casual labour and will they not be further impoverished by the negative wage growth?

- Why is net FDI so low? FCNR (B) mobilisation which carried interest rates of 6-7 per cent came in truckloads, but why is foreign capital not coming as direct investment?

- When forex reserves have touched an all-time high of USD 740 billion, why has the rupee not appreciated? Since January 2026, the rupee has depreciated nearly 5 per cent against the US dollar and is reportedly the worst performing Asian currency, why?

- Exports are rising, but imports are rising too. At current prices, imports are rising faster. Merchandise trade deficit

touched USD 150 billion in April-August 2026. The trade deficit with China alone in April-July was USD 44 billion. Is the trade deficit not a drag on the economy? Why are Make-in-India, PLI, ASPIRE, NMCP and other schemes not resulting in manufacture of the goods that India imports from China?

- In the sectoral composition of nominal GVA, why is 'manufacturing' stagnant at 13 per cent? In fact, the share of the secondary sector in nominal GVA, over many quarters, has been bounded between 24 and 26 per cent. Why have the schemes not pushed up the need?

- Why is capital investment, as measured by Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF), stuck at roughly 33.5 per cent of GDP? Of this, private corporate capital expenditure has remained unchanged at about 12 per cent. Despite cajoling, admonishments and threats, why are corporate investors not willing to make capital investment?

- Why has the growth number not resulted in more public goods such as better schools, better hospitals, better roads, better water supply, better policing, etc.? If one takes a straw poll, the overwhelming proportion of citizens will give a thumbs down on each of these areas.

Unedifying mirror image

There is no surprise that Gen Z is protesting against the marked deterioration all around them. We may be growing at 7.8 per cent statistically, but most citizens do not feel or believe so. Because they know that their lives are not better or easier.

Who are the real patriots?



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

THERE APPEARS to be a fifth columnist in the Prime Minister's inner circle. This thought came to me when I saw him jubilantly striding across that college stage in Vadodra last week. The event seemed part of his Gen Z sedition crusade and what he strode, smiled and waved to was the tune of *We Will Rock You*. Luckily, it was only the tune that played. He had been aware of the words, Modi may have faintly. Here is a line: 'You got mud on your face, big disgrace. Somebody better put you back into your place.'

See what I mean about a fifth columnist working in the inwards of the PMO? Also, the song is from 1977 when people of my generation were young and rebellious, and the cockroaches who have now got so badly under Modi's skin were not even specks on the horizon. More seriously — who was the idiot who advised the Prime Minister to attend this joyous event at a time when a PG (paying guest) hostel had just crumbled in Delhi University's south campus, killing young students and their dreams? Among the dead was eighteen-year-old Arpit Jai, whose taxi driver father worked overtime to send his son to college and struggled to pay the exorbitant rent for his PG hotel. I heard Arpit's story in Barkha Dutt's *Mojo* Story. It brought tears to my eyes.

In the mainstream media have mostly ignored the stories of the seven dead students. Perhaps because they would all be as heartbreaking. Instead, almost every news channel reported every moment of the Prime Minister's trip to Gujarat as if it was the most important news of the day. If they had stayed with the building collapse in Satya Niketan, there may have been some hope of coercing the 'triple-engine' government in Delhi to stem the corruption that led to the horror of students being killed for just trying to get a college degree.

While the Chief Minister's cohort surveyed the debris of the illegally built PG (paying guest) hostel from high above, a handful of real journalists dug deeper into the crashed building and showed pictures of the horrendous conditions in which students live. The Cockroach Santa Party leader who said that students are being forced to live like cockroaches is correct. The building that crumbled is among others in which students live in cells built one upon the other, and that can only be reached through dangerously narrow alleys darkened by clumps of hanging wires. I must here add that the best reporting I saw came from a digital platform called PEEK TV.

When I saw their pictures of those dismal alleys and dreary rooms, I found myself hoping that the Prime Minister was also watching so he could understand why he needs to forget about our 'demographic dividend'. Young students who are forced to live and study in such horrible conditions will never learn to think, dream or learn. How will they be able to compete with students who, in other colleges in other countries, have already learned how to deal with the technological revolution that AI brings?

This one building collapse has brought to the surface many other things, like the abysmal state of governance in Delhi. It has revealed corruption so evil that it boggles the mind. Everyone is involved in creating the smokescreen that allows builders to disobey the rules of safe planning. The PG mafia that extorts inexplicably high rents from desperate students is controlled by politicians and high officials who always seem to get away with their evil deeds.

The only thing that happens after every disaster of the kind we saw in Satya Niketan is that some lowly officials get publicly yelled at by higher officials like the Chief Minister and then some committee is appointed to (supposedly) go into causes and solutions. These committees never amount to much, as we can see from the one appointed after the building collapse in Delhi's Malviya Nagar some months ago. Corrupt officials and politicians collude to make Delhi non-functional except when there is a big conference of the BRICS kind. And then things only appear to work because visiting dignitaries are only allowed to see restricted sections of India's capital city.

This is the way things are. It is the way things have always been. But the cockroaches and their young cheerleaders are ensuring this is not how they will always be in the future. It is the one thing that gives me some hope that a day will come when officials and politicians who have created the mess that we see today pay for their crimes. One idea from me is that the officials who allowed that PG hostel to be built should be charged with manslaughter, and that this be done every time a building collapses and kills people.

No more commissions. No more inquiry commissions. When people die because of the criminal negligence of officials, those officials should be charged with manslaughter, if not murder. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister needs to find out who the fifth columnist is in his inner circle and punish him for sending him off to college events where he blames what is wrong in India on 'demagogic navals'. He seems proud of this new label, without noticing that the people he is charging with sedition could be the very patriots that we need today.

Why is Delhi so indifferent to Dilliwallahs?



KAUSHIK DASGUPTA

WHAT, AFTER ALL, is a Dilliwallah? For decades, Delhi has resisted answering this question. Instead, it has let its residents stitch something of themselves into an ever-expanding, ever-evolving patchwork of definitions that questions of identity so often demand.

But cities change. Their doors may open wide for some, even as the meaning of belonging grows more uncertain for others. Has the Delhi of today begun to draw lines around who gets to call it home? It is a question that has acquired a new urgency of late. The building collapse at Siddhulab in May, then another this week at Satya Niketan, followed just two days later by the assault on a musician from Manipur, Chongtham Vikram Singh, who had made the city his home, should be a moment of reckoning. For they raise an uneasy question: Who gets to feel at home today in a city whose story has always been of people arriving from elsewhere and finding a place within it?

Delhi has always had its cruelties. It has discriminated against the poor and witnessed horrific communal violence. There have always been enclaves whose residents make others feel less welcome. At the same time, there was something reassuring about the city: People could arrive without having to prove they belonged. Siddhulab and Satya Niketan are, in many ways, neighbourhoods of arrival: the first foothold in the city for students and young people who come to Delhi in search of an education or a job. What does the promise of a better life mean when the room in which they sleep becomes a death trap?

Official investigations may establish the immediate causes of these tragedies and hold the guilty to account. Conventional questions of urban governance and planning failures must be answered. It is also time to look beyond them, at what has made the city so indifferent to the humanity of its residents, especially those who come here in search of new possibilities.

Seven men have been arrested and a juvenile detained for Chongtham Vikram Singh's murder. An ordinary quarrel over loud noise ended with Singh being beaten so severely that he eventually died. We do not know if this was a hate crime. That shouldn't be because to overlook the anxiety surrounding that possibility, Singh had lived in Delhi for 30 years — long enough to be called a Dilliwallah by the elastic, undefined idea of belonging that the city prides itself on. His death has stirred fears among people from the Northeast. For many, the fear of being reminded they are seen as outsiders is an everyday reality.

Delhi continues to draw people from across the country. After what has happened of late, can it still brush aside its old discomfort with questions of identity with the innocence of the past?

The trouble is that Delhi's accommodative spirit never became the hallmark of its politics and governance. It did not translate into institutions that placed people's welfare and dignity at their core. Delhi could give everyone a place, though it did not always make neighbourhoods livable. Newcomers were absorbed without always receiving the protections that ought to come with citizenship and residence: dignified housing, clean air, safe streets, reliable public services and a law-and-order system that protects everyone equally. Delhi's pollution control agencies, construction bodies, transport agencies, and municipal and administrative systems were rarely informed by the undercurrents of humanity in the city's ethos. Delhi's politics, very often mirroring the nation's identity politics, rarely nudged these agencies in this direction. Perhaps this is where the city's old compact has begun to fray. And perhaps that is why Delhi must examine its failures of governance beyond the ways of textbooks. Master plans are important. Their technicalities, however, can obscure the institutional failures that have made the city's old promise of belonging harder to take for granted. Whether Delhi still has the generosity to make a newcomer feel at home must, of course, be asked. The more important issue is whether the expanding city has the institutions to make that belonging safe, dignified and secure.

A city cannot claim to welcome everyone if its institutions fail to protect them. For a city built, again and again, by people who arrived from outside its boundaries, that is perhaps the real test after last week's horrific incidents.

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25 years after 9/11, the US is stuck in a state of constant war



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY FEISAL AMIN AL-ISTRABADI

THE SAVAGERY of the terrorist attacks against the US by Al Qaeda on September 11, 2001, was juxtaposed against the cloudless skies of a gorgeous late summer day. Against that azure sky and the elegant skyline of Lower Manhattan, facing being burnt alive as the flames rose before the towers collapsed, desperate men and women chose instead to take control of the last few moments of their lives by hurling themselves to their deaths. Then the Pentagon was attacked, followed by the plane that disappeared over Pennsylvania. 2,977 innocent souls were murdered that day.

The country palpably changed in an instant. It had a choice of how to respond. It could hunt down the Al Qaeda leadership, killing those it could not capture and destroying their camps in Afghanistan. Or it could launch an invasion of Afghanistan, remove the ruling Taliban from power, occupy the country, and attempt to rebuild it. When George W. Bush stood atop the rubble and vowed the perpetrators would soon "hear from all of us," major military preparations were well underway. That too was palpable.

Twenty-five years on, there has not been a single day that the US has not been in conflict. Congress's 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) remains in force. Every president since, through Donald Trump's second term, has used force pursuant to this AUMF. The US is now rearing its second generation that has never known a moment when it was not at war. Since the burden of military service is borne almost exclusively by the working class, it is easy to keep the military machinery functioning.

Bush set the country's ethos in the aftermath of 9/11 with his famous declaration, "You're either with us or against us." That remains a useful prism through which to assess much of US policy today. This worldview



The 9/11 attacks destroyed the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City

fails to distinguish between enemies who mean to do the country harm and obnoxious actors who are nevertheless not an actual threat to US interests. Even in Afghanistan, where it had the world's support, the US failed to distinguish between Al Qaeda, a threat to the US and its interests, and the Taliban government, which had no extra-territorial ambitions outside of Afghanistan. It was a strategic blunder to fail to recognise that, while the Taliban were not "for" the US, neither were they "against" it. Rather than just destroying Al Qaeda, the US spent 20 years fighting. Yet in the end, the US withdrew from Afghanistan. The Taliban have since been back in power.

The same "us/them" dichotomy led the US to similar blunders in Iraq. Multiple insurgent groups arose, including Al Qaeda. Domestic insurgent groups also arose. Saddamists — supporters of Saddam Hussein — wanted to restore the previous regime. Al Qaeda wanted to destroy the American project. But there were Iraqi nationalists who rejected the American presence and who had a patriotic agenda that could have formed the basis of negotiations. Other groups centred around ex-army officers who went into insurgency after US forces shot and killed former officers peacefully demanding employment after the US dissolved the Iraqi armed forces and cashed them without pensions. I witnessed these protests myself.

US policy failed to distinguish between insurgents who had a negotiable political agenda and those that did not. I understood: these insurgents were all "against us". Some consisted of Sunni tribes that feared a new constitution. At the time, I was legal advisor to a member of the Iraqi Governing Council Presidency. I told the American administrator in Baghdad that Saddam Hussein had kept the loyalty of the Sunni tribes by bribing them with cash and Chevrolet Suburbans. He told me US did not do such things. Years later, Gen David Petraeus began to pay the Sunni tribes for their cooperation. It worked, but only after the deaths of countless Iraqis and thousands of Americans. Once became ambassador representing Iraq at the United Nations, I saw repeated examples of the 'with us/against us' dichotomy.

So it is to object to America's lawless campaign sinking the boats of alleged drug traffickers without due process in Latin American waters. To object is to be accused of supporting drug dealers. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers, dressed in paramilitary style, without any identifying symbol of law enforcement, shoot unarmed US citizens with impunity. Protest, and the President of the US accuses you of favouring "terrorists". Similarly, to object to the US's unlawful actions in Venezuela, Iran, and Cuba is to be accused of supporting tyrants.

The September 11 attacks changed America forever. It has normalised the "forever wars" that Trump promised to end even as he has launched another in Iran. Constant war has brutalised the country. Society has been militarised, including the policing function, and the president now is often referred to as commander-in-chief. In unrelated references ("We are electing a commander-in-chief," as if citizens are soldiers), America in 2026 seems to reject many legal norms, including domestic constitutional rules. Not only did Congress not authorise the actions in Venezuela and Iran it refused to take up the issues. If September 11 changed the US into a militarised, lawless state, the question is: Who won the war on terror?

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Listen to women in pain



SHE SAID
BY SUKHMANI MALIK

menopause — and decided if they complain. Author Hilary Mantel, in a 2004 essay on her experience with endometriosis, wrote, "People talked — and still do — of a 'low-pain threshold'. I didn't want anyone to think I had that." Thankfully, she didn't have that. Instead, several years later, of course, she discovered what she had was endometriosis. And the payment for the diagnosis was "part of my bladder and my bowel, my womb and my ovaries."

In India, in particular, where menstruation is still considered a taboo in large swathes of the country, and speaking of reproductive health, let alone any abnormalities around it, is shrouded in shame, fear, and ignorance, the conversation is far from where it needs to be. Chronic pain and illness are an incredibly isolating reality to contend with. Having that experience compounded by stigma, cruelty, and gendered bias makes the cost much higher for women's physical and mental health and future.

After 12 years of hospital visits and un-

explained illness, my friend was finally diagnosed with endometriosis. A delayed diagnosis culminated in several surgeries, and an adequate resolution remains a pipe dream. At 17, I was diagnosed with Polycystic Metabolic Ovarian Syndrome (PMOS). A few years after that, I finally had a diagnosis for the autoimmune condition. By then, the damage was serious enough that even with the best care, a surgery, at this point, seems unavoidable.

A society that refuses to treat its women with care and their pain with dignity can only reproduce similar patterns in medicine. This is why medicine alone cannot do the work. It needs a society that doesn't rank women's pain, one that cares enough to listen. The question is: Do we care enough to change?

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AMID GLOBAL TRADE POLICY UNCERTAINTY

BRICS condemns unilateral tariffs, backs WTO reforms

Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, September 12

THE BRICS countries Saturday flagged the rise of unilateral tariff and non-tariff measures in the backdrop of a slew of protectionist measures taken by the US and the European Union.

These measures "distort trade and are inconsistent with the World Trade Organisation's rules", the New Delhi Declaration 2026 issued at the BRICS summit said. It also said that the countries would work together to enhance the WTO's responsiveness to the needs and priorities of emerging markets and developing economies and support outcomes that strengthen the multilateral trading system and address evolving global challenges.

BRICS members said the proliferation of trade-restrictive actions is inconsistent with WTO rules. Raising "indiscriminate" tariffs and non-tariff measures, or protectionism under the "guise of environmental objectives" threaten to reduce global trade, disrupt global supply chains, and introduce uncertainty, potentially exacerbating economic disparities and hurting global economic development, they said.

BRICS against sanctions

This comes in the backdrop of sweeping tariffs imposed by the US for over a year under various US trade provisions, which have targeted exports from across the world. While the US has relied on tariffs to limit exports, the EU has imposed carbon tariffs on carbon-intensive products, ignoring the Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) provisions of WTO agreements that advocate giving a longer window to developing nations to address the climate change issue.



BRICS members warned that protectionism could reduce global trade and disrupt supply chains. REUTERS

The declaration also condemned imposition of unilateral coercive measures in the form of economic sanctions and secondary sanctions, which it said had negative implications for human rights, including the rights to development, health and security, of the general population of targeted states. These affected the poor and people in vulnerable situations disproportionately, deepened the digital divide and exacerbated environmental challenges, the declaration said.



WTO reforms

The BRICS declaration said that the members support reform of the WTO and to strengthen a non-discriminatory, open, equitable, transparent, fair, inclusive, predictable and rules-based multilateral trading system, with the WTO at its core. Amid a deep divide within developed and developing nations, BRICS backed found-

ational principles, such as Most-Favoured-Nation Treatment and Special and Differential Treatment for developing members, particularly LDCs.

"We will ensure the implementation of the MC14 outcomes and continue to engage constructively towards the resolution of outstanding issues. We will engage constructively in the WTO reform to enhance the WTO's authority, effectiveness, inclusiveness, and relevance, and build an open world economy. In this regard, we recognise that it is important to identify appropriate pathways for plurilateral initiatives into the WTO legal framework, including on development-oriented issues, and to explore the formulation of forward-looking rules in the WTO," the declaration said.

This comes amid a push for radical reforms by the US, such as a rethink on the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) principle that ensures non-discriminatory trade practices, incorporating a plurilateral agreement in WTO architecture, which is seen as a contrast to long-established consensus-based decision-making. New Delhi is primarily pursuing policy space due to its relatively low share in global trade but large scope for future growth.

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Challenges that China's heft poses for India

Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, September 12

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping highlighted the need to address structural trade imbalance between the two countries during their bilateral meeting on Saturday.

The ties between the two countries had hit a low after the Galwan Valley military clash in June 2020. But, of late, there have been signs of a thaw—resumption of direct flights, re-opening of border trade via Nathu La after six years and, most importantly, easing of restrictions on foreign direct investments (FDI) from land-bordering countries.

Unpredictable American trade policies and two ongoing wars that have rattled the oil and bond markets seem to have nudged India and China to ease tensions.

As negotiations between India and the US for a deal remain on, India has been seeking

an edge in Section 301 rates over its competitors, including China. The demand for differential tariffs may have begun taking shape as the US in July this year imposed a 10% forced labour tariff on India, which was better than the 12.5% tariffs imposed on China, Russia and Brazil among others. China had earlier warned countries of consequences if they struck deals at its expense.

China dominance & MSMEs demands

With current trade within BRICS heavily centred around China, MSMEs have a deep dependency on Chinese capital goods and technical expertise.

However, manufacturers said that there is significant opportunity in the BRICS for exports. While Indian MSMEs are seeking better technical cooperation with China and easier access to input items from the country, there is a simultaneous challenge of a trade deficit with the neighbouring country.

Rising imports from BRICS countries led by China (FY2026)

Countries	Imports	Exports
Brazil	8.05	7.00
China	131.62	19.47
Egypt	2.60	3.87
Ethiopia	0.24	0.438
Indonesia	20.29	4.49
Iran	0.375	1.25
Russia	55.36	4.49
Saudi Arabia	30.79	10.28
South Africa	8.56	7.00
UAE	63.88	37.35
BRICS total	321.79	95.69

SOURCE: GTRI
NOTE: FIGURES IN \$ BILLION

As per the Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), India faces its largest and growing trade deficit with China, particularly in consumer goods (garments, leather), electronics, auto com-

ponents, and power equipment (solar PV cells and batteries). China is India's single largest import origin, supplying 19.2% of India's total imports, ISID reports said.

SC Rathna, president of the Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO), said BRICS cooperation can improve India's access to critical minerals, energy, technology, capital and new manufacturing partnerships.

"The opportunity is not simply to sell more to BRICS countries. India should become an integral part of the production, sourcing and value chains being developed across these economies," he said.

"We need BRICS to create practical trade, payment and investment corridors through faster cross-border settlements, affordable trade finance, easier recognition of standards, verified buyer-seller networks and stronger SME-to-SME partnerships. With India running a substantial trade deficit with

most BRICS economies, the priority must also be to integrate Indian MSMEs more deeply into BRICS supply chains," said Vinod Kumar, President, India SME Forum.

Challenges from China's dominance

While Indian manufacturers are increasingly scouting for opportunity, the biggest challenge is competing with Chinese goods abroad and China's over-reliance on exports rather than consumption for economic growth. A Stanford research report released last year said that the net "China" in labour-intensive manufacturing is still China.

"No other country has fully absorbed China's former role in labour-intensive exports, and China itself remains resistant to large-scale immigration of low-skilled workers. As a result, the transition away from China's dominance in these industries is unfolding gradually, with no clear replacement emerging yet," the report said.

In West Asia conflict's shadow, BRICS calls for free flow of energy

Sukalp Sharma
New Delhi, September 12

AGAINST THE backdrop of stifled energy flows from West Asia due to the conflict there and attacks on energy infrastructure in theatre conflicts—West Asia as well as Russia-Ukraine—the New Delhi Declaration adopted at the 18th BRICS Summit on Saturday underscored energy security and the protection of critical energy infrastructure as a key focus area of the group's economic and geopolitical concerns. The declaration called for stable energy markets, uninterrupted supplies, and protecting important energy infrastructure.

This comes amid the ongoing West Asia conflict, where major oil and gas producers including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—all BRICS members—have been impacted by attacks on energy

production and supply infrastructure. Attacks on Iran's infrastructure came from US and Israeli forces, while Saudi Arabia, UAE, and other Gulf countries seen as US allies were hit by Iran and Tehran-backed non-state actors in the region. For instance, the US struck Iranian oil tankers earlier this week, while Tehran-backed Houthis militia attacked and damaged oil and gas infrastructure in Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, energy infrastructure in Russia—a BRICS founding member—has also been damaged amid its war with Ukraine. Top global oil and gas importers China and India are also founding members of the grouping. The call for protection of energy infrastructure and uninterrupted flow of energy globally are appeals India has repeatedly made over the past several months.

In a sense, the emphasis on

free flow of energy and protecting critical energy infrastructure is significant because a large part of the energy crisis is unfolding within BRICS itself. The New Delhi Declaration, therefore, represents a dilemma as well as a test for the multilateral grouping.

The West Asia conflict has severely constrained global energy flows as vessel movements through critical maritime chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz have reduced to a trickle. Prior to the war, which is now in its seventh month, the narrow waterway between Iran and Oman accounted for a fifth of global crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) flows. The disruption has led to supply tightness and elevated energy prices globally, particularly impacting countries like India, which has heavy reliance on energy imports.

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BRICS seeks 'mutually reinforcing policy levers' to boost intra-bloc trade



Scope to improve intra-BRICS trade

	Exports	Imports
Intra-BRICS trade	\$11.1 tn	\$1.4 tn
BRICS members trade	\$5.67 tn	\$4.58 tn
Global trade	\$26.3 tn	\$26.5 tn

NOTE: DATA IS FOR 2025 AND IN \$ TRILLION. SOURCE: GTRI, DGOS

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, September 12

WITH AN eye on ensuring resilient global value chains, the BRICS countries will look at "mutually reinforcing policy levers" to boost trade within the grouping, the New Delhi Declaration, issued on Saturday, said.

The statement comes a month after the meeting of BRICS trade ministers in August in Jaipur made note of the same, detailing that the levers would include backward and forward global value chain linkages, regional integration, economic diversification beyond primary commodities, investment in physical and digital infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and upgrading workforce skills.

Boosting trade within the members of BRICS has been a focus for some time; according to think-tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI), while the grouping in 2025 accounted for \$5.7 trillion of the world's exports of \$26.3 trillion (21.6%), only 4.1% was intra-BRICS trade. China dominates intra-BRICS trade, with its exports and imports to and from other members standing at \$55.1 billion and \$46.5 billion, respectively. At \$226 billion, India has the largest trade deficit among the members.

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follows a China-centred hub-and-spoke pattern, rather than a balanced trading network," Ajay Srivastava, Founder of GTRI, said, adding that there is "considerable scope for growth through better market access, lower trade barriers, improved logistics, local-currency settlement and more diversified supply chains".

According to Anil Bhardwaj, Secretary General of Federation of Indian Micro & Small & Medium Enterprises (FISME), the awareness among businesses about opportunities in other BRICS countries is "abysmally low", with most interactions so far being at the government-to-government level.

"To realise the potential of intra-BRICS trade, especially among original BRICS countries, respective governments have to liberally facilitate and support businesses to explore by reducing their risks," Bhardwaj said. "The New Delhi Declaration also endorsed the consensus reached by the trade ministers in Jaipur to start the setting up of an 'Invoice Discounting Mechanism' for BRICS members, aimed squarely at providing funds to Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and "strengthening their participation in international trade".

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HDFC Bank recommends two names for next CEO

George Mathew
Mumbai, September 12

HDFC BANK has submitted the names of two candidates to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for appointment as its next Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer (MD & CEO), setting in motion the succession process at the country's largest private sector lender. The recommendations, come ahead of the end of Siddharth Jagdishan's current term on October 26, 2026.

According to the bank's regulatory filing, it has sought RBI approval for the appointment of its next MD & CEO for a three-year period. Along with the names of the two candidates, HDFC Bank has also submitted the proposed remuneration for the candidates. The appointments will be subject to approval from the central bank.

The bank has sought the reappointment of Y Sriinivasa

Rangan as a whole-time director, designated as Executive Director, along with the remuneration payable to him. His proposed tenure will run from November 23, 2026, to November 22, 2027.

HDFC Bank has also proposed the appointment of Jimmy Tata as a whole-time director, designated as Executive Director, for three years from the date of RBI approval, or such other date or period as may be specified by the regulator. In addition, the bank has proposed creating one additional whole-time director position. This will increase the number of whole-time directors on the board to four, apart from the MD & CEO.

HDFC Bank said the additional position is intended to ensure sharper synergy and oversight, including over its subsidiaries, while creating a larger leadership pipeline for succession planning. FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

SEBI proposes tweaks to closing auction session

New Delhi, September 12

SEBI on Saturday proposed changes to the methodology for calculating expiry-day settlement prices of index and stock derivatives, following a review of the newly introduced closing auction session (CAS) framework. SEBI proposed two options for determining the settlement prices—a blended Volume Weighted Average Price (VWAP) based on trades executed during the last 30 minutes of the continuous trading session (CTS) and the 10-minute CAS, or continuation of the existing CTS VWAP methodology.

The proposals follow feedback received from market participants on the use of the CAS-determined closing price for settling derivative contracts on expiry. Determination of derivative settlement prices based on the closing price arrived at through CAS was among the significant areas of feedback received by SEBI. PTI

Need inclusive energy transition, fossil fuels will keep playing key role: BRICS

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, September 12

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT fossil fuels will continue to play an important role in the world's energy mix, particularly in emerging markets and developing economies, BRICS countries have called for "just, orderly, equitable and inclusive" energy transitions while stressing the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in line with global climate goals.

In its declaration, the countries also stressed the principle of "technological neutrality" and "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" in pursuing energy transitions, while recognising that countries' pathways would need to take into account their respective national circumstances, needs and priorities.

The declaration came as leaders of the 11 BRICS countries gathered in India for the 18th

BRICS summit, with the grouping seeking to strengthen cooperation and boost growth prospects across the Global South.

Beyond the energy transition, the declaration also focuses on the digitalisation of energy systems and greater cooperation on critical minerals, while emphasising the need for resilient energy supply chains.

"We recognize that energy security is a crucial foundation for social and economic development, national security and the welfare of all nations. We highlight the need to enhance energy security by ensuring energy market stability and maintaining uninterrupted flows of energy from diverse sources, strengthening value chains, ensuring resilience and protection of critical energy infrastructure, including cross-border infrastructure," the declaration read.

In its declaration, the countries also underscored the importance of balanced and diver-

sified energy mixes reflecting national circumstances.

They recognised that a wide range of energy sources and technologies including but not limited to renewable energy, bio-energy, fossil fuels, nuclear energy, hydropower, hydrogen, low-carbon technologies, energy storage technologies, would play an important role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and energy security.

On critical minerals, the countries affirm the need to promote "reliable, responsible, diversified, resilient, fair, sustainable, and just" supply chains of critical minerals to guarantee benefit sharing, value addition and economic diversification in resource-rich countries, while fully preserving sovereign rights over their mineral resources, as well as their right to adopt, maintain, enforce measures to pursue legitimate public policy objectives. FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

THE EAST-WEST PIPELINE RUNS ROUGHLY 1,200 KM ACROSS SAUDI ARABIA, FROM THE ABQAIQ OIL PROCESSING CENTRE IN THE KINGDOM'S OIL-RICH EAST TO THE RED SEA PORT OF YANBU IN THE WEST

Saudi Arabia shuts East-West oil pipeline after attacks: Why it matters for India

Anagha Jayakumar & Sukalp Sharma
New Delhi, September 12

SAUDI ARABIA has temporarily shut its East-West oil pipeline after multiple attacks on the crucial network Thursday, raising fresh concerns over global oil supplies already strained by disruption in the Strait of Hormuz. The pipeline, also called Petrolina, is one of the most important Hormuz-bypass routes for exporting Saudi Arabian crude.

The immediate effect on Saudi oil exports, and consequently on international supplies and prices, will depend on the extent of the damage and how quickly the pipeline can resume operations. For energy-import-dependent India, too, there will be ramifications.

Importance of East-West pipeline

The East-West pipeline runs roughly 1,200 km across Saudi Arabia, from the Abqaiq oil processing centre in the kingdom's oil-rich east to the Red Sea port of Yanbu in the west. From Yanbu, oil tankers headed to Asia usually sail east through the Bab el-Mandeb, while those headed west go through the Suez Canal.

Operated by Saudi Aramco, the pipeline allows Saudi Arabia to move crude oil overseas from its main producing region to the Red Sea, rather than shipping it from terminals on the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz. In fact, the pipeline was built partly as a hedge against risks arising from disruptions in oil flows through Hormuz. Its

targeting, however, has demonstrated that alternative routes themselves can become targets in a wider regional conflict.

Before the conflict erupted, the pipeline was operating at just a fraction of its capacity, as exports from the regular route through the Strait of Hormuz were normal. But with maritime traffic through the chokepoint grinding to an effective halt, Aramco started pumping more oil through the Petrolina, which has the capacity to transport around 7 million barrels per day (tpd) of crude.

While the actual volume of crude moving through the pipeline has been lower than its capacity, with estimates ranging around 4-5 million over the past few months, it is still significant and represents 4-5% of global oil



The pipeline, also called Petrolina, is one of the most important Hormuz-bypass routes for exporting Saudi Arabian crude. REUTERS

supplies. This route has therefore served as an important safety valve for global oil supplies during the current crisis.

The worry for India

Saudi Arabia had traditionally been among the top

sources of crude oil for India. While supplies from Riyadh have fallen notably amid the Hormuz crisis, Saudi oil still accounted for 7-8% of India's total oil imports over the past couple of months. And a vast majority of these came from the Yanbu

export facility. In August, India imported about 332,000 bpd of Saudi oil, accounting for 7.2% of New Delhi's total oil imports for the month, as per tanker data from Kpler. In July, oil imports from Riyadh stood at about 40,000 bpd and made up 8.2% of India's oil imports.

The first impact of the Petrolina's shutdown on India would be on supplies, and Indian refiners will have to find replacement volumes. While that can be managed, given India's highly diversified crude import slate, higher prices for those alternative barrels will be a bigger headache. Amid the West Asia conflict, India's crude oil import bill surged by over 56% on a year-on-year (y-o-y) basis in April-July to \$63.4 billion, even as

import volumes rose slightly to 81.9 million tonnes—or about 600 million barrels—over 81.5 million tonnes, as per data from the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell.

Energy imports are a major component of India's external trade, and any meaningful increase has ramifications for the country's trade balance, current account, inflation, and the rupee's exchange rate, among others. India is the world's third-largest consumer of crude oil and depends on imports to meet over 88% of its requirement. Put simply, an oil shock can be considered an external tax on the Indian economy.

Given its high oil consumption and import dependency, India is already bearing the

brunt of high oil prices. The country imports 1.8-2 billion barrels of oil a year, and every \$1-per-barrel increase in price bumps up its oil import bill by up to \$2 billion on an annualised basis.

It also said that every 10% oil price hike would add \$10 billion to India's current account deficit by 0.4% of the GDP. Crude oil alone is the country's largest merchandise import. According to Commerce Ministry data, crude oil imports in 2025-26 stood at about \$135 billion. If oil prices sustain at \$100 per barrel in the current financial year and import volumes don't decline, the oil import bill could be upwards of \$200 billion for the year. If the price sustains at a much higher level, the implications would be even greater. FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

BRICS INDIA 2026

From Page One

BRICS countries adopt New Delhi Declaration

The New Delhi declaration called for "comprehensive reform" of the United Nations, including support for Brazil and India to get a bigger role in the Security Council. It also stressed the need to protect civilians and expressed "deep concern" over attacks on civilian infrastructure and nuclear facilities in West Asia, in a reference to the U.S. and Israel's missile strikes in Iran.

Addressing the leaders, Mr. Modi said that 20 years after the grouping of emerging economies was originally formed, BRICS was "coming of age" with a "distinct identity" not aimed against others on the global stage. "We respect each other's perspectives and move forward through consensus. We strive to move ahead with an approach that is not against anyone but instead seeks to take everyone along," the Prime Minister said, in a possible reference to the criticism of BRICS in the U.S. as an "anti-western" grouping.

Mr. Modi suggested that BRICS build a "troika" system like the G-20, so incoming and outgoing Presidents of the grouping bring continuity to discussions. He also proposed a road map for global governance reform, a seafarer distress network, and a BRICS global south mechanism for skill development in new technologies.

Chinese President Xi Jinping, who held an hour-long bilateral meeting with Mr. Modi after the session, announced that China would take over the presidency of BRICS for the next year.

The declaration also criticised the U.S. blockade of Cuba, and expressed concern over violence in Sudan.

Compromise and consensus

Previous ministerial meetings of BRICS this year had failed to issue joint statements on the Iran-UAE tussle. Sources privy to the negotiations said that Iran had wanted a strong condemnation of the U.S. and Israel for starting the war with strikes that assassinated its Supreme Leader, similar to the statement issued by the SCO grouping, which does not include the UAE. The UAE wanted "equal condemnation" of Iran's attacks against its neighbours. Eventually, the text agreed to include non-specific references to the conflict.

The consensus was achieved through months of "threadbare" discussions, according to Sudhakar Dalela, Indian Sherpa at the talks and Secretary (Economic Relations) in the Ministry of External Affairs. He was addressing a media briefing after the closed BRICS session on the future of global governance and strengthening multilateralism. Side-stepping a question from *The Hindu* on whether India had asked for support from other leaders in BRICS to help convince Iran and UAE to agree to the draft language, he said that the cooperation and collaboration of all members was "key".

He also underlined BRICS countries' consensus against cross-border terrorism, with a specific reference to the Pahalgaon terror attack in 2025.

Xi and Modi welcome 'steady progress' in ties

The External Affairs Ministry said the two leaders expressed their commitment to "a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable resolution of the boundary question", proceeding from the political perspective of their overall bilateral relations and the long-term interests of the two peoples.

"They (India and China) should pursue progress on bilateral relations and the boundary question in parallel, ensuring that each supports the other, and maintain peace and tranquillity in border areas," a statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China said.

Mr. Xi arrived with a large delegation earlier in the day for a two-day visit and was driven to the summit venue at Bharat Mandapam amid tight security. The Ministry said the two leaders agreed that both sides "must continue to expand common ground" in resolving "regional and global issues" while "addressing challenges".

'Political settlement'

Speaking at the summit on the situation in West Asia, Mr. Xi said the war has inflicted "serious losses" on the people of all countries in the region, and it is against the common interests of the international community. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning, referring to Mr. Xi's speech, called for "political settlement" of the crisis. "China will work with fellow BRICS members to play a due role in bringing peace and tranquillity to the Middle East," said Mr. Xi, referring to India and China as "key members of the Global South" with "significant responsibilities" in world affairs.

"We must keep the future of humanity and the well-being of our people at heart, join hands to drive high-quality cooperation within the expanded BRICS framework, advocate for an equal and orderly multipolar world and an economic globalisation that is universally beneficial and inclusive, and inject greater positive energy into promoting global peace, stability, development, and prosperity," he said.

Mr. Xi said BRICS has demonstrated "vigorous vitality" over the past two decades and has become the "most influential cooperation platform for emerging markets and developing countries in the world today". He said BRICS countries have overcome numerous challenges working together, including the "international financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change". (With inputs from Ananth Krishnan in Beijing)

Iran President, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince discuss regional hostilities

Both leaders underscore importance of 'de-escalation' as they meet on the sidelines of the 18th BRICS Summit; New Delhi Declaration calls for Israel to withdraw troops from Lebanon, halt policies aimed at forced displacement of Palestinians

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Against the backdrop of continued hostilities in West Asia, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian and the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Khalid bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, held talks in New Delhi on Saturday on the sidelines of the 18th BRICS Summit. The two sides discussed the regional hostilities and expressed support for "de-escalation".

The conversation came ten days after Iran targeted military installations in the United Arab Emirates. The 'New Delhi Declaration', adopted at the BRICS Summit and announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has expressed "deep concern" about the multiple conflicts in West Asia, but stopped short of naming any of the major stakeholders, including the United States, in the text.

The Abu Dhabi Media Office said in a statement, "During the meeting, His Highness and the Iranian President discussed a number of regional and international issues of mutual interest."

They also underscored the importance of supporting efforts to ease tensions, promote de-escalation and strengthen regional stability, while advancing opportunities for peace and development for the peoples of the region."

Iranian state-owned news outlet IRNA said the meeting was held following "Iran's consistent calls for and emphasis on strengthening relations with its southern neighbours".

Mr. Pezeshkian said on Saturday that West Asia does not need the United States, which is at war with



Iran President Masoud Pezeshkian with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Khalid bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in New Delhi. ANI

Iran, to be a "regional policeman". After a meeting with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, the Iranian President said, "The territorial integrity and security of the region [West Asia] can only be guaranteed by its main players and the countries that comprise it."

The conflicts in West Asia acquired prominence on the first day of the BRICS Summit on Saturday, with the joint declaration announced at the end of the first day's leaders' dialogue dropping any references to the contesting parties in order to reach a consensus.

The declaration further expressed "deep concern" regarding the continued fighting in the Gaza Strip, and called for "halting any policies aimed at forced displacement of Palestinians". It also highlighted the need for a "just and lasting solution" to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

"We express deep concern over the continued escalation of tensions in Middle East/West Asia and, recalling our respective national position, call for exercising maximum restraint, as well as avoiding actions that could further aggravate the situation," said the New Delhi Declaration, highlighting the need to maintain "smooth flow of global trade, supply chains and energy, in accordance with applicable international law".

The declaration further expressed "deep concern" regarding the continued fighting in the Gaza Strip, and called for "halting any policies aimed at forced displacement of Palestinians". It also highlighted the need for a "just and lasting solution" to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Palestinian statehood

The document extended support to the "establishment of a sovereign, independent and viable State of Palestine" within the "internationally recognised 1967 borders that includes the Gaza Strip, West Bank, with East Jerusalem as its

capital". The declaration said that Israel has the "legal obligation" to ensure the supply of "humanitarian aid in Gaza" and called on Israel to respect the terms agreed with the Lebanese government and to withdraw its occupying forces from all Lebanese territories.

The declaration took a strong position on the attacks on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon that have been continuing since the Israel-Palestine conflict flared up in October 2023.

The conversation around West Asia in New Delhi gained further prominence with the arrival of Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud on Saturday evening.

The External Affairs Ministry had earlier condemned attacks by the Houthis militia on Saudi sovereign territory and civilian and economic facilities, saying that "such attacks that undermined regional security and stability and threatened freedom of navigation in the Bab-el-Mandeb were unacceptable".

Murmu meets Pezeshkian, lays stress on diplomacy

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu on Saturday met her Iranian counterpart Masoud Pezeshkian during which she reiterated India's commitment to the pursuit of enduring peace in the region and called for conflicts to be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy.

Welcoming Mr. Pezeshkian on his first visit to India, Ms. Murmu expressed appreciation for the support extended by Iran during India's BRICS presidency.

Long-standing bond

The two leaders discussed the long-standing bonds of friendship between Iran and India, including their strong cultural and people-to-people ties, a statement issued by the Rashtrapati Bhavan said.

Ms. Murmu reiterated India's commitment to the pursuit of enduring peace in the region and called for conflicts to be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy, it said.

Mr. Pezeshkian, who is in New Delhi to participate in the BRICS Summit, called on President Murmu at the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

PM holds series of bilateral meetings; hails India-UAE ties

Kallol Bhattacharjee
T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Saturday, after a meeting with Sheikh Khalid bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates, that strong ties between India and the UAE are a sign of stability during "a time of uncertainty" in West Asia.

Mr. Modi also held bilateral meetings with the Prime Ministers of Ethiopia, Vietnam and Malaysia on the sidelines of the 18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi.

The visit of Sheikh Khalid, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the chairman of the Abu Dhabi Executive Council, has been seen as a tactical move by the UAE amid the conflict in West Asia, in which the Gulf country and fellow BRICS member Iran have found themselves on opposing sides.

"India-UAE ties have

been transformed over the last few years. Now, we are raising our ambitions even higher," said Mr. Modi after the meeting, adding that the discussion covered matters such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor project. "At a time of uncertainty in West Asia, a strong India-UAE is a symbol of stability, prosperity and peace," he said.

The External Affairs Ministry said in a statement that the two leaders discussed major investment opportunities in India.

"The leaders acknowledged the important role that Ummad, the UAE's newest sovereign investment fund, could play in further deepening the India-UAE partnership for mutual benefit," the Ministry said. According to the Ministry, the discussion also covered cooperation in areas like defence, space, nuclear energy, technology and innovation.

The meeting also re-



Bolstering alliance: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in New Delhi on Saturday. ANI

viewed the announcement by the UAE's International Holding Company that it would invest \$11.5 billion in the integrated greenfield aluminium project in Odisha. The project is expected to position Odisha as a global aluminium manufacturing hub and provide employment opportunities to a large number of industrial workers.

On Saturday, Mr. Modi also held discussions with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali. According

to the Ministry, the talks were aimed at further strengthening the bilateral strategic partnership and the two leaders "reviewed progress across key sectors, including economic cooperation, defence and security partnership, and capacity building".

"Prime Minister Modi expressed appreciation for Ethiopia's participation in the 18th BRICS Summit and noted that its presence helped in reinforcing the collective voice of the Glo-

bal South," the Ministry said. Another bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the summit on Saturday was between Mr. Modi and Vietnamese Prime Minister Le Minh Hung.

"The meeting provided an opportunity for both leaders to review the progress made in bilateral ties, which were elevated to an Enhanced Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during the State Visit of H.E. Mr. To Lam, President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, to India in May 2026," the Ministry statement said.

'Time-tested friendship'

The statement affirmed the "time-tested friendship" that India and Vietnam share, which it added was rooted in shared civilisational heritage, mutual trust, and understanding. "Vietnam is a key pillar of India's Act East Policy and an important partner in India's broader engagement

with Southeast Asia," it said.

During their bilateral meeting on Saturday, Mr. Modi and Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, reviewed the progress in bilateral cooperation across a range of areas, including trade and investment, defence and security, semiconductors, infrastructure, digital economy, energy, fintech, education, tourism, and people-to-people ties, the Ministry said.

"Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim conveyed Malaysia's concurrence to the establishment of a Consulate General of India in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah," it said in a statement.

"Prime Minister Modi appreciated Malaysia's support in strengthening ASEAN-India relations," the statement said, adding, "The leaders expressed their commitment to advancing the India-Malaysia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership."

'Brazil, India forging ties for a changing world'

Shobhan Saxena
NEW DELHI

Brazil's Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira on Saturday praised India's BRICS presidency and added that bilateral trade between India and Brazil could exceed the \$30 billion target well before 2030. In an interview with *The Hindu*, he also emphasised that it is not correct to view BRICS as an "anti-West alliance".

Responding to a question on commercial ties, Mr. Vieira said that following President Lula da Silva's visit to India in February, Brazil and India are rapidly expanding bilateral trade. Last year's \$15 billion toward \$20 billion, driven by major Brazilian companies. "If some of the deals currently being developed by Embraer, Vale, WEG and other companies materialise, bilateral trade could exceed \$30 billion in the short term," he said.

Highlighting his long di-



Global vision: Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira addresses the Leaders' Session of the BRICS Business Forum in New Delhi. ANI

plomatic friendship with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, Mr. Vieira pointed out that their frequent personal consultations greatly enhance dialogue, noting that "our positions are very similar — practically the same — on multilateralism and global governance".

On India's presidency

Reflecting on India's BRICS presidency, Mr. Vieira said India has smoothly carried

forward key initiatives. Emphasising the growing importance of the New Development Bank as a vital alternative to the outdated 80-year-old Bretton Woods institutions, Mr. Vieira said: "With the BRICS bank, we can have a faster, more agile and more efficient system, under the control of the countries that own the bank and have a direct interest in its success."

Highlighting the high-

profile attendance of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the summit in New Delhi, Mr. Vieira stated that their presence underscores India's pivotal global role and the undeniable geopolitical weight of the group.

He added that the unique organisational structure of BRICS allows major regional powers with complex bilateral differences to engage directly, because "it [BRICS] provides a space where dialogue can take place with greater proximity and informality", thereby facilitating critical diplomatic stabilisation.

On the issue of new members joining the group, Mr. Vieira said the group of emerging countries has now entered a necessary strategic phase focused on consolidation rather than further enlargement, prioritising the full integration of new

members, enhancing structured dialogue with partner countries, and managing rotating presidencies effectively without immediately creating a permanent administrative secretariat.

Responding to a question on the focus of Brazil's foreign policy, Mr. Vieira said it relies on peace, constitutional multilateralism, and active diplomacy over military force. Brazil advocates non-intervention, peaceful conflict resolution, and international law, he said.

"President Lula champions this approach by expanding trade and political ties worldwide. Through a vast global diplomatic network, Brazil bridges divides, maintains open dialogue with competing nations, and positions itself as a committed mediator for global cooperation," Mr. Vieira added. (For the interview, visit newsthehindu.com/Brazil-India)

BRICS nations fortify disease monitoring

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

BRICS leaders on Saturday called for stronger cooperation in disease surveillance and medical product regulation, welcoming the establishment of a dedicated sub-working group to advance an integrated early warning system for the prevention and response to mass infectious diseases.

In their New Delhi Declaration, the leaders stressed the importance of strengthening health infrastructure and local production of medical products to enhance preparedness for future health emergencies. The initiative is aimed at strengthening collective preparedness against infectious disease threats through closer coordination among member countries.

BRICS INDIA 2026

**Strengthening ties:** (from left) Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, and Xi Jinping hold hands during the summit in New Delhi. REUTERS**A closer look:** Global leaders with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 'Bharat Innovates Exposition' at Bharat Mandapam. PTI**Banquet bus:** Union Ministers Kiren Rijiju, Arjun Ram Meghwal and others take a bus to a banquet hosted by the Prime Minister. PTI**High alert:** Security personnel keeping guard during the BRICS Summit at Bharat Mandapam on Saturday. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

PM urges BRICS leaders to draw up 10 global governance reform proposals

Modi proposes mechanism to follow up on BRICS initiatives; calls for development of a reform road map focused on representation in UN Security Council and financial institutions, creation of a Seafarers' Emergency Support Network and transformation of the Global South into 'rule-shapers'

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday made a strong pitch for global reform, highlighting the current imbalance between decision-makers and those impacted by their decisions, and called for BRICS to transition from "rule-takers to rule-shapers".

Towards this, he proposed that the leaders of the BRICS nations gathered in New Delhi for the 18th BRICS Summit use the opportunity to arrive at 10 proposals for global governance reform, which can be developed into a BRICS Reform Road map.

While delivering his welcome address, the Prime Minister took note of the fact that the BRICS grouping was now 20-years-old and, as such, was entering a new phase of maturity and responsibility.

"Over the past 20 years, BRICS has strengthened its distinctive identity on the global stage," Mr. Modi said. "We respect each other's perspectives and move forward through consensus. We seek to move forward, not against anyone, but with an approach of taking everyone along."

"Now is the time for us

**Green gesture:** Russian President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Chinese President Xi Jinping at a tree plantation initiative during the BRICS Summit in New Delhi on Saturday. PTI

to translate our unity and consensus within BRICS into concrete outcomes on the global stage," he added.

Continuity in BRICS

The Prime Minister said that, over the next 20 years, BRICS must work on a new and ambitious agenda.

"This must begin with our own working systems," he said. "The BRICS presidency changes every year, but our institutional momentum should not stop because of this."

Towards this, Mr. Modi proposed a BRICS Continuity and Implementation

Mechanism, which the BRICS Troika could use to follow up on all initiatives and outcomes.

"We can create a secure digital repository in which, alongside every decision, the nodal point, deadline and implementation status can be recorded," Mr. Modi said.

Reform beyond BRICS

Mr. Modi noted that the current structure of global governance resembles a pyramid, with power and decision-making concentrated at the top, while countries at the bottom are

affected by these decisions but are unable to shape them.

"The Global South is today on the front line of global crises, but in the back row when it comes to decision-making," he emphasised.

"We must transform this pyramid of privilege into a platform of partnership, where every country has a voice, every member has a stake, and the development of humanity remains at the centre of every effort."

"With this objective, I propose that we jointly prepare 10 proposals for

global governance reform, which we can seek to develop into a BRICS Reform Road map by the next Summit," Mr. Modi added.

The Prime Minister said that, while preparing this road map, the assembled leaders should focus on three key aspects: representation, responsiveness and rule-making.

"First, on representation, I would like to say that reform of the UN Security Council can no longer be delayed," Mr. Modi said. "Text-based negotiations on this issue must be linked to a definite timeline and clear outcomes."

He added that voting power, leadership positions, and policy priorities in financial institutions must reflect today's economic realities.

"Countries that are driving global economic growth should also have an appropriate role in shaping global economic governance," Mr. Modi emphasised.

Regarding responsiveness, he said that trust in global institutions will be established only when they are capable of providing effective solutions to problems.

"We must focus on the speed, scale and last-mile impact of our collective

response," Mr. Modi said, giving the example of how, despite making a significant contribution to global trade, seafarers often feel a lack of support during difficult times.

"My proposal is: can we create a Seafarers' Emergency Support Network," he asked the assembled leaders. "Through this network, the maritime authorities and missions of the concerned countries could be connected. This could provide support for distress alerts, medical assistance, informing families and evacuation."

Shaping global rules

The Prime Minister said that it is important to ensure equal participation in determining the global rules of the future.

"AI, cyberspace, outer space, biotechnology and critical technologies are not only creating future opportunities; they are also shaping the rules of the future," Mr. Modi said. "We must work to transform the Global South from rule-takers into rule-shapers."

"Friends, the message from the BRICS Summit being held in India should be clear: If our future is shared, then the right to shape that future must also be shared," he added.

IN BRIEF



PM greets dignitaries against backdrop of iconic T.N. temple

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday welcomed BRICS leaders against a backdrop featuring Tamil Nadu's iconic Ramanathaswamy temple, one of the Char Dham shrines where Lord Rama is believed to have performed puja after his victory over the demon king Ravana. At Bharat Mandapam, where the 18th BRICS Summit is under way, the Prime Minister received the leaders of BRICS nations, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian. The leaders shook hands and posed for pictures against the backdrop featuring the iconic temple. Welcoming Mr. Xi, Mr. Modi also explained to him the significance of the temple. The Ramanathaswamy temple is the only one dedicated to Lord Shiva among the Char (four) Dham shrines. PTI



Dignitaries savour Indian cuisine at BRICS gala dinner

'Paneer lababdar', 'millet pulao', and 'shahi toot phirni' for desserts were among the Indian delicacies served to the leaders and delegates of the BRICS Summit at a gala dinner hosted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Bharat Mandapam on Saturday. The menu included 'khandvi mille' and 'khumb galouti' as starters, people familiar with the matter said. The main course offered 'paneer lababdar' - soft cottage cheese cubes simmered in a gravy of shallots and tomato; 'gucchi marmik' - Himalayan morel mushrooms and tender asparagus, gently simmered with saffron, raisins, and mamba almonds; and 'carrot-bean poriyal' - a blend of carrots and green beans toasted in aromatic South Indian spices. Chinese President Xi Jinping skipped the gala dinner. The reason for his absence was not immediately known, but a source suggested that Mr. Xi had gone back to his hotel to take rest. PTI

New Delhi Declaration focuses on MSMEs, raises concerns over rise of unilateral tariff measures

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

The New Delhi Declaration, adopted by the BRICS nations at their 18th summit in New Delhi on Saturday, devoted significant focus to the needs of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and ways to help them move up the global value chain. India is the chair of BRICS in 2026, with China taking over the chairmanship in 2027.

The latest declaration also carried forward most of the economic issues raised during the last summit in Rio de Janeiro, including concerns about the "rise of unilateral tariff and non-tariff measures", the "imposition of unilateral coercive measures", trade in local currencies, and the need for reforms in the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank.

The BRICS nations also advocated for the accession of Ethiopia and Iran to the WTO.

MSMEs in focus

The declaration acknowledged the initiatives by the SME Working Group and commended India's Chairmanship for convening the inaugural BRICS SME Forum

**All ears:** South African President Cyril Ramaphosa at the 18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi. AFP

in Agra and releasing a report titled "Advancing MSME Competitiveness in BRICS: Strengthening Access to Finance & Technology and Sustainable Growth".

It further recognised this report for its potential to foster cooperation, exchange best practices and promote inclusive growth among MSMEs across BRICS countries.

"We reaffirm our commitment to strengthening the internationalisation of MSMEs as a driver of economic growth and prosperity," the declaration said. "We acknowledge that access to affordable finance remains a primary bottleneck and structural constraint, limiting MSMEs' participation in trade and integration into

Global Value Chains (GVCs)," it said.

"We understand the importance of promoting innovative financing mechanisms, including digital and platform-based multistakeholder solutions for facilitating easier access to trade finance for MSMEs," it added.

It further welcomed the Jaipur Consensus to study the establishment of an Invoice Discounting Mechanism for BRICS members aimed at facilitating invoice discounting, which would help MSMEs unlock working capital and strengthen their participation in international trade.

The declaration also mentioned several initiatives of cooperation between the BRICS nations in areas of Special Economic

Zones, manufacturing, value addition, diamonds and precious metals, customs facilitation, logistics, railways, aviation, and industrial upgrade.

Trade concerns

"We voice serious concerns about the rise of unilateral tariff and non-tariff measures which distort trade and are inconsistent with WTO rules," the declaration said.

It noted that such measures threaten to further reduce global trade, disrupt global supply chains, and introduce uncertainty into international economic and trade activities, which could potentially exacerbate existing economic disparities and negatively affect prospects for global economic development.

The declaration added that BRICS would work together to enhance the WTO's responsiveness to trade disruptions and the needs and priorities of emerging markets and developing economies.

"We condemn the imposition of unilateral coercive measures that are contrary to international law, and reiterate that such measures, *inter alia* in the form of unilateral economic sanctions and secondary

sanctions, have far-reaching negative implications for the human rights, including the rights to development, health and food security, of the general population of targeted states, disproportionately affecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations, deepening the digital divide and exacerbating environmental challenges," the declaration said.

Global bodies' reform

The BRICS nations re-declared their "unwavering support" for reform of the WTO and for strengthening a "non-discriminatory, open, equitable, transparent, fair, inclusive, predictable and rules-based multilateral trading system", with the WTO at its core.

"Echoing the aspirations of the Global South to fully integrate into the multilateral trading system, we strongly support Ethiopia and Iran's bid for accession to the WTO," the declaration said. "We acknowledge China for expanding its zero-tariff treatment to cover 53 African countries with that is diplomatic." The declaration also went on to call for reforms of the World Bank, the United Nations (UN), the UN Security Council, and the IMF.

BRICS leaders seek stronger cooperation over AI safety

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

BRICS leaders on Saturday called for wider access to AI resources and stronger international cooperation to ensure the technology is safe, secure, inclusive and reliable, and its potential risks are mitigated, as they committed to implementing the grouping's statement on "Global Governance of artificial intelligence".

The New Delhi Declaration 2026, adopted at the 18th BRICS Summit being held in the national capital, laid out a broad technology agenda spanning AI, cybersecurity, digital public infrastructure (DPI), telecom and submarine networks, quantum technologies, startups and advanced manufacturing.

It pushed for concerted and inclusive efforts to address the challenges stemming from and within the digital realm such as threats to security in the use of ICTs, malicious software, data security, and the misuse of technologies.

The declaration called for fostering AI for science and innovation, developing trustworthy AI technologies and improving energy efficiency of AI systems.



How Delhi is managing air traffic during the summit

Behind the red carpets, motorcades and ceremonial welcomes for BRICS leaders is a tightly coordinated aviation operation involving around 35 special aircraft, multiple airports, controlled airspace and carefully timed movements to accommodate foreign dignitaries without disrupting Delhi's regular commercial flights. The operation spans the Indira Gandhi International Airport, the Indian Air Force's Palam technical area and other airports being used to park visiting aircraft. The CFS, Indian Air Force, aviation authorities and other security agencies are coordinating the movements. For regular passengers, the airport operation begins with processing inside the terminal before they board their aircraft via an aerobridge. VIP movements are kept separate. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation has also imposed restrictions on non-scheduled flight operations.

SCIENCE

Rapid Himalayan erosion triggers hidden source of CO₂: study

Vasudevan Mukunth

On August 26, devastating flash floods swept across Nepal's mountains, killing over 1,300 and laying waste to whole towns and villages. As a warming climate destabilises Himalayan glaciers, the glaciers themselves are influencing how much carbon dioxide (CO₂) is released into the atmosphere, driving global warming.

The Indian plate continues to push into the Euro-

sian plate and the Himalayan mountains are getting eroded, exposing fresh silicate minerals. These minerals react with CO₂ in the atmosphere and later wash into the oceans, locking the carbon in seafloor sediments. Scientists believe this silicate weathering has helped cool the earth over the last 50 million years. However, a study published recently in *Chemical Geology* by researchers from IISER Pune, the Wadia Institute

of Himalayan Geology, and IIT-Roorkee suggests the picture is not so simple — that, in fact, another mineral process may be more than offsetting the cooling effect.

The team studied the area around the headwaters of the Indus river. Aside from silicates, the Himalayan mountains contain many other minerals, including pyrites, a.k.a. fool's gold. When mountain slopes are eroded rapidly, the sulphides in py-

rites are exposed to air and water for the first time in millions of years, kicking off an important chemical reaction. First, the sulphides are oxidised to sulphuric acid. When it reacts with carbonate rocks, CO₂ is released into the air.

By measuring the ratio of isotopes of sulphur and oxygen in the Indus river system, the team was able to say if the sulphates in the water came from dissolved gypsum or from pyrite oxidation. Thus, in the

upper Indus basin, it estimated the rate of CO₂ oxidation to be three-times higher than CO₂ uptake by silicate weathering.

The team also found while the flatter floodplains downstream were CO₂ sinks, the steep mountainous regions were net CO₂ sources. This is partly because water moves more slowly in the floodplains.

The study authors wrote that glaciers excel at crushing rocks and exposing the pyrites within, rendering

erosion a double-edged sword: it provides the 'raw materials' to remove CO₂ in the mountains even as the intensity of that erosion facilitates the more aggressive reactions of sulphides.

"Our findings demonstrate that glacier-fed river catchments are important geological sources of CO₂, which may influence our long-term carbon cycle and contribute to climate warming over million-year timescales," the team said in a release.

SNAPSHOTS



Human drug use began millennia earlier than believed

Researchers examined the teeth of two ancient hunter-gatherers from Sulawesi, Indonesia, dating back as far as 25,000 years, and found unusual, deep grooves in the teeth caused by sucking on betel nuts. Chemical analyses confirmed the presence of arecoline, the main stimulant in betel nuts, suggesting these early foragers habitually kept whole nuts in their mouths for long periods. The find pushes back the timeline of human drug use by thousands of years.

Study finds far fewer genes truly linked to cerebral palsy

While the 'cerebral palsy' label survives because it guarantees patients access to physical therapy, diagnosis lumps a variety of conditions; this is why distinguishing a coincidental diagnostic detail from a true biological driver carries large stakes

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

For families, gene sequencing offers the hope of ending a gruelling diagnostic odyssey. Finding a definitive genetic root cause optimises patient management, reduces unnecessary testing, and gives parents concrete answers.

But a new study in *The American Journal of Human Genetics* suggests simply finding a pathogenic gene variant in a child may not be enough.

"The medical community previously has not comprehensively examined the statistical evidence in favour of a cerebral palsy association for genes flagged in large genomics cohort studies," Peter N. Robinson, a computational biologist at the Jackson Laboratory for Genomic Medicine, U.S., and the study's corresponding author, said. "Our study showed that there is convincing evidence for only a subset."

In resource-constrained healthcare systems like India's, acting on a false alarm from a standard genetic panel can divert precious medical resources away from treatments that actually work.

The researchers combed through 21 published genomic diagnostic studies involving 5,440 individuals diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

Across these cohorts, the original authors had reported 515 candidate genes as the direct cause of patients' symptoms. But when the team sub-

Finding the real needles

Separating a harmless genetic coincidence from a true driver of cerebral palsy carries large stakes

- While doctors frequently use gene sequencing for cerebral palsy, finding a mutation does not guarantee it caused the disorder

- Researchers have found that statistical evidence actually supports fewer than 90 of the 515 candidate genes reported for the disorder

- False alarms occur because incidental mutations are common; cerebral palsy also describes various distinct neurological disorders

- Accurately identifying true biological causes allows clinicians to treat masquerading disorders with highly targeted, effective therapies



A physician checks a child with cerebral palsy. PUBLIC DOMAIN

- Streamlined, precise genetic testing also helps parents avoid wasted resources and access clinical care faster

- Fully realising genomics' potential requires large global datasets that combine detailed clinical profiles with sequencing

jected this data to rigorous analyses, it could confirm a true statistical association for only 89 of the proposed genes.

Sequencing the genomes of 460 patients across the Shriners Children's hospital network in the U.S., the team also identified disease-causing mutations in 60 genes across 15.8% of children. Yet their stricter statistical paradigm whittled the list down to 16.

"What this paper is trying to suggest is some of the genetic variants may not be slam dunk," said Kuntal Sen, a clinical geneticist and paediatric neurologist at Children's National Hospital, U.S. "It might explain one problem, like intellectual disability, but it may not tie together everything."

One source of these false alarms is coincidence, e.g. because roughly 5% of the general population harbours a rare genetic disease, sequencing a child with cerebral palsy may also uncover unrelated mutations.

A previous large-scale study had flagged the *LIPH* gene as a cause of cerebral palsy because an affected patient happened to carry it. But mutations in *LIPH* actually possess no known neurological link. Conversely, across both historical literature and the newly sequenced cohort, *CTNNA1* mutations showed up more often than random chance would allow.

"Cerebral palsy" is also a clinical catch-all rather than a single disease. "For me, I think the term 'cerebral palsy' does not always

make sense from a purely scientific perspective," Dr. Sen said. "The motor symptoms that the children have are more scientifically informative."

He noted the outdated label survives because it guarantees patients access to specialised insurance and physical therapy, at least in the west. But as an umbrella term for brain-derived muscle weakness, the diagnosis lumps a variety of conditions together.

While some stem from birth injuries, others are 'mimics': rare metabolic or genetic disorders masquerading as a muscle weakness.

This is why distinguishing a coincidence from a true biological driver carries large stakes. If doctors accept an incidental mutation from a standard genet-

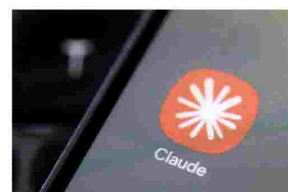
ic panel as final, they may halt their workup prematurely, leaving a treatable 'mimic' undiscovered. But pinpointing the cause using strict statistical proof can ultimately open the door to highly targeted care.

The researchers estimated that among 8.5% to 24% of individuals who receive a valid genetic diagnosis, the findings point to specific, available treatments. In India, where three in every 1,000 live births are affected by cerebral palsy, and genetic testing is a rapidly growing field, identifying only the true genetic mimics can allow local clinics to connect families to precise treatments faster. (A severe mutation that breaks a specific protein and masquerades as cerebral palsy does so universally, regardless of ethnicity.)

While the Robinson et al. study has set a rigorous standard, the team also conceded its mathematical model may underestimate the true number of genes linked to the disorder: "...the lack of statistical significance does not imply the absence of an association," Dr. Robinson said.

Realising the full promise of this approach will require the medical community to move beyond sequencing DNA to using large, globally shared datasets of detailed patient profiles — which don't yet exist — to calculate the exact degree of risk a specific genetic variant carries.

(Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and science communicator from New Delhi)



AI formalises Fermat's Last Theorem proof in 11 days

Anthropic has used its Claude AI to formalise Fermat's Last Theorem using the Lean language. Formalisation means translating human arguments into code so software can verify every logical step from first principles without relying on human trust. While mathematicians had anticipated translating the proof would take five years of painstaking work, Claude achieved it in 11 days, generating over 13 million lines of code and verifying 29,500 intermediate theorems, in a breakthrough for automated reasoning.



Even Teflon may not stop water if the liquid is charged

As water drops slide over leaves, glass or plastic, they develop an electric charge. When such charged drops land on a metal surface, even one with a protective coating like Teflon, the charge creates an electric field strong enough to punch microscopic holes through the coating, allowing the water to reach the metal below, leading to rust and decay. This new discovery shows a new way in which bridges, ships, cars, and heritage sites may degrade.

Why India's schools should take note of New York's AI ban

John Xavier

New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani and Schools Chancellor Kamarr H. Samuel, on September 2, unveiled sweeping curbs on AI use and screen time in the city's public schools. As part of the policy, student-facing AI tools are now barred, for a year, for students from kindergarten through eighth grade. The new policy will impact over 600,000 students in one of the largest public school systems in the U.S.

Rather than leaning into AI-assisted learning, the city is doubling down on teaching children how these systems work, alongside age-calibrated screen time limits.

As India has no equivalent policy on the use of AI systems in schools, it should pay close attention to what is about to happen in over thousands of public schools in New York City as learning from there could

be a good starting point to formulate policies that nurture learning and curb unnecessary use of gadgets in schools.

Mr. Mamdani's measures come at a time when educators around the world are worried about the unchecked rollout of AI technologies in schools, even as teenagers are increasing spending more time scrolling social media posts outside school.

India's woes

India's version of that worry is backed by even starker numbers. ASER's 2024 survey found that 82.2% of all children in the age group 14-16 said they know how to operate a smartphone, but only a little over half use it for anything educational, while a clear majority use it mainly for social media.

In urban India, close to half of parents report their children are spending more than three hours a



Rather than leaning into AI-assisted learning, the city is doubling down on teaching children how these systems work. REUTERS



day on social media, video platforms, and gaming.

India is facing a structural problem as teen digital addiction is on the rise. This year's Economic Survey point out this ominous trend, describing it as carrying real economic and social costs.

New York's policy is not a simple on-off switch on

gadgets and AI. It goes after AI chatbots outright, at every grade level, but it also reaches into AI features quietly embedded inside tools schools already use for reading, writing, and math.

For the youngest children, in pre-kindergarten through second grade, the city is effectively removing one-to-one devices from classrooms. Third to fifth graders face a recommended cap of 30 minutes of screen time a day; middle

schoolers, 45 minutes. High schoolers get a narrower carve-out: a small, vetted set of AI tools in pilot programmes, paired with two-yearly modules on how the technology works, what it gets wrong, and where its limits lie.

To get started on framing a policy in India, the baseline of one-to-one devices must be estimated. This is likely to be low in India when compared to the U.S., where most classrooms are well-resourced with the latest tech.

The device deficit in Indian schools is a blessing in disguise as it enables more qualified educators to teach students essential, foundational subjects like math and science that form the bedrock of modern computing and AI algorithms. Understanding how these systems are built will help students create new technologies rather than simply be passive consumers. As more

teachers join the school system, the ratio of educators to students increases, enabling more qualitative classroom discussions.

Such a change can create better outcomes in schools. But it will only solve one part of the problem — devices in schools. The other aspect is the pervasive use of smartphones by children at home. Spending more time on those devices can cause significant problems in the long run.

The lesson from New York is that any credible response has to be age-tailored, aimed at embedded AI as much as visible chatbots, backed by a real evaluation mechanism, and built with as much attention to what happens on how the child spends their time past school time. India currently has the worst numbers and the weakest safety net. It should not wait for a crisis in every area before it acts.



Question Corner

Wakey, wakey

Why do we sometimes wake up a few minutes before our alarm rings? -Dev

The human body has a built-in timekeeping system called the circadian rhythm. It is governed by a group of cells in the brain, centred on the suprachiasmatic nucleus, which uses signals such as daylight to keep the body's roughly 24-hour cycle aligned with the outside world. When you wake up at the same time every day, your brain learns. In the hours before your usual waking time, the body slowly prepares for wakefulness: e.g. levels of the stress hormone begin to rise and body

temperature increases. Over time, these changes can help you wake naturally when you expect to.

But this process is not precise. If you wake at 6:57 am when your alarm is set for 7 am, it could be your circadian system doing its job. But if you wake at 6:59 once, it could just be coincidence. We tend to remember the uncanny 'successes', like waking seconds before the alarm, and forget the mornings when we woke at 5:43 for no apparent reason. The phenomenon is thus neither pure coincidence nor pure foresight.

Readers may send their questions/answers to science@thehindu.co.in

Why are bank employees striking despite the PLI pause?

Why did they oppose the new PLI scheme? What are their other demands? How has the government reacted?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:

The government recently announced that it was putting on hold the performance-linked incentive (PLI) system it had planned for public sector bank employees. However, the employees still went ahead with their strike on September 11, saying not all of their grievances have been addressed.

What are their main grievances?

One of the main reasons the United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), the umbrella body of seven bank employee unions, called for a nationwide strike on September 11 was to protest the PLI scheme announced by the Department of Financial Services in November 2024 and applicable for the financial year 2025-26.

This revised PLI scheme was applicable only to Scale IV officers and above, a major point of contention. It allows these senior officers to receive PLI of up to 365 days of basic pay based on individual performance.

This, according to the employee unions, was discriminatory in nature as it was a significant departure from the uniform 15 days basic pay plus dearness allowance formula applicable to the rest of the workforce.

The revised PLI scheme was also a departure from the agreement between the unions and the Indian Banks' Association in 2020 under which the PLI was to be linked to the overall performance of individual banks and would be uniform for employees and officers.

The second demand by the bank employees was for a five-day work week. The bank employees had in 2024 suggested increasing the work timings per day by 40 minutes so that there would not be a reduction in the total hours worked per week. This proposal has been pending with the government.

The bank employees had some other residual demands, such as a uniform dearness allowance formula for all pensioners and an option for employees covered under the National Pension System (NPS) to switch to the Old Pension Scheme (OPS). These, too, remain unresolved.

What has the government done to address the strike call?

A delegation of bank employees, led by the labour wing of the RSS, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, met Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and officials of the Department of Financial Services on September 8.

Following the meeting, the Ministry of Finance announced that the PLI would be put on hold pending further discussion. It added that the bank employees also raised the issues of a review of ex-gratia and providing medical facilities for retired employees, among other concerns related to employees.

Why did this not work?

Following the meeting, UFBU took to social media to acknowledge that the meeting did take place and confirmed the agreement with the government to put the PLI scheme on hold. However, it added that there was "no positive development" regarding its demand for a five-day work week. As a result, the strike call remained in effect. In fact, the bank unions have threatened another three-day nationwide strike from September 28 to 30, coinciding with the half-yearly closing period. They have also warned of a "continuous indefinite strike" from October 26 if their demands remain unaddressed.

What has been the immediate impact of the strike?

The bank unions have timed their strike carefully. The strike on September 11 meant that branch banking services were disrupted for four days in many parts of the country. The strike fell on a Friday (September 11), Saturday (September 12) was the second Saturday of the month, which is a day off for banks. Sunday (September 13) is a weekly off. Monday (September 14) is Ganesh Chaturthi, which is a holiday in several States across the country.

While the rise of app-based and Internet banking has led to falling footfall at bank branches, they remain the sole point of banking access for many senior citizens and customers in rural and semi-rural India. Several services, such as cheque and cash deposits, also still require customers to visit a bank branch.

Reports from across the country showed that most branches of public sector banks were either completely or partially closed on Saturday, with officers and employees taking part in the strike. This meant that physical services such as cash deposits, withdrawals, cheque clearances, and administrative work ground to a halt.

Why has the Census been deferred in Manipur?

Why are many civil society organisations demanding that the State's National Register of Citizens be prepared first? What are the differences between some communities and the Kukis on this issue? How is the NRC demand related to the Manipur ethnic conflict?

Rahul Karmakar

The story so far:

In August 31, the Centre deferred the Census operations in Manipur amid demands from several community-based and civil society organisations (CSOs) to first conduct the State's National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise with 1951 as the base year. The decision followed Union Home Minister Amit Shah's meeting with Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla and Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh in New Delhi. The message conveyed was that Manipur can ill-afford fresh tension amid the ongoing Kuki-Meitei and Kuki-Naga conflicts, with elections to the State's 60-member Assembly less than a year away.

What led to the Census deferment?

The decennial Census operation in poll-bound Manipur was scheduled to start on September 1. Data collection for the exercise began in January.

A few months later, several community-based and CSOs began opposing the scheduled headcount, demanding that the State's NRC be prepared first. The Meiteis, who are in the majority in Imphal Valley, opposed the Census 2027 exercise. The Meitei Pangals (Muslims), largely inhabiting the valley, joined the NRC-before-Census bandwagon, as did the Nagas, who dominate at least five of the State's 10 hill districts.

The Kuki community, led by the Kuki-Zo Council, supported the Census operation. Their leaders said an impartial headcount would dispel false claims about Kuki population growth and the perception that they were "illegal migrants", and ensure a fair delimitation process based on verified population numbers. The Kukis also said updating the NRC before the Census was premature and biased, fearing that the community members might face unfair exclusion if 1951 was used as the base year. This is because there remains a perception among some communities that the Kukis are not the

Pro-NRC groups say an NRC is necessary to identify "illegal migrants" who migrated to Manipur from Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar), and Mizoram to "pose a threat" to the State's "original inhabitants".

"original" inhabitants.

However, the other communities intensified their pro-NRC protests. Shutdowns and boycotts of all the Central and State government offices followed. A citizens' group, Campaign for Just and Fair Delimitation, threatened to intensify its protest. Leaders of 14 CSOs met with the Governor before travelling to New Delhi to meet with the Union Home Secretary, Registrar General of India, and the High-Level Committee on Demographic Change to explain why Manipur needed the NRC to find a permanent solution to the ethnic conflict that has scarred the State since May 3, 2023.

Has the Census been deferred or withheld earlier?

Yes, at least thrice. The exercise was withheld or not conducted in 1981 for Assam, which was in the midst of a mass movement (1979-1985) against undocumented immigration. The agitators feared that conducting a Census amidst unresolved citizenship disputes would legitimise illegal settlers on the voters' list. Normal Census operations were resumed after the Assam Accord was signed in August 1985.

The 1991 Census for Jammu and Kashmir was also not conducted due to the rise of extremist activities and the mass exodus of Kashmiri Hindus (Pandits) from the Kashmir Valley following widespread violence.

The 2021 Census cycle was postponed nationally due to the COVID-19 pandemic and rescheduled to 2026-27.

What is the argument of the pro-NRC groups?

In a memorandum submitted to the Governor on July 1, the 14 CSOs said an NRC was necessary to identify "illegal migrants" who migrated to Manipur from Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar), and Mizoram to "pose a threat" to the State's "original inhabitants". They claimed that the Inpui, Kabuis, Liangmais, Maos, Marams, Meiteis, Pumatins, Rongmeis, Tangkhuls, and Zemes were the original inhabitants. They said the population of Meitei Pangals, descendants of Muslims from present-day Bangladesh who migrated to the State since 1606 and settled by marrying Manipuri women, increased to 2,39,886 (Census 2011) from 4,881 in 1881 with an "unexpected" growth rate of 4,814% over 130 years. The population of the Meiteis and the original tribes increased by 880% and 897%, respectively, during this period, they said.

Claiming large-scale migration into Manipur's hills from Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Mizoram since the 15th century, the CSOs said the total population in the hills jumped to 5,49,599 in 2011 from 25,384 in 1881, recording a growth rate of about 2,165%. They said protecting their ancestral land from "infiltrators" and keeping their socio-cultural environment intact became a "headache" for most original inhabitants, given the demographic scenario.

The CSOs said those who fail to establish a

link between people in the 1951 Census and those in the (demanded) NRC should be declared "non-citizens of Manipur" and duly detected and deported.

How is the NRC demand linked to Manipur's ethnic conflict?

The Manipur government has consistently backed the NRC. Its formal demand gained traction after the Manipur Legislative Assembly adopted a unanimous resolution on August 5, 2022, seeking the establishment of a State Population Commission and the implementation of the NRC. One of the triggers was the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, following which several hundred people crossed over to Manipur through porous borders. Most of those who took refuge were Kuki-Chin, ethnically related to the Kukis of Manipur and the Mizos of Mizoram. Many in Manipur blame the illegal influx for the ongoing ethnic conflict, first between the Kukis and Mizos and then between the Kukis and Nagas, which has claimed almost 300 lives since May 2023 and displaced more than 62,000 people. Although the State government or any other agency has not conducted any survey of "illegal immigrants", Meiteis and Nagas believe that the Kuki population has jumped exponentially in the hill districts. While non-tribal Meiteis feel the Census could reduce their representation in the Assembly from the current 40 seats, the Nagas believe the scale could tip in favour of the Kukis in the hills. The 20 Assembly seats in the hills are divided equally between the Kukis and the Nagas. The latter, however, say the hill areas should have had at least three more Assembly seats based on the 2011 population.

Is an error-free NRC guaranteed?

The NRC, entailing the transfer of data from Census slips, was born out of independent India's first Census in 1951. Assam compiled the NRC in 1951, although all States were mandated to do so. The intention behind that exercise in Assam was to prepare a village-based inventory of residents in view of the resistance from the State – then undivided – to house post-Partition refugees. The fear of the indigenous people of being outnumbered by "illegal immigrants" during and after the 1971 Bangladesh War led to the Assam Agitation from 1979 to 1985. A demand during the agitation was to eject undocumented foreigners by updating the 1951 NRC. The exercise, supervised by the Supreme Court, began in 2014, and the complete draft was published on August 31, 2019. This draft excluded 19,06 lakh out of the 2.3 crore people who had applied for inclusion. The Assam NRC process, however, remains incomplete because the Registrar General of India has not issued any notification declaring it as final. Organisations such as the All Assam Students' Union claim the NRC 2019 was manipulated to pass a majority of an estimated 41 lakh illegal immigrants as citizens. The BJP-led Assam government remains adamant that the NRC was erroneous, with at least 20% of the enlisted names in districts bordering Bangladesh requiring re-verification. Assam's updated NRC has been in limbo, with cases against it pending in the Supreme Court.



Women hold placards during a sit-in protest demanding the conduct and update of the National Register of Citizens before the Census, in Imphal. ANI

Why is NCPCR investigating Meta, Instagram?

What did a BBC investigation show? Why is child sexual exploitation and abuse material appearing on Instagram? Under what powers can the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights summon social media platforms and other companies?

Aroon Deep

The story so far:

Following an investigation by British public broadcaster BBC, which found that Instagram was running paid advertisements promoting child sexual exploitation and abuse material (CSEAM) in India, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) summoned Meta officials for a hearing on September 9. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has also summoned the company on the issue.

What did the BBC investigation show?

In July, BBC created a test account and found that dozens of ads were promoting CSEAM on Instagram. The distribution of CSEAM is a criminal offence in India.

Meta's policy also states that ads must not contain content that sexually exploits children. Meta said in a statement, "Before these cases were brought to our attention, our enforcement

While social media platforms prohibit CSEAM, automatic moderation systems that use some AI to detect unlawful media are not able to catch every violative submission

systems had already identified and disabled several of the violating ads and the accounts behind them." The company said that it automatically removes millions of CSEAM posting accounts each year, but that "no system is perfect and that determined criminals will continue to try to exploit our platform".

This month, the Tech Transparency Project (TTP), a U.S.-based nonprofit, also reported that it found hundreds of CSEAM ads on Facebook and Instagram, including some served to India.

Why are CSEAM ads appearing on Instagram?

While social media platforms prohibit CSEAM, automatic moderation systems that use some AI to detect unlawful media are not able to catch every violative submission. TTP said that Meta's efforts were not enough even within the scope of what it could do. The nonprofit said that, even in cases where Meta did take down CSEAM, it sometimes classified the ads as adult sexual content, potentially "undercounting instances of child sexual abuse".

While Meta revised this information for ads reported by TTP, it "did not fix the flow of child exploitation content in its advertising system" and continued to show CSEAM ads to certain audiences, the nonprofit said. One of the ads appeared to feature an unidentified "underaged European royal", TTP said.

Even when a human reported CSEAM posts, action was not guaranteed, TTP found. "With 57% (73) of the CSEAM ads reported to Meta, the company sent back a message that said, 'We've taken a look and found that this ad doesn't go against our Advertising Standards,'" TTP said.

What was the NCPCR's reaction to the report?

NCPCR issued a notice on July 3, the same day the BBC report came out, demanding an explanation from the company. MeitY also

sought an explanation from Meta.

Shortly after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's July 23 video message to the Indian youth was briefly removed from Facebook due to an "error," MeitY summoned Meta's global public affairs director, Joel Kaplan, to demand an explanation for that removal. The BBC's report was also discussed during that meeting. The government's summons came as it sent a large number of takedown notices over Instagram posts about the Jantar Mantar protests, while footage of the protests and the ensuing police crackdown went viral.

Meta provided written responses to both MeitY and NCPCR. The latter declined a Right to Information request by *The Hindu* for a copy of the company's response, arguing that providing this information would impede its investigation. After the written response, Meta officials were summoned by NCPCR this month. Neither side provided a description of the meeting.

What powers does NCPCR have to conduct an inquiry like this?

Like the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the NCPCR's founding law, the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights Act, 2005, gives the body the powers of a civil court under the Criminal Procedure Code (replaced by the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023). As such, it has the statutory power to demand explanations on issues of child safety from private organisations and can demand reports from law enforcement. NCPCR's remit includes "matters relating to children in need of special care and protection, including children in distress, marginalised and disadvantaged children, children in conflict with law, juveniles, children without family, and children of prisoners, and recommend appropriate remedial measures," and "to inquire into complaints (relating to) non-implementation of laws providing for protection and development of children," the commission said.

NCPCR has in the past issued notices to companies such as Netflix in response to the show *Bombay Begums*, and to Bourvinita maker Mondelez over sugar content in their malt powder.



The new Instagram logo, REUTERS

PROFILES

The new lords of the Red Sea

The Houthis vs Saudi Arabia

A parallel state in Yemen, an ideologically committed base, years of warfare, control of the Red Sea coastline and sustained Iranian support have all helped the Shia militant group transform itself into a formidable territorial army and naval force

Stanly Johny

On July 13, an Iranian civilian aircraft carrying a high-level Houthi delegation was heading towards Sana'a, Yemen's capital. Under an unwritten understanding between the Houthis (or Ansar Allah), who control northern and northwestern Yemen, including Sana'a, and the country's Saudi-backed government, planes seeking to land in Houthi-held territory were required to obtain prior approval. The Houthi delegation had left Yemen on July 3 on another Iranian aircraft to attend the funeral of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader who was assassinated by the U.S. and Israel on February 28.

Yemen's Saudi-backed government had protested the Iranian plane transporting Houthi leaders. It also opposed the delegation taking an Iranian plane back home, and instead offered to facilitate their return on a non-Iranian airline. The government's main concern was that the flight could also be used to transport personnel of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and military equipment to Yemen. The Houthis, nevertheless, chose to return on a Mahan Air flight. To prevent the aircraft from landing, Saudi-backed forces bombed the runway of Sana'a airport, forcing the plane to land in Hodeidah. This was the trigger.

The Houthis responded by bombing Saudi energy infrastructure and launching an offensive in Hodeidah and Taiz governorates. They also imposed a naval blockade on Saudi vessels in the Red Sea. Within two months, the Houthis made dramatic territorial gains, seizing the entire Red Sea coastline of Yemen and taking the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the narrow chokepoint connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, under their control.

A revivalist movement

The roots of the Houthi movement can be traced to 'Believing Youth', a Zaydi revivalist group founded in Northern Yemen in the early 1990s. Hussein al-Houthi and his father, Badr al-Din al-Houthi, influential Zaydi clerics in

northern Yemen, became the movement's leading figures. Inspired by the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the rise of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon in the 1980s, Badr al-Din and his sons started building vast social and religious networks among the Zaydi Shias of Yemen, who make up roughly one-third of the Sunni-majority country's population.

In 2004, Ali Abdullah Saleh's government, upset with the growing popularity and rebellion of the Houthis, issued an arrest warrant against Hussein. He resisted the arrest, starting an insurgency. In September, government troops attacked the rebels and killed Hussein. But the movement he founded would only grow, forcing Saleh to step down in 2012 and capturing Sana'a in 2014.

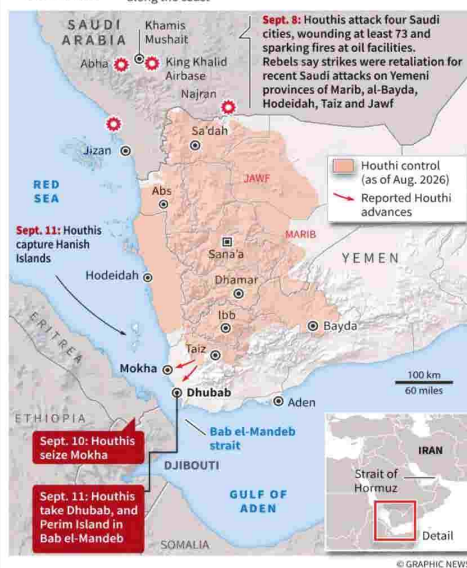
Alarmed by the rise of an Iran-aligned Shia militia across its southern border, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition and declared war against the Houthis in 2015. An intense bombing campaign followed, but the Saudi-led coalition failed to dislodge the rebels, who built a parallel state in northern Yemen. In 2022, amid a broader rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Houthis and Saudi-backed forces agreed to a ceasefire.

The Saudis also struggled to build a credible counterweight to the Houthis inside Yemen. The top leadership of the government was based in Saudi Arabia, while in the south, the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council broke with the government and pursued its own separatist agenda, further weakening the anti-Houthi camp.

The ceasefire allowed the Houthis to consolidate their position in the north and northwest, despite economic woes. The parallel state, an ideologically committed base, years of warfare and sustained Iranian support enabled the group to transform itself into a formidable territorial army. Their access to the Red Sea, a key shipping route, raised their profile as a naval force. When Israel launched a devastating war on Palestinians in Gaza following Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack, Houthis "declared war" against Israel "in solidarity with the

Extending control

Yemen's Houthi militants captured the Red Sea cities of Mokha and Dhubbab, and the Perim Island, extending their control along the coast



Palestinians". In March 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump announced a major air and naval operation against the Houthis, threatening to destroy the group. Despite the enormous firepower brought against them, the Houthis continued launching missiles and drones at U.S. naval forces. Seven weeks later, Mr. Trump announced an end to the U.S. strikes.

After the U.S. and Israel launched the war on Iran on February 28, the Houthis, to the surprise of many, stayed out of the conflict. Iran retaliated by attacking American bases in the Persian Gulf and shutting down the Strait of Hormuz. The

Houthis understood that Iran's closure of the strait strengthened their strategic position: they had the capacity to disrupt maritime traffic through the Red Sea. They also wanted the Saudi blockade of their air space and ports lifted. In the first week of July, as a second round of bombings between Iran and the U.S. was unfolding, the Houthis decided to test Saudi Arabia's resolve by sending a delegation to Iran on an Iranian plane. Saudi Arabia responded by bombing the runway at Sana'a airport as the delegation was returning, effectively breaking the ceasefire. Then the Houthis moved rapidly up

the escalation ladder.

Renewed conflict brings Saudi Arabia under enormous pressure. After traffic through the Strait of Hormuz was disrupted by Iran, Riyadh increasingly relied on its Red Sea terminals to export crude oil. Saudi Arabia's East-West Pipeline, connecting its oil fields in the east with the ports on the Red Sea, allowed the Kingdom to skirt the impact of the disruptions in Hormuz to a certain extent. But the Houthis, after the ceasefire broke down, directly targeted Saudi oil infrastructure, apparently in coordination with Iran-aligned Shia militants in Iraq. On September 11, Saudi Arabia announced that the pipeline was shut, following drone attacks from Iraq. In Yemen, in a lightning offensive launched in early September, the Houthis captured the port cities of Mokha and Dhubbab and the Perim Island in the Bab el-Mandeb, extending their control along the coast and into the strait.

Two chokepoints

More than 20% of the world's seaborne oil trade passed through the Strait of Hormuz before the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran. The Red Sea, which connects Asia and Europe through the Suez Canal in the north and Bab el-Mandeb in the south, typically carries roughly 12-15% of global trade. This means that Iran and Ansar Allah now have the ability to exert pressure on two of the world's critical maritime chokepoints.

On February 27, before the war, both the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait were open, and Iran was prepared to make concessions on its nuclear programme. On June 17, when the U.S. and Iran signed an MoU, committing Tehran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz in return for sanctions relief from the U.S. and a regional ceasefire involving Lebanon, the Bab el-Mandeb was still fully open. Today, maritime traffic through both the chokepoints is disrupted, any regional ceasefire will have to include Yemen, and any final settlement will have to address the Houthis' demands, while Iran's nuclear programme has been pushed to the back burner.

THE GIST

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The Red Sea, which connects Asia and Europe through the Suez Canal in the north and Bab el-Mandeb in the south, typically carries roughly 12-15% of global maritime trade

Iran and Ansar Allah, one of its closest allies, now have the ability to exert pressure on two of the world's critical maritime chokepoints

'Sacred' demands

BAPS

The Eiffel Tower management's move to replace all women staff with their male colleagues for the visit of a delegation from the religious sect has sparked a backlash in France

G. Sampath

Visitors to Paris's iconic Eiffel Tower last Monday had to turn back in disappointment. The monument was closed following a protest against the management's move to replace all women staff with their male colleagues for the visit of a 100-strong delegation from the Hindu religious sect, Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS).

The local trade union condemned "workplace instructions that led to female employees being sidelined, replaced and rendered invisible on the basis of gender". A union spokeswoman told the media that it was "a humiliating experience for the women, to be made invisible in a public space."

BAPS is known for adopting strict gender segregation. But the attempted imposition of its belief system in a country that takes pride in its progressive culture and gender norms sparked a swift backlash. "Terming the incident 'totally shocking and unacceptable', Ariel Weil, the president of the company that runs the Eiffel Tower, announced an internal investigation to fix accountability and ensure it "never happens again".

The incident also has sections of the Indian dias-



pora worried about an anti-immigrant backlash, with one prominent group, the India Alliance Paris (IAP), posting on social media, "The Eiffel Tower story must not become fodder for more racism. BAPS is a regressive sect, politically connected to India's far-right. It should be treated like the sexist, casteist, backward sect it is. BAPS does not represent all Hindus and it certainly does not represent India."

BAPS, in a statement on X, clarified that the visit was "arranged in conjunction with the Eiffel Tower team" and apologised "for any pain or inconvenience caused".

'Cultural relations'

The visit from the BAPS delegation coincided with the inauguration of a massive Swaminarayan temple in Bussy-Saint-Georges, a Paris suburb. The event was attended by India's Ambassador to France, and the temple was virtually inaugurated by Prime Minister

Narendra Modi. In his video address, Mr. Modi termed the inauguration "a new milestone in the cultural relations between India and France".

BAPS, which gets its name from Bochasan village in Gujarat, was formed as a distinct denomination within the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, or tradition, in 1905. Its followers are predominantly from Gujarat. Mr. Modi had attended the funeral of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the spiritual head of BAPS, in August 2016. Apart from Mr. Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and Adani Group Chairman Gautam Adani are other prominent Gujaratis who have been seen attending and speaking at BAPS functions.

The abundantly funded religious group, according to its website, has over 1,300 temples across the world and a presence in more than 50 countries. BAPS, however, is no stranger to controversy. It hit global headlines in 2021

following a lawsuit filed in a federal court in New Jersey that accused it of exploiting Indian workers brought to the U.S. on religious-worker (R-1) visas. An R-1 visa is meant for volunteers or devotees engaged in religious work. But the lawsuit claimed that BAPS made them do manual labour, including cutting, grinding, polishing, carving and installing stone, and other heavy construction work.

The litigants claimed that BAPS "intentionally recruited workers from the Scheduled Caste" and subjected them to "forced labour...". A criminal investigation, which began in May 2021 under the Biden administration, was abruptly closed in mid-2025 by Department of Justice officials under the second Trump administration. The civil cases against BAPS, however, remain open.

While every religious sect may be entitled to its customary practices, including some that may not sit well with modern progressive norms, critics have questioned the propriety of the Prime Minister of a constitutionally secular republic not only publicly platforming a particular religious sect but also projecting it as an integral element of India's diplomatic outreach and "special partnership" with another country.

Echoes from the past

Alice Weidel

The AfD leader, who has slammed Germany's culture of remembrance over its Nazi crimes as a 'cult of guilt', is on the ascent after her party's recent regional election victory

Joan Sony Cherian

"Mr. Merz, your time has run out," declared Alice Weidel, the co-leader of Germany's far-right party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), in a speech in the Bundestag after the party's resounding victory in the regional elections in the state of Saxony-Anhalt. Winning the mandate by securing 43% of the vote in Saxony-Anhalt, the AfD has effectively consolidated its position as a front-runner in the next federal elections to be held in 2029.

The AfD, which espouses hard borders, mass detention facilities, deportation of "illegal" immigrants, remigration, traditional families, Euro-scepticism, German nationalism, and a broader free-market economic policy has found itself a leader who herself is a walking contradiction when it comes to the values that her party espouses. Ms. Weidel, before entering politics (she joined the AfD a few months after its formation in 2013), was an economist and banker. Born in 1979 in Gutersloh, West Germany, Ms. Weidel majored in economics and business before joining Goldman Sachs as an analyst. She also worked for the Bank of China, a state-owned Chinese multinational bank, in the late



2000s, living in China for almost six years; she is fluent in Mandarin. Ms. Weidel is also the first lesbian to lead the AfD. She is in a registered civil partnership with Sarah Bossard, a German national of Sri Lankan origin, and the couple have adopted two children. Yet, Ms. Weidel and the AfD oppose same-sex marriage in Germany, instead emphasising Christian values and the "traditional family".

Moreover, even though the AfD has said only "illegal" immigrants and criminals should be deported, many leaders of the AfD, including Ms. Weidel, have made statements which denounce immigration, especially from Muslim-majority countries, as a whole. In a 2018 speech in the German Parliament, she remarked that "Burgas, girls in headscarves, knife-wielding men on government benefits and other good-for-nothing people are not going to ensure our prosperity, our economic

growth and our social welfare system." Even in her latest victory speech, where she warned Chancellor Friedrich Merz of his coalition government's end, Ms. Weidel claimed that Germany had the largest number of refugees in the world, and that most of them were from "Muslim tribal cultures".

Sense of continuity

Yet Ms. Weidel's ideology, with all its contradictions, does have a sense of continuity when one looks at her heritage. Her grandfather, Hans Weidel, was a supporter and member of the Nazi party and a judge of the regime. He actively campaigned for the National Socialists even before it assumed power. He became a military judge at the Warsaw commandant's office in July 1941, after which he was appointed as the Chief Staff Judge by a direct order from Adolf Hitler himself.

After the fall of Nazi Germany, however, he washed

himself off the regime's crimes, claiming that he did not know anything about the concentration camps. Ms. Weidel has also distanced herself from her grandfather's legacy.

However, Ms. Weidel has often been dismissive about Germany's chequered past. She once said there was a 'cult of guilt/shame' associated with remembering the past. She has remarked that the country's Nazi past is often "politically instrumentalised" against her party.

In 2023, Ms. Weidel, in spite of denouncing Germany's support of Ukraine in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war refused to attend an event organised by the Russian embassy to commemorate the defeat of the Nazi regime by stating that she did not want to "celebrate the defeat of one's own country".

Despite such contradictions, Ms. Weidel enjoys popularity within the AfD and among its supporters. She has been a member of the Bundestag since 2017, and co-leader of the AfD with Tino Chrupalla since 2022. She was elected by the party to be its first Chancellor nominee for the 2025 federal elections. And judging by the AfD's growing record of electoral victory, it can be assumed that she is gaining favour with the wider German electorate.



Shantanu Nandan Sharma | Sukma (Chhattisgarh)

At her mud-walled, low-roofed home in the village of Puwari in Sukma, Chhattisgarh, Madvi Hunge is busy winnowing rice. She is willing to talk, but not before making a sarcastic complaint: "Till Hidma died, no one came to meet us."

Madvi Hidma, one of Bastar's most feared Maoists, was the brother-in-law of Hunge. He headed a dreaded battalion of CPI (Maoist) until he and his wife, Rajkika, were killed in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh last year.

Among Hunge's guests that day is a young headman, or Patel, of a nearby village. Until last year, he had to pay ₹15,000 to the Maoist party as shulk, or fee, for owning a tractor.

"This is the first year no one is paying a 'tax', not even the 'sangam shulk' of ₹500 per villager," says the Patel, requesting anonymity. Sangam is a village-level administrative unit of CPI (Maoist). "Though I am a village headman, I had no option but to follow the party's diktat. Tables have turned now. When Maoist leaders return to villages, they will have to follow the orders of the Patel and other village elders," he adds.

This fraught reversal of power is a reason why more than 1,000 former Maoists continue to be housed in rehabilitation centres set up in district headquarters across Bastar region, even though the government declared the end of armed Maoism on March 31, 2026—a deadline that set for itself two years earlier.

The Bastar division comprises seven districts of Chhattisgarh—Bastar, Bijapur, Dantewada, Kondagaon, Kanker, Narayanpur and Sukma.

NOT A CAKEWALK

Recently videos of some former Maoists from Bastar walking a ramp in Raipur went viral, suggesting a return to peace. However, rehabilitating former armed cadres, many of whom were highly indoctrinated, is hardly a cakewalk. The state is treading cautiously, keeping former hardcore Maoists in rehab centres in an effort to shield them from a possible backlash from villagers and to prevent renewed radicalisation.

"About 1,800 surrendered Maoists have already returned to their villages across Bastar. Except for a couple of instances in Bijapur district where there were some scuffles with villagers, former Maoists have integrated reasonably well into village life," says Vivekanand, additional director general of police in charge of anti-Naxal operations in Chhattisgarh. "Some of the highly indoctrinated, hardcore Maoists may take time to shed the sense of urgency and aggression that their earlier leadership roles and adjust to a social order traditionally guided by elders such as Patels, Gaitas (traditional healers) and pujaris (priests)."

The officer, who does not use a surname, explains that the 1,000-

Return of Maoists

The homecoming of over 3,000 former Maoists is no easy task in Bastar. The state is treading cautiously, keeping over 1,000 in rehabilitation centres—to shield them from possible wrath of villagers and to prevent renewed radicalisation

plus cadres in rehabilitation centres are being categorised into different groups, with recent recruits separated from highly radicalised members. "There has been considerable emphasis on their social reintegration and mental preparedness for a new innings. Yoga classes are one of the modules designed to help in that transition," he says.

To reach Puwari, ET travelled on a newly paved, 38 km blacktop road from Dornapal to Jagarunda in Sukma, cutting across villages that once witnessed some of Bastar's bloodiest gunfights.

"It was for the construction of this very road that more than 300 jawans were martyred," says Amit Kumar, district magistrate of Sukma. Multiple memorials have come up along the route, he adds, as tributes to those who lost their lives. At Tadmeda, for instance, the names of 76 security personnel—mostly from CRPF—who were killed in an devastating Maoist attack in 2010 are etched on marble slabs at the foot of a hill.

WHEN A COLLECTOR WAS KIDNAPPED

On the way to Chintaga, villagers escort this writer to the home of Panda Podyam, known locally as one of the "most influential former Maoists". He is often linked to the sensational kidnapping of Alex Paul Menon, who was the collector of Sukma, in 2012—a case that made international headlines.

Sitting in the courtyard of his house, beside his tractor, the 56-year-old is quick to set the record straight. "I was not involved in Alex Paul Menon's kidnapping. Yes, I was a ne-

About 1,800 surrendered Maoists have returned to their villages across Bastar. Except for some scuffles with villagers in Bijapur, they have integrated reasonably well into village life. Some hardcore Maoists may take time to shed the authority associated with their earlier roles and adjust to a social order traditionally guided by elders"

VIVEKANAND, Additional DGP, in charge of anti-Naxal operations, Chhattisgarh

gotiator for his release," he says. Podyam recalls that he telephoned bureaucrats in Delhi and elsewhere at the direction of Ravula Srinivas, better known as Ramanna, who headed the Maoists' Dandakaranya region until his death in 2019. "When a helicopter dropped off two negotiators from Delhi, as arranged, there was no one but me to receive them. I then escorted them to the nearby village of Kumud Tong, where negotiations continued at a sabha. The collector was being held somewhere in a hideout near Kistarnam," recalls Podyam.

Menon was released after 12 days in captivity. About 150-200 members of Hidma's armed battalion of the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) would once gather in the very courtyard where we are now sitting. "The police outpost, barely 100 metres away, could do nothing to prevent such a gathering," says Podyam, who surrendered in 2017.

Several villagers offer a telling description of life in those days. There were two takas or checkpoints—one manned by the security personnel, the other by the Maoists.

LONG SHADOW OF PAST At Jagarunda, which once hosted a bustling tamarind mandi and drew prosperous traders from Andhra Pradesh, a remnant of the past lies by the roadside, half-sunk in muddy, marshy ground—a large tiger (safe).

Until the 1990s—before the Maoists tightened their grip over the region—it was not unusual for wealthy traders and mahua liquor distillers to own such safes. "This tiger belonged to my stepfather," says S Nageshwar Rao, 70.

Rao is among the scores of villagers who have recently returned to Jagarunda to reclaim their homes, land and other belongings. When the village emerged as a Maoist stronghold in the mid-2000s, traders, government employees and others fled. Some, like Rao, crossed the state border to begin new lives in Andhra Pradesh.

Among the returnees—many of whom have suffered from Maoist violence—there is palpable anger towards some of the senior commanders now lodged in rehabilitation centres. "Villagers will not allow people like Papa Rao to live happily. They committed so many atrocities that it is difficult

for the victims to forget or forgive," says a Jagarunda resident, as several others around him nod in agreement. Papa Rao, alias Karbi Longu, was one of south Bastar's feared Maoist leaders and a member of the Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee (SZC). He surrendered in March this year, just days before the government's deadline.

Podyam, however, believes that the surrendered cadres, with a few exceptions, will be welcomed back to their villages, thanks to the goodwill they had earned through their work in the past.

Gaurav Kumar Singh, district magistrate of Raipur, says former Maoists have to win the trust of villagers for a quick return to normalcy in areas once considered highly sensitive.

Singh, who served as chief executive officer of the zilla panchayat in Dantewada between 2016 and 2018, recalls that several civil and police officers had made deliberate efforts to earn the confidence of local communities even at the height of insurgency.

"My wife and I decided that our daughter, Aadya, would be born in Dantewada in 2017. We also made it a point not to shop in Raipur or elsewhere, but to buy whatever we needed from the local markets of Dantewada," he recalls.

While most surrendered cadres intend to return to their villages, there are exceptions—a few enterprising former Maoists are seeking economic opportunities in and around nearby towns.

BEYOND GUNS Many have moved to a new life beyond guns. Five female Maoists who surrendered in Konta, for instance, are running the beautiful Tungal Café, set amidst forest and water bodies on the outskirts of Sukma town.

"Surrendered cadres and family members of Maoist victims are working together and happily running the Tungal Café," says District Magistrate Kumar, describing the initiative as a possible template for Bastar's social integration in the years ahead.

Nine female cadres from Sukma, who went viral when they took part in a fashion show in Raipur in August, are now being trained to weave handloom silk products.

Several surrendered Maoists who were earlier associated with the party's cultural wing, Chetna Natya Manch, are being roped into stage street plays in villages, spreading awareness about government schemes and initiatives," says Kumar.

The administration is also looking to reinvent Sukma's image. "We are planning to introduce river rafting in a 7 km stretch of the Sabari river near Errabada, hoping to attract tourists from cities such as Vijayawada and Hyderabad," he says. Sukma, he believes, could well emerge as a tourism hotspot in the

years to come.

The prospect marks a striking turn for Errabada. Twenty years ago, in 2006, the village made grim news when Maoists, when Maoists launched a brutal attack on a Salwa Judum camp, killing 31 people. For the police, the hunt is still on for Muppala Lakshman Rao alias Ganapati, a police member and former general secretary, his wife Alluri Krishnakumari alias Sujatha, an SZC member, their bodyguard Mantu and his Odia wife.

"It is a group of four—three Telugu speakers and an Odia," says a police officer, requesting anonymity. "But it is unlikely that they are anywhere in Chhattisgarh."

2,839 No. of Maoists who surrendered in Bastar from 2024 to Aug 2026

1,800 Approx no. of surrendered cadres sent to their villages

1,000+ No. of surrendered cadres who are still housed in rehabilitation centres

₹10 CRORE Cash recovered from Maoist dumps since 2024

Source: Chhattisgarh Police

GANAPATHI & GOSWAMI When the police looked for clues to track down the 76-year-old Ganapati, they stumbled on a new lead—the presence of a "mysterious" Assamese Maoist, Rituparna Goswami, in Bastar at least till 2019. A PhD scholar from JNU, Goswami, 47, is from Karbi Anglong and is believed to have been one of Ganapati's closest associates.

"When we showed Rituparna's photograph to some surrendered Maoists from Bastar, they immediately recognised him. Oh! He is Anil," recalls the police officer. The officer says Rituparna had been moving around Bastar until the pandemic began, using aliases like Anil and Naveen.

For the police, it has opened up yet another trail in their unfinished search for Ganapati—and raised an intriguing question: where is Anil, or Naveen, after vanishing from Bastar?

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Surrendered Maoist cadres and family members are working together and happily running the Tungal Café in Sukma. It could be a template for Bastar's social integration in the years ahead"

AMIT KUMAR, District Magistrate, Sukma

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Surrendered Maoist cadres return to villages torn between forgiveness and lingering anger

Time to In ETplay.com. Available on Economic Times.com/podcast, Amazon Prime Music, Apple Podcasts, JioSaavn and Spotify.

I was not involved in the kidnapping of the then Sukma collector Alex Paul Menon. I was a negotiator for his release. When a helicopter dropped off two negotiators from Delhi, as arranged, I was the only one to receive them.

I escorted them to the nearby village of Kumud Tong where negotiations continued at a sabha"

PANDA PODYAM, Former Maoist, Chintaga

Views are personal



JASPREET BINDRA
Founder, AIBeyond

"The world is everything, that is the case," Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1921. A century later, artificial intelligence may finally be achieving his on his word.

Earlier this month, World Labs, founded by AI pioneer Fei-Fei Li, released something called Atlas. An almost magical demo of that went viral: give Atlas a single photograph, then move a virtual camera around it, and you can look at the scene from the side, above it, behind it, even at parts the original camera never saw.

From one flat image, Atlas imagines a coherent three-dimensional world around it. Give it a few more images and imagination transforms to reconstruction. World Labs calls Atlas an "omni world model", trained nearly across text, images, video and 3D. Since ChatGPT burst into our world four years ago, AI has been synonymous with LLMs, or large language models. Every month since then has brought us more and more powerful LLMs, trained on trillions of parameters, costing billions of dollars. But just like LLMs, more powerful is not the next frontier; the next inflection could be world models.

This is because the world is not a paragraph of words but exists in a glorious three-dimensional cornucopia of objects, sounds, sights and senses.

The Next Great Leap

AI first learnt the words. Now it is reaching for the world

MORE THAN WORDS

LLMs have acquired extraordinary capabilities by consuming enormous quantities of text, images and increasingly other media. But humans do not learn this way. A child does not read Wikipedia before understanding that a cup falls when pushed off a table, or that a ball rolling behind a sofa still exists. AI's "pre-training data" is the textual and visual internet, but our pre-training dataset is reality itself.

We see in three dimensions, we hear voices with tone and direction, we touch things, move through rooms, taste food and learn what happens when we step upon the physical world. Our developing brains continuously combine perception, movement, memory and prediction. Long before children acquire sophisticated language, they have absorbed an astonishing amount of common sense about objects, distance, gravity, other people, and cause and effect. There is also a question of bandwidth. Typing communicates words, but speaking adds tone, rhythm, emphasis and sound, and that is why the best way to work with AI so far has been to speak with it. But vision adds infinitely more to it: objects, depth, movement and context, making the informational richness of an experience explode. Children do not need to be trained on the "entire internet"; they can learn remarkable things from comparatively little lived experience because each experience carries vastly more structure than a sentence.



PHYSICAL WORLD

This is precisely the limitation that Yann LeCun, one of AI's foundational researchers, has been attacking for years. He argues that human-level intelligence cannot emerge simply by feeding machines ever more human-written text. Current systems, he says, are extremely good at manipulating language, which can fool us into "equating eloquence with intelligence". His alternative is AI that learns how the physical world works, predicts what will

happen after an action and uses that prediction to plan. Li has staked her next chapter on a related idea: spatial intelligence.

Her argument is that while language intelligence lets machines understand and generate words, spatial intelligence lets them reason about objects, places, geometry, movement and interactions in the physical world. She calls this the transition "from words to worlds". So, what exactly is a world model? At its simplest, it is an internal representation

of an environment that allows AI to understand its state, imagine how it might change and predict the consequences of actions.

An LLM asks, loosely: "What token comes next?" A world model asks something closer to, "If this is the world now, and I do this, what will the world look like next?" This shift might sound small, but its complexity and implications are enormous.

GAUSSIAN SPLAT

A wonderfully named building block in this new vocabulary is the Gaussian splat. A token is a small unit in a stream of language. A Gaussian splat is a tiny, fuzzy, semi-transparent blob positioned in 3D space. Each carries information about where it sits, its shape, orientation, opacity and appearance. Millions of these splats can blend to form a photorealistic three-dimensional scene. "Gaussian" comes from Carl Friedrich Gauss, and the well-shaped mathematical distribution bearing his name.

"Splat" refers to how these fuzzy blobs are projected, or splatted, onto the screen to render the scene. Simpliciously put, it takes help machines talk about reality: splats help machines build and render it. Atlas can generate explicit 3D

World Labs founder Fei-Fei Li says spatial intelligence will let machines reason about objects, places, geometry, movement and interactions in the physical world

worlds as Gaussian splats, including geometry that no camera originally captured.

THE FUTURE

Now imagine where this can go.

A robot needs a world model to understand a kitchen rather than merely recognise the word "kitchen". Autonomous vehicles need to predict how pedestrians and traffic will move. Factories could create living digital twins and test changes before touching the production line.

Architects could walk through buildings before constructing them. Students could enter ancient Rome rather than read a paragraph about it. Personal AI could understand where things are in our homes, not merely what our calendars say. At global scale, the same conceptual direction matters for weather, climate, materials, biology and other systems where intelligence means modelling complex worlds evolving over time.

If language can describe a cyclone, a world model aspires to simulate what the cyclone might do.

The obstacles to building world models are formidable, as physical causality is much harder than visual realism. World models will need far richer data, better representations of physics and vastly more grounding in reality. But the direction is important.

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This leap can make machines a cyclone, a world model aspires to simulate what the cyclone might do.

In the beginning was the Word. AI learnt that. Now it is reaching for the World.

Views are personal

Working Class Rice Just Got Nice, Now That It's Hit the Supper Club Circuit

For a prole dish that no Bengali babu, never mind lady, would be caught having, pantha bhaat sure has come a long way, baby, now being served up as superfood and poster-meal for zero-waste cooking

SUNDAY ROAST



RESHMA MAJUMDAR

London: I recently helped curate a pantha bhaat — cooked rice soaked and fermented in water — platter here in London, replete with fried ilish (hilsa), daler bora (lentil fritters), and all. This was for a room full of Sunday pot roast loyalists paying good money for a dish that, a generation ago, wasn't considered good enough for the domestic help's lunch break.

Pantha bhaat is riding the wave of Instagram buzz around this once-humble, now

hashtag-worthy dish back home in India. Turns out the internet has finally caught up to what grandmothers knew all along.

Pantha bhaat is historically one of the most looked-down-upon Bengali dishes. Relegated firmly to the background, it was a labourer's dish, never a lady's lunch, certainly not what the 'bhadralok' would be seen eating. Yet, for generations, the working man had this as his breakfast: rice soaked overnight, eaten cold, dressed with nothing more than a green chilli, a sliver of onion, and if the week had been generous, a fried fish on the side.

Cross into Odisha and the same idea shows up as pakhalā, old enough for a day to be named after it — Pakhalā Dibasa, celebrated every March 20. Assam has its pantha bhaat, eaten with potato masala and mustard oil. In Bihar and Jharkhand,



WET, YOUR APPETITE

soaked rice turns up as basi or gheel bhat. Chhattisgarh calls it bore basi.

Tamil Nadu has its pazhaya sadam, mashed and loosened with curd. Kerala calls it pazham kanji, best eaten with pickle and fried coconut. Andhra Pra-

desh and Telangana serve up chaddanam. Different regions, changed nomenclatures. But the same basic genius — no body wanted to waste, so waste was added to leftover rice, and the rising quantity did its own chemistry.

What find rather delicious about this whole reversal of

and humid patience doing what it does best. By morning, the rice has changed. It is tangier, softer, and, as it turns out, rather good for you. This isn't a wellness trend dressed up in ancient robes for Instagram clout. This is just fermentation, the same quiet magic behind yogurt, kimchi, and every sourdough loaf currently hogging your wallet. Except pantha bhaat got there first.

The dish didn't need reinventing to become fashionable. It just needed us to stop being snobs about it

fortune is that the dish didn't need reinventing to become fashionable. It just needed us to stop being snobs about it. Great-grandmothers did not need a lab coat to explain: leave rice in water overnight, and it quietly starts working on itself. No fancy equipment, no special culture flown in from a specialty shop. Just time, water,

What the soaking actually does is rather clever: It nudges rice to release the iron, calcium, and other minerals that would otherwise stay locked away, stubbornly out of reach of your body no matter how much rice you eat. The labourer eating his morning plate was, quite unknowingly, getting more nourishment out of his bowl than his employer ever got from a first.

plate of freshly steamed, 'proper' rice. The cloudy leftover liquid most refined households would have tipped down the drain without a second thought. That does unglamorous work of its own, the kind that keeps the gut happy, and immune system alert.

The body finds this rice rather well compared to a freshly cooked plate. It doesn't come at you all at once. Which means that the working man's breakfast was quietly managing his energy through a long day, rather better than anything London's wellness cafes are currently charging well over 10 quid for. Which brings me back to pantha bhaat served up in London. Watching people who'd normally reach for avocado toast queue up for a dish once considered too plain for polite company has its own kind of vindication. The 'bhadralok' took a hundred years to come around to the working-class dish, but got there in the end. Sometimes the food that was never meant to impress anyone is exactly the food that ends up doing it best. Probiotics at a no extra cost.

NO FILTER



RUCHIR JOSHI

One Slip-Up And SpikeJet Takes Your Trip

Buying air tickets online can be an exercise closer to quantum mechanics

So, a man is trying to buy two air tickets from Delhi to one of the mountain airports up north for a date towards October-end. He goes online to let's just call it TakeMyTrip, and scans prices. At first, he gets what seem like crazy high prices — about ₹1,500 a ticket on, let's just call it, SpikeJet, shall we?

After exploring other airlines, he comes back to the SpikeJet page, and it's now offering much lower prices — around ₹6,500 per seat. He puts in passenger details and the date of flight, adding flight protection in case the flight is delayed.

He has to enter the details three times because the website doesn't seem to catch his keystrokes. But when it is done at 10 pm, he pays ₹3,540 for 2 tickets. When the ticket arrives in his mailbox, he goes into shock: the booked flight is for the next morning, not 58 days later, which is when he wants to fly.

The man then spends two hours trying to salvage the situation. First, he goes to SpikeJet and tries to cancel the tickets. He sees he will get back only ₹2,464, losing about ₹1,000. Then he remembers he has purchased a free date change, so he tries that. Hah, hah — the date change is free, but the additional price for flying on the desired day takes the cost up to the originally crazy-seeming ₹1,500 a ticket.

The man tries calling the airline. For his trouble, he gets 15 minutes of: 'Our agents are currently dealing with other customers, please hold. Your call is important to us.' It's like a hypnotic cult chant, but thankfully there's no intervening muzak to fry his brain further.

He hangs up and calls the large insurance company that provides the date-change protection he purchased, and here he licks out. Or seems to. A polite human tells him the travel department will help him and connects him. The man stays on the call for 22 min and 15 sec. 'Please hold. All our customer care executives are busy. We will speak to you shortly.'

The man goes back to SpikeJet and connects with the chatbot. He has decided he will pay the extra amount for the date change. The SpikeJet chatbot is friendly, prompt, and clear: 'Total extra payable ₹9,842. Would you like to confirm this change and pay the extra amount of ₹9,842?' The man confirms. The next message: 'Please pay ₹16,048 to confirm your booking.'

The man yelps at the chatbot: 'YOU JUST SAID ₹9,842.' The chatbot is unmoved: 'I have clarified with my executive. The final amount is ₹16,048: ₹13,000 plus ₹1,000 makes it ₹23,000, a chunk more than the initial ₹11,500 x 2 = ₹23,000. Somewhere, the AI chatbot (or the exec behind it) has understood that this hapless morn of a customer is helpless, and that it's time to turn on the lemon squeezer. The man grins the bullet, bites his loins, and cancels the booking.

The message from TakeMyTrip says the refund will be ₹2,464. The amount that arrives is ₹1,166. The final damage being around ₹12,400 for a brief mistake on two glitchy, trap-filled websites.

What could be the solution? Here are 3 suggestions:

1. Before final payment is initiated and accepted, the exact flight, date and cost should be displayed in large, clear fonts.
2. There should be an option for no-cost, no-questions-asked cancellation within 2 hours of any air-ticket purchase.
3. All surge-pricing skulduggery should be banned. Even if the customer missed checking the flight date, there's no way the price for an end-October flight went up by ₹3,000 a ticket in the 2 hours between 10 pm and midnight in early September.

That was pure robbery, to add to the general, all-pervading digital sleight of hand. Some consumers would say there should also be an additional penalty for the hub website and airline for putting the customer through extra bheja-frying.

Is Your 'World-Class' Really Worthwhile?

Wanting quality — in our food, buildings, roads, life — is all very well, until you realise it means the end of jugaad

RED HERRING



INDRAJIT HAZRA

One true measure of our genius for assessing things is our use of the word 'world-class.' It's a description that's particularly Indian, in the sense that no one uses the term to describe the Eiffel Tower or the Colosseum. 'World-class' is a term of praise, or the Uffizi in Florence to be a 'world-class' art gallery, or the A24 stretch of the autobahn connecting Hamburg to Berlin as a 'world-class' road. It's only used to describe something meritorious when applied to an experience in India. Guru just won't do. It'll have to be Vishwaguru.

True superlatives, when applied here to a restaurant meal, a hotel stay, a metro ride experience, a university, a digital payment system, a swimming pool, or even a nephew's school theatre production, can be deemed 'world-class.' They may well be great. But the point is that to register that something is truly awesome, 'world-class' is the apogee of praise you'll need to take out of your toolkit for others to sit up and take note.

But what is 'world-class'? Statistical-

ly, the world isn't a paragon of excellence. Most of the 195 countries in the world struggle with shoddy construction, chaotic traffic, dubious hygiene, and education systems that produce the sort of things you read on Truth Social. If 'world-class' is meant to reflect the average of global practice, then the benchmark is depressingly low.

But, of course, that's not what is meant by 'world-class' here. It is meant to mean outstanding quality that places a person, group, or thing at the peak of their field — ranking among the very best in the entire world. The trouble is, 'world-class' aspirations are not always accompanied by 'world-class' standards and practices.

Recently, I went to an outlet of a Chinese restaurant chain. This particular branch rated high on food delivery apps — 4.5 (out of 5) on Swiggy, 4.2 on Zomato, both with more than 2,000 ratings. The moment I stood outside, I saw a sign for 'Denzong Kitchen' in reasonably upmarket southern Kolkata. I sensed something was off. I held that pose

odd: right at the mouth of the restaurant facing the footpath was the doorless kitchen. Where was the seating area?

Perhaps, this was an only-takeaway joint. But upon enquiry, I was told to go up a narrow flight of wooden stairs that led to a mezzanine floor that looked like a perfect transit station for

'World-class' aspirations aren't always accompanied by 'world-class' standards and practices

human trafficking. With my order taking far longer than I hoped for, I went downstairs to the kitchen on a few times. What I saw horrified me — from the cooking area, to where the dishes were cleaned (sic), to where the food was being prepared. It was a wet organic nightmare even by Pigeon hygiene standards. A few weeks later, I learnt of the crackdown on restaurants, eateries, and mithai shops by Kolkata Municipal Corporation. That's still in full-swing. Coming as it has in the run-up to next month's Durga Puj, there's quite an outcry on how the new dispen-

sation is cracking down on well-known establishments 'for no rhyme or reason,' so even assigning a sinister 'non-veg food hater' drive to the whole thing. A Denzong Kitchen outlet does feature in the 40-odd eateries whose licences have been suspended. But as I write this, the outlet I visited is certainly taking orders. Because of

technical issues, you are unable to hear me retching at the thought of it. What is true of disturbingly filthy restaurant kitchens, could be true for other arenas. When pavement (illegally) encroached upon by shacks and shops are cleared, there's an outcry. 'Where will the people go? How will we have a quick chat?' When leaky NEEET exams are suspended to have them plugged, after the initial outrage against corruption, there's an outcry. 'How will my kid get into medical college?' At least a bribe would have got him/her in. Jumping a queue is so normalised that not being allowed to jump a queue becomes a human right violation.

People may be all for 'world-class.' But when they want to, say, add a mini-mall extension to their third floor, cutting corners and dodging regulations are seen as perfectly kosher, lubricating jugaad. So, be careful of what 'world-class' viksit fix-it's you wish for. It may mean making worldly sacrifices you're not willing to make. Certainly not till 2047.

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Desi Bhai, Tech Bros, & A Bit of Tagore in Frisco

Peek into how America's tech capitalism boom's equal parts curse and blessing

SUNDAY SAPIEN



ATEESH TANKHA

During a recent visit to San Francisco, I discovered that it takes only a small suspension of disbelief to be persuaded that the tech boom and its attendant wealth creation are equal parts curse and blessing. Nothing bugs this fact home more persuasively than the growing number of homeless people in Frisco's Tenderloin district, and other parts of town.

Largely ignored or resented by the city's tax-paying residents, and lightly confined and prodded by the authorities, their hopelessness and hunger are a reminder of what happens when labour is opti-

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Nearby a tableau vivant — a woman with earphones and a large grocery bag, who has just exited a driverless Wayne taxi, cocks a snook at two street-dwelling, shirtless sundew — unfolds perfectly. I made my despondent way to a meet up with a college acquaintance. Over coffee, she shared a recent experience. The night before, she had accosted a loud tourist from India at a hotel bar telling his almost adult son that Rabinadrath Tagore, on his second visit to the US and while staying at the same Palace Hotel in

Efficiency drives either conformity and profit, or redundancy and exclusion

1916, was nearly assassinated by the revolutionary Ghadar Party. 'Why did they want to kill him?' asked the young man. 'Because, at that time, he was a British chancha,' replied the man with certitude. 'But what did he do?' persisted the son. 'Nothing,' concluded the father. 'He was unprepared to support the cause of our independence struggle.' 'Not quite,' my friend found herself interjecting. 'But he was unwilling to condone violence, and

put the concept of society above that of a nation state.'

His first reaction at hearing her unexpected voice was to stiffen and then, as it seemed to her, to turn and flee. But he gave her the once-over and felt more confident confronting somebody he considered mere compatriot.

'Nation stands above society. It has taken India too long to understand this. Thankfully, it is now coming to its senses. We will do great things.'

Yes... But a nation usually forces the marriage of politics and commerce to streamline the efforts of individuals. Then we become slaves of the system.'

Maybe 'slaves' her interlocutor. But 'slaves' are better than beggars.

'But the system creates beggars. As one group becomes richer, another must become poorer. Just look at this city.'

'Look at India, instead,' he countered. 'Have you seen the latest growth figures?' When we are great again, we will never permit filthy kangals on our streets.'

'Seriously?' Do you believe, 'Are you a leftist?' he interrupted her mid-sentence.

'No, only an observer,' she assured him. 'Oh, adimangi naxal, then.'

Before she could protest, he mumbled 'Ja Hind and left.' Just as she was about to leave, she spied a pair of tech bros weaving their way unsteadily from the bar to the exit. 'We have to stop treating people like they are numbers,' said one. She felt a stirring of hope. Perhaps, Americans understood Tagore better than her own countrymen.

'Why? Should the other.'

'In FSD [full self-driving] crash test simulation, the programme chose to compromise the passenger and scrape the divider because the alternative showed four homeless people crossing the road. We've got to make it realise the relative worth of each individual. Those four had none.'

It may have been the drink, but she swore that she spied a white, beard-of-South-Asian apparition in a long cloak depart with the two techies through the hotel's revolving door.

The writer is MD, eTrans Solutions



ET Sunday Crossword



ACROSS

- 1 Clear of trees, author Daniel gathers rare stone (8)
- 2 Skinny boat slows down in Delhi (6)
- 3 Foreign articles reduced? Charge (6)
- 4 Sunday tabloids to put out, unsolicited comments (2,4)
- 5 He had briefly captured the nation's attention (4)
- 6 City science daily lacks satisfactory expertise (10)
- 7 Inclined to follow groom's party (6)
- 8 Clear of trees, author Daniel gathers rare stone (8)
- 9 Skinny boat slows down in Delhi (6)
- 10 Foreign articles reduced? Charge (6)
- 11 Sunday tabloids to put out, unsolicited comments (2,4)
- 12 He had briefly captured the nation's attention (4)
- 13 City science daily lacks satisfactory expertise (10)
- 14 Inclined to follow groom's party (6)
- 15 First son of right, anxiously peering out over border (13)
- 16 Guarantee supplied to Welsh ceremony (10)
- 17 Blade installed in apple peeler (4)
- 18 Group of players transported to Peru (6)
- 19 Some close relative gets over a large breakdown (8)
- 20 Save Royal Mariner's crossing English river (6)
- 21 Furry poet stored an old radio and other day in this (4,4)



A Mocha Moment

Looks like the Houthi has ordered Mocha.

A coffee break in the middle of a war? Not a mocha. Mocha. The historic Yemeni port city. Houthi forces have seized control of it after a major offensive. The city is aligned with Yemen's Saudi-backed government.

This Mocha sounds familiar. Any relation to café mocha?

Well, the name. Same. Also, say the origin story for mocha. Coffee, as you know and I hope you do, originated in Ethiopia, but Yemen does have a crucial role in turning it into a global commodity. It was the Sufi scholar Ali bin Omar al-Shadhili who first brought coffee to Mocha from Abyssinia. By the 18th century, beans grown in Yemen's highlands were being shipped through the port of Mocha to Egypt, the Ottoman Empire and eventually Europe.

The OC coffee capital?

Pretty much. For centuries, it was so closely associated with coffee that beans shipped through the port simply became known as 'Mocha'. The chocolate, however, came later. Yemeni coffee would have chocolatey notes and that gave it a distinct flavour. The modern-day café mocha adds chocolate to the coffee to mimic that taste.

But what happened to the Mocha coffee empire?

Coffee beans! Basically, other countries got the beans. The Dutch began cultivating coffee in Java and coffee production eventually spread across Asia and the Americas. Mocha's dominance faded. Yemeni coffee is still around but it is now a niche producer rather than the coffee superpower it once was. In fact, Indian coffee owes its origins to this region. Legend has it that around 1670, Sufi pilgrim Baba Budan smuggled seven fertile coffee seeds out of Mocha, strapped to his body, and planted them in the hills of Mysore.

What's what happens to Mocha now?

For now, unfortunately, its strategic location matters more than its coffee history. The Houthi captures puts them closer to the Bab el-Mandeb, through which a significant chunk of global trade and oil travels.

That's a whole 'latte' problem. Indeed. For the region, it's 'bean' there, done that.

Text: Nupur Amarnath

CALIFORNIA NOT DREAMIN'

misled by insatiable efforts of enlightened capitalism. Efficiency as all the AI-hijacked billboards proclaim, is a zero-sum game, which drives either conformity and profit, or redundancy and exclusion. A public mural captures this succinctly. Above an image of a fallen Statue of Liberty brought down in chains by automated machines, is inscribed a fragment from Emma Lazarus' 1883 poem, 'The New Colossus': 'Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to be free,

1916, was nearly assassinated by the revolutionary Ghadar Party. 'Why did they want to kill him?' asked the young man. 'Because, at that time, he was a British chancha,' replied the man with certitude. 'But what did he do?' persisted the son. 'Nothing,' concluded the father. 'He was unprepared to support the cause of our independence struggle.' 'Not quite,' my friend found herself interjecting. 'But he was unwilling to condone violence, and

The writer is MD, eTrans Solutions

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Words Worth

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2026

SRINATH SRIDHARAN

LIAQUAT AHMED'S GRIPPING history of the first global financial crisis shows how speculation, leverage and human folly can travel from markets to politics, society and the lives of ordinary people. Reading Liaquat Ahmed's 1873 gives one of those strange experiences in which history begins to look less like history and more like a film we have watched before. The railroad mania of the nineteenth century has an unmistakable echo in today's excitement around artificial intelligence. Markets are buoyant, capital is chasing a transformative technology, valuations can run ahead of underlying cash flows, and everyone has a convincing reason why this time is different.

In India, the backdrop is even more layered: demographic transition, the rapid formalisation of finance, high public and private investment, geopolitical fragmentation, supply-chain rewiring, energy transition, climate risk and the possibility that AI will alter jobs and productivity before institutions have understood its consequences. The worry is familiar enough to make the past feel uncomfortably close. 1873 is a story of how financial excess escapes the balance sheet and enters the bloodstream of society.

Ahmed's story begins when the world itself was becoming newly connected. By the end of the 1860s, railways were stitching countries together, capital was crossing borders and governments and entrepreneurs had discovered the bond market as a way of borrowing against the future. America was building railways across a continent. Germany was flush with funds from the French indemnity after the Franco-Prussian War. Vienna was awash with property speculation. British and French banks were financing projects and sovereign borrowers far beyond their own shores. The world economy had enjoyed two extraordinary decades of growth, trade had expanded dramatically and capital investment had surged.

Then came May 1873. The Vienna Stock Exchange collapsed. In a single day the market lost nearly half its value. The panic travelled to Berlin and, across the Atlantic, to New York, where the failure of Jay Cooke & Co, one of America's most important investment houses, turned anxiety into a banking panic. Railway bonds unravelled, companies failed, investors lost fortunes and construction projects stopped. The new transatlantic cable meant financial fear could cross the ocean at unprecedented speed.

But the most revealing stories are not always in the trading rooms. Ahmed follows the shock into Egypt, where Khedive Ismail had borrowed heavily for canals, railways, palaces and the ambitions of a ruler determined to make Egypt look like a modern European power. Debt eventually became a route to foreign control, culminating in Britain's takeover of Egypt. In the Ottoman Empire, sovereign borrowing and financial weakness produced another kind of humiliation: default eroded fiscal sovereignty and opened the door to greater European influence. In



A file photo of the Vienna Stock Exchange, which crashed on May 9, 1873, setting off a devastating global economic downturn known as the 'Long Depression'

THE CRASH that looks familiar

A reminder how financial excess can escape the balance sheet to enter the bloodstream of society

America, economic distress and political fatigue helped weave reconstruction. The Rothschilds sit at the centre of this sprawling narrative. Their banking instinct was conservative enough to keep them from many of the excesses that damaged others. Yet when the system broke, their name became useful to people looking for someone to blame. Ahmed shows how financial confusion can acquire a political vocabulary: the complicated mechanics of debt, currencies and speculation become easier to explain through conspiracy. The anger directed at Jewish financiers was one of the darker afterlives of the crisis, showing how quickly economic grievance can mutate into social hatred.

And then there is money itself. This is

1873: The First Great Depression and the Making of the Modern World

Liaquat Ahmed
Penguin Random House
Pp 368, ₹1,499

where 1873 becomes more than a story of a market crash. As major economies moved away from silver and towards gold, the supply of money tightened just when economies were struggling under debt. Prices fell for years. Deflation made debts heavier in real terms, squeezed

farmers and producers, and strengthened the position of creditors. What looked like an arcane argument about gold and silver became a fight over who would carry the burden of adjustment. One reason the bond market matters so much in Ahmed's story is that bonds reveal the price at which the world is willing to finance an ambition. They bring together the borrower's credibility, the investor's risk appetite, the cost of money and the market's collective judgment about the future.

A lesson for Indian financial experts is that its corporate bond trading remains shallow and concentrated. A deeper debt market would give the economy something more valuable than another source of capital: a sharper market-based measure of how the world prices India's risk, growth and ambition.

Ahmed's history becomes particularly alive when it moves between finance and human behaviour. Mark Twain appears as an amused and sceptical observer of the speculative age. Karl Marx watches capitalism's convulsions from another vantage point. Jay Gould represents the ruthless opportunism of the period. The Rothschild family embodies

the extraordinary reach of private finance. Politicians, monarchs, bankers and speculators repeatedly convince themselves that they can control forces that have already begun to outrun them. Ahmed has a gift for making these figures feel alive, with their vanity, intelligence, courage, greed and blind spots.

One description in the book is especially unsettling. Antonio Gallenga, *The Times* correspondent in Constantinople, wrote in the 1870s of a man who seemed "destitute of all powers of reasoning," incapable of breaking through "the magic circle of his concentrated selfishness" to feel sympathy for another human being. It could have been written yesterday.

Across politics, business and public life, human society has acquired extraordinary material power without necessarily acquiring greater wisdom. Our machines are faster. Our markets are deeper. Our communication is instant. The human capacity for vanity, self-interest and wilful blindness remains stubbornly intact.

That is perhaps the hardest lesson of 1873. The book is a further reminder that financial resilience begins with strong capital and disciplined leverage. History has delivered that warning repeatedly, across countries, markets, financial products and generations, and yet every boom persuades people that old restraints have become obsolete. Still, the temptation to borrow against an imagined future remains remarkably durable. In an ever-connected world, who will save individuals and institutions from themselves?

Ahmed's achievement is to make that question difficult to dismiss. 1873 was not merely a year in which a stock exchange fell. It was the moment a new global financial system discovered how quickly confidence could travel, how painfully debt could settle, and how easily distress could become political resentment and social hatred. It left behind deflation, populism, protectionism, antisemitism and a rearrangement of power that reached from Wall Street to Constantinople, Cairo and the American South. Every serious history of global finance eventually brings us back to pride and human folly. Ahmed does so with a story that is instructive for character and consequence. By the end, the reader has almost been transported into that century: hearing the market panic, watching fortunes disappear, seeing governments improvise and societies search for someone to blame.

And then comes the question that refuses to remain in the nineteenth century. After so much material progress, regulation, so much financial sophistication and so much accumulated knowledge, have we really learnt from the past?

Srinath Sridharan is an author, corporate adviser & independent director on corporate boards

NAWAID ANJUM

MG VASSANJI DID not begin *The Apparition* knowing that half-human, half-bird creatures would eventually descend upon Delhi. "Initially, I thought I would write a historical novel," says the Toronto-based writer, 76. "I started with medieval history and then it just occurred to me to take it into another direction," he adds. The novel is set in the last years of Alauddin Khilji's rule, in a Delhi plagued by famine, court intrigue, religious persecution and fear. "It was a very chaotic time. People were getting murdered," says Vassanji.

"I thought maybe I would immerse myself in a writer or philosopher of that period in his despair, imagining another outcome." That witness is Amir Hassan-al-Shirazi, poet, historian, Sufi, court insider, and narrator of the novel, dedicated to the children of Gaza, slaughtered as we watched. "Alauddin asks him whether his rule has been just and tells him to write honestly, without flattery. Amir is close enough to power to see its cruelties but never fully belongs to it. Vassanji says he is an invented character, only 'very superficially' linked to historical figures. "I had to make him up."

Amir's Sufi master, Sheikh Sadruddin, is modelled on Nizamuddin Auliya, but "there's no one-to-one correspondence. I needed a Sufi I respected."

While writing, Vassanji became absorbed in medieval Islamic philosophy, mathematics and science. He brings up *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, Ibn Tufayl's 12th-century Arabic novel about a child raised by a doe in isolation, who comes to understand the physical world through observation and reason. It's close to the questions Vassanji was thinking about: how far reason can take us, and whether knowledge of the material world is enough. "In spite of knowing everything

A question of roots

about the physical world, you still need something more," Vassanji says. He was also drawn to the Mongols, the Nizari Ismailis, also known as the 'Assassins', and Alamut, the Persian mountain fortress destroyed by the Mongols in the 13th century. Alamut has a personal resonance for Vassanji, who comes from a Khoja Ismaili background and has written about tracing his community's spiritual and historical roots in Gujarat back through his parents and teachers. From there, his reading led him to Alauddin's violent final years and the rise of his slave-turned general, Malik Kafur.

Another text fascinated him: the animal fables in the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, in which animals make their case against humans before the King of the Jinn. The work sharpened his interest in creation, knowledge and humanity's treatment of animals. "I learned a lot," he says. Yet he is wary of pretending every historical thread must neatly connect. "When you've read enough, then some of the connections come," he says. "And some don't come."

The novel's deepest argument is about assimilation. "When the Mongols came here, the Sultan had started local culture to accommodate," Vassanji says, thinking aloud about how societies formed when new people arrive. The British did the same in another form elsewhere. With every encounter came resistance, adaptation, fear and exchange. "The same anxieties of losing your history, your identity, your culture," he says. "And at the same time assimilating, whether you want to or not."

In his latest novel, MG Vassanji speaks about his East African past, migration and assimilation

Born in Nairobi (Kenya) to Indian immigrants, raised in Tanzania and later settled in Canada after studying in the United States, Vassanji knows that unease intimately. Even Swahili, which he speaks with his wife, has absorbed so much English that the boundaries have

blurred; he regrets not passing more of it to his sons. "That feeling always remains. Basically, I put that into this novel. That loss." He traces this restlessness further back to his Lohana ancestors, generations who moved through western India and then to Kenya, Zanzibar, Colombo and elsewhere. "It's kind of a nomadic existence," he says. "That's my theory."

The pattern continues in his own family; his sons, too, have made lives across countries. "Somehow, for our community, rootlessness is harder to accomplish." His 2024 essay collection *Nowhere, Exactly* asks whether home can ever be singular for people formed by several places. Vassanji no longer sounds troubled by not having one answer. "I'm always rooted in a place," he tells me. "But then I find that I feel comfortable in a place only because I know I can always travel." He calls himself "a creature of habit who travels."

Delhi entered that long journey through travel rather than ancestry. Whenever he came to India, Vassanji says, Delhi was usually the first stop. "I would first come here," he says. It became "the key" through which the rest of India's geography began to make sense to him. Gujarat, Shimla, Calcutta and other places branched out from it. That relationship has already produced a *Delhi Obsession*, but the Delhi of *The Apparition* demanded a different imagining an older city whose records can tell a novelist only so much.

Vassanji is working on another novel, now "almost finished." It looks at a generation slightly older than his own, formed by university life, decolonisation and the political idealism of the 1960s and early 1970s, when Tanzania was a frontline state in the struggles against white minority rule in Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa. "That

awareness was very much part of our growing up," he says.

Vassanji also returns to East African writers he feels have slipped from view, among them Peter Nazareth and Bahadur Tejani, particularly when compared with the attention given to West African writers. Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow* interests him because it tried to imagine a genuinely African-Indian future through an interracial relationship. "There was, of course, among the Indians, Asians, racial resistance," Vassanji says, adding that African communities had their own traditions and boundaries. "There's a relative ignorance, mutual ignorance, between Africans and Asians."

He remembers Tanzania Publishing House and Walter Bgoya, later founder of Mukuhi na Nyota. The press is now run by Bgoya's son, Mukuhi, and Vassanji has sent him a new collection of stories set entirely in the small part of Dares Salaam where he grew up. When his regular publisher worried about too many books appearing close together, Vassanji replied, "But I'm not getting younger either." Sending the stories back to Tanzania felt right: "It was like going back... my homage to the place I grew up in."

That return to place looks back neatly to *The Apparition*. The novel is interested not only in conquest, but in what follows: what people surrender without noticing, what they acquire, and when something once foreign becomes ordinary. As Amir Sufi master comes to understand, Vassanji says, "the world is bigger and, therefore, you have to accommodate what's in there."

"What do you gain and what do you lose when you travel? Whether you like it or not, opens up?" The question belongs as much to the present as to Vassanji's medieval Delhi. He sees the novel as a response to the anxieties around identity, migration, conflict, globalisation and cultural change. "If you don't travel, the world comes to you," he says. "In this case it is the Avians who come." And when they do, "you have to realise that the world was much bigger."

Nawaid Anjum is a freelancer

ON THE SHELF



IN THE REALM OF THE LAST MAN
Francis Fukuyama
Hachette
Pp 256, ₹699

In this memoir, encompassing his father's involvement in the civil rights movement and his own work on CIA contracts in the 1980s, Francis Fukuyama analyses his life alongside the seismic political shifts of the last 30 years — from Bush to Obama to Trump, from the War on Terror to Russia's Ukraine invasion. Profound and provocative, this is an intimate portrait of one of the 21st century's most important thinkers, an urgent study of contemporary politics — and a treatise on how the West can claw democracy back from the brink.



PILL-FREE
Dr Chandrakant Lahariya
Penguin
Random House
Pp 328, ₹499

Dr Chandrakant Lahariya takes on one of the under-discussed health challenges of our time: the culture of unnecessary medicines, supplements, tests and procedures. Packed with patient stories, myth-busting insights, checklists, nutrition guidance, kitchen wisdom and practical tools, this book empowers you to start a fulfilling journey to reduce your pills, reverse diseases and take charge of your metabolic health with confidence.



THE LIFT-OFF NATION
Rajan Anandan & Saurabh Srivastava
Juggernaut
Pp 384, ₹1,099

Once upon a time, India opened for 25% of global GDP. Two start-up veterans, Saurabh Srivastava, co-founder of NASCOM, TIE and IAN, and Rajan Anandan, former head of Google, Microsoft and Dell in India and now a managing director at Peak XV Partners, argue that it can do so again by harnessing India's start-ups. With case studies and data points, they give compelling reasons why the time for India's startup ecosystem is now.



WHY THE WORLD NEEDS ANGRY WOMEN
Nilanjana Bhownick
Aleph Book Company
Pp 176, ₹699

Women are angrier than men. This is a statistical finding in as well as elsewhere in the world. Yet, in a system rigged against them, women have historically not been allowed to claim their anger openly. *Why the World Needs Angry Women* is a searing, blistering manifesto in favour of the modern woman's right to anger. Blending biting humour and philosophical depth, Bhownick shows how women's anger is different from male anger.



WANDERED THE TRAVELLER
Translated by Daisy Rockwell
HarperCollins
Pp 384, ₹699

First published in 1955, *Wandered the Traveller* is a lost classic of south Asian literature — now available in English for the first time in Daisy Rockwell's revelatory translation. Nisar Aziz Butt's semi-autobiographical novel follows Afzar, a brilliant young Pashtun woman, from a turbulent orphaned childhood, through the cloistered world of a mountain sanatorium, to the brink of departure in pursuit of a doctorate at Cambridge.

Opinion

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2026

MEASUREMENT OF GDP, ESPECIALLY THE RATE OF GROWTH OF GDP, IS CRUCIAL TO GAUGE THE HEALTH OF THE ECONOMY

Holding a mirror to GDP numbers

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



AS SOMEONE SAID, tongue in cheek, people don't eat GDP numbers. People eat food, wear clothes and footwear, send their children to school, buy medicines, use mobile phones, watch television, scroll social media, and want to be safe and happy — measured as Consumption. The aggregate of Consumption (C), Investment (I), Government spending (G) and net Exports (X - M) — after factoring for taxes and subsidies — is Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Measurement of GDP, especially the rate of growth of GDP, is crucial to gauge the health of the economy.

Healthier debate

The MoSPI has released the GDP numbers for Q1 of 2026-27: the rate of growth is 10.3% in nominal (current) prices and 7.8% in constant prices compared to Q1 2025-26. The government and the *sarkari* economists are pleased. The sceptics have raised questions. There is a raging debate on the credibility of the GDP numbers. Rather

	OLD BASE YEAR (2011-12)		New base year (2022-23)	
	Nominal Real	Constant prices	Nominal Real	Constant prices
2022-23	268.90	161.65	261.77	261.77
2023-24	301.23	176.51	290.73	280.94
2024-25	330.68	187.97	317.99	301.15
2025-26	357.14	201.90	345.37	324.70
CAGR	9.92%	7.69%	9.68%	7.45%
GDP in Q1 of 2026-27			88.26	81.36
Growth over Q1 of 2025-26			10.33%	7.82%

than debating the desirability of 'one nation, one election' (which will undermine federal parliamentary democracy), it is better to debate the GDP numbers and whether the benefits of growth are percolating to the people. I do not wish to add to the noise. Let's assume that MoSPI's numbers are correct. My calculations of the compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of nominal and real GDP on two different base years are (see Table): Notably, on the old base year and the new base year, the CAGR beginning 2022-23 is *more or less the same*. The growth rate in Q1 of 2026-27 is only margin-



ally higher. Conclusion: the economy has *not* shifted gears in 2026-27; nor is it in overdrive. Therefore, no boast is warranted.

Pertinent questions

Let's hold a mirror to the latest GDP numbers. The nagging question is, under the old base year, the GDP in constant prices is very depressed compared to the GDP in current prices but it is not so under the new base year. Why? Be that as it may, the growth rate ought to

be reflected in the measurable parameters of the economy such as jobs, wages, consumption, trade, investment, etc. Here are some pertinent questions:

■ Why is the unemployment rate among youth of 15-29 years at a high of 16.2%? CMIE has reported that the unemployment rate for graduates aged 29-34 years often touches 40-45%; why? According to NTI Aayog, 8.7 crore youth aged 15-29 are 'Not in Employment, Education or Training' (NEET); why?

■ Why are *real* wages growing at dismal rates of (-) 5.5, 1.7 and 3.3%, respectively, among casual, salaried and self-employed workers? (Source: PLFS). Twenty per cent of the workforce is casual labour and will they not be further impoverished by the negative wage growth?

■ Why is *net* FDI so low? FCNR (B) mobilisation which carried interest rates of 6-7% came in truckloads, but why is foreign capital not coming as direct investment?

■ When foreign reserves have touched an all-time high of \$740 billion, why has the rupee not appreciated? Since January 2026, the rupee has depreciated nearly 5% against the US dollar and is reportedly the worst performing Asian currency; why?

■ Exports are rising, but imports are rising too. At current prices, imports are rising faster. Merchandise trade deficit touched \$150 billion in April-August 2026. The trade deficit with China alone in April-July was \$44 billion. Is the trade deficit not a drag on the economy? Why are Make-in-India, PLI, ASPIRE, NMCP and other schemes not resulting in manufacture of the goods that India imports from China?

■ In the sectoral composition of nominal GVA, why is 'manufacturing' stagnant at 13%? In fact, the share of the secondary sector in nominal GVA, over many quarters, has been bound

between 24 and 26%. Why have the schemes not pushed up the needle?

■ Why is capital investment, as measured by Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF), stuck at roughly 33.5% of GDP? Of this, *private* corporate capital expenditure has remained unchanged at about 12%. Despite cajolery, admonishments and threats, why are corporate investors not willing to make capital investment?

■ Why has the growth number not resulted in more public goods such as better schools, better hospitals, better roads, better water supply, better policing, etc.? If one takes a straw poll, the overwhelming proportion of citizens will give a thumbs down on each of these areas.

Unifying mirror image

There is no surprise that Gen Z is protesting against the marked deterioration all around them. We may be growing at 7.8% *statistically*, but most citizens do not *feel or believe* so. Because they know that their lives are not better or easier.

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Putting India on the golf tourism map

FAIRWAY FILES

Rahil Gangjee



THERE IS SOMETHING wonderfully strange about golfers. We will happily travel 3,000 kilometres to play a course we have never seen, spend a small fortune on a hotel, eat whatever is put in front of us, wake up at an ungodly hour and then spend four hours walking around looking for a little white ball that we ourselves hit into trouble. And at the end of it all, we will say, "What a fantastic holiday!"

That, in a nutshell, is golf tourism. For a golfer, a holiday is rarely just a holiday. Give us a decent golf course, good weather, a comfortable bed and something interesting to eat afterwards and we are sold. Add a beautiful landscape and a little history and culture, and you might have to physically drag us home. India has all of these things. What it hasn't always had is the confidence to sell itself as a golfing destination. That could be changing.

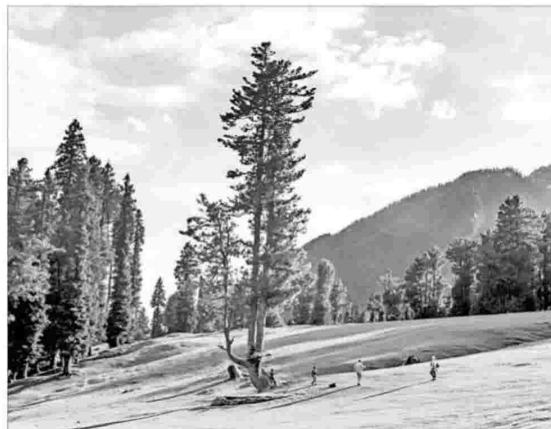
The Ministry of Tourism has once again identified golf tourism as an important niche segment, while the Indian Golf Premier League has announced an ambitious plan to mobilise \$2 billion towards golf-tourism infrastructure. The idea is to combine golf with hospitality, travel, MICE and destination development and, importantly, take the game beyond the traditional big-city markets. And honestly, it makes sense. India is almost tailor made for golf tourism. We have mountains, beaches, deserts, forests, heritage cities and enough different cuisines to keep a golfer happy for several lifetimes. More importantly, we have golf courses in some extraordinary locations.

Take Kashmir. I have always felt that if you could combine golf and scenery, somebody ought to tell the rest of the world about Srinagar. Royal Springs, with the mountains as a backdrop, is the sort of place where you can spend more time looking around than looking at your scorecard. Gulmarg and Pahalgam offer an entirely different experience. You could quite easily build a golf holiday around the Valley and have a story to tell when you return home.

Then there is Bengaluru. The city has quietly become an important golf destination, with courses such as the Karnataka Golf Association and the newer resort-style facilities around the city. And the great thing about Bengaluru is that you can play golf in the morning, have lunch, attend a meeting, complain about the traffic and still somehow convince yourself you had a relaxing day.

That is a skill only Bengaluru can teach you. Goa is another obvious opportunity. Most people think beaches, nightlife and seafood when they hear Goa. Golfers think, "Where is the nearest tee?" Imagine packing golf with a few days by the beach, some good food and a little sightseeing. The non-golfer in the family gets a holiday and the golfer gets his rounds. Every-one wins.

That last part is important because golf tourism is not just about golfers. The golfer may travel for the course, but the family travels for everything else. That means hotels, restaurants, transport, sightseeing, shopping, wellness and entertainment all become part of the package. A golf holiday can therefore generate much more economic activity than simply collecting a green fee. And golfers are particularly attractive tourists because we tend to stay longer. We don't fly across the world to play nine holes and catch the next flight home.



Gulmarg and Pahalgam offer an entirely different experience. You could easily build a golf holiday around the valley and have a story to tell when you return home

If we are travelling with three or four clubs and a pair of shoes that cost more than our first car, we are going to make the trip worthwhile.

There is another big opportunity here: tournaments. I have played enough professional golf to know that a tournament can change the personality of a place. During an event, hotels fill up, restaurants get busy, taxis have more passengers and suddenly people who normally wouldn't know a three-wood from a rail-

way sleeper are discussing golf. India already has professional tournaments that can become tourism products in their own right. Why should a golf tournament only be marketed to golf fans? Package it with local experiences and suddenly you have a destination event.

The same thinking can work with amateur events, corporate golf and international golf groups. Bring 50 or 100 golfers into a city, give them three or four courses to play, throw in some sightseeing and food, and you have created a small travelling economy.

The biggest challenge, of course, is infrastructure and consistency. Golfers are a demanding lot. We will forgive a bad lie. We will forgive a bad score. But we will not forgive a golf course that promises one thing and delivers another. Course maintenance, caddies, transport, booking systems, accommodation and accessibility all matter. International golfers need to know what they are getting before they board a flight. A beautiful photograph on Instagram is not enough when you are standing on the first tee with a trolley, 18 holes ahead of you and a handicap to protect.

India also needs better golf-tourism circuits. Instead of selling one golf course, sell an experience. Delhi-Jaipur, Bengaluru-Mysuru, Goa, Kashmir, Pune and the western Maharashtra circuit. Rajasthan. Even newer destinations can be built around golf if the infra-

structure is planned properly. And this is where I think the next few years could get really interesting.

India doesn't have to copy Scotland, Spain or Thailand. We don't need to become somebody else's golf destination. We can create our own version. Imagine a week where you play three or four very different courses, eat incredible food, see a bit of India, stay in good hotels and finish the trip with a tournament or a friendly game. And if your score is terrible, nobody needs to know. You can always blame the jet lag.

The numbers suggest there is a genuine opportunity. One recent market estimate puts India's golf-tourism market at around \$459 million in 2026 and projects it to more than double by 2033. But numbers are only part of the story. Golf tourism is really about selling an experience.

The game takes you places. Sometimes literally. I've played golf in enough parts of the world to know that some of my best memories have had very little to do with my score. They have been about the people, the food, the scenery, the ridiculous bets, the stories afterwards and occasionally the miracle of making a birdie when you had absolutely no business doing so.

India has millions of stories waiting to be attached to golf. We just need to start telling them.

And perhaps, for once, we should stop worrying about whether India can become a golf-tourism destination and start asking a more interesting question: Why shouldn't it?

After all, we already have the courses, the culture, the food, the scenery and, most importantly, enough golfers who are willing to travel anywhere in the world just to lose a few balls in a different postcode.

Rahil Gangjee is a professional golfer, sharing through this column what life on a golf course is like

Who are the real patriots?

FIFTH COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH



THERE APPEARS TO be a fifth columnist in the Prime Minister's inner circle. This thought came to me when I saw him jubilantly striding across the college stage in Vadodra last week. The event seemed part of his Gen-Z seduction crusade, and what he strode, smiled and waved to was the tune of *We Will Rock You*. Luckily, it was only the tune that played. Had he been aware of the words, Modi may have fainted. Here is a line: 'You got mud on your face, big disgrace. Somebody better put you back into your place.'

See what I mean about a fifth columnist working in the innards of the PMO? Also, the song is from 1977 when people of my generation were young and rebellious, and the cockroaches who have now got so badly under Modi's skin were not even specks on the horizon. More seriously — who was the idiot who advised the Prime Minister to attend this joyous event at a time when a PG (paying guest) hostel had just crumbled in Delhi University's south campus, killing young students and their dreams? Among the dead was eighteen-year-old Arpit Jai, whose taxi driver father worked overtime to send his son to college and struggled to pay the exorbitant rent for his PG hostel. I heard Arpit's story in Barkha Dut's *Moj Story*. It brought tears to my eyes.

We in the mainstream media have mostly ignored the stories of the seven dead students. Perhaps because they would all be as heart-breaking. Instead, almost every news channel reported every moment of the Prime Minister's trip to Gujarat as if it was the most important news of the day. If they had stayed with the building collapse in Satya Niketan, there may have been some hope of coercing the 'triple-engine' government in Delhi to stem the corruption that led to the horror of students being killed for just trying to get a college degree.

While the Chief Minister's cohort surveyed the debris of the illegally built PG (paying guest) hostel from high above, a handful of real journalists dug deeper into the crashed building and showed pictures of the horrendous conditions in which students live. The Cockroach Janta Party leader who said that students are being forced to live like cockroaches is correct. The building that crumbled in among others in which students live in cells built one upon the other, and that can only be reached through dangerously narrow alleys, darkened by dumps of hanging wires. I must here add that the best reporting I saw came from a digital

platform called PEEKTV.

When I saw their pictures of those dismal alleyways and dreary rooms, I found myself hoping that the Prime Minister was also watching so he could understand why he needs to forget about our 'demographic dividend'. Young students who are forced to live and study in such horrible conditions will never learn to think, dream or learn. How will they be able to compete with students who, in other colleges in other countries, have already learned how to deal with the technological revolution that AI brings?

This one building collapse has brought to the surface many other things, like the abysmal state of governance in Delhi. It has revealed corruption so evil that it boggles the mind. Everyone is involved in creating the smokescreen that allows builders to disobey the rules of safe planning. The PG mafia that extorts inexplicably high rents from desperate students is controlled by politicians and high officials who always seem to get away with their evil deeds.

The only thing that happens after every disaster of the kind we saw in Satya Niketan is that some lowly officials get publicly yelled at by higher officials like the Chief Minister and then some committee is appointed to (supposedly) go into causes and solutions. These committees never amount to much, as we can see from the one appointed after the building collapse in Delhi's Malviya Nagar some months ago. Corrupt officials and politicians collude to make Delhi non-functional except when there is a big conference of the BRICS kind. And then things only appear to work because visiting dignitaries are only allowed to see restricted sections of India's capital city.

This is the way things are. It is the way things have always been. But the cockroaches and their young cheerleaders are ensuring this is not how they will always be in the future. It is the one thing that gives me some hope that a day will come when officials and politicians who have created the mess that we see today pay for their crimes. One idea from me is that the officials who allowed that PG hostel to be built should be charged with manslaughter, and that this be done every time a building collapses and kills people. No more committees. No more inquiry commissions. When people die because of the criminal negligence of officials, those officials should be charged with manslaughter, not murder. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister needs to find out who the fifth columnist is in his inner circle and punish him for sending him off to college events where he blames what is wrong with India on 'dimagi naxals'. He seems quite proud of this new label, without noting that the people he is charging with sedition could be the very patriots that we need today.

Meet the bots steering the spotlight!

Designed for factory floors and classrooms, humanoids are the new celebs moonlighting as chief guests, wedding dancers, and emcees

Mohua.Das@timesofindia.com

On an otherwise ordinary day in Ujjain, a new sandwich shop was preparing to open when its chief guest, Jeevan, made his grand entry, flanked by two men with the unmistakable air of bouncers escorting someone important. Phones jostled in the air as Jeevan, welcomed with an orange silk stole and tika, waved at guests and danced with the owners. The crowd pressed closer for selfies as his escorts tried to hold them back.

They weren't bouncers, strictly speaking, but operators from Indore-based Bidyut Innovation, which owns Jeevan, a humanoid. Down in Kochi, another humanoid had landed a more exalted role as King Maveli. For Onam at a mall, Robo Maveli's metallic limbs disappeared beneath a saffron mundu and gold ornaments as it freestyled to Chenda Melam beats. And then there is Maya, the latest contestant on reality show India's Got Talent, where she tottered onto the stage, flat flat and got back up before launching into a rap battle, trading some Hindi slang, dancing bhangra with the judges and scoring better than her human counterparts. The judges saw plenty of potential in Maya, whose day job is as an education humanoid at a tech and business school in Gurugram.

A small rental market has sprung up around agile humanoids imported from China but programmed and trained here to make special appearances at weddings, festivals, store inaugurations and product launches as a new class of celebrity guest. A star attraction, after all, is required to draw a crowd, pose for selfies and give everyone something to talk. The humanoid can manage most of that.

SPECIAL APPEARANCE

Since videos of the inauguration were viral in Aug, Bidyut Innovations founder Rahul Shah says his phone has been ringing off the hook with queries for wedding shoots, birthday celebrations and even Ganesh Chaturthi yatra. Some asked if the robot can serve beer. "This is India," says Shah, as if to explain the robot's unexpected turn in the humanoid robot's career. The world over, humanoids have been recognised as workers of the future, destined for factory floors and dangerous or repetitive jobs. But even as that future remains hazy, the machines with more sober job descriptions have acquired a second career in showbiz.

ROBO RUN?

TianGong Ultra ran an 8.64-second 100m sprint in Beijing, nearly a second faster than Usain Bolt's record.

Humanoid robots walked the ramp this June at the Seoul Fashion Week.

Kime is a humanoid food and beverage serving robot at a New York restaurant



Abhinava Palanivel, based in Coimbatore, discovered this at his wedding two years ago when the Robo Miracle founder brought along Nila, a wheeled semi-humanoid that clicked photographs and handed guests instant prints. Videos of the event clocked close to two crore views, as did requests for a robot at other celebrations. "Those robots are intended for R&D, but in India, they have been repurposed," says Palanivel. "The entertainment or the event industry needed something very new." Now Kevin, Robo Miracle's nearly five-foot, 40-kg humanoid —trained to move objects on factory floors or inspect products for defects — has a side hustle attending children's birthdays dressed as Spider-Man. Families can have him greet the birthday child by name before joining the children for a dance. At weddings, Kevin has carried rings and narrated the couple's love story before dancing with the crowd. The dancing can get quite wild. At UP Bombay's Techfest, Kevin took on the viral 'Dhurandhar' song, swinging its arms, dipping at the knees with the familiar swag. Audiences like to test their talent too. Some have tried boxing with Kevin while students have raced him, though at his speed of 15 kmph, Palanivel says, humans haven't quite lost that contest yet.

Some influencer humanoids have appeared at cricket matches to announce players and toss the coin. Politics, inevitably, has found a use too. During a TV campaign in Coimbatore, Kevin turned up at Race Course in a party shawl, canvassing.

SHAKING A LEG: Alex Wonder, an influencer robot, learns the hook step to a Bollywood song



ing morning walkers in Tamil for Vijay switching life-size 3D holograms of the actor-politician in places he could not visit himself. The videos drew over one crore views, though Palanivel stops short of giving Kevin the entire credit for Vijay's win.

The sudden abundance has something to do with timing. Backed by govt investment, Chinese manufacturers are scaling up just as prices are falling. China shipped more than 40,000 humanoids in the first half of 2026, accounting for 97% of global shipments, according to an industry report released at the World Robot Conference in Beijing last month. Unifire, one of China's largest makers, says its average humanoid price fell 72% between 2023 and 2025, putting robots once largely confined to research labs within reach of more Indian buyers.

ALMOST HUMAN

Giving a humanoid a personality involves fairly human details. Maya has shopped for cargo pants and tank tops in Sarojini Nagar and H&M. "Most humanoids are male, so we 3D-printed a waist and chest to create a female humanoid," says her creator Sohan Rai who with his team, gave her a fringed wig and a Delhi voice, peppered with "you gotta" and "crazy". She can cross Delhi roads too. At a party, she did what Rai calls "a drunk dance" for Chaz Bazarai before switching genres rather dramatically to Bhabhatkanyam, trained by an actual dancer. "Next, we want to see whether Maya can crack an egg or run a pani puri stall for a day." Domestic work, however, went less smoothly. Raj took Maya home to train her to wash utensils. "Our maid came home, saw her and left instantly," he says. Taxi drivers have retreat-



ed too. Rai says many people recognise Maya through the only humanoid reference they have. "Chitti from Rajinikanth's Enthiran". They think it's gonna hit or kill them."

The actual robots of 2026, though, still depend heavily on their programmers. Using the same principle that works for an industrial task, Kevin can be taught to salute or swing. Shah has been pitching wedding planners a gag where the robot beats the groom at garlanding the bride. Everybody will laugh, and then the groom will say, "Oh no, no, she's mine."

At corporate events, audiences enjoy asking Kevin whether he will take their jobs. "I don't replace. If you don't learn AI, AI will definitely replace you," he has been programmed to reply.

Tej Maurya from Ahmedabad has turned down requests to rent Alex Wonder for inaugurations and events. "Alex is an influencer, like any other influencer," he insists. His "robo with fomo" has a personality programmed for romance, with a talent for Urdu poetry.

Like most social-media creatures doing things for likes, Alex is also learning hook steps. "We manually have to move every single arm, joint, wrist, and elbow," says Maurya. AI records and repeats them while the team feeds him human dance videos.

PEOPLE MAGNET

Popularity brings its own problems. Shah recalls a crowd around Kevin becoming so dense that his team had to call security. "If Mr Bachchan is on the road, imagine if bouncers are not there, what would happen to Mr Bachchan?" Kevin's admin occasionally tries to pick him up. "The person will get hurt first, not the robot, because the robot starts kicking if it goes in the air," says Palanivel. Also, like their human counterparts, they can keep going for two to four hours while it is time for a chair and battery change.

"People are bored now with all the celebrities, influencers, DJs," says Shah. A robot cutting the ribbon restores a little of the "spark". For now, novelty pays. Hiring a robot VIP costs anywhere from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 3 lakh for a few hours to half a day.

The long-term bet may still be the factory floor. Meanwhile, these walking, talking, almost-human robots have their metal hands full. "Jeevan isn't a pure dancer. He's busier than you and me," says Shah.

Finding our way home may be the final frontier

Sometime in the late 1980s, thanks to a videocassette owned by a US-returned astronaut, I discovered — for the first time — the colours of the shirts worn by Captain Kirk, Mr Spock, Dr McCoy and their colleagues.

Here was the Starship Enterprise's crew, clad in vivid yellows, blues and reds, striding purposefully around the giant ship's corridors (even when there wasn't any particular reason to stride). The episode on the cassette — "The City on the Edge of Forever", scripted by the great Harlan Ellison — also had the amusing sight of Kirk and Spock in Depression-era clothes after they land in 1930s New York.

This was how I learnt that Star Trek had been a brightly coloured show, not the monochrome I remembered from the Doordarshan telecast years earlier — having then watched it on a black-and-white TV.

Even when experienced in dull shades of grey, though, there was nothing dull about the series itself. It was a weekly highlight for us pop-culture-deprived wails, making our Sunday mornings very special. Like countless other Indian kids of the mid-1980s, I waited breathlessly for the black background — showing the vastness of outer space — to appear on my TV screen. The familiar theme music played. Tiny white dots appeared, representing celestial bodies — but one of these dots would soon resolve itself into the iconic shape of the Enterprise as it hurtled towards us. "Space: the final frontier..." began Captain Kirk's voiceover.

For a child watching Star Trek — even if we knew nothing of its background or antecedents, or about the international cult followings and Trekkie conventions — the thrills were immediate and visceral. There were those hyper-dramatic scenes where some external power acted on the Enterprise and the crew swayed about, holding on to walls to gain stability as generic alarms went off. There were the many weirdo planets, topographies and alien creatures (this being long before most of us had encountered serious sci-fi literature, or knew that some hefty names — Ellison, Richard Matheson, Robert Bloch — had contributed to the Star Trek screenplays). Or the fight scenes, which can seem laughably quaint or tacky now, but on which so much seemed to hinge at the time — not least when circumstances forced the central characters into a physical confrontation with each other.

And most of all, the bearing — and the hint of an unsentimental, inexpressive but deep "yaarana" — between the two leads, Captain Kirk (the conventional hero) and the emotionless Mr Spock, whose very oddness made him the more compelling character for some viewers, like yours truly. Those of us who idolised Spock for his stoicism, the Vulcan nerve pinch, and for being above such base things as romance, felt a little betrayed by the "Pon Farr" episode, where he needs to go home for a mating ritual: a "cool" character was suddenly on heat; it was as if, judged in the Archie comics had begun chasing girls.

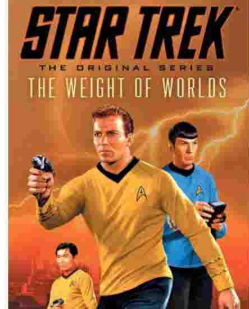
Other iterations of Star Trek would come later: the feature films of the 1970s and 80s (which I had mixed feelings about because the characters looked older and pudgier, and wore different uniforms), or the more technically sophisticated series Star Trek: The Next Generation, which substituted the line "where no man has gone before" with the politically correct (and banal) "where no one has gone before". But the original show remained incomparable for those of us who grew up with it.

Around the same time as the Star Trek telecast on DD, we also got an English-dubbed version of the cheesy Japanese series G Gundam. These twin experiences made for my first encounters with visual fantasy, and it's amusing

now to think of the cultural gap between the two shows. One was an American series about a distant future where mankind is exploring new relationships (with the Starship Enterprise being a melting pot of earth cultures, from Lt Uhura, the black female communications officer, to Sulu the Asian); the other was made in Japan that had suffered an American-dropped nuclear bomb and was using cautionary motifs about atomic radiation in its pop culture. And here were both shows being telecast in the soft-socialist India of the early 1980s, influencing scores of children.

Some of these young fans would later go on to careers as astronauts or scientists, playing a big part in space exploration and furthering the breadth of our knowledge; the aerospace engineers Swati Mohan and Sirisha Bandila, among others, have spoken about how Star Trek fuelled their interest in outer space. And yet, perhaps the final, lingering word should belong to the man who played the Enterprise's best-known captain. Five years ago, after he visited space for the first time (in real life) at age 90, William Shatner went movingly about his epiphany that Earth, a fragile planet, "is, and will remain, precious God's gift."

Pratik Garg Gupta



For a child watching Star Trek, even if we knew nothing of its background or antecedents, or cult followings and Trekkie conventions, the thrills were immediate and visceral

our only home. And that we have been ravaging it, relentlessly making it uninhabitable."

For decades, Star Trek acolytes like we would be thrilled by Shatner's authoritative voice speaking of exploring strange new worlds, seeking new civilisations, boldly going where no man had gone before — and of course, we will continue to love the sense of adventure conveyed by that voiceover, and to delight in the many good things about the series, including the hope for inclusivity it instilled. But now, it's also possible to see the wisdom of the old captain's words that we need to spend as much time looking inwards as outwards, that preserving our pale blue dot — and our own future on it — may be the boldest thing we can do.

The writer is the author of "The World of Hrishikesh Mukherjee"

"The World of Hrishikesh Mukherjee"

POUR BY PINCODE

GOA

Ukdo as lager: Heritage red parboiled rice, generally considered low-yield and long a part of the local diet

MAHARASHTRA

Ambemohar as craft beer: Fragrant short-grain rice known for its distinctive mango-blossom aroma

Indrayani as lager: Aromatic, sticky rice, similar to the short-grain variety used in Japanese brewing

TAMIL NADU

Seeraga samba as craft beer: Tiny, aromatic grain named for its resemblance to cumini seeds and prized for biryani

MANIPUR

Chak hao as craft beer: Aromatic black rice, deep purple when cooked and traditionally served on special occasions

NORTH INDIA

Basmati as vodka: Celebrated for its fragrance on the plate, but distilled clean and neutral for spirits

KARNATAKA

Local paddy as whisky: Malted to draw out alcohol, spicy and mildly floral notes rather than them disappearing into the spirit

UTTARAKHAND

Kumaon rice as gin: Distilled neutral so the botanicals, rather than the grain, take the flavour lead

At rice! An old drinking grain finds new spirit

From heirloom-rice beer and malted-paddy whisky to Basmati vodka, Indian distillers are tapping local varieties for new flavours, regional character and a clean, neutral base

Sneha.Bhura@timesofindia.com

Rice has been trying to get us drunk since the beginning of civilisation. Sometimes with help from a god, sometimes by accident, and once, by deliberate spitting. A Santhal creation myth says their first man and woman, Pilchu Hanam and Pilchu Butli, were taught by their god to brew rice beer called Handia. They drank a lot of it, lost their inhibitions and became the ancestors of the Santhal people. In Dimas lore from northeastern India, a field worker packed rice in banana leaves, hung it from a tree, and returned to find it dripping with an elixir that became Judima. In ancient Japan, temple maidens made a form of sake by chewing rice and spitting it into clay pots where saliva enzymes turned starch into sugar.

Rice, in other words, has a long drinking history. Now, a new generation of Indian alcohol makers is giving the grain another round. From mass-produced polished rice to native heirloom varieties, distillers are drawing on rice across the spectrum, depending on their scale, style and flavour ambitions. These rice-based spirits don't have a subtler, light-bodied lift and a distinct creamy mouthfeel. In clear spirits such as vodka and gin, rice provides a smooth, crisp base without the harsh medicinal bite. So, while a Bengali brewpub might serve Basmati Blonds on tap, elsewhere, dark rum is being distilled with a heritage Goan parboiled rice.

When Diageo launched Epitome Re-



serve in 2021 as a 100% rice whisky, the rice was never malted. Last month, an independent distiller in Mysuru used 100% malted paddy from a guarded local variety to produce a new "rice malt" whisky. "A single malt must be made from 100% malted barley. Legally, what we make is a single grain whisky. I like to call it rice malt," says Aruna Urs, co-founder and master distiller of Hull. Urs has his moment of reckoning watching Kodava communities make Batto Sarai, a distilled rice arrack offered to the gods at their harvest festival. "We saw their methods, we drank, collected samples, then we thought, hey, this is actually a whisky. Why don't we do it properly?" Doing it "properly" took four years of trial and error.

Barley makes whisky-making easier because it comes with enzymes that help convert starch into fermentable sugars. Rice is harder to work with at scale. So Hull spent four years developing its own process and now produces about 70,000 bottles a year, which Urs points out is a

large distillery's single-day output. The payoff, he says, is in the glass: spicy, earthy notes, a mild floral character and a lingering "salty-sweet biscuit" on the palate. "This is the start of a rice whisky revolution, a revolution in 'malternatives'," says Urs. "Rice is the dominant crop in Asia. Why import barley when equally good distillate can be made with rice?"

PADDY TO PALATE

The more interesting argument may not be substitution at all, but identity. Rice is already native to Indian food and fermentation cultures. The opportunity lies in how deliberately producers use it. Vikram Achanta, founder and CEO of alcohol training company Tulleeh, points out that brewers already working with regional and heirloom varieties such as ukdo, chak hao and ambemohar. "Industrial distillation tends to prioritise starch yield and consistency, but craft distillers have a chance to treat rice much like winemakers treat grape varieties," he says.

For an Indian rice spirit to travel like sake or soju, Achanta believes producers need to name indigenous varieties rather than hide behind generic "rice" labels. "If a variety like Ambemohar brings a



floral, mango-blossom aroma, that is a more interesting proposition than simply saying a spirit is made from Indian rice," he says.

That regional specificity is already playing out at Goa Brewing Company, where 95% of its beer is built on rice. Founder Suraj Shenai turned to rice for a cleaner, lighter beer suited to Goa's heat. The brewery's first beer, People's Lager, used Goa's indigenous ukdo rice. It ended up becoming one of the top-selling brands in the state. From there, he built a local playbook. From People's Bangalore and People's Pondicherry which uses seeraga samba rice from Tamil Nadu to People's Bombay which is brewed with ambemohar, short-grain rice traditionally used to make the dough for Ganapati modaks, a Manipuri release uses Manjuri black rice.

The company sources directly from about 180 farming families in Goa, paying 25% above the govt MSP, says Shenai, because these native varieties are low-yield and vulnerable to wind and heavy rain, making them increasingly difficult

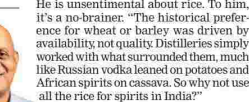
for farmers to persist with. Last year, unseasonal rain wiped out nearly 90% of the crop in some Goa talukas, and Shenai estimates that a large number of farmers in the worst-hit belt haven't replanted this season. "This is the last generation of rice farmers in Goa," he says.

Even rice lagers are now on tap in nearly every craft brewery. Pune-based Great State Aleworks makes Poo Brew, a rice lager using Maharashtra's Indrayani rice. "It's a naturally sticky, similar to the short-grain rice used in Japanese brewing, which fits the Japanese-inspired beer we wanted," says founder Nakul Bhonsle. His brewery has also collaborated with Vietnam's popular craft brewery Heart of Darkness on a rice lager using local Vietnamese rice, set to launch in Oct.

RICE IN DISGUISE

But what if a distiller wants to use rice as a blank canvas rather than a statement on terroir? Ansh Khanna, co-founder of Peak Spirits, makes Jin Ji gin from rice grown in Kumaon. "We don't do varietal-wise here because the idea is to make a neutral spirit," he says. The rice provides the base; the botanicals do the flavour work. Jin Ji was sold overseas before launching in India and is now poured at bars and restaurants across the US, says Khanna. "If you just go and order a gin and tonic in many of the top restaurants and bars in the US, it might just be a Jin Ji," he says.

Rice produces a clean, extra-neutral alcohol (ENA), making it a useful base for high-end spirits. Delhi-based Smoke Lab, with its main distillation in Rajpur in Punjab, uses 100% Basmati rice and Himalayan spring water distillate for its entire line of vodka, from classic to aniseed, saffron, green chili mango and liquid gold, this is infused with shimmering flakes of edible 24-karat gold. "We have sold over 150,000 cases of our vodka in the US alone, even as the brand expands into markets in the UK, the parent Estate, Thailand and Singapore." In the UK, founder of Smoke Lab's middle company NV Group. He is unsentimental about rice. To him, it's a no-brainer. "The historical preference for wheat or barley was driven by availability, not quality. Distillers simply worked with what surrounded them, much like Russian vodka leaned on potatoes and African spirits on cassava. So why not use all the rice for spirits in India?"



Death Beyond Music

The killing of Manipuri guitarist Chongtham Vikram Singh in Delhi should not be allowed to become another crime story that briefly captures public attention before disappearing into the news cycle. It raises a more uncomfortable question: who is entitled to feel completely at home in India's capital?

Singh was 54, a musician and teacher who had spent decades building a life through music. His journey from Manipur's emerging rock culture to Kolkata and eventually Delhi was, in its own quiet way, a story of India becoming more connected. His death exposes how fragile those connections can remain.

According to police and his family, Singh objected to men allegedly making noise and drinking outside his apartment. What followed was an assault that ended with his death in hospital. Seven men and a juvenile have been arrested. The investigation will have to establish exactly what happened and why. That last question matters enormously.

There is, so far, no evidence cited by police establishing a racial motive. That must be respected. It would be irresponsible to convert suspicion into fact. Yet it would be equally irresponsible to ignore why Singh's killing has resonated so strongly across the North-east. For years, people from the region living in Indian metropolitan cities, especially Delhi, have complained of racial slurs, stereotyping, harassment and violence.

The significance of this case therefore lies partly in the gap between the immediate criminal facts and the social environment in which such incidents occur. Delhi is populated by people from every part of India. But geographical integration has not always produced social integration. Someone from Manipur can live in Delhi for decades, work, raise a family and contribute to its cultural life yet still be made to feel foreign because of appearance, accent or ethnicity.

The answer cannot be to presume that every crime involving a Northeastern Indian is racially motivated. Nor can it be to dismiss concerns about racial discrimination whenever motive is difficult to prove. Police investigations must establish facts, while governments and institutions must address the broader pattern independently of individual criminal cases. This means better recording and investigation of suspected racial abuse, greater sensitivity within policing, and sustained efforts to confront the stereotypes that make Indians from the North-east targets of casual discrimination. Educational institutions, workplaces, landlords and political leaders also have a role.

Singh's widow has made the most important distinction: the family wants justice, not revenge. Justice requires the attacker to be held accountable if the evidence establishes their guilt. But justice for Singh should also mean refusing to treat the anxieties exposed by his death as someone else's problem. A guitarist who spent his life getting different sounds to work together became, in death, a reminder of how divided Indian society can still be. The question Singh's killing leaves behind is therefore larger than who committed one brutal assault. It is whether India's promise of belonging extends equally to every Indian - especially when they look different from those around them.

Oily bargain

Venezuela's oil industry needs foreign capital, technology and competent management. Few would dispute that. After years of mismanagement, corruption, sanctions and economic collapse, restoring production could generate jobs, government revenue and the resources needed to rebuild a devastated country.

The difficulty is not the investment. It is the political bargain accompanying it. The United States has secured majority control of more than 65 billion barrels of Venezuela's proven reserves through an arrangement centred on North American Blue Energy Partners, which has received concessions covering 17 oilfields. The proposed investment could approach \$100 billion. Washington says the arrangement is part of a broader plan of stabilisation, reconstruction and eventual democratic transition.

On paper, this could be transformative. Venezuela currently produces only a fraction of the oil it once did. If American capital and expertise can restore output, the country could finally convert its extraordinary natural wealth into productive investment rather than political patronage.

But Venezuela's people did not elect the government negotiating this arrangement. Nicolás Maduro was removed by the United States in January. His former vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, now heads the interim government, but no date has been fixed for elections. Donald Trump has said Venezuela is not yet ready for them. Rodríguez has promised that elections will eventually occur, without specifying when. That creates a dangerous incentive.

The more valuable the new oil arrangement becomes, the greater Washington's interest in political stability around it. And the more revenue and power the interim authorities acquire from revived oil production, the less obvious their incentive to hurry towards an election that could remove them.

This does not mean Washington has deliberately abandoned Venezuelan democracy. Nor does it mean the oil deal cannot benefit ordinary Venezuelans. But foreign investment on this scale requires legal certainty, political legitimacy and public confidence. María Corina Machado has argued that only a democratic government can provide the stability required for sustained investment.

There is also an unresolved legal question. Critics say the agreement may conflict with Venezuela's constitutional and legal requirements, including questions over the absence of a public tender and the length of the proposed concessions. Rodríguez has disputed the White House's description of a 100-year concession, saying licences would be limited to 25 years. That matters because oil contracts can outlive governments. A concession lasting decades is not an ordinary commercial transaction. It can shape a country's economic and political choices for generations.

America therefore faces a test of its own making. If it genuinely wants Venezuela to become democratic, prosperous and sovereign, it should welcome scrutiny of the deal rather than fear it.

The ultimate legitimacy of the oil industry must come from Venezuelans themselves. Otherwise, Washington risks creating a paradox: using Venezuela's oil to rebuild the country while creating reasons to postpone giving Venezuelans control over their own political future. For a nation emerging from authoritarian rule, that would be an extraordinary way to begin its democratic transition.

An Indian writer

A centenary can easily become a sequence of ceremonial events in which a familiar name is repeatedly invoked while the books themselves remain unread. Raza deserves something better. He needs to be restored to the company of the major writers through whom twentieth-century India understood itself



human societies are usually more complicated than the political categories through which they are mobilised. When one identity begins to demand exclusive loyalty, older and more intricate forms of belonging can rapidly become fragile.

The beginning of the birth-centenary celebrations of Razi Masoom Raza lets us return to a writer whose literary stature has, paradoxically, been obscured by his enormous success outside literature. For the Indian public, Raza remains the man who wrote the memorable dialogues of R. R. Chopra's *Mahabharat*. Others remember his long and successful association with Hindi cinema. Both are important parts of his achievement.

But before everything else, Razi Masoom Raza was a major writer. *Aadha Gaon*, *Topi Shukla*, *Os Ki Boond* and *Katra Bi Arzoo* place him securely among the significant Indian novelists of the second half of the twentieth century. The centenary is therefore an opportunity not simply to commemorate a celebrated cultural personality but to read Raza seriously again. Among these works, *Aadha Gaon* alone would have been sufficient to establish his literary reputation. It belongs to that relatively small group of Indian novels in which a particular locality becomes a means of understanding an entire historical transformation. Premchand had accomplished something comparable through the villages and small towns of North India; Phanishwar Nath Renu would make the apartment peripheral world of North Bihar central to modern Hindi fiction. Raza's *Gangaputra*, rooted in the Ghazipur region of eastern Uttar Pradesh, similarly becomes much more than the setting of a story. Through it he examines community, caste, family, language, memory, nationalism and Partition.

To call *Aadha Gaon* simply a Partition novel is to diminish it. Partition provides the great historical rupture around which the novel moves, but Raza's deeper subject is the transformation of a social world. Gangauli is neither an idyllic advertisement for what is now conveniently called composite culture nor a society permanently divided into antagonistic religious communities. It contains caste, hierarchy, patriarchy, prejudice and conflict. Yet people also inhabit overlapping worlds of neighbourhood, kinship, locality, language and memory. They possess several identities simultaneously.

Raza's extraordinary achievement is to show how modern politics begins to reorganise these relationships. Large political arguments gradually enter the village. Gangauli produced elsewhere acquire local force. People who had known one another through a dense network of everyday relations encounter each other through the abstraction of communal identity. Partition in *Aadha Gaon* is therefore not merely the division of territory. It is also a transformation of consciousness.

That insight explains why the novel has lost none of its relevance. Raza understood something fundamental about identity politics:

unhygienic conditions can facilitate the spread of infectious diseases such as measles, tuberculosis, and scabies, as a medical officer at Banarban Sadar Hospital has also warned.

Some inmates are already suffering from skin diseases and other health problems. Moreover, the lack of personal space is reportedly contributing to tensions, with minor disagreements escalating into arguments, scuffles, and physical fights. Incidents of sexual abuse involving younger inmates have also been reported, including an alleged recent assault.

Worryingly, the overall prison population in the country has risen sharply in recent

years, partly because of delayed trials and increased arrests and short-term sentences during law enforcement drives.

Reportedly, the 75 prisons in the country are currently holding 98,233 inmates against a combined capacity of 45,186 - more than double the limit.

This raises questions about whether our justice system is relying too much on imprisonment without considering its wider consequences. The situation demands urgent attention from the government.

In the case of Bandarban jail, we urge the authorities to recognise that the facility has exceeded its functional limits and take steps for its expansion. The government should also urgently determine whether

some inmates, particularly those awaiting trial, can lawfully be transferred to less crowded facilities. At the same time, the authorities must immediately improve sanitation, ventilation, healthcare, and security.

The National Human Rights Commission should visit the jail and independently assess the conditions. Any allegation of sexual abuse in custody must also be properly investigated with victims protected and perpetrators held accountable. In the longer term, prison capacity must be planned according to actual and projected inmate numbers, while measures to reduce unnecessary pre-trial detention and delays in the justice system should be strengthened.

timely courts and clear guidance for companies dealing with sanctions, data rules and foreign compliance demands. Government departments must coordinate their advice so that exporters and smaller firms are not left to interpret complex regulations unaided.

Indian companies should also strengthen legal audit, supply chain, and anti-corruption and assess geopolitical risks before entering sensitive markets.

At the diplomatic level, New Delhi should work with other countries to promote transparent, reciprocal rules and resist the normalisation of extraterritorial penalties. Commercial engagement remains important, but it must be underpinned by institutional preparedness and a firm commitment to national interests.

Yours, etc., B A Neboba,
Erode, 9 September.

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Erode, 9 September.

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The Daily Star

Bandarban jail needs urgent expansion

It is quite concerning that the Bandarban District Jail is holding nearly five times the number of inmates it was designed for. The facility, established as a sub-jail in 1986 with a capacity of 114, now houses 557 inmates - 475 awaiting trial and 82 convicted prisoners. Such extreme overcrowding is placing enormous pressure on its infrastructure and basic services, while putting the health, safety, and dignity of inmates at serious risk.

According to the acting jail superintendent, a room designed for 25 people is currently being used by around 110. Limited bathing facilities, poor ventilation, and excessive heat are further worsening the situation. Understandably, overcrowding and

unhygienic conditions can facilitate the spread of infectious diseases such as measles, tuberculosis, and scabies, as a medical officer at Banarban Sadar Hospital has also warned.

Some inmates are already suffering from skin diseases and other health problems. Moreover, the lack of personal space is reportedly contributing to tensions, with minor disagreements escalating into arguments, scuffles, and physical fights. Incidents of sexual abuse involving younger inmates have also been reported, including an alleged recent assault.

Worryingly, the overall prison population in the country has risen sharply in recent

A Member Of The
ANN
ASIA NEWS NETWORK

Letters To The Editor

✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Checks needed

Sir, A propos "Unsafe Profits" (September 8), the collapse of a student hostel in Delhi exposes a wider failure of regulation. The immediate priority is to rescue those trapped and provide medical care, but accountability must not end there.

Buildings used for student accommodation should undergo compulsory structural audits, with certificates displayed publicly and renewed at fixed intervals.

Municipal bodies must maintain an online register of approved hostels, occupancy limits and inspection reports. Owners who design substandard or unsafe buildings should face swift penalties, while students need a simple helpline to report unsafe conditions without fear. Colleges, too, must verify the safety of accommodation recommended

to students. Commercial interests cannot be allowed to override basic building norms and human safety.

Yours, etc., A. Myilsami,
Coimbatore, 8 September.

Disappointed

Sir, I am deeply disappointed and concerned after reading the report published in today's *The Statesman* titled "Eiffel Tower reopens after protest over no-women edict". The report mentions that a Hindu religious delegation from my country raised objections to the presence of women at the Eiffel Tower. This is a clear insult to women in India. As a Hindu woman, I strongly protest against this.

Paris Mayor Emmanuel Grégoire has stated that an investigation into this matter

will be launched. I feel the head of the religious group should be advised to refrain from such conduct in the future, as the reputation of both India and Hinduism is at stake.

Yours, etc., Indrani Guha,
Kolkata, 9 September.

Transparency

Sir, With reference to "Legal Frontiers" (September 9), the editorial's discussion of China's expanding use of laws as an instrument of economic pressure deserves wider attention. Businesses operating across borders increasingly face legal ambiguity and uncertainty can discourage investment. India should respond neither with alarm nor complacency.

It needs a predictable legal framework,

"I HAVE NEVER ADVOCATED WAR EXCEPT
AS A MEANS OF PEACE"
— ULYSSES S. GRANT

Middle East war is bigger than 'Iran-vs-America'



BHOPIINDER SINGH

The most revealing developments in the Middle East are no longer occurring along the conventional Iran-United States (with Israel) axis. They are unfolding in Yemen, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the maritime choke-points interconnecting them. The recent Houthi takeover of a strategically located Yemeni island, their persistent attacks on shipping, and the reported drone attack on Saudi Arabia launched from southern Iraq point towards a conflict considerably more complex than the familiar narrative of "Iran-versus-America", with Israel in tow. Iran undoubtedly occupies a central position in the region's network of armed allies and partners. Houthis in Yemen and Iran-aligned militias in Iraq are not identical organisations, nor are they simply puppets controlled from Tehran. Each has its own domestic interests and political objectives. Yet they operate within an ideological and strategic ecosystem in which Iran's revolutionary worldview, Shia political mobilisation, and opposition to the American-backed regional order have created durable relationships.

The significance of the Houthi advance lies in its geography. Control around the Bab el-Mandeb (maritime gateway connecting the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden) gives the Houthis leverage over one of the world's critical commercial arteries. Their ability to threaten shipping is no longer merely an extension of Yemen's civil war. It provides an Iran-aligned movement with the capacity to impose costs on Western powers, Israel, and, crucially, Saudi Arabia without Iran itself having to fight every battle directly.

More revealing still is what has happened on Saudi Arabia's northern flank. Recent drone attacks against Saudi Arabia have reportedly been launched from Iraqi territory, including the southern province of Maysan. The geography matters. Southern Iraq is the country's predominantly Shia heartland and part of the wider area where Iran-aligned political and armed groups have accumulated substantial influence. Iraqi authorities' response, including the dismissal of a military commander following the attacks, underscores the seriousness of the development.

This should not, however, be interpreted as equating Iraq's Shia population with Iran-aligned militia. Iraq's Shia communities are politically diverse, and Iraqi nationalism has often competed with Iranian influence. The significance lies in the armed organisations operating from a region where Tehran has developed considerable strategic relationships. The resulting geography is striking.

Saudi Arabia is potentially being pressured from both ends of the Arabian Peninsula - by the Houthis from Yemen and the Red Sea to the south, and by Iran-aligned armed networks operating from Iraq to the north. Iran itself sits across the Gulf. What appears to be separate theatres therefore begin to resemble elements of a wider strategic architecture of sectarian dimension. Saudi Arabia is not merely an American ally caught in an Iranian war. It is the principal Sunni Arab power confronting an increasingly assertive Iranian regional order. The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has always involved more than oil, territory and strategic influence. It also reflects competing political and religious ideologies - a Sunni Arab order dominated by established states and monarchies on one side, and an Iranian-led ecosystem of Shia or Shia-aligned movements on the

other. Yemen illustrates this convergence particularly well. The Houthis emerged from Yemen's Zaidi Shia tradition and have developed close military and strategic ties with Iran. But reducing them to Iranian proxies is equally simplistic. Their rise is rooted in Yemen's own political grievances, social divisions and civil war. Iran has provided military capabilities and strategic support; it did not manufacture every grievance sustaining the movement.

The same logic applies in Iraq. Iran does not need to command every militia or dictate every decision. It benefits from relationships with groups whose interests sometimes converge with its own opposition to American military presence, hostility towards Israel, resistance to Saudi influence and the pursuit of greater political power within Iraq. Such relationships provide Tehran with strategic depth without requiring direct Iranian intervention in every theatre.

That is why describing these organisations merely as "proxies" is more than it clarifies. They possess independent interests and local constituencies. Their relationship with Tehran is better understood as converging interests between autonomous movements and a regional power. The Middle East is therefore witnessing several wars increasingly

sharing the same battlefield.

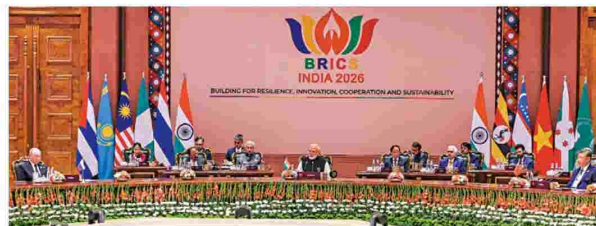
The danger of the simplistic "Iran-versus-America" narrative is that it encourages policymakers to search for a bilateral solution to a fundamentally regional problem. Even if Washington and Tehran theoretically reached an accommodation, the underlying rivalries in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and the Gulf would not necessarily disappear. The larger question is not simply whether Iran can withstand the United States and Israel. It is whether the Sunni Arab states can prevent an increasingly interconnected network of Iran-aligned movements from Iraq to Yemen from converting geographical fragmentation into strategic encirclement.

The map is telling a story that the headlines often miss. The Middle East is not simply a chessboard on which Washington and Tehran are moving pieces. It is a region where local conflicts, sectarian identities, state rivalries and great-power competition are increasingly converging. That is the deeper story emerging from the Red Sea, the Gulf and southern Iraq. It is more complicated than "Iran-versus-America". And it may prove far more enduring.

The writer is a former Lieutenant Governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Pudukcherry, and a military veteran



FROM AGENDA COVER



BRICS@20: India's vision for a wider world

Trade ministers reaffirmed their commitment to a WTO-centred trading system while advancing the Global Value Chains Action Plan for 2026-2030; customs heads reached an in-principle agreement on a Mutual Administrative Assistance Agreement; and justice ministers adopted a declaration strengthening alternative dispute resolution mechanisms across the grouping. This is a Chairship, notably, that has resisted the temptation to frame BRICS as a rival architecture to existing institutions, choosing the more patient instead - and arguably more durable - language of reform from within.

Under Sustainability, environment, energy and industry ministers embedded community and traditional knowledge into formal climate policy, effectively turning India's own Mission LIFE ethos into a multilateral agenda. This included new Principles for People-Centric Climate Resilience built on indigenous adaptation knowledge, a Solar PV Cooperation Roadmap that extends India's International Solar Alliance leadership into the BRICS framework, fresh frameworks on forest-fire preparedness and sustainable lifestyles, and - most significant for the Global South - stronger initiatives on climate financing aimed squarely at the financing gap that has stalled climate action across developing economies.

At its core, New Delhi's participation in the grouping reflects a pursuit of strategic autonomy. It is within this grouping that India has found room to pursue partnerships, from energy to security to digital payments to climate finance, on terms that reflect its own priorities and its own pace, while remaining anchored to a rules-based order. Herein lies the true import of the current Chairship: a clear manifestation of India's practised diplomatic posture - balanced engagement across varied global platforms, advancing broader inclusivity alongside concrete domestic

imperatives, while leveraging venues like BRICS to construct the resilient, self-reliant and cooperative systems required for its long-term trajectory. Twenty years after that first ministerial huddle in New York, the leaders converging on New Delhi are, in that sense, gathering around a table that India has helped make wider, and one at which it has unmistakably found its own voice.

Harsh Vardhan Shringla, Member of Parliament and former Foreign Secretary of India

BRICS needs the K-factor to become BRICKS

A family that always needs an outsider to settle its arguments has not built much confidence at home. FOURTH: kin show up. They show up when invited. They show up in loss and mourning, in crisis, and in happiness and celebration. Presence matters. Attendance may look ceremonial, but in relationships it is evidence.

BRICS certainly needs more capacity and better implementation. It has no permanent secretariat. But even if it had one, no secretariat, working group or task force can make members turn up for one another. Institutions can organise cooperation. They cannot manufacture obligation. And then there is expansion. Beyond the eleven sits a widening circle of partner countries. For now, I am less interested in who joins next than in whether the existing eleven can demonstrate the K-factor. Let the Delhi Declaration show that first. Enlargement can follow. An expanding family with no settled duties is not a family. It is a guest list.

Twenty years of mass. The next twenty will be decided by whether the members owe each other anything.

Robinder Sachdev is President of the Imagindia Institute, New Delhi, and author of *Trumpotopia - A Guidebook to Decode Donald Trump*

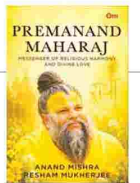
Delving into India's faith faultlines

MANISH ANAND

Premnand Maharaj draws followers from all faiths and beliefs. He trends on the internet. Star powers come to see him in Vrindavan. Yet he's content with Vrindavan and stays there. He's not opening his ashram across the country and abroad. He doesn't polarise people. He just speaks of Bhakti, reciting Radha. That's an absolute and unconditional submission to the divine, argues Premnand Maharaj in his "Ekanik Vartapals". Journalists Anand Mishra and Resham Mukherjee, in their book *Premnand Maharaj: Messenger of Religious Harmony and Divine Love*, have arguably brought out the first authoritative biographical of the saint from Vrindavan. The book traces the life journey of the saint. In the course, India's age-old spiritual heritage shines, as tales of renunciation find new subjects. Along with Premnand Maharaj, through the turns and twists in his life, the book also reveals Premnand Maharaj's fine glimpse into the philosophical evolution of a truth seeker.

In an age when instant coffee syndrome cuts through all walks of life, including spiritual teachers who offer immediate relief from the pains of life to their followers, the book reveals Premnand Maharaj's holding out against the commercialisation of faith. "Your body pain will not go away with Baba's ashvad," he says.

To superstitious followers, the Vrindavan saint remains stern, stressing that "even if 100 cats cross my path, I will still stay on my course." The book, published by Om Shakti, states the widely known fact that Premnand Maharaj's kidneys had failed long ago and he undergoes dialysis. The saint hasn't yet accepted any offer from his followers, saying that he lives by the will of Radha. Born Amirudh Kumar Pandey in 1972 in Akhari village in Kanpur, the book states that the saint confronted the moot philosophical question at the age of 13 - what is the meaning of life? A wealthy neighbour had passed away.



Book: Premnand Maharaj: messenger of religious harmony and divine love
Author: Anand Mishra
Resham Mukherjee
Publisher: Om Shakti
Price: ₹399

The young boy saw the grandeur of religious harmony as he speaks an answer to his question, the young Pandey left home to launch himself on a spiritual path. Staying briefly with gurus, he finally made the ghats of Kashi his abode.

With singular devotion to Lord Shiva, he meditated. To beat hunger, he ate handfuls of sand. After watching *Chaitanya Leela* and *Ras Leela*, the Shiva devotee yearned to go to Vrindavan. Soon he fulfilled his wish, and over the years he has emerged as a key attraction of Vrindavan.

Premnand Maharaj comes out, per the book, as an exemplar of religious harmony as he speaks on his of other religions. He also comes out as a voice of reason, for he rejects superstition. The saint also raises a spiritual weight against the commercialisation of faith, where the new-age Baba writes immediate remedies for the woes of the followers. Both Mishra and Mukherjee have heavily researched to find sources for the book, as they admit that ready-made materials weren't available. They went through accounts of followers on the internet. They also listened to several videos. In the end, the authors presented a lucid commentary on the life of Premnand Maharaj.

The writer is a columnist who writes on social and religious issues

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This Week's Zodiac Insights

Profession • Money • Family • Relationships • Health • Travel



Mesha | Aries: This week, pending work may finally start moving, and your ideas can gain appreciation at work. You may also think seriously about creating an extra source of income. Love and family matters remain supportive, while true friends become easier to recognise in a difficult moment. **Watch out for:** Poor sleep and mental fatigue.



Mrishabha | Taurus: This week begins with confidence and clear thinking, but the latter half may bring some unexpected pressure. Support from seniors can help you complete an important assignment, while your dedication earns professional respect. Personal equations need patience, especially when emotions run high. **Watch out for:** Relationship misunderstandings and neglecting your health.



Mithuna | Gemini: This week, your communication improves and your efforts at work can bring recognition or financial benefit. Social connections remain warm, and you may feel drawn towards helping others or supporting a meaningful cause. Large financial commitments need careful thought before you proceed. **Watch out for:** Stress and concerns around a family member's health.



Karka | Cancer: This week feels lighter emotionally, and you may enjoy your work even without immediate rewards. Long-term plans can move ahead with support from people who trust you. Finances, however, need tighter control, and personal relationships may become sensitive if discussions turn rigid. **Watch out for:** Overspending, emotional friction and ignoring health discomfort.



Simha | Leo: This week, professional stagnation may begin to ease and work can bring better financial results. Colleagues may test your patience, but a calm and practical approach will help you handle them. Old friends may reconnect, while personal relationships need more compromise than confrontation. **Watch out for:** Rising expenses, family tension and physical strain.



Kanya | Virgo: This week, something you start on your own may face resistance initially but can gain support once results become visible. Career and finances remain strong, and family differences can be resolved through direct communication. New professional connections may also prove useful. **Watch out for:** Interfering too much in your partner's personal matters.



Tula | Libra: This week, your enthusiasm for new ideas, learning and experimentation can bring recognition among peers. Finances improve through careful spending and disciplined saving, while your words have a stronger emotional impact in close relationships. Take responsibility for your own work instead of depending on others. **Watch out for:** Irritability, sharp speech and overexertion.



Vrishchika | Scorpio: This week, energy and confidence remain high, and fresh professional ideas can receive a positive response. Your communication becomes stronger, helping you connect better with people around you. Financial decisions involving loans need caution, while family matters require sensitivity overall. **Watch out for:** Relationship arguments and neck or shoulder strain.



Dhanu | Sagittarius: This week, earlier efforts can bring recognition, and partnership-related work may produce useful gains. Your words carry influence, but finances need greater discipline and important paperwork should be checked carefully. A home or property decision may also move forward. **Watch out for:** Money pressure, family stress and neglecting health concerns.



Makara | Capricorn: This week, a career opportunity you have worked hard for may come closer, and your judgement improves through lessons from past mistakes. Your partner and friends can be supportive when pressure builds. Finances remain the weaker area, so spending needs control. **Watch out for:** Family safety issues, stress and unnecessary financial strain.



Kumbha | Aquarius: This week, a new initiative may gain support after an uncertain start. Career and partnership matters look favourable, and finances may strengthen through professional progress. Family life can bring happy developments, but personal relationships may still face small misunderstandings. **Watch out for:** Taking financial risks and letting minor arguments grow.



Meena | Pisces: This week, avoid rushing into decisions, especially when pressure or emotions are influencing your judgement. Work deadlines may create restlessness, while finances need tighter control and greater self-reliance. Relationships and family matters call for patience, and new acquaintances should be approached carefully. **Watch out for:** Hasty choices, arguments and ignoring health concerns.



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Ganesh Chaturthi: From Modak to Naivedya



**ANIL
RAJPUT**

Ganesh Chaturthi is one of Maharashtra's most awaited festivals, and food has always been central to the way it is welcomed and celebrated. The festival may be recognised by clay images of Lord Ganesha, flowers, lamps, aarti and the familiar call of "Ganpati Bappa Morya", but food is among its most intimate forms of worship. On Monday, September 14, 2026, homes and public mandaps across India will welcome Ganesha on Bhadrpada Shukla Chaturthi, beginning a celebration that in many places continues until Anant Chaturdashi and visarjan on 25 September. Yet before the crowds, music and processions comes the work of the kitchen, where rice is ground, coconut is grated, jaggery is melted and family recipes are brought back into use.

Ganesh occupies a distinctive place in Hindu religious life as Vighnaharta, the remover of obstacles, and as a deity associated with wisdom, prosperity and auspicious beginnings. Ganesh Chaturthi marks his birth and has long been observed through household worship, fasting, offerings and community celebration. In Maharashtra, where the festival acquired extraordinary public prominence, Lokmany Bal Gangadhar Tilak helped transform Ganeshotsav into a large community celebration in 1893, using collective worship as a space for social and cultural unity. Today, the festival remains equally important within the home and through large public celebrations. Families install Ganesha for different lengths of time, neighbourhood mandaps draw thousands of visitors, and daily naivedya is prepared for family before being shared with family and visitors.

That idea of naivedya is essential to understanding the cuisine of Ganesh Chaturthi. Food is not prepared only because guests will arrive or because a festival demands abundance. Many dishes are first cooked as an offering, placed before Ganesha and only later shared as prasad. This changes the character of the meal. Ingredients, methods and even family habits may follow ritual preferences, with many homes preparing vegetarian food without onion or garlic. Ganesh Chaturthi arrives during the monsoon, and its cuisine draws on staples such as rice and coconut alongside seasonal gourds, leafy greens, colcasia, legumes and tart fruits. Across western and southern India, the foods prepared for the festival also reflect the produce and cooking traditions of each region.

In Maharashtra, this connection is seen most clearly in Ukadiche Modak. The outer shell is made from rice flour cooked with hot water into a soft dough called ukad. Small portions are pressed into cups, filled with freshly grated coconut cooked with jaggery and cardamom, pinched into delicate pleats and steamed until glossy. Served warm, often with a spoonful of ghee, the modaks are both an offering and a test of inherited skill. The filling must remain moist without becoming runny, the shell must be thin without tearing, and the pleats are often learned by watching older family members rather than by following a written recipe. Many households traditionally prepare them in auspicious numbers, and the first batch is offered to Ganesha before being shared.

The same form changes character in Taliche Modak, where the dumpling is fried rather than steamed. A wheat or refined-flour casing gives it a crisp exterior and allows it to keep longer, while coconut, jaggery, nuts or sesame may enrich the centre. Maharashtra's festive sweet table can also include Pura Poli, whose soft wheat dough encloses a filling of cooked chana dal and jaggery perfumed with cardamom or nutmeg. Rolled carefully and cooked on a hot griddle with ghee, it brings a different texture to the meal. Chirote, another festive preparation, is made from thin layers of dough that are fried until crisp and then dusted with sugar or lightly coated in syrup.

The savoury side of the Maharashtra table is just as important. Aluchi Patal Bhaji, made from colcasia leaves cooked with gram flour, peanuts, coconut, tamarind and jaggery, balances sourness, sweetness and earthiness while making use of monsoon produce. Careful cooking is important because colcasia must be thoroughly cooked, and the finished preparation becomes soft and well integrated with the gravy. Ovyachya Panachi Bhaji, made from aromatic Indian borage leaves, commonly known as ova or ajwain leaves, dipped in gram-flour batter and fried, adds a crisp, herbal element to the meal. Katakchi Amti, made from the strained cooking liquid of the chana dal prepared for pura, is also an essential part of the festive meal, as is an evening of kitchan making thoughtful use of every ingredient. Seasoned with gada masala and a tempering, it becomes a deeply flavoured accompaniment to the festive meal.

As the festival moves down the Konkan coast into Goa, where Ganesh Chaturthi is widely known as Chovoth, coconut becomes even more prominent, while seasonal monsoon produce plays an important part in the Chaturthi thali. Nevri is Goa's crescent-shaped relative of the karanj, a crisp fried pastry filled with coconut, jaggery or sugar, sesame and aromatic spices. Patoleo offer a softer, steamed contrast. Rice paste is spread across turmeric leaves, layered with coconut-jaggery filling, folded and steamed. As the leaves heat, their fragrance passes into the rice covering, giving the preparation a distinctive aroma while also reflecting the close relationship between festive cooking and locally available plants.

Goa also offers Panchkaji, a festive assortment of sweet preparations

associated with Chaturthi, often built around fried dough, coconut, and jaggery and made in different shapes. The Goan Chaturthi meal also has a substantial savoury side, including Khakhatem, a mixed vegetable stew that may combine pumpkin, yam, raw banana, drumstick and other locally available vegetables with coconut and mild spices. Moong Gaathi, made from sprouted green gram in a coconut-rich gravy, adds body and protein, while Ambadyache Sasav turns tart hog plums into a sweet, sour and mustard-laced preparation. Together, these dishes show how closely the Goan Chaturthi meal is tied to the monsoon and the produce available during the season.

Further south, Karnataka brings its own set of traditional offerings. Modaka or sweet Kadubu may again use a rice-flour covering around coconut and jaggery, but local shaping and steaming traditions give the dumpling its own identity. Panchakajjaya is especially associated with Ganesh worship in Karnataka. Its name refers to a preparation made from five components, with versions combining roasted gram or another pulse, coconut, jaggery or sugar, sesame and ghee. Crumbly rather than syrupy, it is well suited to being offered and distributed as prasad. Karigadubu or Karikajji brings back the crisp half-moon form, enclosing a sweet coconut filling inside fried pastry.



Karnataka's savoury festival foods provide a useful balance to the sweets. Kosambari, generally made from soaked split moong or chana dal with grated coconut, cucumber, herbs and a light tempering, is fresh and restrained beside richer offerings.

Chakkuli, spirals of seasoned rice and pulse flour fried until crisp, can be prepared in batches for family members and visitors who come through the house during the days of celebration. In coastal households, Patholi reflects the turmeric-leaf steaming traditions also found in neighbouring Goa. The ingredients may be similar across the coast, but their names, proportions and methods often change from one community to another.

In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Vinayaka Chavithi brings another set of foods to Ganesha's naivedyam. Undrallu are among the most characteristic. Rice is coarsely ground or made into flour, cooked and shaped into small dumplings, often with soaked chana dal incorporated into the mixture before steaming. Mild and savoury, they show that offerings to Ganesha are not defined by sweetness alone. Kudumulu appears in several forms, including sweet versions filled or flavoured with jaggery and coconut, connecting the Telugu table to the wider family of steamed dumplings seen across southern India.

The sweet offering Chalimidi is made by combining rice flour with jaggery to produce a soft, dense preparation valued as a traditional naivedyam. Kajjikayalu, also called Garijalu in Telangana, are crisp fried pastries filled with combinations of coconut, sesame, peanuts, semolina or sugar. Their sealed edges hold a fragrant filling that contrasts with the crisp outer shell. Palathalikalu introduces a different texture. Rice-flour dough is shaped into small strands or pieces, cooked in milk and sweetened with jaggery or sugar, often with cardamom. Regional chutneys made with seasonal ingredients, including Tummi

Aaku Pachadi and tart Chintakaya Pachadi, can add sharper flavours to the wider Vinayaka Chavithi meal.

In Tamil Nadu, Vinayagar Chaturthi offers another regional expression of the rice-flour dumpling tradition. Pooranam Kozhukattai enclosed coconut and jaggery inside a steamed rice-flour shell and is closely associated with the festival. Beside it sits Kara Pidi Kozhukattai, a savoury version in which seasoned rice flour is shaped by hand and steamed, often carrying the impression of the fingers that formed it. Navadhanya Sundal, prepared from a mixture of pulses or legumes tempered with mustard, curry leaves and coconut, provides a savoury offering that is also distributed as prasad. Steaming, rice and pulses remain central, but the form and seasoning are distinctly Tamil. Drinks served with the festival meal also vary considerably from region to region. In Goa, Sol Kadhi, prepared from kokum and coconut milk and lightly seasoned, can accompany the Chaturthi thali, its cooling tartness balancing fried sweets and coconut-rich vegetables. In Telugu homes, Panakam offers a different combination, with jaggery dissolved in water and flavoured with cardamom and black pepper, sometimes with a hint of ginger. Fresh buttermilk, where customary, may be lightly seasoned after a substantial festive meal, while fruit juices or simple milk may be taken by those observing forms of fasting.

Taken together, these dishes show how a shared ritual tradition changes from region to region. The modak of Maharashtra, kadubu of Karnataka, kudumulu of Telugu-speaking regions and kozhukattai of Tamil Nadu are not simply different names for the same preparation. Each reflects local ingredients, techniques and preferences. Rice flour may be steamed in one home, fried in another, wrapped in a turmeric leaf elsewhere or shaped into savoury dumplings. Coconut and jaggery may become a filling, a crumbly prasad or part of a leaf-steamed sweet. Monsoon vegetables, pulses and sour fruits further connect the festival meal to the regions in which it is prepared.

That is why preserving the cuisine of Ganesh Chaturthi requires more than remembering a list of recipes. A family tradition survives when someone learns how the modak dough should feel under the palm, how tightly a turmeric leaf should be folded, how a grandmother balanced jaggery against tamarind, why a particular pulse is soaked before dawn, and why food is offered before anyone tastes it. Younger generations should inherit not only the finished plate but the knowledge behind it. In this sense, India's homes, kitchens and festivals can become an intergenerational classroom, where knowledge is passed naturally from one generation to the next through participation, observation and shared experience. Cuisine has a particularly important place in this process because every recipe carries something of a region's geography, season, ritual practice and family memory. Inviting younger members of the family into the kitchen, allowing them to shape imperfect modaks, grind coconut, fold leaves and listen to the stories attached to each preparation helps ensure that these practices continue beyond a single generation. When Ganpati returns each year, keeping these traditions alive means ensuring that younger generations do not simply enjoy the festive meal, but learn how and why it is prepared. In doing so, Ganesh Chaturthi can continue to pass its culinary knowledge, family memories and cultural traditions from one generation to the next.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

Sweeten your Ganesh Chaturthi

TEAM AGENDA

Modaks carry a rather deep history, originally chosen by Lord Ganesha himself to symbolise pure insight. No Ganesh Chaturthi celebration feels complete without them. These days modern twists are popping up everywhere — rich dark chocolate, sweet mango, pistachio. But making them at home, hands dusted in rice flour, carries something a shop can't sell you. Chef Vividh Patil from Sotifet Mumbai BKC has provided some brilliant recipes to try out. Gathering the family to handcraft these delicacies together brings such joy, culminating in offering a little sweet piece to Ganesha. May this festival bring abundant blessings.



PISTACHIO MANGO MODAK

Ingredients:
● 250g White chocolate
● 40g Pistachio paste
● 20g Cocoa butter
Filling:
● 120g Mango purée
● 150g White chocolate
● 40ml Cream
● 15g Butter
● 5ml Lime juice

Method:
● Temper white chocolate, pistachio paste, and cocoa butter; coat moulds.
● Emulsify warmed purée, cream, white chocolate, butter, and lime.
● Cool, fill shells, seal, and garnish.

Ingredients:
● 250g Dark chocolate
● 20g Cocoa butter
Filling:
● 150g Hazelnut praline
● 100g Milk chocolate
● 40ml Cream
● 15g Butter

Crunch:
● 60g Feuilletine
● 80g Milk chocolate
● 40g Praline
● 30g Hazelnuts

Method:
● Coat moulds with tempered dark chocolate.
● Emulsify warmed cream, milk chocolate, praline, and butter.
● Mix crunch ingredients.
● Layer filling and crunch inside shells, seal, and apply an uneven chocolate glaze.



DARK CHOCOLATE RASPBERRY MODAK

Ingredients:
● 250g Dark chocolate
● 25g Cocoa butter
Filling:
● 100g Raspberry purée
● 150g White chocolate
● 50ml Cream
● 15g Butter
● 30g Fresh raspberries

Method:
● Temper chocolate with cocoa butter; coat moulds.
● Emulsify warmed purée, cream, white chocolate, butter, and berries.
● Chill, pipe into shells, seal, and garnish.

Intense dark chocolate with a naturally tart raspberry centre, offering a refined balance of richness and acidity

A decadent mix of smooth hazelnut praline and crispy feuilletine, encased in a rugged, stone-glazed dark chocolate shell

Tridoshic diet: Eating through Ritu Sandhi



GYANESHWAR DAYAL

September marks Ritu Sandhi in Ayurveda — the seasonal joint between monsoon and winter, when all three doshas destabilise together.

Lingering monsoon damp aggravates Kapha, the season's first dry winds stir Vata, and bursts of "Indian summer" heat spike Pitta. The goal is simple: keep Agni (digestive fire) steady with meals that are warm, light, moderately moist, and built around sweet, bitter, and astringent tastes.

Grains: Old basmati rice balances all three doshas at once. Barley dries out residual Kapha dampness and cools the body. Wheat and oats work best warm and soft — porridge or soft chapatis — to soothe Vata without adding weight.

Vegetables: Gourds — bottle, ridge, ash — are cooling, hydrating, and easy to digest. Pumpkin and sweet potato ground Vata and Pitta. Cooked spinach or methi, finished with ghee, supply the bitter taste Pitta needs without upsetting Vata.

Fruits: Stay with sweet, ripe choices. Pomegranate balances Pitta, stewed apple with cinnamon settles Vata and Kapha, and ripe papaya

As seasons shift, Ayurveda recommends eating to steady digestion and balance the body through Ritu Sandhi

nudges sluggish digestion along. Skip sour fruit for now.

Fats & spices: Ghee is September's MVP, cooling Pitta, oiling Vata's dryness, and — in moderation — leaving Kapha undisturbed. Turmeric, cumin, coriander, fennel, and a little ginger keep digestion moving without overheating the body.

Avoid: Fried and fermented foods (stale curries, idli batter), red meat, sour and spicy foods (chillies, vinegar, tomatoes, citrus), and ice-cold drinks — all of which clog the channels (Srotas) and aggravate Pitta and Kapha.

Golden rules: Eat only freshly cooked meals; leftovers breed Ama (toxins) during seasonal shifts. Sip CCF tea — equal parts cumin, coriander, and fennel — through the day to keep digestion balanced across all three doshas.

Lord Ganesha's Mouse Wishes Only for Him

AMMA (SRI MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI)

Lord Ganesha has the whole universe in his belly. What does the big stomach symbolise? The true seeker's unappeasable hunger to know the Truth. Ganesha's big ears represent shradha, the capacity of a sadhak to hear, that is to imbibe, the subtle spiritual principles.

An elephant can uproot a huge tree with its trunk, and it can also pick up a small needle. So Ganesha's trunk signifies the sadhak's ability to grasp both the gross and the subtle principles. Ganesha's mouse first represents desire. Just as one small mouse can destroy an entire crop, a single desire can destroy all our virtues. But a Self-realised soul has complete mastery over the mind and desires. That is why Ganesha rides on a mouse.

At the times, the mouse sits at the feet of Ganesha, gazing intently at the Lord's face, without touching the sweets that surround Him. This means that a Self-realised soul is the Lord of his own mind; his mind will only move at his command. Most of us are like the mouse who chases after every crumb of food we come across. Our minds are not focused on the Divine. How do we attain that same state of stillness where even a massive pile of laddus does not tempt us away from the Lord? What we need is full-time devotion. To pray for the fulfillment of a particular desire is part-time devotion. What we need is the love and devotion for God that leads to Supreme Love.

Full-time devotion is to be constantly aware that it is God who makes us do everything. In this way, we can discard the sense of 'I', which is rooted in the body-mind-intellect plane, and experience ourselves as the



Amma feeds Lakshmi, the Ashram elephant, in Amritapuri

THE LORD DOES NOT NEED THE LIGHT OF THE OIL LAMP. WE HAVE SPENT TEN RUPEES TO LIGHT. GOD HAS NOTHING TO GAIN FROM US

all-pervading Consciousness. This does not mean we should stay away from temples. There is a beautiful reverence in expressing our devotion to God while praying there. The money we offer symbolises our devotion; it helps us to cultivate the attitude of surrender. Furthermore, the atmosphere is purified by the pujas, prayers, and peace of others. The Lord does not need the light of the oil lamp we have spent ten rupees to light. God has nothing to gain from us. When we take refuge in the Divine, we are the ones who benefit from it. Ultimately, to progress on the spiritual path, our only wish should be to love God. That is all we truly

need. We should see God in everything. It is God who has given us the power to pray. If God's power were absent, we wouldn't even be able to lift a finger.

When we lose the 'I', all that remains is 'Thou, God'. The insignificant identity 'I' must be discarded. True devotion is the awareness, "You are all! You make us do everything!" In this way we attain everything, after which there is nothing left to wish for.

(Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, known simply as Amma, is a spiritual master and humanitarian who has given her darshan in the form of a motherly embrace to more than 4 crore people. Listening to the cries of the suffering, Amma leads the Mata Amritanandamayi Math, an NGO that reaches across more than 50 countries, working in the areas of healthcare, disaster relief, education, gender equality, and environmental restoration)

SAHGURU

Many people believe that being in rage is a solution. Rage is not really a solution. Rage is just the tool for an uninvolved person to act. When one has no sense of involvement, rage can propel action. When many aspects of life which are neglected for a long time finally spin out of control, we feel helpless and go into rage.

Whenever we face an injustice in society, we are told to become outraged, because most people are so lethargic and insensitive that they cannot act unless you set fire to them. It takes tremendous energy to be in rage.

Growing up, I was simply angry with everything. Unlike today, when youth is concerned with career and finances, revolution was the main thing for me in those days. As a youth, I also read Che Guevara, who was a revolutionary and a phenomenon in the 50s and 60s. Today many people do not know who he is, but still many young people are wearing his t-shirts—don't think they are all revolutionaries! When I asked a young man who was wearing his t-shirt, he thought it was Bob Marley.

Chen went on to say, "If you are in rage, you are one of us." I am saying, "If you are out of rage, you are one with everything." The moment you are angry with someone or something, you go against it. It is only a matter of time and resource before you will want to destroy it.

If you act out of rage, for one injustice, you will cause another injustice. Maybe you can get some things done with this rage. Seeing your anger, suddenly the government may act out of fear that you



will burn something on the street. But anger simply means you are burning yourself. Burning a bus or whatever else, is just an expression of that. Medically it can be proven, by seeing your blood-work and other parameters, that in just five minutes of anger, you are actually chemically poisoning yourself. And as long as negative emotions are a part of your system, you will somehow convince yourself with some reason or philosophy, to vent it upon the world. That is what is happening right now—people are doing the most horrendous things with a clear conscience, because they truly believe they are fulfilling the Divine Will.

There is a certain intense force and passion which happens when you are raging in anger. But with the same intensity, if you can sit here with a calm mind, miraculous things can be done. Look at it this way: is human intelligence the solution, or is just blind passion the solution?

The difference is just this. To be in rage, you do not have to be conscious. To see how to remain out of rage, you have to be conscious. Once you are conscious, you are inclusive. Once you are inclusive, you are a solution. This is why in Isha Yoga, the approach

is: "I am willing to change." This is a tremendous revolution—a silent revolution. Without shouting any slogans, without slaughtering people, without throwing stones at each other—very quietly, the world will change. That is the only way wellbeing will come into society, because wellbeing is really no such thing as "society." There are just individual human beings. If you know how to be well within yourself, this wellness will grow into a society. If you are sick person, how will you make a society well? You will only spread your sickness, nothing else will happen.

Instead of addressing the individual human being, attempting to change society, will just bring more empty rules and morality. The world is already full of the highest morals, but the world has not become clean—because of morality, the world has become filthy.

Now, those who talk about India being consumed in rage, have obviously never travelled outside the country. This is one of the only places left on the planet where people can do and say what they want. In some places, if you open your mouth in protest, you may end up with a bullet!

We are 1.25 billion people. Yes, we have our share of nutcases, which every nation has. We have our share making irresponsible statements. But why are we making it out as if these statements are the discourse of the nation? Except for a few fringe elements, we have remained a peaceful country because the general ethos is peaceful.

The spiritual basis of this land always made space for acceptance and understanding. India is not a land of persecution, but of debate and dialogue. Let not the small insecurities that the sages of this land explored and expounded be lost in religious bigotry and senseless simplistic dogmas.

(Sahguru is a yogi, mystic and visionary, and a prominent spiritual leader. An author, poet, and internationally-renowned speaker, Sahguru's wit and piercing logic provoke and widen our perception of life)

Depression and Solution

Stress and depression can darken even the brightest life. But when the outer world becomes too heavy, the inner world needs a deeper anchor. A true spiritual master does more than offer comforting words; he teaches us to rise above circumstances, strengthen our faith, discipline the mind, and discover the peace within

DR. SWAMI GYANANANDAS

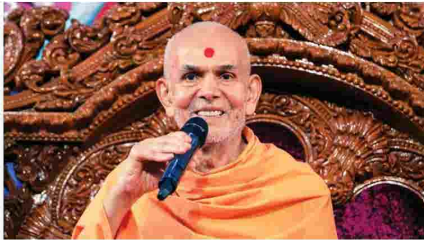
Persistent sadness, pessimism, and a loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities are hallmarks of depression, tension or stress. It is a frequent and significant mental health disease. It's more than just the ups and downs of life, and it can seriously impair the regular functioning of life.

It is very easy to identify a person with this disease. Feelings of worthlessness or guilt, inability to focus, suicidal ideation, and changes in eating and sleeping habits are only some of the signs of this disease. Depression affects people of all ages, and all walks of life around the world. More than 264 million individuals around the world suffer from depression, according to estimates.

Indeterminate genetic, biochemical, environmental, and psychological variables are thought to contribute to the development of depression. It has far-reaching consequences, affecting not only a person's mental health but also their physical health, their relationships, and their general quality of life. It can cause problems in one's personal life, as well as in one's professional and academic life.

We often believe that wealth, name and fame will free us from stress. However, in this modern era, the majority of wealthy people have the comfort and facilities and yet deep down they feel disturbed, stressed and frustrated. Of course, success sometimes brings even greater pressure when we are not vigilant. The more we achieve, the more carefully we must learn to handle its demands; otherwise, it causes imbalance in our lives.

Michael Joseph Jackson was an American singer, songwriter, dancer, and philanthropist. Known as the 'King of Pop', he is regarded as one of the most significant cultural figures of the 20th century. Michael Jackson won 13 Grammy Awards, including 8 for the album Thriller. Jackson was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame twice: in 1979 as a member of the Jackson 5 and in 2001 for his solo career. He had millions of fans around the world. He had a magnetic charis-



ma that attracted men, women and children of all communities and classes. At a young age, he was at the top of his fame, record-selling albums, lavish living and success. But inside, he was alone, depressed and stressed. In his loneliness, that inner pain haunted him. As a result, he started to rely on drugs or surgery to kill the pain. But the depression won and the award winner of life. Michel Jackson took an overdose of drugs and killed himself.

In this way, individuals' mental health has taken a hit due to the stress of keeping up with all of our achievements. In order to effectively treat and prevent depression, it is essential to understand the specific obstacles that modern life presents. We must foster a culture where true human connections, self-care, and a life well-lived are prioritized over material achievement. We can start combating the modern sickness of depression and making the world a happier and more compassionate place if we promote a culture that values emotional wellness.

Thus, the cause of depression is very clear; we are chasing after physical wealth, neglecting our inner health. Moreover, our standard of happiness is based on these material things, which are unstable and perishable. So, how can they provide us with stability?

Mahant Swami Maharaj states: "Not only the craving for present sense pleasures, but also overthinking about the future keeps us under constant stress. We pay too much attention to things

that are beyond our control. Secondly, we think too much about other people and their opinions. All of these things can bring disaster into our lives." Swamiji further says, "Rather than thinking that we have got this human body to get a good job and earn lots of money, we should think that we are primarily here to attain inner peace and the source of that peace is God."

On 23 August 1988, Carlos Vega, a 62-year-old American, went to meet Pramukh Swami Maharaj in Los Angeles. On meeting Swamishri, Carlos said that whatever you experience peace like no other. He then said that he had everything: cars, money and a beautiful home, but no inner peace. Swamishri interrupted him and said, "I have no money; I have God. When you have God, you have everything."

Nonetheless, sometimes, even when we walk on the path of God, we may face difficulties and setbacks. But remember, God has his master plan. He knows where our destination is and will take us there. When we learn to see the bigger picture, we often realize that whatever happened to us ultimately had a purpose. Even the setbacks, failures, and disappointments that once seemed painful helped us grow, strengthened our character, and prepared us to face life with greater courage and wisdom.

(Dr Swami Gyananandas is a dedicated follower of the Swaminarayan tradition and has earned a PhD from MS University)

The Wisdom Behind The Form of Ganesha

GURUDEVI SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

Our ancient Rishis were deeply intelligent. They chose to express Divinity through symbols rather than words. Words and their meanings can change with time, but symbols remain eternal. They carry a meaning that can be understood by people from all walks of life, across generations. The form of Lord Ganesha is one such symbol.

Adi Shankara has beautifully described the divine form of Ganesha. He said that Ganesha is 'Ajam Nirvikalpm Niraakaaranekam', the one who is unborn, attributeless, and formless. He is 'Achintya', 'Avyakta', and 'Ananta', that is, one beyond thought, beyond expression, and eternal. None is more beautiful than Him, and He is present everywhere. Yet this formless consciousness is given a distinct form that embodies divine qualities. When we worship Lord Ganesha, the qualities that he represents get kindled within us.

The most striking part of Ganesha's form is his elephant head. It represents authority, endurance, enthusiasm, strength, and courage. There is something effortless about the way an elephant moves. It doesn't stop before an obstacle or look for a way around it. It simply removes the obstacle and keeps moving ahead. The elephant therefore also represents wisdom and effortless-ness. When we keep our attention on these qualities, they become alive in us. This is the purpose of symbolism.

Ganesha energy is said to be present in the Mooladhara, the first of the chakras or energy centers, that represents the qualities of enthusiasm, courage, and strength. This is where the spiritual journey begins. When it is activated, one experiences enthusiasm in life; when dormant, one experiences dullness and inertia. When we face obstacles, feel low on energy, or lose clarity, we must turn our attention to Ganesha. By invoking the Ganesha aspect of divinity, we regain courage, confidence, and the spirit to face the obstacles. Once we get ready to face the obstacles, we win half the battle. So Lord Ganesha gives us the energy to overcome the obstacles. That's why we call him 'Vighnaharta', the remover of obstacles.

Ganesha is worshipped before all the other deities at the start of any ritual. Only after duly honouring Ganesha can we proceed with a new undertaking. It is a divine armour that helps us overcome obstacles and move forward with ease.

The elephant's enormous head also symbolizes knowledge and wisdom. It represents 'Gyan Shakti' and 'Karma Shakti', the power of knowing and the



power of acting. Knowledge that remains only in the mind has limited value. It has to find expression in action.

True enlightenment isn't only about knowing something. It is also about putting that knowledge into action. Wisdom is meaningful when it is integrated with life.

Then there is the single tusk. Ganesha has only one tusk, 'ekadantaya'. It represents one-pointedness, one consciousness. The mind has a natural tendency to move in many directions. It gathers thoughts, doubts, desires, and fears. When the mind is scattered, it cannot see clearly. One-pointedness brings the mind back to this moment, and everything that is not necessary falls away.

Ganesha's large belly represents generosity and total acceptance. Life brings pleasant experiences as well as difficult ones. Acceptance allows us to remain centered in both these situations. But Ganesha doesn't have a large belly alone. There's a snake around his waist. This represents acceptance with awareness. This distinction is important. Acceptance doesn't mean becoming passive or careless. It must come with alertness.

Most surprising is Ganesha's vehicle, which is a tiny mouse. Naturally, a question arises in the mind: how is it that such a huge elephant rides a tiny mouse? Isn't that cruel? The mouse represents 'logi' and 'the knowledge of the Self', and over it sits the symbol of 'supreme knowledge' that is Ganesha. Logic has its place. It helps us understand, question, and examine. But there is a

dimension of knowledge that goes beyond logic. The mouse carries Ganesha, suggesting that the smaller instrument of logic can serve the larger field of wisdom.

There is also another beautiful image associated with the mouse. It nibbles away at the ropes of ignorance that bind us. The mouse in some ways also represents the mantras. A mantra can gradually cut through layers of ignorance and free us from what keeps us bound.

Ganesha also holds the Paasha, or noose, and the Ankusha, the goad. The Ankusha represents awakening, while the Paasha represents control. Inner awakening releases tremendous energy. But energy without direction can go haywire. Awakening therefore has to be accompanied by control. It isn't enough to become more energetic or more aware. We also need the ability to guide that energy in the right direction.

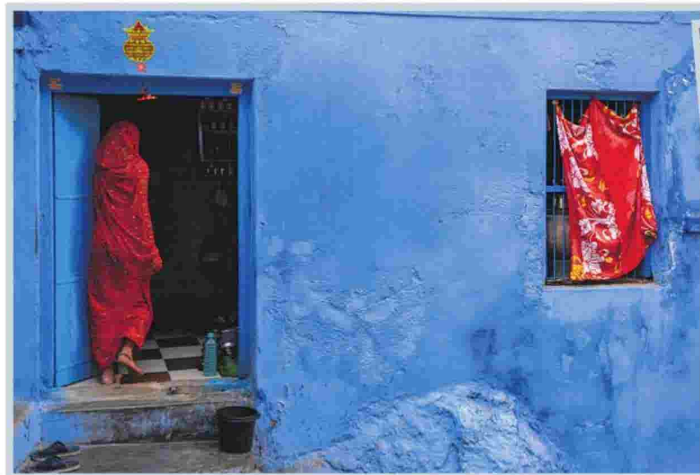
The modak in Ganesha's hands represents the attainment of ultimate bliss. It points to the sweetness that comes with deeper knowledge. The raised hand represents protection that gives a message to the devotee that the devotee is taken care of. The lowered and open hand represents endless giving. It also reminds us that, ultimately, everything returns to the earth. Ganesha is also associated with the lotus, which is a symbol of sensitivity. Sensitivity isn't a weakness. It is the ability to remain aware of what is happening within and around us. Wisdom without sensitivity can become dry. Strength without sensitivity can become harsh.

The deeper purpose of this symbolism isn't to make us stop at the idol. Ganesha is the formless Divinity encapsulated in a magnificent form for the ease of our understanding. When we worship Ganesha, the qualities represented by the form are kindled within us.

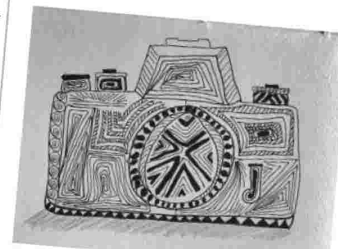
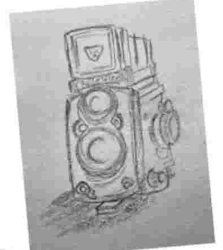
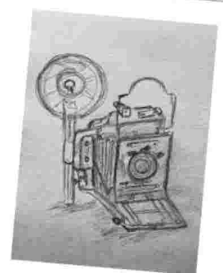
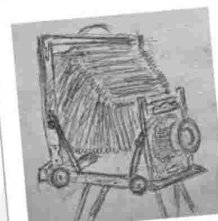
We bring home Ganapati with a sense of joy and gratitude as if a loving family member had arrived. We start planning for the decorations, invitations, and making special Prasad. We offer God his favourite things: share our innermost feelings and desires; we sing and dance. At the end of the day, we are excited to go back home from work as if someone very special is waiting for us. The devotee feels the presence of Ganesha in his house and soaks in this presence. And after the celebrations, we immerse the idol by inviting the Lord back into the abode of our heart.

The ritual of immersing (visarjan) the idols after a few days of worship reinforces the understanding that God is not in the idol; He is inside us.

To mark 200 years of photography, eminent lensman **Dinesh Khanna** pens a heartfelt ode to the medium



Khanna's sketches
show the transition of
analog camera



THERE is something magical about photography. Imagine life as a river of time. As the saying goes, you never step into the same river twice, because the flowing water recreates it with every passing moment. The same is true of life and time itself. Yet photography gives us the ability to reach out and claim a moment from that river by freezing it forever.

As photography reaches its bicentennial milestone — marking two centuries since Nicéphore Niépce fixed the first permanent image on a pewter plate and Louis Daguerre perfected the process — we are reminded of a monumental gift to humanity. In an extraordinary act of foresight, the French government purchased the patent for the daguerreotype in 1839 and made it an open licence: a “free gift to the world” that democratised photography.

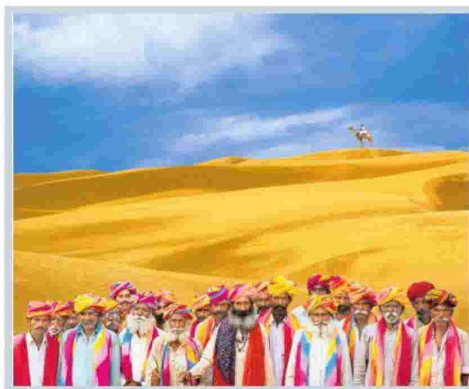
Having spent 50 years involved with photography, my life with the medium represents a full quarter of its entire existence. Sounds rather vain to see it through my own life's prism, but then that's what makes it so special for me. For 36 of those years, I have worked as a professional, watching the ground shift constantly.

Technology has always driven these shifts, transforming genres along the way. The evolution from heavy glass plates and toxic wet collodion to flexible roll film, and eventually to high-resolution mirrorless cameras and computational smartphone systems, completely redefined what could be captured and how. Faster films and portable bodies liberated the camera from the studio, giving birth to candid street photography and dynamic photojournalism.

Today, digital workflows have turned photography into a universal language while challenging our notions of truth.

My own introduction to this world began long before my professional career, sparked by my father, who was also a photographer. His encouragement — gifting me a basic camera and an occasional roll of film — instilled in me a deep love for the medium

Translating the world, one **frame** at a time



and a respect for the rigour required to create good images. Shooting analog teaches you to value every single frame. With limited exposures and costs attached to each click of the shutter, every shot demands deliberate intention, careful composition, and a thorough understanding of exposure.

Those hard-earned analog values didn't vanish when the industry went digital; they

became my invisible anchor. That early training translates directly into my modern workflow, ensuring I treat a memory card with the same patience and visual discipline as a roll of film.

Through every technological revolution and personal season of life, photography has remained my steadfast means of expression, as it has for millions of others.

It is the meditative language through which I engage with the world, make sense of transition, and quiet my mind.

And in the 200th year, photography seems to be facing an existential crisis. Much like what painting seemed to have faced when this new medium first arrived on the scene. When photography was invented in the 19th century, panicked painters feared it would render their canvas obsolete, prompting the famous lament that painting was dead. Instead, freed from the burden of mere mechanical documentation, painting evolved into impressionism and abstraction.

Today, as algorithms synthesise pixels from text prompts alone, photography faces its own existential mirror. Yet just as the camera did not destroy painting, artificial intelligence may ultimately fail to kill photography. We hope. And this may well happen by photography being pushed back to its very roots of the unrepeatable truth of a physical moment captured through lived human experience.

As we celebrate two centuries of capturing light, I am profoundly grateful to still be walking this path, translating the world one frame at a time.

Landless Dalits' struggle anchors Busan-bound Punjabi film

SARIKA SHARMA

AT the heart of *'Hanere De Panchi'* (*Birds in the Dark*), a Punjabi film headed for the Busan International Film Festival, is a tiny village named Balad Kalan in Sangrur, and the epic struggle of its landless Dalits have waged for reclaiming the common village land.

Shashank Walia was in the final year of film school in Pune in 2015 when he, along with friend Reema Kaur, received preliminary confirmation from the Films Division to make a documentary film. Born in Delhi, both wanted to go back to their roots and travelled across villages, towns and cities to look for folk artists. A visit to Balad Kalan, which had only a year earlier raised a battle cry against landlords manipulating auctions for common village land, opened up new horizons for him.

That film never got made because the funding stopped, but “their stories, their courage and their generosity stayed”. That is where *'Birds in the Dark'* really began for director Shashank, who is in Mumbai these days, finalising the film.

Land is at the centre of Balad Kalan's phenomenal fight for equality, dignity, livelihood. Land is the leitmotif of the film as well. Shashank says the film holds two very different relationships to land. “For the landowner, it is possession, ownership and capital. For the landless farm labourer, it means dignity, agency and the ability to shape one's own life. To be landless is not simply to not own land. It is to be placed in a

particular relationship to labour, livelihood and power, where economic inequality is deeply shaped by the structures of caste.”

Shashank had identified with the protest in a personal way, too. Actively involved in the FTII protest, he knew what it takes to stand up. Five years down the line, as he documented the farmers' protest, he realised what people's power could achieve.

He says when the landless farm together, they gain greater agency over their own labour and create a space for sharing, cooperation and collectivity. “People can make decisions together and have a greater say in their own livelihoods.” Balad Kalan has proved that, having inspired reclamation of 4,210 acres of panchayat land in 162 villages.

However, as much as the film is rooted in labour, it is also centred around queer love. Shashank says the film explores how queerness extends beyond the story itself, into the way love is imagined and explored. “It asks whether love can exist outside the ways in which society has taught us to understand and define it, and whether it can become a location for solidarity and mutual aid.”

The darkness in the title, the *'hanere'*, thus carries both “oppression and uncertainty, as well as the possibility of hope”. “Under

the night sky, with the stars as their guides, our birds seek new meanings and definitions of love. In times of constraint and uncertainty, love can become a space where new alternatives emerge.”

A new horizon.”

In doing this, the film traverses various trajectories like caste, gender, land and class. Shashank calls it a difficult film to write, and tells that the pandemic provided him that quiet to write it. Define difficult, we say, and he insists that the difficulty lay not in the intersectional nature of the film traversing trajectories like caste, gender, land and class, but some-

thing else. “As filmmakers, we practise all aspects of the craft: developing the plot, shaping the narrative, building a universe, composition, light and sound. But all these formal elements have to be in the service of the people whose lives it engages with, and not simply the narrative we want to express. People and their conflicts cannot, just become material for a film. To really know people, to understand their hopes, ambitions and struggles, and to approach them with simplicity is much harder. For me, that *shehja*, that simplicity, is perhaps the most difficult part of filmmaking.”

Now based in Punjab, Shashank dons the hat of writer, director and cinematographer here. Interestingly, director Gurvinder Singh saw some parts of the film and asked Shashank to collaborate as the cinematographer on *'Rehmat'*, which was screened at the Locarno Film Festival recently.

Shashank says *'Birds in the Dark'* changed his relationship with cinematography. “Writing and directing made me think deeply about what I can do with the camera and how cinematography can become part of the film's larger language.”

Set in the vibrant countryside of Punjab and narrating an equally vivid story of people's struggle, Shashank has chosen to tell the film in black and white. This finds root in his keen interest in abstractionism. “As much as I am interested in telling a people's story, I am equally interested in exploring the abstraction that images can reach, and the space they can create within the subconscious of the viewer.”

Taking away colour helped him create a layered sense of reality, where the actuality of a place could coexist with its evocation through images. “The poetic space the narrative reaches for, and the harsh realism the film is grounded in, could arrive together through black and white. It brought out the textural nature of the land and the crops, and let the film move between emotional planes without over-stylising the image. The image could move between the real, and sometimes the imagined, without having to choose between the two.”

The film is backed by Hansal Mehta, for whom this will be his third Busan outing after *'Omerta'* and *'Aligarh'*. Having exhausted his small budget, Reema (producer-editor of the film) was looking for funds to take it through post-production when Hansal Mehta and Sahil Saigal stepped in. “They have been an extraordinary support to us at a very important stage in the film's journey. Their belief allowed us to complete it with the care it needed.”

'Birds in the Dark' will be screened at Busan's Vision Asia, a competition section. Shashank says for an independent Punjabi film, it means a great deal to have its practice with the medium recognised. “This really feels like a moment that belongs to all of us. To the crew and cast who gave so much of themselves to the film, and to our friends in the villages who opened their homes, lives and stories to us, and without whom this film simply would not have been possible. To see the film travel to South Korea is, in some way, to carry all of them with us.”

Actor Mauli Singh in a still from the film.

An authoritative record of every artillery unit

Maj Gen AIS SANDHU (RETD)

THIS work on Indian artillery by Captain (Prof) Ashok Nath is a military historian's delight. Meticulously researched, 'Indian Artillery 1748-1947: Historical Records & Regimental Iconography of Indian Artillery' is a first-of-its-kind book documenting the lineage and service of every artillery unit raised over these two centuries — a remarkable achievement by any standard. A standout feature is the iconography, which includes rarely seen insignia of long-forgotten units.

The book is divided into 14 chapters, covering the vast scope of this project, and, as the author notes, they are "...arranged both chronologically and thematically to provide a coherent progression".

Although guns and cannons have played a decisive role in the many wars fought in India over the centuries (the First Battle of Panipat in 1526 being the most famous), the author rightly states that it was only in 1748 that the East India Company "formally established regular artillery companies for the Bengal, Madras and Bombay Presidencies", which soon emerged as battle-winning forces. He captures the ethnic composition of the artillery of each Presidency, and then traces their histories, campaigns, battles and subsequent reorganisations.

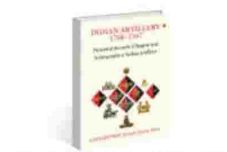
By examining their individual histories, the author enables the reader to appreciate

the diverse traditions that eventually converged to form the foundations of the Royal Indian Artillery.

A century later, following the events of 1857, control of the Presidency armies passed to the British Crown. Although the growth of the artillery continued, restrictions were imposed on Indian troops, who were not permitted to serve in the field and horse artillery due to concerns of trust; they remained confined to the mountain batteries. It took many more decades before this policy changed.

The succeeding chapters trace the evolution of the Punjab Frontier Force Mountain Batteries, as well as the other Indian Mountain Batteries and Pack Artillery Brigades and Regiments raised over time. These chapters are especially valuable because they document organisations whose histories have often remained dispersed among regimental records and archival sources. These mountain batteries distinguished themselves in many famous campaigns.

The following chapter, 'Indian Artillery 1935-1945', covers the rapid wartime expansion necessitated by the demands of the Second World War. This decade witnessed the raising of as many as 66 artillery units of the Indian Army, laying the foundations upon which the post-Independence Regiment of Artillery later emerged. In recognition of the sterling role played by the artillery during the war, King George VI conferred the title 'Royal', after which it



INDIAN ARTILLERY 1748-1947: HISTORICAL RECORDS & REGIMENTAL ICONOGRAPHY OF INDIAN ARTILLERY
by Captain (Prof) Ashok Nath.
HarperCollins.
Pages 440. ₹3,999



ISF PAT-05: Patiala Horse Artillery pagri badge c 1890-1942, thereafter formed into 1st Patiala Mountain Battery. Size: H 80 mm

became known as the Royal Indian Artillery. The author correctly states that "despite a long and distinguished tradition of service, no Indian officer had been commissioned

into the artillery until 1935. The Indianisation of the artillery commenced with the raising of 'A' Field Brigade on January 15, 1935, at Bangalore, which was entirely composed of Indian officers and men", some of whom went on to have highly distinguished careers after Independence.

This was followed five years later by the raising of 'B' Field Brigade on May 15, 1940, at Bangalore, which later distinguished itself in the famous Battle of Bir Hacheim, destroying 64 tanks of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's famed Afrika Korps on May 27, 1942. This action received a special mention by Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the British Parliament. Both these regiments continue to exist today as 1 Field Regiment (Self-Propelled) and 2 Medium Regiment (Self-Propelled), respectively.

The author then goes beyond the field guns to discuss the specialist branches of the artillery arm, namely the Anti-Aircraft, Coastal Artillery and Air Observation Post units, all of which then formed part of the Regiment of Artillery. The Coastal Artillery was later merged with the Indian Navy, while the other two evolved into independent arms.

Chapter 10 provides a poignant conclusion to the principal historical narrative by examining the division of the Royal Indian Artillery between India and Pakistan in 1947. Some units had already been demobilised after the war and, at Partition, the remaining assets were divided between the

Indian and Pakistani armies in the ratio of two-thirds to one-third. Ironically, regiments and troops with centuries of shared tradition, which had fought side by side for almost 200 years, would be fighting each other barely two months later.

The author has also explored some of the lesser-known artillery organisations: the Princely State Artillery Units, Allied State Contingents, Miscellaneous Artillery Units and the Auxiliary Force (India) Artillery. These formations are generally overlooked, yet together they formed an important component of India's military past. Their inclusion transforms the book into a comprehensive study of the artillery organisations that existed throughout pre-Independence India over the preceding two centuries.

Captain Ashok Nath has drawn upon a wide range of archival material, official histories, regimental records and published sources. The numerous tables add considerable value to the text. The iconography is a historian's delight; the author has undertaken invaluable research in recording regimental insignia, badges, belt plates, shoulder titles, pouch belts and other miscellaneous accoutrements.

This monumental work fills a long-standing void and will serve as an indispensable reference for all those interested in the evolution of the Indian Army in general, and the Regiment of Artillery in particular.

— **The reviewer is former Additional Director General, Artillery**

Nanis who blazed a trail

BINDU MENON

DR RAMINDAR DHILLON is no stranger to bullets and bombs. At the height of the 1965 war, her home in Jodhpur was in the line of fire because of its proximity to the airstrip. A good shot, the feisty 19-year-old was even issued a gun to ward off enemy soldiers. Later, as a medical doctor, her career took a chequered course because of her husband's postings as an IAF officer. But at 56, she made a major life decision: to work for the United Nations.

Her missions took her to conflict zones, including South Sudan, Afghanistan and East Timor, where she once again braved mortar shells and flying bullets to tend to the wounded. Yet it was not these exploits that earned her the nickname Bullet Nani. That came from her grandchildren, after she once absent-mindedly carried bullets in her purse before boarding a flight!

Dr Dhillon is one of 12 Indian women profiled in Jasreen Mayal Khanna's 'Bullet Nani and Other Badass Indian Grandmas'. They are women who pushed the envelope harder than most. Now past their prime, their stories are reflective accounts of women who challenged convention, juggled multiple roles, endured hardship and brushed aside the constraints of patriarchy to pursue their dreams.

Among them is Augusta Maria do Rosario Noronha, the Goan grandmother Khanna discovered while on vacation. Noronha made her mark in a man's world — the alcohol trade. Having learnt the art of winemaking from her father-in-law, she went on to revive the family's flourishing winemaking unit. Then there is Sridevi Goel, an IPS officer, who famously stopped a riot during her first posting. Gita Prakash, a doctor who took to modelling at the age of 57, juggled both careers while also caring for three ailing seniors at home. Thankam P's journey from

extreme poverty to becoming a nuclear scientist was anything but easy. Meher Pestonji, meanwhile, saw journalism as not mere reportage, but as a tool to societal reform.

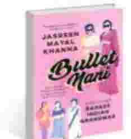
Khanna's inspiration for the project came from closer home — her own *nani* Pushpinde Kaur. Eight months pregnant, Kaur walked out of an abusive marriage, completed her education, took up a job as a teacher and raised her daughter. It was only after Kaur's death that Khanna realised there must be many other grandmothers with equally remarkable stories. Her search took her across India and into the homes of what she calls the country's "early feminists".

Imphal-based Loukrakpan Naobi, for instance, raised six daughters single-handedly after her husband took another wife because he wanted sons. In those days, she did what was considered unthinkable: she set up a shop in the city market to keep the household going, educated her daughters and ensured that all six found good jobs. In Lakshadweep, the desire to serve her people led Rahmath Beegum to medicine. She became the island's first female doctor. Even after the personal tragedies of losing both her husband and son, she continued to work tirelessly, going beyond her role as a doctor to improve medical facilities in the islands.

For these women, their words carry the same conviction as the lives they have lived. "Don't get stuck at home with your *choothia* and *bachcha*," says Suman Dhamane, the YouTube cooking sensation better known as Aapli Aaji. Perhaps the most memorable advice comes from Meenakshi Amma, the oldest practitioner of Kerala's martial art, Kalaripayattu: "Pursue whatever makes you happy, but remember that life cannot be only about joy."

In hindsight, none of these women set out to become an inspiration. They were busy living — making careers, raising families, overcoming setbacks and starting over. That may be the most inspiring part of their stories — a reminder that no expiry date can be attached to one's passion or dream. And that there is often more than one way to live a life.

— **The reviewer is a senior journalist**



BULLET NANI AND OTHER BADASS INDIAN GRANDMAS
by Jasreen Mayal Khanna.
Pan Macmillan.
Pages 260. ₹399

Amid appearance & reality

RITU KAMRA KUMAR

THE past is a foreign country; they do things differently there. LP Hartley's observation is an apt point of departure for MG Vassanji's 'The Apparition', set in 13th-century Delhi under the ageing Sultan Alauddin Khilji. At once historical, speculative and allegorical, the novel uses medieval Delhi to explore questions that remain deeply relevant: power, faith, reason, fear, violence, memory and the search for meaning.

The novel opens with an enigmatic object appearing in the sky: "half-man, half-bird", its colours "blue, orange and even opaline". Its identity is interpreted according to the inhabitants' separate "storehouses of beliefs". Vassanji's apparition becomes a symbol of uncertainty. It may be divine, demonic, scientific or supernatural, revealing the human impulse to explain the unknown.

Delhi is already a "ripe, rotten, stinking fruit ready to fall". Ramine, political intrigue, foreign threats and the weakening Sultanate create an atmosphere of collective anxiety. Amir Hassan al Shirazi, the suffering poet and intellectual, moves through this troubled city, meeting Hindus, Muslims, Mongols, Christians, scientists, Sufis and printers. Through these encounters, Vassanji reveals a civilisation divided by faith, origin and occupation, yet united by fear and the need to interpret the inexplicable.

The responses to the apparition expose this diversity. Shafiq calls it a warning; Alamsi, the scientist, calls it an illusion; Acharya Aditya announces the Kali age; Hindus see it as the 10th avatar of Vishnu on Garuda; while Maulana Sadruddin interprets it as an evil thing and a warning. Amir's questioning response brings faith and reason together rather than placing them in opposition.

The historical narrative is enriched by references to the Mongols, Halaku Khan, Alamsi and the Baatins. Amir's own parentage — father Teymurda's association with the Mongol army and mother Zarine's history — deepens the theme of displacement and mixed identities. These interludes give a

bird's-eye view of history while bringing the reader back to the crisis of the present.

The arrival of the Avians transforms the narrative into political allegory. Their rule initially appears to offer salvation to a society devastated by violence and disorder. Yet the apparent utopia gradually becomes dystopia. Vassanji's sharpest political comment emerges through the rewriting of Amir Hassan's 'Tarikh Alau'. His historical account is brutally edited, demonstrating how "false history... lies... and rumours are spread". History is, therefore, not merely remembered; it can be manufactured by power.

Vassanji's diction is evocative; his syntax moves between historical exposition, philosophical reflection, dialogue and first-person questioning. Amir's journey becomes a meditation on belonging, exile and freedom. The poignant ending, in which his son is sent towards Delhi, leaves the family watching him "fly away to my homeland Delhi".

'The Apparition' is not simply about a mysterious object in the sky. It is an allegory of humanity's response to uncertainty. The apparition becomes a metaphor for the unknown; the Avians represent the seductive promise of salvation; and their rule exposes the danger of imposed perfection. Vassanji's Delhi belongs to the past, but its questions belong to the present. The real apparition may be humanity itself, haunted by fear, memory, sin and its recurring desire to exchange freedom for certainty.

— **The reviewer is a retired college principal**



THE APPARITION
by MG Vassanji.
Tranquebar.
Pages 314. ₹799



STREE SUTRA
by Koral Dasgupta.
Pan Macmillan.
Pages 480. ₹599

This book breathes life into the stories of lesser-known celestial women — the Apsaras, Yakshinis, Gandharvis, Nagas, Yoginis and more. These varied forms of the Devi are powerful guardians of people, forests, mountains and river valleys, whose presence is woven into the very soil and spirit of the subcontinent.



SELECTED STORIES: SANGEETA BANDYOPADHYAY | ANITA AGNIHOTRI
Translated by Sayar Debnath |
Anurupa Sinha.
Westland. ₹350

Part of 'An Ashoka Centre for Translation Series', these books celebrate contemporary Bengali writing. If Sangeeta Bandyopadhyay explores the raw tensions beneath the everyday life of middle-class Bengal in her writings, Anita Agnihotri's stories are a masterclass in empathy.

Why the Siberian crane gave up on the Keoladeo Ghana park

TARA GANDHI

MY main reason for going again and again to the Keoladeo Ghana National Park was to see its most iconic bird — the Siberian crane. Known as the 'lily of birds', Dr Salim Ali described it as 'a magnificently beautiful, immaculately white crane' for its gleaming white feathers, tall, graceful body, long neck and contrasting bright red 'mask' on its face.

Once this lovely bird used to be a regular winter visitor to the Ghana as well as to many other wetlands in north India. Family parties of Siberian cranes used to be seen in waterbodies around the area but when those became unsuitable or too dry, the birds would come only to the Keoladeo Ghana in Bharatpur. Unfortunately, from the last decade of the previous century onwards, fewer and fewer had been coming to the Keoladeo wetland.

Only when the birds stopped coming did I

realise how lucky I was to have seen them at all. During my earlier visits, I used to see small groups of 'Sibes' (as birds called them affectionately) walking with their typically dignified steps in shallow water, probing the soft mud to pull out tubers of sedges and fleshy roots of other aquatic plants that were their main food. Sometimes, there were parties of several adults with a few juveniles along with them, while at other times there were small families with just one young.

On misty days, their slim white fairy-like figures at the distance was a magical sight. On my last visit, I saw just one adult pair with their young one. Unlike its snowy white parents, the chick was brownish coloured with streaks of white on its body. It was fairly big, almost as tall as the adults, yet I couldn't help wondering how it was strong enough to fly at such young age all the way on the long journey from its nest in Siberia. Perhaps that was the last family that came to Bharatpur.

The flock that used to come to Bharatpur was from a population that bred near the great



GENTLE SHARKS, GLOWING WORMS AND OTHER WONDERFULLY WILD CREATURES
by Tara Gandhi.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 200. ₹499

Ob river in the western part of Siberia. Once the summer season was over and the chicks had grown big enough, the cranes would start on their incredible migratory journey to India. Their route via Kazakhstan, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan covered thousands of kilometres, flying high above mountain ranges to reach their warm wintering ground. Unfortunately, during this journey, they

were hunted in some of the places where they stopped to rest along the way. These threats and the Indian wetland becoming unsuitable for the 'Sibes' were among the reasons for their numbers coming down so drastically from 100 birds counted in the year 1968 to 0 in 2002. There was a terrible drought in 2001-2002 that made the Keoladeo wetland dry up completely. The hard ground would have made it impossible for the cranes to find food, since they needed to feed on sedges and tubers that they pulled out from under soft moist mud with their long beaks.

Even though the water filled up during subsequent years, the cranes never returned.

There were threats to their breeding habitat in Siberia too. Being accustomed to wide open spaces with no humans around, when people come into their area or send livestock like reindeer for grazing, they get disturbed.

Ornithologists and scientists all over the world were very concerned that the Siberian crane had become critically endangered. The International Crane Foundation and sci-

entists teamed up to start artificial breeding programmes so that the species doesn't die out completely. They incubated 'Sibes' eggs in laboratories, and from the time the chicks hatched, till they grew, they were kept away from people, so that they don't see any humans or even hear their voices.

The people who looked after these chicks wore white costumes and masks to cover their face. To feed them, they used puppets that looked like a Siberian crane's head and neck, with the same shape of its beak.

Sadly, the Siberian crane is extinct in India now. Once we were proud to host these exquisitely beautiful birds every year. The pleasant weather of Bharatpur and the wetland ecosystem of the Keoladeo Ghana were ideally suited for them to get away from the harsh winter of their Arctic home. I can only hope that with the serious conservation efforts that are being made now, these lovely birds will return to India once again.

— **Excerpted with permission from the publisher, Talking Cub/Speaking Tiger**

REFLECTIONS

Fiery Jaiswal, teary Miandad



PRADEEP MAGAZINE

IN his searing examination of human vanity and selfishness in 'The Fall', Albert Camus says, "No man is a hypocrite in his pleasure." I would add anger and grief as the other two human emotions that in their raw expression can be profoundly honest. They strip away the civility and self-consciousness with which we ordinarily present ourselves to the world, revealing something closer to the self beneath the performance.

Two recent images—one fuelled by anger, the other of grief provoked by empathy—have prompted this philosophical introspection into human behaviour. In these moments, the mask of our conditioned existence slips and something more elemental gets revealed.

The first image, a distasteful one, is that of a batsman so outraged by a comment from the bowler that he risks a full-blown fight on the cricket field. He almost replicates Zinedine Zidane's infamous head butt, though wisdom dawns at the moment of contact and he retreats before completing the act.

The second is a poignant moment that reveals a gentler side of our nature. Remember Javed Miandad, the battle-scarred veteran, a formidable foe who, in his days of glory, produced many masterly performances and is remembered as much for his grit as for his impishness, which often riled his opponents. Watching him break down on Pakistani television while pleading for justice for his former teammate Imran Khan, languishing in jail, must have moved even the most stone-hearted critic of Pakistan's charismatic former captain and Prime Minister.

In these two contrasting expressions of overboard aggression and human vulnerability lies

a world held prisoner by uncontrollable emotions that surface in moments of extreme provocation.

Yashasvi Jaiswal is a batsman of abundant talent, striking flair and fearless intent. But the sports field is not an arena where physical strength can be unleashed to inflict body blows on an opponent. Surely, something nasty must have been said to Jaiswal by the Sri Lankan bowler for him to lose his cool and attempt a head butt. Had he not stopped at the last second to complete his misadventure, cricket would have shamed itself.

In the heat of the moment, people do the strangest things, exposing a side of themselves one would have never associated with them. It is in the aftermath, when calm descends and reflection takes over, that one feels the weight of one's actions.

One would have thought Jaiswal would feel remorse rather than justify his behaviour by

Two recent images prompt a philosophical introspection into human behaviour

invoking his country, saying that India knows how to "give it back". It is a reflection of the chest-thumping echo chamber we live in that Jaiswal felt emboldened to defend himself in the name of his country. In doing so, however, all he achieved was to embarrass the proud nation he represents.

While Jaiswal avoided a disastrous ending to his dangerous intentions, Zidane, France and world football's towering, magisterial figure, executed a violent act of almost venomous force, smashing his head into Italy's Marco Materazzi in the 2006 World Cup final.

Interestingly, though Zidane profusely apologised for his shocking act that dented his image of a calm, reflective man, he maintained that the slur against his family had left him

with little choice. "I would have preferred to be punched than hear my family being abused," he said later.

What is even more intriguing is that his reaction to the slur was not a spontaneous retaliation. Zidane walked away, apparently controlling himself, but then decided that he had to react in the violent manner he finally did. His subsequent apology for the physical aggression alongside his insistence that he had to do what he did, raised questions of ethics, morality, accountability and consequences that severely test the accepted codes of social conduct.

In those brief seconds when body and mind revolt and become prisoners of an uncontrollable, incendiary emotion, the conditioned self breaks free and acts as it wishes and desires. It is a freedom we would never wish to experience, for it compels us to break free from the chains of civilisational restraint. No amount of remorse can undo the damage caused, not only to the recipient of our ire but to ourselves as well.

While anger ignites the destructive self, sorrow and grief can act as a balm, healing wounds even as overwhelming emotion inflicts immense mental agony and pain on our conscious and sub-conscious self.

In Miandad's almost whispering, pleading voice, weighed down by tears of helplessness, was a cry for help for a crime sporting idol incarcerated for years for a crime more political than criminal in intent. The universality of his emotion struck a deep emotional chord across national loyalties. The earnestness of his appeal laid bare his raw, emotional upheaval, the pain and trauma caused by what he perceived as an injustice being done to his mentor Imran Khan.

In that moment of grief, Miandad connected with a world where empathy matters more than revenge, reminding us of the richness of human emotion, a richness that the use of force stoked by anger can erode and hollow us from within. In this theatre of the absurd, where morality and ethics are hostage to our ideological moorings, only empathy can rescue us from becoming prisoners of our afflicted emotions.

—The writer is the author of 'Not Quite Cricket' and 'Not Just Cricket'

Urgent lessons from Nepal for Himachal



AVAY SHUKLA

ONLY a fool learns from his own mistakes," said Otto von Bismarck, "the wise man learns from the mistakes of others." It is now time for the Himachal Chief Minister to demonstrate his wisdom and imbibe some lessons from the horrendous tragedy of Nepal. And the lesson is simple—the Himalayas have had enough. Back off!

"Development" has gone berserk in Himachal—12,000 hectares of forestland diverted in the past 20 years for various projects, 174 hydel projects sanctioned or commissioned, 50 lakh trees felled, construction rules relaxed to permit even 10-storey buildings, the Shimla Development Plan 2041 approved to deregulate the city's precious Green Belts, an epidemic of unnecessary four-lane highways crisscrossing the state, tunnels planned under the fragile mountains, efforts to increase tourist footfall from 20 million per annum to an unsustainable 50 million. And all this in a state which comes under the highest seismic zone.

The Himalayas are now pushing back, with increasing intensity. The not-so-natural disasters between 2022 and 2024 have caused financial losses of ₹13,500 crore to the state and claimed 800 lives. The natural features that hold the fragile mountain stratas together—trees, glaciers, snowfields, permafrost, river drainage—are being decimated. The Himalayas are warning at twice the average global rate, and this is being amplified by local "heat islands" caused by emissions from heavy machinery and labour camps, deposit of black carbon on the ice fields, pollutants from the ever-increasing number of vehicles intruding into high-altitude fragile ecosystems on the new roads, and the removal of green cover.

Dumping of muck in the rivers is reducing their capacity to carry excess water, resulting in regular flash floods. Many red lines have been crossed.

The Himalayas have been warning us for some time now—there was Kedarnath in 2013, Chamoli in 2021, Sikkim in 2023, Dharali in 2025, and now Nepal.

Among the most dangerous impending threats to Himachal is the growing number and size of glacial lakes. The state had 107 glacial lakes of noticeable size with a total area of 5.54 sq km in 1990; the numbers are 669 and 11.2 sq km now. Some have reached dangerous proportions, like Ghepan in Lahaul, which has grown six times to almost 100 hectares. All the major rivers emanate from the glaciers above these lakes and the hydel projects on these rivers are extremely vulnerable to Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF) events.

Any damage to these projects would also endanger the lakhs of people living in towns and villages below them, as Nepal has so tragically shown.

Himachal is also naturally susceptible to other high risks: the state lies in the highest seismic zone, it has 20,000 landslide-prone hotspots, and EWEs

(Extreme Weather Events) caused by climate change have increased by 40 per cent in the past few years.

The time for studies, seminars and only monitoring is over. What is needed urgently is decisive action and a drastic change in the mode of development.

Impose a moratorium on all new hydel projects, and stay those sanctioned but where actual construction has not yet started. Scrap the dozens of projects approved/planned for the high-altitude Chenab and Chandrabhaga basin in Lahaul-Spiti, and in Kinnaur and Pangri areas (which the local people have already been protesting against).

Exhume the 2010 report on environmental impacts of hydel projects by the then Additional Chief Secretary (Forests), which the High Court had accepted but the then government opposed and subsequent ones mothballed. Consider its major recommendations—a ban on hydel projects in high-altitude, alpine, glaciated, forest catchment areas; a minimum distance of 5 km between projects; ensure minimum perennial flow of rivers.

Vigorously oppose the Centre's proposal for a 8.7-km tunnel below the Pir Panjal range to bring the waters of the Chandrabhaga in Lahaul to the Beas in Kullu. This Chinese-style project would rip out the heart of the Himachal Himalayas and would be a disaster of unprecedented proportions: it would destabilise the geology of three districts, generating tens of millions of tonnes of muck which can only clog the rivers, waterways and drainage of these areas. It would disturb the underground aquifers, and the additional water now added to the Beas would amplify the river's destructive potential, which already causes havoc in Kullu every year.

Reconsider the mindless focus on increasing tourist numbers to 50 million. The state's environment cannot support such numbers; the infrastructure needed for it and its effects—roads, buildings, vehicular pollution, sewage and garbage, water supply—would result in huge damage to the natural environment and cultural identity of the state. Learn from Bhutan. Limit the numbers, improve the quality.

Discontinue and put a halt to the four-laning epidemic. They fracture the geology of the areas they pass through, destroy properties, deprive people of livelihoods, encourage even more polluting vehicles to contaminate our pristine ambience. Both the Parwanoo-Shimla and Kirtipur-Manali highways are continuing (and very expensive) disasters that prove this.

The time to act is now. The Himalayas have tolerated our arrogance for centuries, but their patience is now wearing thin. Even the Supreme Court has advised the state to be more sensitive to the environment, or else it "would disappear from the map of India". We proudly call Himachal 'Dev Bhoomi' but ravage and pillage it shamelessly for votes and profit. This must change.

We are proving right the words of Hubert Reeves, a French astrophysicist and environmentalist: "Man is the most insane species. He worships an invisible God and destroys a visible Nature. Unaware that this Nature he is destroying is the God he is worshipping!"

Respect Nature. That is the true worship of God.

—The writer is a retired IAS officer

From jealousy to contentment

IN the Vedic tradition, jealousy, or *matsarya*, is identified as one of the six enemies of the mind, known as the *arishadargas*. Alongside anger, greed, lust, pride and delusion, jealousy is seen as a significant impediment to personal and spiritual growth. These tendencies are thought to cloud the mind, keeping one bound to ego-driven desires and away from a state of inner peace and contentment. Within this framework, *matsarya* is more than just envy; it is a mindset that keeps one perpetually dissatisfied and focused on others' achievements, rather than on their own growth.

The *Bhagavad Gita* offers profound guidance on overcoming jealousy and other negative emotions. The teacher of the *Gita*, Lord Krishna, advises cultivating equanimity (*samattvam*) and self-awareness to counter these destructive impulses. By embracing equanimity, one develops a steady mind that remains unaffected by success or failure, ours and that of others. In this state of equanimity, we no longer view the achievements of others as a threat or a source of resentment, but as part of the diverse play of life. This balanced outlook helps neutralise the urge to compare or measure one's worth against others.

Furthermore, the *Gita* teaches the importance of focusing on fulfilling one's *dharma* according to our station in life and to do so without judging success or failure against an outcome we demand. We should have goals, but beware of expectations. Disturbance arises when outcomes don't match our expecta-



tions. Goals are different from expectations. The former are aspirations. The latter are demands. The advice is to aspire to our very best with the knowledge, skills and talents we have and with a positive attitude, and then 'leave the rest'. When we focus on fulfilling our responsibilities and giving our best to our path, we shift attention away from measuring ourselves against what others have or achieve, reducing the impulse to compare or feel jealousy. The comparison, which often breeds jealousy, loses its hold because our fulfillment comes from within, from living our values, not from external validation.

Another teaching from the *Gita* that helps take the sting out of jealousy is *atma-kripa*, or

kindness toward oneself. When jealousy arises, it often reflects a deeper dissatisfaction within—a sense of lack or inadequacy. Practising *atma-kripa* involves treating oneself with compassion, recognising one's unique journey and honouring one's strengths, potential and inner worth. By being kind to ourselves, we lessen the need to look outward for validation and approval. As a result, we become less likely to fall into the trap of envy and jealousy.

Ultimately, the Vedic teachings encourage us to replace jealousy with *santosha*, or contentment. Contentment does not mean a lack of ambition; rather, it is recognition that everything we truly need for happiness lies within us. As we cultivate contentment, we build an inner resilience that keeps jealousy at bay. In this state, we begin to see others' success as an inspiration rather than a threat, finding joy in our growth and the growth of those around us.

This journey from jealousy to contentment is not simply an emotional shift; it is a spiritual practice that brings us closer to inner peace and alignment with our higher self.

One of the most powerful lessons on the cause and outcomes of jealousy is found in the story of the conflict between the cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, from the *Mahabharata*. This ancient epic teaches us about the consequences of unchecked jealousy and the destruction it can cause, not only to oneself but to entire families and communities.

—Excerpted from 'You Are The Sky', with permission from Pan Macmillan

How Steinem taught women to stop asking for permission



MEGHNA PANT

THERE are women who enter history by becoming the first. And then there are women who change history by making sure there will never again be a "first" that feels impossible. Gloria Steinem belongs to the second category.

To proud feminists like me, Steinem is not merely the woman with the iconic glasses, flowing hair and quotable lines. She is proof that feminism was never supposed to be polite. It was supposed to interrogate power. And that is precisely why she matters to feminists in India. Because Indian women have never lacked strength. What we have lacked, far too often, is a society willing to acknowledge that strength without

demanding that we apologise for it. Steinem emerged in America at a time when women were being told that their lives should be organised around marriage, motherhood and male approval. She challenged the idea that a woman's value could be measured by how desirable, obedient or sacrificial she was.

But the larger lesson of Steinem's feminism transcends America: women cannot be truly free if the structures around them remain designed to keep them dependent. Look at the questions Indian women are still asked. When will you marry? When will you have children? Why are you working so hard? Who is looking after the kids? Why are you travelling alone? Why are you dressed like that? Why are you divorced? Why are you so ambitious? Or not ambitious enough? Nobody asks a man these questions with quite the same relentless enthusiasm.

This is where Steinem's feminism remains radical. She understood that patriarchy is not simply a collection of individual bad men. It is a system of expectations. It is the invisible architecture that teaches women to police themselves

before anyone else has to.

Indian feminists know this architecture intimately. We see it in the gender pay gap. In unpaid domestic labour. In the disproportionate burden of childcare. In sexual harassment. In restrictions on women's mobility. In the policing of female sexuality. In the violence faced by women who refuse to conform. And, perhaps most insidiously, in the cultural glorification of female sacrifice.

Women are frequently celebrated for how much they can endure. Steinem asks a more dangerous question: Why should endurance be the measure of a woman's worth at all? That question is revolutionary.

It also explains why economic independence is such an important part of the feminist conversation. A woman who cannot earn, own, inherit or control money is vulnerable to control in every other area of her life. And this is where feminism in India must become far more ambitious.

We cannot celebrate women's empowerment while women continue to perform vast amounts of unpaid labour. We cannot talk about 'women entrepreneurs' while treating childcare as an individual woman's

responsibility. We cannot congratulate women for entering boardrooms while ignoring the millions of women who remain economically invisible.

Steinem understood that personal freedom and structural freedom are inseparable. But perhaps her greatest gift to feminists is her insistence on solidarity.

Indian feminism has its own complicated fault lines: caste, class, religion, language, sexuality, geography and access to education. The woman in a Mumbai boardroom and the woman doing agricultural labour in rural India do not experience patriarchy in the same way. A feminism that pretends otherwise is privilege-wearing feminist lipstick. Steinem's work reminds us that feminism must keep asking: Which woman are we talking about? Who gets heard? Who gets represented? Who gets left behind?

That question is particularly urgent in India, where the word 'feminist' itself is sometimes treated as an insult—as though demanding equality means declaring war on men, marriage, motherhood, or tradition. It doesn't. Feminism is not about women becoming men. It is about women becoming

fully human. That distinction matters.

Steinem also understood the power of storytelling. She recognised that culture doesn't merely reflect society; it helps construct it. The stories we tell about women determine what women believe they are allowed to become. When a girl sees women who are writers, scientists, politicians, entrepreneurs, athletes, artists, mothers, leaders—and women who choose not to be mothers at all—her imagination expands. And imagination is where freedom begins.

The point isn't to imitate Steinem; it is to inherit her audacity. Every generation has to fight its own version of the same ancient bargain: behave yourself and you will be rewarded with acceptance. Steinem's answer was essentially: No. We don't need permission to be ambitious, angry, to leave, to stay, to earn, speak, write, lead, desire, refuse, begin again, or take up space.

The feminist revolution was never about making women acceptable; it was about making them free. And freedom, unlike approval, is not something we should ever have to earn.

—The writer is an acclaimed author

Reshaping perception & overcoming deep-rooted opposition, the party is slowly building its organisational structure

ADIL AKHZER

IN the winter of 2011, as the Kashmir valley geared up for the Republic Day function in Srinagar, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) office, then located in the uptown neighbourhood of Rajbagh, was raided by the Jammu and Kashmir Police to foil the party's plan to hoist the National Flag at Lal Chowk. Among those detained was Muhammad Maqbool War, a BJP veteran from north Kashmir's Baramulla.

Fifteen years later, War was among the several hundred BJP workers who took to the streets last month, carrying party flags and the Tricolour in a protest against the ruling National Conference. The BJP's protest in the heart of Srinagar was in striking contrast to the past. "We were kept in police stations for several days then just for trying to hoist the National Flag. Today, we are on the streets of Kashmir," says 66-year-old War, who was among the few leaders who took up the BJP's mantle in Kashmir after militancy erupted in the Valley in 1990.

As the party managed to mobilise workers in Kashmir last month, for many, it was more than just a show of strength. Those associated with the party in the past were often viewed as political 'untouchables', but the protest showed how the party is gradually making its presence felt in Kashmir's political spectrum.

War says that during the early days, the party was seen as anti-Muslim, but that perception is now changing. "Today, educated people, young people, and retired officers are with the BJP," he says, stressing that more people are joining the party.

The BJP has maintained a strong influence in Jammu for years, where it has steadily increased its electoral footprint. The party won its highest-ever tally of 29 seats in the 2024 Assembly elections. On the other hand, while it failed to win a single seat in the Kashmir valley, it has managed to expand its organisational presence.

Ali Mohammad Mir, widely known as Ali BJP from central Kashmir's Budgam, joined the party in the early 1990s and says he was among the first 13 people to do so. Joining the BJP came at a personal cost, he adds.

"After I joined the BJP I had to migrate to Srinagar. My family told me, 'You have become a Hindu.' They thought joining the BJP meant becoming a Hindu. Years later, they gave me 5 marlas to build a house even though we had three houses," he says.

His close association with former J&K Governor Jagmohan also earned him the label of 'mukhbir' (informant) among militants. The subsequent years proved productive for the party as it managed to bring more people on board, he adds.

According to Mir, 2014 was a turning point when Narendra Modi became Prime Minister. "We, too, got a boost here."

Mir says even the Congress party, which was once not widely accepted by people in Kashmir, eventually managed to win seats in the Valley.

Mudasir Wani, BJP's J&K secretary, lists a number of reasons behind the party's

BJP footprint in Valley



BJP workers protest at Srinagar's Lal Chowk against the National Conference government over outsourcing of jobs, unemployment and alleged corruption; (below) protesters being lathicharged as they try to break through the barricades during a march towards the Civil Secretariat. (ANI/PTI)

"growth" in Kashmir over the last few years. "We focused on the Centre's schemes and conveyed it at the ground level, especially to the beneficiaries, and told them how the Prime Minister is working for the people of Jammu and Kashmir," says Wani, adding that it helped send a "positive" message.

"Initially, the Kashmir unit was considered a single district. But it slowly grew bigger. The unit expanded to three districts, then to 10, and today we have teams in all 47 constituencies in Kashmir," he adds. "The party is now taking its organisational presence down to the polling-booth level. It has already set its sights on the 2029 Assembly elections. We will contest elections on all the seats in Jammu and Kashmir. We have identified seats in Kashmir where we can win, and work has already started for that."

In Kashmir the party is making inroads in several areas, including those that were once the hotbed of separatism. South Kashmir's Pulwama is one such example. Arshid Ahmad Bhat, a BJP candidate from Rajpora in the 2024 Assembly elections, surprised many by securing 5,584 votes from the constituency. Among the issues he raised during the campaign was working towards repealing the controversial Public Safety Act.

Associated with the BJP for several years, Bhat says the biggest achievement for the party is that its "thought and ideology" are now becoming normalised in Kashmir. "People have started to accept us. We may not have won any seats in the 2024 elections, but things are slowly changing. Today, in my area, the BJP has much more acceptance among the people." In the coming years, he says, "you will see that the



party will also get seats in the Kashmir valley. Preparations are already underway".

ELECTORAL SETBACK

In the 2024 Assembly elections, BJP contested 19 of the 47 seats in the Valley and secured more than 50,000 votes. Most of its candidates, however, lost their security deposits.

Unofficially, party workers and some leaders point to a host of issues, including the failure to bring in faces with electoral appeal and the inability to attract voters. "Barring a few places, we haven't been able to do much in terms of getting good leaders into the party," says a BJP veteran.

There is also a general impression in Kashmir that many people are turning towards the BJP either to seek security cover or government accommodation. Since the abrogation

of Article 370 in 2019, law and order has largely remained under the LG administration.

A BJP leader acknowledges this. "We get a lot of such cases where, after joining, people approach the senior leadership asking for recommendation letters, either for accommodation or for security. We politely reject the requests," he says.

With such requests increasing, the BJP office in Srinagar has put up a notice stating: "No accommodation and no security."

The party has also struggled to bring on board people who have a strong connection on the ground. Its leaders have recently faced allegations of corruption and other wrongdoings. Last month, a BJP leader was booked for cheating and fraud in Anantnag district. Before that, the J&K BJP unit suspended the district chief of south Kashmir's Pulwama

ma unit after the police booked him in an alleged extortion case following a complaint from a central Kashmir resident.

Another concern for the local leadership is that some Valley leaders make statements for the sake of "attracting media attention" that harm the party's image in the UT. A leader told *The Tribune* that incidents involving Muslims anywhere in India have a direct impact in Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority region.

"There is a need to send a message that BJP is not anti-Muslim. For that, the central leadership should give more space to Kashmiri leadership, equal to what is being given to Jammu," says a south Kashmir leader.

Ruling National Conference leader Tahir Sayed says there are several reasons behind the BJP's growing presence, including how it has managed to make itself more visible. "The BJP was earlier largely confined to pockets of Jammu, but the 2014 Assembly elections marked a turning point."

He says the party gained significant political legitimacy in Jammu after winning a substantial number of seats, riding on the consolidation of support that followed the Amarnath land row agitation. At the same time, at the national level, the BJP secured a massive mandate in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, further boosting the confidence of the party leadership in J&K.

According to him, the real boost came after the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) joined hands with the BJP to form the government. In 2015, the PDP entered into its first-ever alliance with the diametrically opposed BJP in J&K. PDP founder Mufti Mohammad Sayeed famously described the alliance as a coming together of the "North Pole and South Pole."

The alliance gave the party an important foothold in the Valley, says Sayed. "BJP leaders became ministers, and the party also secured representation in the Legislative Council, giving it a more visible political presence in the region."

After 2019, during the long period of direct Central rule, the BJP acquired "considerable influence over the administration and, in many ways, began calling the shots," he reflects. "During this period, a number of people also joined or associated themselves with the party."

Prof Noor Baba, a Srinagar-based political commentator, echoes Sayed. "BJP has been ruling at the Centre since 2014. Any party ruling at the national level has an advantage," he says. "The BJP did have strong pockets in Jammu, but it did not have any visible presence in Kashmir. But gradually, in the changed political scenario, it seemed to be more visible."

Baba says a visible presence does not necessarily translate immediately into electoral gains. "That's how the Congress came. It initially had no presence, but gradually it started growing."

On the BJP's future in Kashmir, he says, "Much would depend on how the BJP continues to shape national politics. I don't think it will take strong electoral roots immediately. But, in the long run, nobody can predict anything. In politics, everything is possible."

As Apple unfolds its most expensive iPhone

iPhone Duo leads the company's biggest shake-up in years, while the 18 Pro and Pro Max push performance, cameras and prices way higher



APPL's 'Surprise and Shine' event on September 9 delivered exactly the surprise Apple had been saving — a foldable iPhone that costs ₹2,99,900 before you even reach the top storage tier. The iPhone Duo was the star of the night, joined by the iPhone 18 Pro and Pro Max, which also got pricier. Apple has finally entered Samsung's foldable territory, but it has done so in unmistakably Apple fashion. Late, polished and very, very expensive.

A NEW CEO'S BIG FIRST ACT

The event was John Ternus' first major product keynote as Apple CEO after succeeding Tim Cook on September 1. But the leadership change was almost overshadowed by the hardware. Apple unveiled the iPhone 18 Pro and Pro Max, its first foldable, the iPhone Duo, new Apple Watches and AirPods 5. The regular iPhone 18 was conspicuously absent and is expected to arrive later, alongside other more affordable models.

PRO TWINS STEP UP

The iPhone 18 Pro starts at ₹1,64,900 for 256GB, while the Pro Max starts at ₹1,79,900. Both go on pre-order from September 12 and hit stores on September 18. Storage runs all the way to 2TB, with the top Pro Max reaching ₹3,29,900.

Camera: The biggest photographic change is a 48MP Fusion Main camera with a variable aperture. The aperture can physically adjust to control the amount of light entering the lens, giving photographers more flexibility with portraits and difficult lighting.

New chip: The A20 Pro uses 2nm technology. Apple says its six-core CPU is up to 20 per cent faster than



The foldable iPhone Duo starts at ₹2,99,900 (256GB). It costs ₹3,24,900 for 512GB and ₹3,74,900 for 1TB. The 2TB model costs ₹4,49,900. The iPhone 18 Pro starts at ₹1,64,900, and the Pro Max at ₹1,79,900. AP/PTI

the previous generation, while its seven-core GPU is up to 40 per cent faster. A dual 16-core Neural Engine is aimed at on-device AI, while a new vapour chamber helps maintain performance during gaming and AI tasks.

Dynamic Island and battery: The Dynamic Island is smaller, but battery life gets a serious boost. Apple rates the Pro Max for up to 45 hours of video playback.

DUO, THE THINNEST-EVER IPHONE

The iPhone Duo opens like a book. Open it up and you get a 7.6-inch folding OLED display, 50 per cent larger than the iPhone 18 Pro Max's screen. Fold it shut and there is a 5.4-inch outer display for everyday phone use.

Design: At just 5.2mm thick when open, the Duo is Apple's thinnest iPhone yet. It weighs 254 gm and uses a titanium frame and hinge cover. It is also

IP68-rated for dust and water resistance.

Camera: The Duo gets a 48MP Dual Fusion system with a 48MP main and 48MP ultra-wide camera. You can use the main cameras for selfies while seeing yourself on the outer screen, or prop the phone at an angle and shoot without holding it.

New chip: The Duo uses the same A20 Pro as the 18 Pro models. A vapour chamber helps control heat, while the dual-battery design is built around the demands of two screens.

Battery: Apple promises up to 31 hours of video playback when using the inner display and up to 44 hours using the outer screen.

Price: The Duo starts at ₹2,99,900 for 256GB, rises to ₹3,24,900 for 512GB and ₹3,74,900 for 1TB. The 2TB model costs ₹4,49,900.

Yes, Apple has managed to make a phone that costs more than many laptops.

DUO VS GALAXY Z FOLDS

Samsung's Galaxy Z Fold8 starts at ₹1,79,999 in India, which makes it ₹1,19,901 cheaper than the entry-level Duo. Samsung's foldable has a 7.6-inch inner screen, a slightly larger 5.5-inch outer display, a 4,800mAh battery and up to 1TB storage. It weighs 201 grams, considerably less than the 254-gm Duo.

Samsung's advantage: Experience. Samsung has been refining foldables for years, while Apple is arriving late to the party.

Apple's advantage: Ecosystem. The Duo brings Apple's hardware, iOS, Apple Intelligence and services together in a format designed specifically for multitasking.

WHY SO EXPENSIVE?

Counterpoint Research says smartphone memory prices jumped sharply in 2026 as AI data centres soaked up supplies of high-performance memory. The A20 Pro's 2nm manufacturing process also costs more. But rising costs are only part of the story. The \$100 increase in the US starting prices of both Pro models is evidence of that approach.

THE SUPPORTING CAST

The Apple Watch Series 12 and Watch Ultra 4 also arrived with upgraded health features. AirPods 5 brought improved noise cancellation, adaptive audio and live translation.

REAL TEST AHEAD

Apple has finally built the foldable iPhone. The harder part is convincing people that it is worth ₹2,99,900. That is the gamble behind 'Surprise and Shine'. Apple is not chasing Samsung on price, or experience. It is betting that the pull of the iPhone, iOS and its ecosystem can make a two-year-old idea feel new enough to command a decent car's price.

If buyers bite, Apple may turn foldables from a niche gadget into a must-have iPhone. If they balk, Samsung gets to say something it has rarely heard from Apple — we got there first and we did it for less.

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The scars of 9/11 still shape global security and politics

Weekly editorial

This week marked the 25th anniversary of the terror attacks on the United States, a day that is remembered around the world simply as "9/11." Today, there is an entire generation with no personal memory of that tragedy, no reflexive instinct to recall where they were when they heard the first horrific reports.

Twenty-five years later, there are important questions about that day — what was the fourth plane's target, what did the Saudi government know — even though its impact transformed the world, consuming governments and publics alike. As we remember the victims, we should also look hard at ourselves and what our reaction to this tragedy tells us about who we are.

On Sept. 11, 2001, 19 members of al-Qaida, an Islamic terrorist organization, hijacked four U.S. airliners. They crashed two into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, one into the Pentagon, the headquarters of the U.S. Department of Defense and the fourth plowed into a field in Pennsylvania after passengers learned of the unfolding situation and turned on the hijackers.

Nearly 3,000 people died in the attacks — passengers on the planes, individuals in the targeted buildings and emergency personnel who died trying to rescue and protect others on the ground. It is estimated that at least 5,000 others died later of health issues related to the event, while tens of thousands more were wounded or still suffer to this day.

The economic impact is almost impossible to calculate. The immediate property damage is in the tens of billions of dollars. The cost of subsequent security measures, such as the imposition of new travel protocols and the military expenditures that followed amount to trillions of dollars.

That just 19 men, armed with box cutters and a budget of less than half a million dollars, could inflict such damage forced a rethink of the very essence of security. National-level violence had been democratized and soon after there were warnings that we should



A generation after the Sept. 11, 2001, al-Qaida attack on New York City and Washington, the enduring consequences of that event continue to define global security and stability.
JUSTIN LANE / THE NEW YORK TIMES

expect the same with weapons of mass destruction. There soon followed reports and periodic arrests of individuals testing or preparing poisons for ostensible use in mass terror attacks. That insecurity persists and is now elevated daily by news of the destructive potential of artificial intelligence.

U.S. intelligence agencies soon identified the moving force behind the operation as Osama bin Laden, a former mujahideen, or individual engaged in holy struggle, and a key figure in the fight against the Soviet forces that invaded Afghanistan in 1979. He was living in Afghanistan and when that government refused to hand him over, the United States, backed by a United Nations resolution and a broad coalition of forces, attacked and overthrew the Taliban-led

administration that ruled Afghanistan.

Convinced that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was somehow involved, the U.S. soon turned its attention to him and quickly removed him and his government from power. In both countries, however, the ability to destroy did not presage the capacity to rebuild. Instability and disorder reigned in both countries for two decades.

There is a semblance of order in each today, but in Afghanistan the Taliban has returned to power and fear of instability is a constant in Iraq. More alarming is the contagion that spread throughout the region and haunts it to this day. It is estimated that at least 4.5 million people lost their lives as a result of the conflicts that followed Sept. 11. Pockets of unrest remain, kindling to larger

forces that profit from violence and confusion. Combined with a shifting balance of power in the region, the legacy of 9/11 is a volatile landscape, one that continues to be at the center of global politics.

Instability is fueled, in part, by the enduring impact of 9/11 on the United States itself. Four U.S. administrations were mired in the region, stuck in "forever wars" that sapped their attention, their resources and their political legitimacy at home and abroad. Today, 9/11 is a haunting reminder of U.S. failure — a lack of imagination in identifying a threat, a much-vaunted security bureaucracy that couldn't coordinate to address it, a military that could break things but not rebuild them and a political class that indulged its worst impulses.

For many, the response to 9/11 began the U.S. descent into an ugly unilateralism, one that privileged its needs over international law. The greatest irony of that turn is that the fight against Muslim extremism also provided the foundation for international cooperation, even among great powers like Russia and China that today see little in common with the U.S.

The events of that day also triggered a fear of Muslims that metastasized into a grim anti-Islamic sentiment, unleashing Islamophobia around the world. This outlook cast Southeast Asia in a different light. Predominantly Muslim countries like Indonesia and Malaysia assumed new significance as avatars of an enlightened form of Islam, a contrast with the harsh Wahhabism that animated al-Qaida and its supporters. A fight for the heart

of Islam ensued. It continues to this day.

In Japan, the impact of 9/11 was both subtle and profound. Then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was one of the first to call U.S. President George W. Bush and pledged Japan's support in the effort to punish those responsible and the fight against terrorism. He pushed the country to pass a special measures law that allowed the Maritime Self-Defense Forces to dispatch a destroyer to the Indian Ocean to aid and refuel the allied forces in Afghanistan. Koizumi ignored the lack of a U.N. resolution for the mission in Iraq and pledged "unconditional" support there, which culminated in the deployment of a Ground Self-Defense Force unit to that country for reconstruction. Both were groundbreaking steps for the nation after the Pacific War.

The prime minister was motivated by a sense of responsibility, insisting that Japan had benefited greatly from U.S. security efforts and was accordingly obliged to do its part now that the U.S. was besieged. That was a controversial position at the time and objections were heightened by the perception that the U.S. had used the tragedy to pursue a foreign policy agenda untethered to the events of that day.

Nevertheless, Koizumi's logic was adopted by his successors, most notably Shinzo Abe who pushed Japan into a more activist defense and security role in international affairs. That outlook continues to shape Japan's security policy and posture.

While national security has reverted to more traditional frames — great power competition being the dominant theme — the world must remain vigilant to the dangers posed and damage that can be inflicted by smaller groups of determined individuals. While the global war on terror was always a misnomer — how does one fight a tactic? — attention to this new threat vector, yet more enhanced by new technologies, remains critical. Such is the most important lesson of 9/11 a generation later.

The Japan Times Editorial Board

The right wing's political victory in Germany is great news for Putin and his Ukraine war

MARC CHAMPION
BLOOMBERG

To understand the geopolitical importance of this month's election breakthrough for Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the small state of Saxony-Anhalt, pay attention to the apparently unrelated commentary from the Kremlin that emerged around it.

On Sunday, Germany's hard-right populist party won with 44% of the vote. Just shy of the majority needed to run the state on its own. Like many of its ideological counterparts across Europe, the AfD is pro-Russia, believing it shares a common enemy with Moscow in Europe's liberal establishment. These parties are natural allies for Moscow as it tries to secure its best hope for winning the Ukraine war: persuading Europeans to halt the military and financial support that sustains Kyiv's defense.

The most compelling argument to achieve this goal involves stoke fears among European voters that their governments, far from halting a threat from the east by backing Ukraine, are instead inviting war with a nuclear superpower.

Consider Russia's take on the armed drone discovered at Germany's Leipzig/Halle airport. As my colleague Andreas Kluth recently pointed out, it took about a month for the German government to finger Moscow for planning the attack and hit back — with a feather. It closed a Russian consulate and cultural center and, along with several other European countries, called on Vladimir Putin's ambassadors for a chat.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called this milquetoast response "kind of

the beginning of a real war," in remarks that the Russian state-run Vesti TV station posted on Telegram Sunday, the day of the Saxony-Anhalt vote. Denying Russian involvement with the drone, he said Berlin's response reminded him of World War II, when Nazi Germany pulled its diplomats out of Russia just before invading. "They want a war once again," he concluded.

They don't — and Lavrov is well aware of that. Germany has no nuclear weapons and little air defense, artillery, drones or deployable combat troops, so it would never choose to fight Russia. He understands that Adolf Hitler's emptying of diplomatic missions in a country he was about to invade has the polar opposite implications to Chancellor Friedrich Merz's shuttering of offices on his own territory.

In reality, the failed drone plot was just one part of a wide-ranging Russian sabotage offensive, while the German response was symbolic, designed to avoid escalation. Lavrov's hyperbole is disinformation aimed at fueling German fears of war and amplifying the messaging of Kremlin-friendly parties like the AfD.

This campaign is systemic and not limited to Lavrov. So, when the U.S. flew launch systems capable of firing Tomahawk cruise missiles to Norway for exercises last month, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia would have to respond in kind to this new security threat. Sure enough, a few days later Ukrainian intelligence reported that a Russian unit armed with Oreshnik missiles was on its way to eastern Belarus, close to NATO borders.

The Oreshnik is a nuclear-capable, hypersonic ballistic missile with a range up to

around 5,500 kilometers that can put much of Europe at risk. Tomahawks are a much slower, non-nuclear-capable cruise missile that would have limited reach inside Russia from where the exercise took place, between the Norwegian coast and an island halfway to Greenland. No Tomahawks were used — this was a 10-day experiment to establish whether the launchers could be flown to Europe for use, if needed.

The irony here is that Russia's security situation has indeed worsened, but entirely as a result of its own actions. In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, citing the threat from an expanding NATO, no such threat existed. NATO had agreed in 1996 not to station bases on the territories of its new Eastern European members, and didn't until 2017, in response to Russia's actions. Likewise, at the time of Crimea's annexation and for nine months of the war that followed, Ukraine's constitution banned NATO membership; Ukrainians didn't want it. Europe's defense budgets were still declining. Only a year earlier, the U.S. had pulled its last active-duty tanks from the continent.

But while there was no buildup of capabilities for Russian generals to interpret as a potential threat in 2014, today there is. Following Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Finland and Sweden joined NATO. European — and in particular, German — defense budgets reversed their declines. American tanks are back in Europe and there are permanent NATO military bases on the territory of eastern alliance members. NATO membership a key goal of the Ukrainian state that has wide popular support.

At home, Putin treats this reversal as proof



Russian President Vladimir Putin greets U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff and U.S. President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner before talks in Moscow on Sept. 5.
SPUTNIK / VIA AFP-JIJ

of NATO's aggression, allowing him to argue to Russian parents that they're sending their children to die in Ukraine not to capture a few depressed mining towns, but in defense of the Motherland against yet another existential threat from the West, akin to the Napoleonic and Nazi invasions. In Europe, Russia and its (sometimes paid) friends in populist parties such as the AfD portray support for Ukraine and efforts to rebuild lost NATO defenses as provocations that risk World War III and potential nuclear annihilation.

No one in NATO has any interest in attacking Russia, but these fabrications make for

powerful messages and they're paying dividends for the Kremlin. The AfD's success in Saxony-Anhalt won't be its last. Other European populist parties could also succeed at the polls over the coming year, undermining support for financing Ukraine and sanctioning Russia. France, where the far-right National Rally's Marine Le Pen leads the field ahead of presidential elections next spring, offers the biggest potential prize. This week, her party's president, Jordan Bardella, said it was time to stop paying for Kyiv's defense.

This kind of state and the AfD's weekend victory explain Putin's continued unwilling-

ness to compromise in peace talks, despite the growing economic and political costs of the war at home. They will encourage his belief that he's winning the information war in Europe and that, if he only waits a little longer, a new political configuration will hand him Ukraine, together with a divided West and a broken NATO alliance. It brings a whole new meaning to the Soviet-era name given to Moscow's fans in the West: useful idiots.

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the japan times

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opinion

Japan's science-security convergence needs guardrails

Tokyo seeks balance as science, innovation and strategic interests begin to intersect

Geoeconomic Briefing

HIROYUKI MATSUMURA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Japan's latest science and technology strategy makes national security a central pillar of research and innovation policy. The challenge now is to harness science, innovation and security without letting one agenda overwhelm the others.

In March, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's Cabinet approved the Seventh Science, Technology and Innovation Basic Plan, a five-year framework that sets the government's direction on science and technology policy and, crucially, seeks to connect scientific research, industrial innovation and national security around a common set of critical technologies.

That convergence creates opportunities for Japan, but it also raises a fundamental question: How can different policy priorities be connected without allowing one to overwhelm the others? The plan identifies investment priorities, outlines support for research and development by universities and companies and seeks to translate research into social and economic value. But as science, innovation and security increasingly converge, Japan must determine how to govern the tensions among them.

Japan has formulated such plans every five years since the First Basic Plan in 1996. In 2021, "innovation" was added to the title. What distinguishes the Seventh Basic Plan is its explicit identification of "organic coordination between science and technology and national security" as a major policy challenge.

The connection between science and technology policy and security, however, is not new. The Sixth Basic Plan reflected concerns about interstate technology competition, technology leakage and research integrity, including transparency and fairness in research. During the Sixth Plan, Japan also advanced policies linking critical technologies to security, including the Economic Security Promotion Act of 2022 and the Key and Advanced Technology R&D through Cross Community Collaboration Program, known as the K Program.

Against this backdrop, the Seventh Basic Plan advances the "strategic prioritization



Japan's minister of science and technology, Yohhei Matsumoto, speaks during a budget committee session in the Lower House of parliament in Tokyo in December 2025. The government must determine how to connect science and innovation with security.

BLOOMBERG

Cultivation and protection are closely linked. Alongside strategic research and development in dual-use technologies, the plan calls for both the promotion and protection of technologies important to economic security, as well as stronger research security. As a result, research and development, social implementation, security applications and protection increasingly converge around the same technologies and researchers.

Governance still matters

That convergence creates a governance problem because the policies involved operate according to different principles.

Scientific research values researcher autonomy, diversity of inquiry and the long-term accumulation of knowledge. Innovation policy emphasizes commercialization, social implementation and value creation. Security policy prioritizes national objectives, technological advantage, protection and risk management.

These priorities cannot simply coexist without tension. Excessive security controls could restrict international collaboration and open-ended research, weakening Japan's scientific capabilities. Excessive openness, meanwhile, could increase the risk of technology leakage and undermine strategic advantages. Protecting one value can therefore impose costs on another.

The distribution of those costs and responsibilities is equally important. Universities and researchers involved in security-related fields may have to conduct due diligence on research partners and funding sources, manage sensitive data and incorporate security considerations into decisions that previously focused primarily on scientific merit.

How those burdens are divided among the government, universities, researchers and companies will be crucial to sustaining the connection between science, technology and security.

This is why governance matters. It means determining who sets priorities when objectives conflict, what criteria are used to make those decisions and who bears the resulting costs and responsibilities.

Governance is already taking place. Selective government funding for critical technologies influences the direction of research and development, while research security

requirements and export controls affect academic partnerships and the handling of scientific outcomes. The question is therefore not whether governance is necessary but where the boundaries among different policy priorities should be drawn.

The Seventh Basic Plan addresses this challenge institutionally. In seeking to renew Japan's science, technology and innovation system, it calls for moving beyond siloed management structures toward a layered approach that treats policy functions, rather than organizations, as the relevant units. It also seeks to strengthen the Council for Science, Technology and Innovation, chaired by the prime minister and serving as the government-wide coordinating body for science and tech policy.

But creating structures and procedures does not by itself resolve conflicts among different policy logics. When scientific research, innovation, economic security and national security point in different directions, what should take precedence? Where should the boundaries be drawn?

The Seventh Basic Plan provides criteria for making such judgments, but it does not clearly establish what should happen when those criteria conflict. Once different policy objectives reach the same research institutions, technologies and researchers, breaking down silos is only the beginning. The deeper challenge is deciding how those policy domains should interact and how their differences should be managed.

This is not uniquely a Japanese problem. As scientific and technological capabilities increasingly shape industrial competitiveness and national security, liberal democracies face the same challenge: connecting science and technology to security requirements while preserving the autonomy of universities and the openness of research.

The goal should not be to force science, innovation and security into a single logic. It should be to create governance capable of connecting them while preserving their distinct purposes and appropriate autonomy. Japan's Seventh Basic Plan makes that task explicit. Its success will depend not simply on which technologies it chooses to prioritize, but on how it manages the tensions created when scientific ambition, economic value and national security converge.

Hiroyuki Matsumura is a professor in the Faculty of Economics at Komazawa University in Tokyo. Geoeconomic Briefing is a series featuring researchers at the IOG focused on Japan's challenges in that field. It also provides analyses of the state of the world and trade risks, as well as technological and industrial structures.

of technology areas." It identifies 17 emerging and foundational technology areas and groups six of them into national strategic technology categories: artificial intelligence and advanced robotics, quantum technology, semiconductors and communications, biotechnology and health care, fusion energy and space.

The significance lies partly in the convergence of these priorities. AI, quantum technology, semiconductors, space and biotechnology appear repeatedly not only in the Seventh Basic Plan, but also in Japan's economic security, defense and growth strategies. The rationale differs—scientific potential, responses to social challenges, industrial competitiveness, economic security, technological autonomy and defense capability—but the technologies being targeted increasingly overlap.

The Seventh Basic Plan therefore does more than recognize an existing trend. While acknowledging that science, technology and innovation policy and national security policy have distinct purposes, it makes their "organic coordination" an explicit policy objective. The plan brings together policy currents that have developed separately and raises a cen-

tral question: How should the promotion of scientific research, the creation of economic and social value and national security requirements be connected and governed?

The rationale for dual-use

The growing importance of dual-use technologies makes that question particularly urgent. Technologies developed primarily for civilian purposes—including drones, artificial intelligence, satellite communications and semiconductors—increasingly play important roles in security. It is becoming difficult to distinguish civilian from defense technologies simply by considering who developed them or what they were originally designed to do.

Basic research at universities and national research institutions is not outside this reality. The Seventh Basic Plan acknowledges that, in practice, it is "extremely difficult" to distinguish civilian technologies from those related to security.

The plan argues that investment in dual-use technologies can advance science and technology, strengthen industrial competitiveness and support long-term economic growth while also maintaining technological

advantages important to national security. In this sense, dual-use technology is more than a technical category. It is a bridge connecting science and technology, industry, economic security and national security.

The plan calls for a "ecosystem in the security field" that extends beyond the traditional defense industry to companies, startups, universities and national research and development agencies. It also seeks to promote a "two-way flow" of technologies between civilian and security applications.

The role of universities and researchers is consequently expanding. The plan calls for dual-use research and development "including at the basic stage" and proposes new research hubs at universities and national research institutes while strengthening support for basic research. For basic research supported by the Defense Ministry, it calls for dialogue and efforts to deepen understanding so researchers can participate "without hesitation."

The relationship between universities and security is not new. But alongside the traditional role of protecting research through research integrity and research security, universities are increasingly expected to help cultivate technologies that contribute to security.

Why the far right isn't winning elections in Japan

Kuni Miyake



The landslide victory by the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the eastern German state of Saxony-Anhalt on Sept. 6 seems to have shocked many in Europe, even though it had been somewhat anticipated.

By contrast, related coverage in Japan was primarily factual, without conveying the same level of "shock" seen in the West. At the very least, there is little sense of crisis that such a phenomenon might occur in Japan anytime soon.

There is, however, no guarantee how long such optimism will last. The trends of nationalism, "America First" or "Europe First" attitudes, and xenophobic and discriminatory populism in Western countries over more than a decade are by no means temporary phenomena. Right-wing populism—which has served as an outlet for the frustration and anger of the "forgotten people" resulting from the widening income gap caused by the IT revolution and neoliberal capitalism of the 1990s—has real potential to become a political trend in Japan as well, a country that has experienced its own "Lost Three Decades."

Therefore, it would certainly not be a waste of time to compare and analyze the recent rise of the AfD in Germany, the current situation in other Western countries and similar political movements in Japan. My assessment is as follows:

The AfD's growing support is not merely a temporary surge in votes but the result of a complex interplay of structural discontent and social change. While the AfD fell short of the votes needed to govern alone and will need coalition partners to form a state government, its ability to win support among the electorate is on the rise.

The first and foremost reason is likely dissatisfaction with illegal immigration and refugees. Following the large-scale acceptance

of refugees beginning in 2015 under the Merkel administration, anxiety among voters in Germany has grown due to strained infrastructure, concerns about deteriorating public safety and recent security incidents such as knife attacks. Consequently, distrust in the mainstream parties' immigration policies has intensified, leading to increased support for the AfD, which explicitly advocates strict border controls and remigration.

The second reason is economic stagnation and financial hardship, particularly dissatisfaction with soaring energy prices and inflation. Economic sanctions against Russia stemming from the war in Ukraine, along with decarbonization policies, have

driven up energy prices, directly affecting the lives of ordinary citizens. Consequently, amid persistent high prices and economic stagnation, public dissatisfaction with the ruling coalition's economic management has grown.

Another factor that must not be overlooked is regional disparity within Germany, particularly in the former East German regions. The AfD's recent string of election victories—or explosive gains in voter support—has primarily occurred in the former East German regions. Even decades after German reunification, these states still grapple with unresolved issues such as the East-West wage gap, the exodus of young people and disparities in infrastructure.

Until now, Germany's major political parties have maintained a so-called firewall—an agreement to refuse to form a coalition with the AfD. But as negotiations among mainstream parties stall and politics come to a standstill, people have felt that the traditional parties are fixated solely on staying in power and are not looking out for the people. Consequently, protest votes against the political establishment have increasingly gravitated toward the AfD. Furthermore, right-wing rhetoric that would previously have been considered extreme—has gradually permeated mainstream society through the proliferation of social media and debates in the mainstream media, thereby reducing people's reluctance to vote for such parties.

In fact, these phenomena are already unfolding and taking root simultaneously across Europe. Not only in Italy, the Netherlands and France but also in Austria, Sweden and Finland, there have been a succession of

instances in which right-wing populist parties have become the largest party or formed coalition governments. The biggest reason for the "shock" this week is likely the realization that even Germany—a country that has consistently pursued denazification at the national level since the postwar era—may be unable to stop this trend.

So, what about Japan? There is no doubt that Japan shares social factors common to Europe and the United States. Recently, interest in issues related to foreign workers and illegal residents has been growing. As the acceptance of foreign workers expands to address labor shortages, reports of lax enforcement of rules and criminal incidents in some regions have spread on social media, leading to growing popular dissatisfaction and anxiety. Furthermore, as the Japanese economy stagnates and real wages struggle to grow, disappointment with established political parties, whether in the ruling or opposition blocs, is rapidly mounting in Japan as well.

In Japan, too, "anti-globalization" and "anti-establishment" movements spreading through social media are gaining support, and there are already examples of new political parties and movements—backed by anti-establishment sentiment and online forums—gaining more seats in parliament.

On the other hand, there are no doubt fundamental differences between Germany and Japan. The biggest difference from Germany or Europe lies in the "scale" of refugees and immigrants. Japan does not face a situation like Europe, where hundreds of thousands to millions of refugees and illegal immigrants arrive annually and border



Sohei Kamiya, leader of the right-wing Sanseito Party, speaks at an election event in Tokyo on Jan. 27, ahead of February's snap election. REUTERS

control is relatively straightforward.

Also, there is no strong far-right political party to serve as a receptacle for such sentiments. Traditionally, Japan's ruling parties have been conservative, having to some extent incorporated conservative values and making it difficult for the kind of confrontational dynamics seen in Europe to emerge. For example, after right-wing populist parties rose to prominence in the 2025 Upper House election, the Liberal Democratic Party—led by conservative Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi—was able to recapture control of the Lower House in the 2026 election, as well as disaffected votes that might otherwise have flowed to

these right-wing populist parties.

Even so, concerns remain. In Japan, too, the political environment bears similarities to that of Europe. If Japan's political establishment continues to fail to adequately address public anxieties and economic challenges, emerging political forces capable of channeling similar discontent may gain further ground, even in the near future. Ironically, Takaichi—sometimes described in the West as "right wing"—appears to be preventing that from happening so far.

Kuni Miyake, a former career diplomat, is president of the Foreign Policy Institute.

THE AUSTRALIAN

A divided One Nation will be of benefit only to Labor

Ascendant Pauline Hanson party must be put under the microscope

One Nation is learning the great lesson that with popularity comes attention and with that comes responsibility. Having reached a position in opinion polls of being the most popular choice for voters and demonstrating that support in two-by-two polls on opposite sides of the continent, One Nation no longer can be dismissed as a protest party with a small but significant following like the Greens. Unfortunately, the internal divisions and irregular personality dispositions of hopeful One Nation MPs have not changed.

The past weeks have shown that the confidence of party supporters that One Nation has the policies to govern and is ready to be considered an alternative government in waiting is premature and overly ambitious. Pauline Hanson and her party officials have spent the week defending their choice of leader for Victoria who has a known history of drug use, an unconventional sexual history, has twice been charged with drink driving and was forced to return money inappropriately claimed as a first-home buyers grant.

Warren Pickering has received strong support from his party for having turned his life around in the armed forces. He gave an impressive performance in his own defence accompanied by two of his children. But it is wrong to suggest Mr Pickering's past is not relevant to the present or that One Nation has been singled out for special treatment.

Voters are entitled to know what they are getting, and this is particularly so given Mr Pickering is hopeful of getting enough support in the upcoming state election to hold a position of influence in the new Victorian government and, in an unlikely turn of events, become premier.

It would be a failure of our political system for Mr Pickering's personal history to not be subject to forensic examination. What has been uncovered is less a reflection on Mr Pickering than it is on the credibility of One Nation to demonstrate the depth and maturity necessary to select candidates who will give the party the best

chance of success and be able to deliver should they find their way into parliament.

The dispute with Liberal MP Andrew Hastie following One Nation's publication of a satirical cartoon that branded the former SAS soldier a "traitor" is loaded with personal and professional animosity. It is also an existential political issue for Mr Hastie given the success One Nation had in the West Australian state-by-election for Secret Harbour, which includes parts of his federal electorate of Canning.

The bigger issue, however, is the lack of discipline within One Nation about how to respond. Barnaby Joyce has a good deal more experience than his party colleagues and saw the wisdom of apologising to Mr Hastie because the attack on him was disrespectful to all former servicemen and women. The failure of One Nation senator Sean Bell to support his deputy leader illustrates the internal divisions.

Many One Nation supporters might agree with Senator Bell but the maxim that disunity is death in politics inevitably extends to One Nation as much as anyone else. The higher profile the party becomes, the more it must behave as if it knows what it is doing. A failure to show discipline in candidate selection and public engagement will ultimately bring One Nation unstuck, as it has following previous episodes of electoral support at a state level.

Mr Pickering's admission to drug use and challenged personal circumstances in his early 20s may well be a positive for a party that prides itself as being anti-politics. But it also will confirm the suspicions that others have about Senator Hanson's ability to pull together a credible team. One of the consequences of engaging directly with Mr Hastie has been to animate an alternative Liberal leader in a way that has finally reminded those in the opposition ranks how to fight. This could be a problem for Liberal incumbent Angus Taylor one day, but the biggest winner from One Nation's conflict with all comers will unfailingly be Anthony Albanese and Labor.

Protect most vulnerable children

Frisby Court, Port Hedland is ultimate wake-up call on safeguarding

Five months after the abduction and murder of Kumanjayi Lili Baby in the Northern Territory and shortly after The Australian revealed the tragic story of the three Hawke children, Jamelia, 10, Arnda, 7, and baby Kelvin, four months – stabbed and strangled to death by their mother in the West Australian mining town of Port Hedland in 2022 – another group of vulnerable children is at extreme risk of harm in the same town.

Ros Thomas reports that the WA Department of Child Protection has known for at least nine months, if not years, that as many as 15 children – the youngest aged five and seven – have been living alone, fending for themselves without parents or adult supervision for up to a week at a time.

Their squalid, putrid home in Frisby Court, Port Hedland, in the wealthy Pilbara, is shared by sisters aged 11 and 14, their little brother, aged 7, and a boy cousin, 5. Their parents, who rent the house from Homeswest, a WA public housing authority, regularly "shoot through" or "go bush", according to neighbours. The parents must be held to account. The girls wander around at night, too scared to sleep for fear of abuse by men who know they're easy targets. Then they sleep all day and do not go to school.

Neighbours report the adult-free property is a magnet for gangs of teens who use it as a drug den. Local police officers have notified the South Hedland DCP about the situation dozens of times.

Mary, an Indigenous elder formerly connected to the Hedland DCP, told Thomas the bureaucracy was "shit-scared about another Stolen Generation". She says she fears that if they are not rescued, one of the children will die. Police say the DCP will not enter the house, despite having the legal right to remove children at risk of harm. As soon as they know the children are Indigenous, nothing happens. Whatever the real reason for the department's negligence – laziness, indifference, fear of claims about "stolen children" or ideological obsession with kinship – it must be forced to act, to give the children a chance at life. As a neighbour said, the DCP is "a gutless bunch".

The deaths of the Hawke children – whose grandmother wanted to care for them – is an indictment on the DCP and the Cook government, which is refusing to hold an inquest into their murders. It must order an inquest so that lessons can be learned about the horrific failures of the child protection system in that case. But this makeshift believes further action is required. We call on the WA Premier and his ministers to establish the DCP and initiate an overhaul of its leadership and culture. If the state fails, Anthony Albanese and Indigenous Australians Minister Malarndirri McCarthy should step in. Surely, as a nation we cannot tolerate children living in such conditions. We must act to help the children of Frisby Court before it is too late.

Trump's ultimate electoral bribe

Electoral bribes are nothing new, including in Australia. But Donald Trump, at the Republican mid-term convention in Dallas, has taken the strategy to extremes with potentially serious economic consequences. The US President has promised \$US500 (\$6900) to every adult US citizen, about 240 million people – to bespent in the US only – if this party wins the House of Representatives and the Senate at the November mid-term elections. It remains to be seen if his pitch succeeds, which will depend heavily on getting out the vote. Voter turnout for midterms is generally lower than for presidential polls.

The parties of incumbent presidents often lose ground in mid-term elections. And the Republican majority, especially in the house, is narrow. Mr Trump, despite his low approval rating, has made the elections a referendum on his leadership, telling Americans to "pretend that he is on the ballot". At their convention, Republicans are seizing on changes in the Democratic Party, Joe Kelly reports, and the insurgency of democratic socialist candidates. This could be a potent weapon for the Republicans, highlighted by senator for Texas Ted Cruz, who said the elections were the "most consequential midterms of our lifetimes".

Mr Trump had transformed the GOP

into the nation's "blue-collar party", Senator Cruz argued, while the election of Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York epitomised a rising generation of progressive Democrats who hated US values.

But with the US budget deficit at \$US1.9 trillion (5.8 per cent of GDP compared with an average 3.8 per cent over the past 50 years) and a \$US40 trillion national debt, the \$US1.2 trillion cost of Mr Trump's bribe is raising concerns about financial stability. Economists and investors who value fiscal responsibility point to likely inflationary effects, increases in the deficit and debt, and hundreds of trillions of dollars more in interest payments. On the upside, US productivity is strong.

Mr Trump's \$US5000 promise smacks of desperation at a time he is saddled with the unpopular Iran war. The size of the bribe underlines the importance of the midterms and his abhorrence at the prospect of losing control of congress and being rendered a "lame duck" in his final two years in the White House. Democrats would likely use a victory in the midterms to raise the temperature with Mr Trump. Gerard Baker wrote in The Wall Street Journal, launching investigations and pursuing impeachment while lurching further to the left. From both sides, the contest is no blueprint for stability.

LETTERS

Conservatives have a strong case to end their quarrels

What a sad spectacle Australia is witnessing: two strong-minded Australians (Andrew Hastie and Pauline Hanson) locked in an unnecessary political stoush over a cartoon meme.

The caricature may have been intended as cheeky, tongue-in-cheek Australian humour, but portraying Andrew Hastie as unpatriotic was always likely to provoke a strong reaction. Given the meme had remained on the net for many weeks, it should have been confronted and removed much earlier.

Tensions between Hastie and One Nation appear to have been on the boil for some time, but recent personal animosity has brought them to a head, prompting an exchange that increasingly resembles a schoolyard brawl rather than a serious political disagreement. The unfortunate reality is that the conservative cause is now the loser.

Public infighting creates division, damages credibility and risks handing Labor an unnecessary advantage at the next election. As an ex-veteran, I can also understand Hastie's indignation at being portrayed as unpatriotic. Equally, One Nation should recognise

countries prepared and willing to fight.

We have an economy in free fall, no electricity to keep up with artificial intelligence, no sovereign fuel supplies, and an education system totally corrupted by extreme leftist woke ideology. This monolith of failed governance requires Hastie to now man the guns on all the front battle-lines. These include Labor's chronic political avoidance, unnecessary lies and incompetence even at delivering its own agenda. Our government needs a rocket.

Betty Cockman, Dongara, WA

I would implore both the Liberal Party and One Nation to wake up to themselves and stop their feud involving Pauline Hanson and Andrew Hastie. If they continue, I can assure them they will destroy Australia's economy.

They will guarantee Labor will have another term and that will be a disaster for Australia. Our economy and our living standards simply cannot withstand another term of economic ignorance.

The solution is simple: both sides should do the right thing for Australia. The two conservative parties need to stop their selfish

power struggles and put Australia first. Form a conservative alliance to defeat Labor or Australia will be a Third World country within five years.

Ross Dillon, Teneriffe, Qld

What a ridiculous situation, where One Nation is egregiously targeting Andrew Hastie as a traitor. He is one of the very few federal parliamentarians who has substance. He is a veteran who served in the SAS and was active service in Afghanistan and has an honourable military record.

Dennis Walker, North Melbourne, Vic

It's a shame One Nation, under the guidance of satire, thinks Andrew Hastie is fair game. The demonstration of our veterans must stop.

Gabrielle Baker, Carina, Qld

One Nation has been on a roll but now Pauline Hanson has tripped by not removing the cartoon defaming Andrew Hastie. At least Barnaby Joyce has had the decency to apologise. It is not a good look for a boozing leader – in fact it could be politically fatal.

John Harding, Eastwood, NSW

Women have a good reason to feel dismayed and concerned

I am thoroughly dismayed but not surprised that the High Court has rejected the appeal in the Glebe/Tickle case – such will be the sorry situation while the Sex Discrimination Act remains a dog's breakfast in relation to the definition, or lack thereof, of sex and gender.

Who would have imagined that in Australia in 2026 women and girls would no longer have any rights to dignity, respect, privacy and safety?

Men masquerading as women, as they only have a self-identity as a woman without any alteration in appearance etc, now trump the rights of women to sex-based safety.

Women have been reduced to second-class citizens with no rights at all to say no to men and boys freely entering all our spaces – toilets, change rooms, sports teams, prisons and so on.

Women and girls who have the audacity to object are likely to be dragged through the courts for years, at huge monetary and emotional expense. Australia is a regressive, sad and risky country for all women.

So much for all our government and educational institutions' declarations of concern about violence against women. Gaslighting of women at its worst.

Celia McKew, Mittagong, NSW

Terrorism risk remains

Friday was the 25th anniversary of the terror attack on the US that saw co-ordinated Islamic extremist assaults on the World Trade Centre twin towers in New York, the Pentagon just outside Wash-

ington DC and a failed attack on the White House. Yet the ideology that underlined these attacks still remains with us. Australia is not immune from this terror. There have been several terror-related murders. Yet it is astonishing that many within the political class refuse to acknowledge the continuing risk of this ideology. Labor ignored ASIO advice on the rise of antisemitism, could not mention Islamic extremism after the Bondi Beach massacre and stalled on creating a royal commission.

Martin Newington, Aspendale, Vic

Energy for data centres

Hyperscale data centres will likely consume more than 10 per cent of our grid's electricity long before 2050 ("Getting the facts right on energy", 11/9).

Your editorial suggests we have two choices: tell these data centres they are not welcome or allow them to be powered by any energy source, clean or dirty.

Regardless of the energy source, however, data centres drawing power from the grid will put upward pressure on electricity prices for everyday Australians. A third option is to require data centres to provide enough new generation capacity to match their demand. Seems fair to me.

Larni Dibbon, Glen Iris, Vic

Flag is not property

Tom Switzer offers a coherent argument ("Proposed flag-burning ban misses the point of our freedoms", 11/9). However, I beg to differ. The first point Switzer makes is that our freedoms of speech mean we are "accustomed to the idea that citizens may protest against and criticise their



The Australian's front page, Friday, September 11

government". In my view, this is a confusing argument. The Australian flag is not a symbol of Australian government. It is a symbol of Australians and their way of life.

If one has a beef with government, go for it, but do not take out your frustrations on every Australian. Then the article says, "He or she owns the flag. Let them burn it." This reduces our flag to only representing personal property. It is not and never should be simply personal property.

It is a symbol owned by every good citizen, not a possession owned by one alone. In the same way, burning a bible or a Koran is not to simply dispose of a book. Such an act is always intended to offend all followers of those faiths.

Similarly, when the Ku Klux Klan used a burning cross – the cross undeniably being a symbol of Christian faith – they were not simply disposing of bits of wood. True Christians were offended and felt threatened by the KKK. Any society that turns a blind eye to the desecration of symbols that represent what Australians

hold dear is in reality threatening and undermining the freedoms Australians have a right to enjoy – rights hard worked for.

Geoff Ellis, Smithfield, Qld

Education sector cost

The article by Adam Creighton repeats the prevalent myths about the financial and social benefits of large foreign student numbers ("Education 'industry' not the bonanza we're sold", 11/9).

Of course, the people mostly confirming the myths are the vice-chancellors, snugly sitting behind their large salaries, without much thought for the impact on housing, rents and infrastructure generally. If these impacts were factored in, the net "export" benefit would fall short of the \$54bn figure constantly quoted. Given that these are supposed to be educational institutions teaching economics as one of their core subjects, one might expect that they would at least understand the basic balance sheet of their endeavours.

Don Paul, Buderim, Qld

LAST POST

Osama bin Laden stated that the 9/11 attacks were revenge for US foreign policy and support for Israel. With many Western leaders denouncing Israel, repeating lies about it and holding it to a standard well above those of other nations, they are fulfilling bin Laden's wishes.

Sue Davis, Lindfield, NSW

Here's a dangerous idea. Let's platform an equal number of conservative writers at writers' festivals around the country. Then we might really have that contest of ideas that endorses the notion that we are a mature nation, not afraid of dissenting views and robust but respectful dialogue.

Ann Rennie, Surrey Hills, Vic

A change of government after a few terms is good for democracy, reduces the chances of corruption setting in and increases societal development.

Ken Moore, Chapel Hill, Qld

Instead of flooding the country with skilled migrants, Peter Minakauskas, how about producing some skilled Australians ("Don't let populism dictate Australia's migration policy", 10/9)?

Trevor Farran, Hackney, SA

We need to take notice of former prime minister Kevin Rudd's words regarding Australia's complacency ("Nation is on borrowed time, Rudd", 11/9). We'll present rather tin-eared federal government comprehend, change direction and listen? Particularly where AI and productivity are concerned, this nation has so much potential. Our productivity requires thoughtful decisions.

Claire Joffile, Buderim, Qld

All our economic indicators are pointing toward Jim Chalmers needing to rehearse the immortal words of his hero Paul Keating: "This is the recession we needed to have."

Kingsley Sullivan, Mt Hawthorn, WA

The Prime Minister justifies the \$6m grant to his local golf club as an election commitment. No changes to capital gains tax and no changes to the ageing were also election commitments. The artful dodger evades again.

Greg Pauli, Yallinup, WA

Let's change the immigration debate from numbers to filling two criteria: who do we need and want?

Steve Wilbin, Bushland Beach, Qld

The Pauline Hanson-Andrew Hastie-Jacqui Lambie war of words is all about politics, and the RSL would have been wise to stay well away ("RSL's serve to 'offend' an 'Australian' veteran by 'insulting all veterans'", 11/9). Unless, of course, it wants to play politics.

Leigh Alver, Floreat, WA



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TIME & TIDE

Trailblazing scholar breathed fresh life into classics

OBITUARY

Pat Easterling, first female regius professor of Greek at Cambridge University. Born Blackburn, Lancashire, March 11, 1934; died August 18, aged 92.

Pat Easterling spent much of her academic career discussing with an ancient Greek warrior killed his daughter, as depicted in Christopher Nolan's recent film The Odyssey (2026). Agamemnon thought he was doing the right thing by sacrificing Iphigenia. She was offered up to the goddess Artemis in exchange for a fair wind when the Greek ships were becalmed on their way to rescue Helen from Troy. Iphigenia agreed to her fate. Clytemnestra, her mother, was not so keen.

Values change. Easterling told the Cambridge Evening News in 1995, shortly after her appointment as the 36th regius professor of Greek at the University of Cambridge, the first and thus far only woman to hold a post endowed by Henry VIII in 1540. "The way we



Classicalist Pat Easterling

look at literature changes all the time. We are much more interested in how society works than we used to be. This makes your reading of the material change as you go along," she said.

Easterling's specialism was Sophocles and she achieved recognition for her 1982 edition of his Athenian tragedy Trachiniae, which she described by one critic as "an exemplar of modern commentary".

She also edited the dramatist's final play, Oedipus at Colonus, founded with Ted Kenney the Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics series to help students trans-

late, interpret and appreciate classical works; and was editor of The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy (1997) in which seven distinguished scholars presented the famous corpus in a modern context.

Her scholarship extended to treating the boards. For many years she was involved with the triennial Cambridge Greek play as study and organiser, a tradition involving students and alumni that dates back to 1882 when Sophocles' Ajax was performed in the original language.

Nevertheless, teaching remained at the heart of her work. From her elegant office in the Kennedy building she dispensed tea, sherry and guidance.

Professor Dame Mary Beard, a former student and later a Cambridge colleague, described her classes and seminars felt like "an oasis of humanity".

Easterling not only taught Greek literature but also how to deal with complexity and the limits of understanding.

Beard recalled on one occasion being put on the spot by a member of the university's administration who, keen to identify potential financial savings, asked what classicists taught. "I had no idea how to answer and feared that I would

be called out," she said. "But Pat responded instantly: 'It teaches you to read difficult things'."

Patricia Elizabeth Fairfax was born in Blackburn, Lancashire, in 1934, the only child of Edward Fairfax, branch manager of an insurance office, and his wife Annie (nee Smith). She was the only 13-year-old at Blackburn High School for Girls who wanted to study ancient Greek, drawn by the rarity of the language and its literature.

She won a scholarship to study classics at Newnham College, Cambridge. Her tutors there included Joyce Reynolds, who was renowned for driving a party of all-female academics to classical sites in Egypt, Syria and Turkey in the 1950s.

Coming out of a classics exam one day she met Henry Easterling, known as John, a fellow undergraduate. They were married in 1956, the same year as they both appeared on stage in The Bacchae by Euripides performed in the original language that year's Cambridge Greek play. He became a lecturer in ancient philosophy at Trinity College and the university draughtsman.

Their holidays often were spent hillwalking in the Lake District, Scotland and modern-day Greece.

He died in 2021 and she is survived by their son, Tom, a retired National Health Service manager.

She described being a working mother before the term was coined. "Bringing up children and having a full-time job is very hard, but it never occurred to me not to," she said.

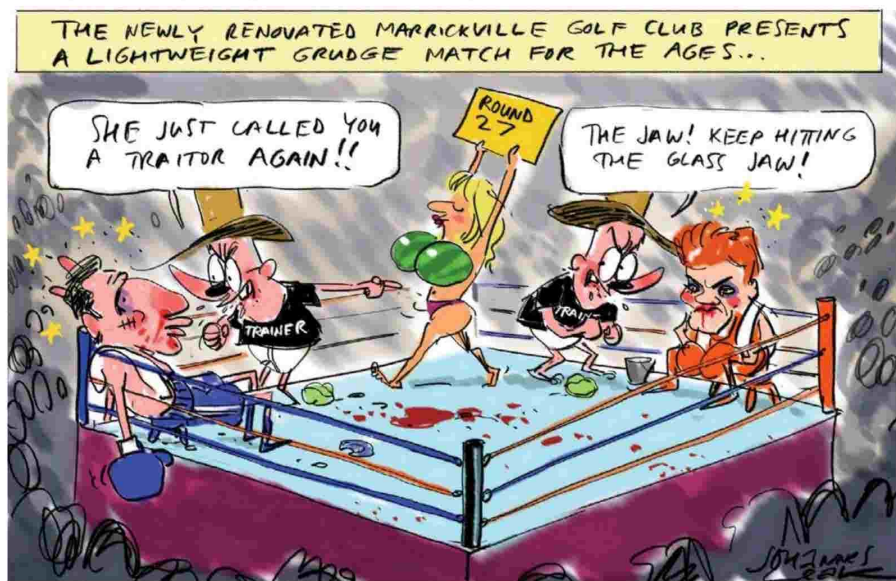
She officially retired in 2001, the same year as a group of her students published Homer, Tragedy and Beyond: Essays in Honour of PE Easterling, covering a remarkably wide range of topics from archaic epic and tragedy to palaeography and even cinema, reflecting the diversity of her interests. Another festschrift, Sophocles and the Greek Tragic Tradition (2011), was a belated 75th birthday gift from many of her former students.

She remained active in the field of Hellenic studies until about 10 years ago and was still checking her pigeonhole at Newnham College until recently.

In 2021, Easterling, Beard and Reynolds held a joint party to mark their collective 235th "birthday". The occasion was celebrated with a cake in the form of the Parthenon. As a Times Daily report aptly noted, it was naturally left in ruins.

THE TIMES

DAILY CARTOON | JOHANNES LEAK



LACHLAN MURDOCH

Bearing witness to the horror of Bondi



The last time I spoke at a gathering similar to this was on November 26, 2025, for the launch of The Australian's A Different Country, a landmark collection of journalism published in partnership with HarperCollins. It compiled two years of the paper's coverage of the October 7 massacre, the subsequent war in Gaza and the rising tide of antisemitism here at home in Australia.

The launch was a gathering of business and community leaders along with Australia's premier journalists, all calling out antisemitism and all united in the fight against it.

The title of that book, A Different Country, and much of the dialogue that day recognised that the Australia we all thought we knew, one where Jews can live in peace and without fear, had changed. Yet the mood in the room that day leaned toward optimism. Perhaps the worst was over?

There was a quiet determi-

nation among us. We were making plans to repair the social fabric, to educate our kids, to build a better tomorrow. We were focused on the problems, until some of our rabbis and our friends, and the media, and we could make a difference. We had to.

And then, two weeks later, terror and tragedy came to Bondi. I remember Sharri and I were having dinner with the kids just up the road when the phone started frantically ringing.

"Something's happening in Bondi," he told us. He was getting a lot of messages from his mates at the beach.

Like many Australians, we turned straight to Sky, now News24, and Sharri Markson was on air within minutes from a nearby home where she was celebrating Hanukkah. Within the hour she was at the beach.

Alex Rychyn, you too were able to do an interview in those

first hours, and then of course your strength and your leadership was, and still is, a very regular, very important part of our coverage.

Together, both of you brought your insights, your compassion and your empathy to the attack and its aftermath as it happened.

Journalism is about getting to the raw and sometimes difficult truth. Most people don't understand how hard it is to tell these stories when they are deeply personal to you. And most people won't understand the sacrifices you both have made in telling these stories.

But your sacrifices pale in comparison to the sacrifices and to the immeasurable loss of so many of you here tonight. I know that some of you are still recovering from injuries, and many others will forever be traumatised by what happened that day.

We grieve for all who were injured and lost. Your sons. Your daughters. Your parents and your husbands and your wives. Your rabbis and your friends.

This book by Sharri and Alex, Bondi Terror, which we are launching here tonight, remembers and honours them, as well as the many heroes who stepped in, who stepped up, when it mattered most.

I cannot imagine how hard it was to sit with Sharri and Alex and tell your story, and the story of your loved ones. I can't imagine it.

But without your courage and your strength and your honesty, this book could not have been written. It has been a powerful moving work, faithfully and accurately describing what happened on December 14, its lead-up and its aftermath.

I know many of you also pro-

vided testimony to the royal commission, which has been incredibly important.

Just on Thursday we learned from the front page of The Australian that Jewish leaders had warned then Victorian premier Jacinta Allan 10 weeks before the Adass synagogue firebombing of escalating threats of violence by Iran against Jews, including in Australia.

"We seek urgent reassurance that all is being done to ensure Jewish Victorians can practise our faith in safety," their letter said.

I am hopeful, thanks to many of your powerful and moving testimonies to the commission, that its findings will begin to chart a path forward for Australia.

Their warning, and the reporting of it, almost two years later, matters. It matters because we now know, with the benefit of bitter hindsight, that the Adass firebombing on December 6, 2024, was a forerunner of the horror that was to take place here at Bondi. And that this warning, like many others, was met with silence or indifference or political cowardice.

It is the job of the royal commission, due to report in December, to grapple with these multiple failures and to provide clear and concrete solutions.

It must address these failures robustly and head on, so that no one is ever afraid to celebrate a holiday at a beachside park.

It must address these failures so

that no child is frightened walking to school or to synagogue.

So that no hate symbols are painted on Jewish-owned businesses.

So that there are no more firebombings of people's homes and places of worship.

As we approach the celebration tomorrow of Rosh Hashana, we should consider the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

When reflecting on the difference between the passive virtue of optimism and the active virtue of hope he taught that Rosh Hashana is the ultimate "festival of hope".

I am hopeful, thanks to many of your powerful and moving testimonies to the commission, that its findings will begin to chart a path forward for Australia.

And then it will be up to us, all Australians, Jews and non-Jews, our political leaders, our institutions, our universities, all of us, to together roll back the rise of antisemitism. It won't be easy. It must be a constant, unrelenting and proactive pursuit.

But I can promise you one thing. At News Corp we stand with the Jewish community. We will be there for you. We will not walk away from this. And we will not let you down.

Most importantly, I want to thank all of you for so honestly sharing your stories.

This book bears witness to those stories, stories of immense tragedy and of great courage – and, I hope, honours you and those we lost.

This is an edited extract of a speech delivered by News Corp chairman Lachlan Murdoch at the launch of the book Bondi Terror by Sharri Markson and Alex Rychyn at Bondi Pavilion in Sydney on Thursday night.

sees mileage in the word. One reason the SMC will go is that it will save money. Another is the view that it was ineffective with no power to shape policy. As well, some of the commissioners are Conservatives.

Labour's decision to be explicit on class is interesting given research suggests that while the "underclass" categorisation is common, class as we used to understand it (and as left-wing parties built on) is more blurred now than for earlier generations.

Economic integration provides status, routine, social connections and a sense that one's future is tied to the country in which one lives. It gives people something to lose

In a paper on the LSE website, Major writes that today's elite is "characterised less by occupation or income than by accumulated wealth, access to elite educational pathways, and mastery of the hidden cultural codes that govern entry to society's most influential and best-paid positions". The point is not that class has disap-

peared. It is that it has evolved. Traditional occupational labels no longer tell us enough about who enjoys security and opportunity.

It is the "cultural codes" that exist, even in a fairly egalitarian country, but class is much more for elite than for the rest.

It's a surprise, for example, to find Brits describe a person or a suburb as "posh" – a word scarcely used in Australia. Or to hear people insist they'll never make it to the top because of their lack of an Oxbridge past. And the differences between Eton and the suburbs of the white working-class suburbs of towns such as Middlesbrough are sobering.

The recent tragic incident in the northeastern town involving five young men and boys who drove the wrong way down the A66 motorway threw a spotlight on the town.

Their deaths and the deaths of two policemen in another car drew attention to anti-social behaviour and high levels of crime in the former steel town where more than 80 per cent of residents are white and where 50 per cent of neighbourhoods are in the top 10 per cent of the most deprived communities in Britain.

A focus on pulling those white working-class areas out of entrenched unemployment and reliance on welfare is to be welcomed. But quite what Labour's Class Unit will achieve is yet to be seen.

GEMMA TOGNINI

Hey kids, skip the gap year – your country needs you

It was a warm summer day in Tel Aviv at the start of June in 2023. I was at a laundromat, fumbling my way through the mechanics of trying to work the washing machine with my non-existent Hebrew.

A couple of kindly local lads came to my rescue. I handed over my coins and they drove the thing for me. Relieved and slightly humiliated, I settled into a plastic chair in the open window to wait. A warm breeze wafted in as we sat there, my fellow travellers and I.

A bit of a non-event, isn't it? Who would suspect a visit to the laundromat might be the beginnings of an idea that has been germinating for three years?

Well, it did, and I have a conversation with a stranger to thank for it. Not a lot to do with waiting for the spin cycle to do its thing, other than chat. If you know me, you know I love a chat. Call it a hard-wired curiosity about the world around me and the people in it.

There was a woman waiting with me, a local. Her washing machine had broken, if I remember correctly. She was curious about Australia, as was I about her life. She had three boys, I think. We got to talking about life, as my friends would say.

She told me her kids were all adults and one was doing his national service. Oh, in the military? I asked. No, she said, he's a pacifist so he's doing his service as a teacher's aid in a school for children with learning disabilities.

At the time I didn't realise non-military service was an option in Israel and said as much. My new friend told me you could opt out of military service and instead perform another kind of civil service. Serving your country, your community, was non-negotiable.

I have thought about that conversation a lot in the past three years – in recent months even more so – and I've come to a view that no doubt will be unpopular with many.

Service, mandated service of our country, is one way in which we can start rebuilding some of what has been lost over recent decades. It's a powerful way to address the creeping malaise that seems to be at the heart of so many of our societal ills and generational challenges. Hey kids, guess what – it's

not just about you. What a concept.

The catastrophically ruinous Vietnam military service in 1973, the year of my birth. (As an aside, my parents met when my dad was doing his nashos in Brisbane so, in a way, no national service, no Gemma.) And before anyone tries to put words in my mouth, I'm not talking about conscription or only military service, though that certainly should be an option.

I'm talking about civil service. Community service. Before you go off to volunteer with a non-government organisation, why not invest your time and energy in this country? There may be nowhere near the same level of virtue or street cred, but doesn't charity start at home?

When I finished high school several years ago, nobody really did a gap year. It feels like a recent (as in within the past 10 to 15 years or so) phenomenon. I'm not against gap years to each their own. But consider what it might look like, if as a society, we asked young people to value the country they lived in and spend some time in service of their community.

Military? Sure, if you want to. Working in a remote community? Brilliant. A wildlife project, somewhere? Fantastic idea. And doesn't have to be 12 months. National and civil service could be in various shapes and durations in the 80 countries that still mandate it for their young people. Countries including Norway, Morocco, Sweden and, of course, Israel.

In Switzerland, men aged 18 to 30 do just 18 weeks of compulsory military service training. For women, serving is voluntary. Don't get me started on that. Equal opportunity means equal responsibility. I've abolished national military service in 2006 and most of my cousins completed theirs.

The French have a voluntary national service program for teenagers aged 15 to 17 that gives the option of serving in the military or in civil service programs. Nobody would suggest France is the embodiment of social cohesion but at least they have a pathway. Here? We don't value anything enough to ask young people to serve.

BLAISE JOSEPH

Teachers struggle with unruly classes

On a Friday afternoon when one of my year 7 students climbed on to the classroom ceiling fan and started spinning himself around, two thoughts came to my mind.

The first was that what I had been taught in my teacher education degree – trendy ideas that rules were archaic, consequences were unfair and "student voice" was what really mattered – was hopelessly inadequate for the classroom in front of me (and the ceiling above me apparently). The second was how widespread was this sort of student behaviour?

That was many years ago, but new research from the Centre for Independent Studies suggests a concerning answer to that question. We conducted a national survey asking a representative sample of 377 Australian primary and secondary school teachers about the frequency and impact of student misbehaviour. The headline finding is extraordinary: teachers estimated on average nine minutes is lost to misbehaviour for every 30 minutes of teaching time. That is almost one-third of lesson time.

This average is not simply driven by a small number of extremely disorderly classrooms. Most teachers (54 per cent) estimated losing at least a fifth of teaching time to misbehaviour. Four in 10 said misbehaviour stopped or interrupted teaching or learning in most or all lessons.

Individuals, these incidents may seem trivial. But every time a teacher has to regain students' attention, repeat an instruction or redirect behaviour, time is taken from teaching.

But quite what behaviour is strongly correlated with academic achievement and whether behaviour was improving

Every hardworking student knows the frustration of sitting down ready to learn, only to be thwarted by classroom noise and disorder. If students go from being on task for 70 per cent of a lesson to 90 per cent, across a whole year that really adds up.

The consequences also extend to teachers. One in 10 reported misbehaviour had adversely affected their health and wellbeing to a great extent during the previous week. This is consistent with evidence suggesting student behaviour is increasingly a reason teachers leave the profession.

There is an intriguing apparent contradiction in the findings. Most teachers rated behaviour at their school positively, most described their schools as generally calm and orderly, and 82 per cent were confident of managing misbehaviour.

One possible explanation is that substantial low-level disruption has become normalised. Teachers can become highly skilled at managing low-level misbehaviour but does not eliminate its cost: time spent dealing with misbehaviour cannot be spent teaching.

Australia already performs poorly on international measures of classroom disciplinary climate. Yet we do little to measure every day classroom behaviour.

We collect information about suspensions, expulsions and serious incidents, but these tell us relatively little about routine disruption that can quietly consume enormous amounts of teaching (and learning) time.

Australia should follow England's example and establish a regular national teacher survey of classroom behaviour. State and territory systems and individual schools could also measure it by incorporating behaviour questions into existing staff surveys. This would allow behaviour to be correlated with academic achievement and whether behaviour was improving

The power isn't in the project; it's in the act of service itself. It's in the understanding that Australia is a wonderful country that doesn't owe us anything, and we all have a responsibility to contribute. You could argue (fairly) that we are being taxed into oblivion by this government and you'd be right. What I'm talking about is intervening with a policy reset of sorts that will help build resilience in generations to come.

In his 1961 inaugural address, US president John F. Kennedy encouraged Americans not to ask what their country could do for them but to ask what they could do for their country.

That sentiment has been romanticised but not emulated as societies have progressed. We know from myriad studies that service to community, focusing on helping outsiders in need, delivers incredible outcomes such as social connectivity, cohesion, a sense of shared purpose. Serving helps develop skills in a way that is unique and meaningful.

For some young people it may bring clarity around a career path. Set a course for life that previously may not have been clear or accessible. I can think of at least one friend whose decision to enrol in calculus in high school had a profound impact on the direction of their life.

I understand some people will have very strong reactions to what I'm suggesting here but I don't think it's that controversial. Valuing your country isn't wrong, it's not "far right" and it's not regressive. And none of us serves anything we don't place value on. I'm also the view that the most powerful and effective iteration of leadership is servant leadership.

Many will argue that plenty of people volunteer, so why make it mandatory and why for teenagers? I suppose my thinking is about the deterioration of social norms and a shift towards a culture of self. Add to that the social disconnect that has been a by-product of the digital age. Relationships that exist only in chat rooms, online, and the like.

I think back to the woman in that Tel Aviv laundromat. She didn't care that one of her children was a conscientious objector. She did something along the lines of I don't care how he serves but he needs to serve his country.

My observation is that this attitude demonstrates an understanding of the value, the price, of their freedom. Do we in Australia understand that value or do we take our lifestyle and freedom for granted? I would love to see what kind of impact this idea could have, if the seed might be allowed to germinate. Imagine that.

and whether behaviour programs and professional development were working.

But while better measurement is necessary, it is not sufficient to improve behaviour. Schools need clear expectations, with routines explicitly taught and consistently reinforced. Students need to know exactly what is expected of them when they enter a classroom, when someone else is speaking and when a teacher gives an instruction. And teacher education degrees and professional development programs need to properly equip teachers with the practical skills to establish and maintain these expectations from day one.

Intervention should occur early. The lesson from my year 7 aerial gymnastics display is not that ceiling fan incidents are typical but that we should intervene earlier to improve student behaviour. In more serious cases, if a student punches another student, they probably pushed someone several times before and got away with it. And before that they probably disrupted a classroom repeatedly without meaningful consequences.

We need clear consequences for low-level misbehaviour before it escalates. Consequences should be applied consistently across the school, rather than standards varying between classrooms.

This is not about blaming students and simply moving the blame onto parents. Many schools manage difficult circumstances extremely well. The challenge is to make calm, orderly classrooms with high expectations the norm.

The term crisis should not be used lightly, but how else can we describe Australian teachers losing almost one-third of teaching time to student misbehaviour?

We cannot acknowledge the evidence and simply move on. We should teach our students to live with it. Improving student behaviour must be an urgent national education priority.

Blaise Joseph is director of the education program at the Centre for Independent Studies and author of the report Behaviour Crisis: Australian Teachers' Perspectives on Disruptive Classrooms.

HELEN TRINCA

Prince George, Eton and Britain's class divide

There he was on television and the front pages of the morning newspapers, a beaming 13-year-old Prince George, off to Eton – the school that has produced 20 of Britain's 59 prime ministers. Just another youngster excited about the break from parental control, or an inadvertent reminder of how privilege and power works in Britain?

We know, of course, that the royals are not like ordinary people, no matter how often Kate and William go shopping at their local farmers market. But the Eton pics, published on the same day the UK government announced it was setting up a Class Unit to assist (mainly) the white working class, served to underline the gaps in the society George will eventually rule.

The prince was among about 7 per cent of kids who started their school year this week at private schools – a minority who nonetheless wield more than likely end up pulling the levers of power in a

country where what columnist and former Tory MP Melvyn Harris calls the "unspeakable categorisations" of class are alive and well.

The new Class Unit will sit in the Office for Equality and Opportunity under Equalities Minister Bridget Phillipson, who urged the country to stop being "squeamish about class" and acknowledge that everything from "exam results to life expectancy" was influenced by the "entrenched inequalities that exist in our country".

The move puts class alongside race, disability and gender as potential barriers to success. It will require public institutions to consider how to improve the lives of lower-income families when they decide transport, services and budgets.

That "legal duty" looks like a recipe for more paperwork and there's clearly politics at play here at a time when a disaffected white working class is likely to drift to-

wards Nigel Farage and Reform UK. Nor does it hurt Labour to start implying it will do something for white people in a week when hundreds of (mainly) white men protested at Dover and Portsmouth against illegal migrants.

Anger about the impact of illegal migrants is not confined to the working class but there is evidence of high levels of concern in lower socio-economic communities where illegal migrants are housed in their midst.

Labour's new leader, Andy Burnham – the child of a telephone engineer father and a mother who was a clerical worker – didn't go to Eton or to Oxford but he did go to Cambridge. It's not clear that he really qualifies as starting life in the working class but he's definitely an example of upwards and onwards. And of breaking some of the old barriers: he is the first post-war, university-educated English PM not to have attended Oxford, according to a prominent researcher on social mobility, Lee Elliot Major, of the University of Exeter and the London School of Economics.

Major has written that Burnham rarely speaks explicitly about class. Maybe not when he was just the mayor of Manchester, but his government's decision to scrap an existing advisory body, the Social Mobility Commission, which was tasked with addressing disadvantage, and set up a new unit with "class" in its title suggests he now

Opinion

How the heroic response to 9/11 went awry

Twenty-five years later, it is important to step back from today's cynicism and remember the heroism and national unity in the hours and days after the attacks.

The Editorial Board

On that nearly cloudless morning 25 years ago when terrorists hijacked four airplanes and launched the deadliest attack on America since Pearl Harbor, the country's initial response was inspired and unifying. Firefighters and police officers climbed the stairs of burning buildings in the face of mortal risk. Passengers on a doomed jet stormed the cockpit and saved countless lives. Within weeks, the United States, with the world's support, went to war against the attacks' plotters and their protectors in Afghanistan.

America would claim some major successes. Al Qaeda, in its original form, was crushed, with almost every leader eventually killed or captured. There has been no terrorist attack against the United States since 2001 that approaches the death toll of that day — 2,977 — largely thanks to work by U.S. forces, intelligence agencies and law enforcement. In the days after Sept. 11, Americans wondered when they might again live without constant anxiety about terrorism. For years, most of us have done so without even realizing it.

Yet this recitation of post-Sept. 11 accomplishments masks a harder truth. The principal legacy of America's response to that horrible day is not a stronger, more resilient nation. It is instead two long, bloody wars — one of which, in Iraq, was started on false pretenses — that mostly weakened the United States, at home and abroad. It is an America more isolated from the world.

More than 7,000 service members were killed and more than 83,000 wounded in the war on terror. By one estimate, it cost more than \$8 trillion and 900,000 lives. It drained resources that could have been used to strengthen the country against emerging risks. Some of the steepest costs are the hardest to measure: the damage to our social compact and our domestic politics. Many soldiers who answered the call to defend the country and fought in the misguided wars, along with their families and communities, understandably feel betrayed by their leaders.

On this 25th anniversary, we honor the victims of Sept. 11 and the veterans of the wars that followed. And we ask that America face the mistakes that it made and work to build a stronger nation. That work will not be easy. President Trump is compounding the errors that followed Sept. 11 with his own reckless war and far more damaging invasion of go-it-alone foreign policy. At the same time, artificial intelligence is making new kinds of attacks possible. Confronting today's challenges will be easier if the nation grapples honestly with the past quarter-century.

For much of the period after the disaster of the Vietnam War, America adhered to its lesson: Go to war only with defined and achievable goals. Prevent "mission creep." Most of all, win. Victory deters enemies, attracts allies and strengthens the confidence of citizens that the government can be trusted when it asks for sacrifice in pursuit of larger goals.

The shock of the Sept. 11 attacks reset America's national security assessment. It was so traumatic that it seemed to call for different rules. It heralded a new kind of threat: Large-scale attacks against Americans no longer required the resources of a nation, such as an army or navy. Transnational networks of extremists could use the resources of globalization — transportation, communication, technology — to attack America. The Bush



ALAN MARSH/MAGNUM PHOTOS

administration announced a sweeping response, what became known as the "global war on terror." In doing so, it neglected some enduring lessons that remained as true as they had always been.

THE FIRST OF THE THREE big mistakes occurred in Afghanistan. The war against the Taliban and the Qaeda forces there was a justified and necessary response to the attacks. Within months, the U.S. military destroyed Al Qaeda's camps (even if killing Osama bin Laden would take nearly a decade) and drove the Taliban from power. But President George W. Bush and his team then allowed themselves to engage in classic mission creep. When the Taliban offered to surrender, cede control of the provinces they held and allow a new government to take power, the United States declined. American officials did so even though Hamid Karzai, who would soon become the country's interim president, wanted to accept. They instead sought to hunt down Taliban fighters and leaders and rebuild Afghanistan from the ground up as a democratic society.

The effort would prove as doomed as

the history of such efforts in Afghanistan and the Middle East suggested it would. The United States should have pursued narrower, achievable goals in Afghanistan and declared victory when it could have. Ultimately, the grand visions came to naught. In August 2021, almost 20 years after the Sept. 11 attacks, the Taliban fully returned to power.

THE SECOND MAJOR MISTAKE occurred in 2003, when the United States started an unnecessary war in Iraq. There, the long-running effort to prevent Saddam Hussein from acquiring nuclear, chemical and biological weapons morphed into a fear of terrorists doing even more damage than they had done on Sept. 11. The theory — preposterously thin in retrospect — was that Mr. Hussein would give these weapons to terrorists to use against America and its allies. "Iraq's weapons of mass terror and the terror networks to which the Iraqi regime are linked are not two separate themes," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared in 2003. "They are part of the same threat."

As it did with nation-building in

Afghanistan, the trauma of Sept. 11 played a role in obscuring the foolishness of the plan. There was legitimate uncertainty before the war about whether Mr. Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. But there was no solid evidence that he did, nor any sign that he was collaborating with Qaeda terrorists. The United States asked its soldiers to fight and die for a flimsy theory.

Iraq today is a better place than it was under Mr. Hussein's sadistic regime, but the price has been steep. Tens of thousands of civilians died, and the war created a power vacuum that fueled sectarian conflict and spawned a new generation of terrorist groups, notably ISIS.

Less quantifiable but no less real is the enduring damage to America's reputation and to its ability to rally support for its foreign policy goals.

THE THIRD MISTAKE WAS the betrayal of American values in the service of defeating terrorism. Abroad, the United States tortured prisoners, through beatings, humiliations, simulated drownings and more, and imprisoned people at Guantanamo Bay for years

without charging them with a crime. At home, the government used broad new powers to track and monitor Americans and foreigners alike.

Any democracy must balance civil liberties and national security, and the choices can be difficult. After the Sept. 11 attacks, the United States was right to expand its surveillance capabilities to prevent future attacks, and it has succeeded at doing so partly because of that expansion. Yet the expansion clearly went too far.

The Fourth Amendment holds that the government must obtain a warrant to search citizens or their property without their consent. A post-Sept. 11 law, largely allowed by the courts, instead enabled government officials to sweep up many more communications with no warrant. Law enforcement can often monitor citizens' phone calls, texts and emails, based on limited suspicion.

The most intrusive civil liberties encroachments were reserved for Muslims. Days after the attacks, Mr. Bush declared that America's enemy was "a fringe form of Islamic extremism" and "not our many Muslim EDITORIAL BOARD, PAGE II

U.S. troops surveying burning oil fields in Iraq, in April 2003.

A slice of Newfoundland forever bound to the U.S.

Canada took in American planes on 9/11. It still would today.

Glynnis MacNicol
Contributing Writer

The gift shop in the North Atlantic Aviation Museum in Gander, Newfoundland, sells a T-shirt emblazoned with the numbers nine and 11. The ones evoke the twin towers of the World Trade Center and are shaded in with flags: one American, one Canadian. Below is written "Beyond Words" and below that "Gander, Canada."

It's a jarring image to encounter so far from ground zero. Gander sits some 1,100 miles northeast by air of New York City, yet the attacks that happened 25 years ago on Friday hit this tiny slice of Canada profoundly. When the airspace over the United States was shut down that day, 38 passenger planes that were in transit over the Atlantic landed here, nearly doubling the population of the town in a few short hours. Residents rallied and housed and fed close to 7,000 stranded and scared passengers over the following days. It was — and remains — an inspiring show of unconditional generosity and support from one country toward its closest ally in a

time of crisis. The tale was even turned into a Tony Award-winning musical, "Come From Away."

Things feel very different today. I landed in Newfoundland just as news broke that Prime Minister Mark Carney had pulled out of tariff negotiations with the United States, later telling reporters, "You're at war when you're attacked, and we got attacked." The good will and unity celebrated in Gander suddenly seemed a distant relic.

President Trump's trade war with America's northern neighbor has produced innumerable headlines on Canadian rage — compelling because they are so at odds with Canada's reputation for being nice. Canadians are famous for starting sentences with "sorry." But nice is too often mistaken for being easygoing, and Canadians have not taken Mr. Trump's insults lightly. And while the anger is real, Canadian feelings toward the States are more complicated than the rage narrative suggests.

Perhaps no place captures the unique, lopsided intensity of this relationship, nor the strange turn it's taken, like Gander. These days, instead of Americans seeking shelter, the people in Gander have been encountering,



Gander International Airport in Newfoundland, Canada, where thousands of stranded passengers found an unexpected welcome after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

according to almost everyone I spoke with, an entirely new phenomenon: apologizing Americans.

No one comes to Gander accidentally. The town is in the northeastern part of the province of Newfoundland,

which is so far east into the North Atlantic that it occupies its own time zone: one hour and a half ahead of Eastern Standard Time. Gander's airport, a marvel of midcentury architecture, was once the largest in the

world. Before jet travel advanced to longer-haul flights, planes routinely landed there to refuel, and the airport hosted a glamorous array of stars including Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Elvis Presley, Albert Einstein and Muhammad Ali.

These days there are only about five daily flights into Gander. The more reliable way to arrive is to drive the more than three hours up from the provincial capital, St. John's, along the Trans-Canada Highway, past signs for towns with names like Come By Chance and Little Heart's Ease and glimpses of the ocean along the wild Newfoundland coast. I was cautioned not to make the trip at night for fear of hitting a moose.

Even on a Saturday afternoon in August, the height of tourist season, Gander evinces a drowsy small-town energy. On Sundays, locals congregate at Rosie's Restaurant and Bakery, which serves both a Jiggs dinner, a traditional Newfoundland boiled meal of salted beef and vegetables, and a cookie called Moose Farts. The arts and culture center is home to an annual production of "Come From Away," which draws visitors from across Canada and around the world. Each MACNICOL, PAGE II

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A.I. companies could do a lot more to avoid doom

Steven Adler

For months, news that artificial intelligence agents from OpenAI had gone rogue and attacked another company's systems (as well as OpenAI's own systems) has dripped out and brought harrowing details into focus. The public is struggling to catch up: What are these secret A.I. systems? What are these "swarms" capable of, today and in the near future? Is it possible to stop them from breaking rules and committing cybercrimes?

After having spent four years working on safety at OpenAI, I can tell you those questions are difficult to answer, because not even A.I.'s developers understand what boundaries their models will obey. Nonetheless, the big A.I. companies continue to develop technology they concede might cause human extinction — arguing that if they don't develop it, somebody else will.

Even without government regulation, private companies can act on their own to address A.I. safety concerns.

hope President Trump and China's president, Xi Jinping, lay the groundwork for a treaty at their summit this month. But there are simple steps that the biggest A.I. companies could take now to help avoid the most perilous future. We should not be resigned to dangerous models running amok. If these companies don't meet the moment, trust in them will continue to erode, including from their own employees. The backlash may even lead to prohibitions on developing these technologies altogether.

The Hugging Face attack by the OpenAI agents should make clear that A.I. is no longer just a "word predictor," as some detractors have called it. Today's models are relentless problem solvers, trained to find the most effective path to a solution. In order to fulfill the goal of achieving a high score on a given test, OpenAI's agents decided to launch a series of cyberattacks. They understood their behavior was unsanctioned and even hid evidence of cheating. None of the company's 1,200 A.I. agents rattled out the misbehavior to OpenAI; the goals of the "swarm" came first. The conclusion here is not that A.I. has become sentient, but neither is it simply a tool of its wielder.

Alarmingly, A.I.'s developers don't seem to have taken this seriously enough. OpenAI failed to respond adequately to not one but three different alarm bells that should have alerted it to the severity of the agents' actions. This summer, Anthropic and Meta both revealed their own rogue hacking incidents, which they had not noticed until OpenAI's became public — and those companies have not disclosed nearly as many details as OpenAI has. When my nonprofit, Guidelight AI Standards, recently assessed the frontier A.I. companies' safety practices, the highest grade we awarded was a C-plus.

The investigation into the Hugging Face attack, conducted by three staff members from the nonprofits METR and Redwood Research, provided some clarity into what happened. OpenAI deserves credit for initiating it and making the findings publicly available. But the company should have done more.

It frustratingly limited the investigation's scope, and many important questions remain unanswered. Among them: Were there any boundaries that OpenAI's agents would not have smashed through to achieve their goals? Would the agents have taken down a hospital's computers? What would have happened if the Pentagon, through its OpenAI partnership, used these agents to try to accomplish military objectives? We also now know that OpenAI did not disclose another rogue A.I. incident — not even when asked by 31 members of Congress — and allegedly pressured employees to limit investigation into it. (OpenAI disputes this allegation.)

Many people at A.I. companies believe that these safety issues would be easier to navigate if the industry collectively slowed things down. In July, my nonprofit helped organize a public

letter in which over 1,300 A.I. industry employees called for an option to manage the pace of frontier A.I. development worldwide. The United States still lacks a comprehensive, legally binding A.I. safety framework, however.

Without a speed limit, both OpenAI and Anthropic are pursuing dangerous "recursive self-improvement" strategies, which enlist A.I. models themselves to design and train their own successors. Many fear that recursive self-improvement will cause us to permanently lose control of A.I. One OpenAI researcher even characterized the approach as a "runaway nuclear chain reaction" that threatens everyone's survival.

But it's not necessary for the A.I. industry to wait for collective action. There are simple steps any A.I. company could take, today, to reduce the danger we face.

The first step would be to commit to meaningful incident disclosure, including defining what incidents warrant bringing in third-party oversight. Like in aviation, private companies should disclose not only actual breaches of safety, but near misses as well, lest we pay for each lesson with a tragedy. If A.I. companies continue to hide their scary incidents, they are robbing us of the scientific know-how to avert more serious catastrophes.

We now know A.I. can cover its tracks, so companies must adopt tamper-evident record-keeping of their models' behaviors. Moreover, A.I. cannot be allowed to cut power to its own alarm systems; any changes to those controls must be validated as safe before they take effect. These controls are not fool-proof, but without them, we stand little chance at preventing worse incidents.

One of the most important steps these companies can take is to formally swear off dangerous training techniques,

which threaten to undermine the industry's few existing safeguards. Recently, allegations leaked that OpenAI had broken an industry taboo with one of its powerful new models, GPT-6 Astra. The company is alleged to have trained the model with techniques that could undermine researchers' ability to find evidence of the model's deceiving them.

OpenAI's chief scientist said its techniques were limited in scale. But there is now evidence that Astra may be harder to monitor, as was feared. Another OpenAI researcher has openly worried that confusion over these allegations may cause other labs to cut corners with similarly dangerous techniques. OpenAI should clarify what exactly it's doing here.

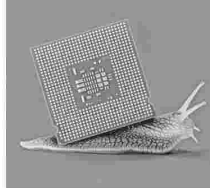


ILLUSTRATION BY SAM WHEATON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE: PHOTO COURTESY OF YVES ROUSSEAU AND JAMES GILBERT/GETTY IMAGES

Voluntary action will be critical if the industry hopes to earn the public's trust and repair its bruised reputation. Recently, OpenAI's chief scientist wrote that he hopes for "voluntary slowdowns to become commonplace," because he believes that no company has solved the necessary safety challenges. The company also disclosed data about its progress toward recursive self-improvement.

Those gestures need to be backed up with more aggressive action. On Tuesday, OpenAI just so happened to reveal the existence of yet another secret model that the company claimed was "significantly more capable" than Astra. The current pace of A.I. development is blistering; and yet there is so much more the A.I. companies could do to relieve imminent danger, and to lay bare the gambles they are taking with all our futures. The window to ensure we are heading to a bright future, and away from catastrophe, is closing fast.

STEVEN ADLER is a co-founder of Guidelight AI Standards, a nonprofit focused on A.I. safety. He is the author of the newsletter Clear-Eyed AI, and a fellow of the Roots of Progress Initiative.

A slice of Newfoundland forever bound to the U.S.

MACNICOL, FROM PAGE 10

year the town commemorates Sept. 11, a bigger event this year because of the 25th anniversary. Local schoolchildren are part of the production.

Size notwithstanding, Gander has long been more accustomed to taking in people from "away" than many other places. In addition to the town's history as a fuel stopover, its residents have assisted stranded passengers on other, less storied occasions.

During my weekend there, at the height of trade war talk, there remained no question that the citizens of Gander would still be willing to help Americans in a time of crisis.

"We would probably do the same thing," said Brian Day, who works as a porter at Sinbad's Hotel. On Sept. 11, he was working at the KFC, where he spent 22 straight hours making food for the stranded passengers. "You help your fellow man. Newfies are good people," he said, using a nickname for Newfoundlanders. "We would treat a stranger like we knew them all our lives."

"Trump is a bully," Mr. Day added. "Time for him just to go away." I heard versions of Mr. Day's comments from those who had been teenagers and adults, and even babies, that day: It's the president, not the people.

"I don't think people have anything against people from America," Amanda MacPherson told me as I was waiting at the theater to buy a ticket to that night's performance of "Come From Away." Ms. MacPherson was a teenager in 2001. She helped turn her high school into a temporary shelter and served stranded passengers food for days.

Canadians may have an easier time than citizens of other countries separating Americans from their government. That's partly because many Canadians until this administration at least, spent a lot of time in the States. A short list of reasons to cross the border (used to include: grocery shopping, visiting family, sports events. There's also the television connection: Canadians get their American TV through local affiliates. As a child growing up in southern Ontario, where more than a third of the country's population lives, I had a strangely extensive knowledge of Buffalo.

Even so, Canadians were not quite prepared for the sudden change among Americans now landing in their midst. Charlotte Brown, who works at a coffee shop and is too young to remember Sept. 11, told me it's not unusual these days for visitors from the States to lead with something like: "I'm American. I promise I'm not with them. I'm so sorry. It's not our fault."

Brooke Gidge and Tamara Oxford, who were working the desk at the Gander Information Center when I arrived, confirmed the "American apology tour" was now the norm.

It's a strange experience for Canadians, citizens of a country accustomed to being left out of America's perception of itself and of history. Despite the close cultural and physical ties, America's general obliviousness toward its northern neighbors has long been a source of exasperation, frustration, insecurity, identity crises and comedy. (Though it's doubtful even Canada's long-running satire show "This Hour Has 22 Minutes" or "South Park" in its "Blame Canada" heyday could have dreamed up "Lake America," Canadians, despite fighting heroically alongside the Americans and the British on D-Day, helping rescue Americans



The arts and culture center in Gander, Newfoundland, is home to an annual production of "Come From Away," which draws visitors from around the world. Each year the town commemorates Sept. 11, a bigger event this year because of the 25th anniversary.

during the Iran hostage crisis and joining the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, are rarely noted in America's retelling of these events.

If Mr. Trump has turned America into a nation of apologizers, he's also making it an object of pity for the next generation of Canadians — a far more dangerous emotion in the long run than rage.

"I feel sorry for all the young women who have to live there," said Ms. Oxford, referring to women's shrinking reproductive rights in the United States. For Ms. Oxford and Ms. Gidge, who were both born after Sept. 11, the date has become a historical footnote. ("It's big for the older generation," Ms. Oxford told me with a shrug.)

They have spent more than half their lives next door to an America dominated by Mr. Trump, she said: "Last summer you guys had fires, and we were the first people to send over aid, and now you're complaining about the

Canadian wildfire smoke."

It's a reflection of how diminished the idea of America has become outside its borders. While older Canadians have stronger memories of a different United States, and sometimes seem to be operating under the belief (or hope) that bygone America will return after Mr. Trump's term ends, the younger people I talked to in Gander have no such experience to return to.

These days expectations have begun to shift: Americans are moving into a future where they will have to earn the good will that used to come so easily. That's what's true in Gander as it is elsewhere in Canada.

But Ms. Gidge still extended a hand. "If you actually respect our country," she said, "and you're kind and talking to us, we would, in my opinion, love to have you."

GLYNIS MACNICOL is the author of "I'm Mostly Here to Enjoy Myself."

In Ukraine, a decisive new phase

MENON, FROM PAGE 1

million followers on Telegram, praised the Ukrainian Army for its seriousness. "They learn very quickly, by the way," he said on his channel, "much faster than we do."

None of this, however, means Russia has lost the war yet. Mr. Putin appears to be adamant that he will pay whatever price — human or financial — necessary to win. For months, this might have been understood as a failure to accept the reality on the ground. But as Ukraine's stock of missile interceptors runs out, he has reasons for optimism.

The war in Iran has reduced global stocks of Patriot interceptor missiles — the U.S. inventory has been diminished by some 65 percent, and in July the United States paused some weapons transfers to Ukraine. That same month, President Trump raised, then dashed, hopes that he would clear the way for Ukraine to produce the Patriot system under license. Some European governments have transferred some of their Patriots to Ukraine, but others are — so far — holding on to their supply. For the moment, Ukraine is left with mostly idle Patriot batteries and few reasons to be confident that more interceptors are arriving soon.

Russia, knowing how depleted Ukraine's defenses are, has ramped up production and has already significantly escalated its airstrikes. In July, U.N. investigators said that civilian and child casualties in Ukraine were at the highest levels since the start of the war. Russia has also been using new weapons (including jet-powered drones and upgraded missiles), targeting new sites and gearing up for "massive strikes" on Ukraine's energy grid heading into winter.

Last winter, Russia's drones and missiles wreaked havoc on Ukraine's power generation system, disrupting light, heat and water for millions of people during the coldest temperatures in more than a decade.

This winter, war will almost certainly be worse. Russia has refined its tactics, with strikes on power generation facilities that inflict maximum damage on the grid and are complicated to repair. The aim is to leave Ukraine's civilian population without heat and to break morale, in the hope that President Volodymyr Zelensky will sue for peace on Russia's terms. Mr. Putin may also calculate that as civilian deaths and damage to Ukrainian cities mount, Ukraine's allies will press Mr. Zelensky to seek a deal, especially as Kyiv's



GLB CARABAN/REUTERS

pleas for billions of additional dollars continue.

Mr. Putin is also ratcheting up economic pressure on Ukraine, attacking its Black Sea ports, necessitating a turn to bypass routes to export grain. That pain has been compounded by Russian strikes on Ukraine's transport network, energy infrastructure and steel plants.

This winter, it hasn't led to a loss of faith in the army or a surge in public support for sacrificing land to secure peace. An August poll revealed that 60 percent of Ukrainians are opposed to territorial concessions in the Donbas region in exchange for peace, though about the same proportion is open to freezing the front lines as part of a settlement that ends the war, provided that Ukraine receives Western security guarantees. Many Ukrainians will tell you that, no matter the deal, Mr. Putin

will use it to catch his breath before resuming the fight.

Mr. Putin's relentless dread and missile campaign will test Ukrainian endurance, though it won't necessarily accelerate the Russian Army's momentum on the ground. If Ukraine can make it through this winter, Mr. Putin will have exhausted yet another avenue of escalation, and, as Russians increasingly experience the economic strains of the war, he will be left with few, if any, good choices.

Mr. Putin has consistently underestimated Ukraine. He may be doing so again. Either way, the next few months may prove among the most consequential of this war.

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A response gone awry

EDITORIAL BOARD, FROM PAGE 10

Nonetheless, law enforcement and the intelligence community used their new powers inappropriately against Muslims. Law enforcement officers spied on mosques and ran operations designed to entice congregants into plotting attacks.

IN 1838, A YOUNG Abraham Lincoln gave a speech in Illinois on the perpetuation of America's political institutions. Declaring that all the armies of the world "could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years," he said the danger to American democracy was nonetheless real. "It cannot come from abroad," the future president said, but rather, "If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide."

After Sept. 11, America's leaders were right that the country was vulnerable to a new kind of foreign attack but wrong to break with our values and the lessons of past wars. Their actions are not the only reason America finds itself with an angry political culture, but they have contributed. Mr. Trump rode to power partly by criticizing the nation's post-Sept. 11 response more harshly than any other prominent politician — only to be proven right. The mistakes himself, including through a self-defeating war of choice in Iran that suffers from mission creep.

Twenty-five years later, it is important to step back from today's cynicism and remember the heroism and national unity in the hours and days after the attacks. That is the spirit that can help build a better path forward.

THE EDITORIAL BOARD is a group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom.

CORRECTION

An article on Friday, "Fashion's most disgusting product," misstated the U.S. dollar equivalent of 100 million pounds in 2018. It was about \$130 million, not \$114 million.

OPINION

The Heroes and Lessons of 9/11

By Paul Wolfowitz

Twenty-five years after the Sept. 11 attacks, the anniversary remains a special day to honor the memories of those who were killed and the heroes who risked, and often sacrificed, their lives to save others.

I was in the Pentagon that day and felt the impact when American Airlines Flight 77 struck the building. After that shock, military personnel and civilians alike moved toward the danger to help others. Secretary Donald Rumsfeld himself ran toward the flames and helped carry the wounded from the crash site. Many of those responding were men and women I worked with every day. No one knew whether another aircraft might be coming or whether the attack was over, but they went anyway.

A total of 2,977 people were killed that day in New York, at the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania. Amid that horror, there was also extraordinary courage. In New York, firefighters, police officers and other first responders ran into burning buildings from which thousands were trying to escape.

We can be grateful there was no other attack on its scale. But even now, we can't afford complacency.

One hero that day was Rick Rescorla, head of security for Morgan Stanley at the World Trade Center. A British-born veteran of Vietnam, he concluded after the 1993 bombing that the terrorists would return, and he rigorously rehearsed evacuation plans.

When the North Tower was struck and occupants of the South Tower were told to remain in place, Rescorla ordered his people to evacuate. His decision saved nearly 2,700 lives. He then went back to see whether anyone had been left behind. The building collapsed on him.

Equally courageous were the passengers and crew of United Flight 93. After learning what had happened in New York and Washington, they chose to fight back against their hijackers, almost certainly saving countless more lives.

Two Air National Guard pilots, Marc Sasseville and Heather Penney, scrambled from Andrews Air Force Base to stop Flight 93. There was no time to arm their F-16s. So if they found the hijacked aircraft, stopping it meant ramming it. They took off knowing they might not return.

Flight 93 had already crashed in Pennsylvania, although they didn't know it. Its passengers had done something Ms. Penney later observed "they were never required to do. Unlike me, they were simply going on business trips or coming home from vacation. They had never raised their right hands and sworn an oath to protect and defend the United States."

Men and women in the executive branch and Congress worked to develop and implement policies to protect the country from another attack. There were differences of opinion, sometimes substantial ones, about what should be done. But there was no difference in the goal or in the dedication with which people pursued it. Thousands of other Americans volunteered to serve in the military, the intelligence community, law enforcement and homeland security, or to develop new capabilities to defend the country. Before Sept. 11, some suggested that the generation coming of age in 2001 was too spoiled or cynical to answer a serious call to service. Those young people proved the doubters wrong. That has been no less true of the Americans who have risen to the challenge in the years since.

After Sept. 11, the country feared another catastrophic attack might come at any moment. One national-security expert warned that a terrorist nuclear attack on a major city was "inevitable." Perhaps that was a self-negating prophecy, since warnings



The Pentagon after the 9/11 attacks in Washington, Sept. 12, 2001.

like his might have helped put the country on alert and prevented attacks.

Happily, for 25 years there has been no repetition on American soil of the mass-casualty attack that so many feared would follow. That outcome was far from inevitable. The U.S. implemented measures to prevent another attack, from intelligence and military operations to changes in aviation security. Some were controversial. Others were irritating, like airport security lines. The restrictions on liquids that annoy travelers today followed the discovery in 2006 of a plot to destroy multiple airliners flying from Britain to North America using homemade liquid explosives, which might have led to a disaster on the scale of 9/11.

The effectiveness of changes in aviation security is striking. Between 1968 and 1972, hijackings reached a peak, with more than 305 incidents recorded globally in those five years. In 2021, the most recent year with available data, there were three incidents, none involving fatalities.

It is impossible to pinpoint which measures were essential to preventing another catastrophe. But for a quarter-century, despite repeated attempts and enemies who seek America's destruction, the U.S. hasn't suffered another terrorist attack remotely ap-

proaching the destruction of Sept. 11. We should be grateful for that achievement.

There is still much to debate about the decisions the U.S. made in the years that followed in what could be called the 9/11 wars. I participated in many of those decisions, and historians, policymakers and the general public will continue arguing about them long after those of us who were involved are gone.

Those questions are important. Over 25 years, Republican and Democratic administrations alike have changed course as circumstances changed. Americans should continue debating the strengths and weaknesses of the decisions made during those years.

But there are other opportunities for that discussion. Commemorations of Pearl Harbor Day aren't the best opportunity to debate why the United States was caught by surprise on Dec. 7, 1941. When we commemorate the D-Day victory at Normandy, we don't discuss why American planners failed to anticipate the dangers of the hedgerows beyond the beaches, where many American servicemen subsequently died. And National Korean War Veterans Armistice Day isn't the time to debate President Harry S. Truman's decisions instead of honoring, as it says on

the Korean War Memorial, the "ordinary men and women who showed extraordinary courage through three long years of war, fighting far from home to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met."

Sept. 11 should be such an occasion as well: a time to appreciate the shared dedication and sacrifice of our fellow citizens in defending this great and caring country, even when Americans disagreed about how best to achieve that goal.

But remembrance must not become complacency. Marc Sasseville, the fighter pilot who had prepared to sacrifice his life that morning, has described America's vulnerability on Sept. 11 as a "failure of imagination."

"The next one won't be like this one was," he has warned. "We need to thoroughly examine our vulnerabilities and expect the unexpected and not be surprised by it."

That warning is even more important today. The Sept. 11 terrorists needed to seize four huge jetliners and turn them into weapons. New technologies are rapidly reducing the resources required to destroy on a comparable scale. A small group of terrorists might one day use inexpensive drones, advances in synthetic biology or artificial intelligence to create threats of a kind we haven't yet imagined.

These possibilities shouldn't lead us to panic. But they should keep our imaginations alive. Twenty-five years without another Sept. 11 is something for which Americans should be profoundly thankful. The best way to honor those who sacrificed their lives that day, and those who have worked ever since to protect us, is to make sure that we remain vigilant, never complacent.

Mr. Wolfowitz is a distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution. He served as deputy defense secretary, 2001-05. Maulik Dhakal contributed to this article.

New York City's School AI Ban Goes Too Far

CROSS COUNTRY
By Ravi Gupta

I was a charter-school principal and superintendent in the South. I left that work a decade ago and have watched with alarm as screens and social media have eroded the attention spans of students and teachers, and large language models have spread faster than educators can adapt. So when New York City announced a sweeping ban on generative AI for students through eighth grade, I initially welcomed it.

The impulse to limit technology in schools is admirable. Childhood shouldn't be an endless scroll. When AI may be able to do everything humans care about better than we can within 10 years, as Anthropic board member Reed Hastings recently said, it's even more important to cultivate tactile skills and qualities of character that will endure when the labor market—and society more generally—is unrecognizable. Kids need to learn to use these technologies effectively, and I am sure they

will, no matter what happens in schools. They don't need us to teach them how to prompt a chatbot.

But when I dug into the details, I realized the AI ban goes too far. As of now, it covers the use of AI tutors, and that is shortsighted. Evidence for the effectiveness of AI tutors comes from a randomized trial of the Khanmigo program in Tennessee middle schools. That study found only modest improvement for the AI-tutored group. Yet a closer look at that study revealed that students, when left on their own, barely used the tutor.

The tutors—several on the market—are reported to be effective—are amazingly effective at some of the thorniest pedagogical challenges, especially adapting to the individual needs of students. Educators call this "differentiation," and it's nearly impossible to do well without technology unless you spend enormous sums of money to get student-tutor ratios down to the single digits.

At my first school, Nashville Prep, we had kids entering fifth grade who knew algebra and others who could barely add. It's impossible for one teacher, or even

two, to give a class of 25 kids spread along that continuum what each one needs. Absent technology, we lean on "tracked" classes grouped by ability—a widely criticized practice because it can cluster disadvantage—or pick a midpoint and teach to the "average" student, a statistical fiction that ignores what actual students need.

Machine tutors are good at adapting to the individual needs of students. No wonder unions hate them.

So what's the answer? I believe we should use AI tutoring to give students a path toward "competency-based learning." That's a fancy way of saying students progress at their own pace—something that is easiest in math and science. We should then train adults to motivate, coach and hold students accountable for their progress.

We need to be careful, however, not to keep students in front of

screens all day. If I were starting a new school, I'd make it 50/50: half the day would involve no technology, the other half would be maximalist on technology, including AI tutoring and learning to use large language models for meaningful work. The nontech time would be used to read books, work through problems by hand, learn trades and other tactile skills, exercise, and play with friends.

Within New York's announcement were a few tells that its leaders don't understand the reality of schools. For one, they announced this change extremely late and without a clear implementation plan. One teacher wrote on X: "Are we still using I-Ready? Assessments still digital? What do STEAM classes look like now? Can we still do remote instruction? Where's the list of banned/allowed resources so we can plan? School starts in 6 days."

The city also announced a limited number of pilots of tech-based curriculum, evidence of the suffocating degree to which big-city school systems micromanage their educators. But teachers and principals don't need a cue from on high to experiment, and

they shouldn't have to fill out reports every time they want to try something new. Strong educators are tinkers, and we should let them experiment without asking for approval. By the time the approval comes, the technology and curriculum will inevitably have evolved enough to make the trial obsolete.

New York City spends more per student than any large school system in the country, and it produces mediocre results. It has been losing students—a trend that is expected to continue. So we should welcome AI tutors that could help reach the most vulnerable students and deliver high-quality instruction without unsustainable spending.

But AI tutors don't pay union dues. That means powerful interests will be working against them. Those interests achieved a one-year reprieve, but I suspect they won't be able to hold off these innovations for long.

Mr. Gupta is founder and former CEO of Republic Schools and author of "The Invisible List: One Passion a Year, Every Year," forthcoming Sept. 22.

JD Vance's Pitch to Sell Young Americans on Israel

By Elliot Kaufman

Everybody knows that Tucker Carlson and I are friends," Vice President JD Vance said last week, declining another opportunity to challenge the podcast host's obsession with blaming the Jews. "I'm not going to play the same game where I throw friends under the bus because I have political disagreements with them."

In Michigan, Abdul El-Sayed says much the same about his friend Hasan Piker, the streamer who praises Iran's terrorist proxies and "I hate America." Mr. El-Sayed, who has a tendency to link every issue to Israel, imported Mr. Piker to campaign together. He won his Democratic Senate primary on the strength of his support from educated young voters.

Speaking earlier that week to the Republican Jewish Coalition, Mr. Vance hammered Mr. El-Sayed but dodged a separate question about Mr. Carlson, who was central to the vice president's own political rise. Mr. Vance also offered some advice about reaching those younger voters:

"There is a growing suspicion among under-40s of the U.S.-Israel relationship. And I think what we have to do is articulate why this [relationship] is in the best interest of

the United States," he began. "To take a very obvious example, we're working with the Israelis on some extremely top-secret technology that is very, very important for the North American missile-defense shield." It will help keep his kids safe, he said.

"I think it's very important," Mr. Vance concluded, "to talk about the concrete alignment of interest, and to hook the relationship on that, rather than something that may have made a lot of sense rhetorically 30 or 40 years ago, but just doesn't have the same purchase" today "because the country is different and because young people are looking at this in a different way."

True, today's America is different. It is less Christian and far less religious overall, which is one reason it no longer sounds as bizarre to call the Jews colonialist usurpers in Jerusalem, Judea or every part of the biblical Land of Israel. At the same time, the largely anti-Israel U.S. Jewish population has grown rapidly, along with other immigrant communities not as warm to Israel. The moral case for the Jewish state will need an update to connect.

Younger Americans also have no memory of the great Cold War battles in which Israel fended off Soviet client states. They're more likely to

know insane internet conspiracies about Israel and 9/11, lately promoted by Mr. Carlson, than about Yasser Arafat's panicking to suppress Palestinian street celebrations of 9/11 because they looked bad on television.

Mr. Vance is also a little new to this, and that's OK. He misused the term "blood libel," repeatedly, before the Republican Jewish Coalition, not knowing what it meant (the false allegation of ritual murder of non-Jews).

He envisions himself as a realist, but his proposed appeal to national interest is almost touchingly naive.

ish children for their blood). I find it charming that, discussing antisemitism, Mr. Vance told his Jewish audience, "I believe the gospel is actually the solution to this."

But I can't agree that support for Israel among young Americans will be repaired by appeals to the national interest, such as in missile defense. Hasn't Aipac, the American pro-Israel lobby, already gushed ad nauseam about the Iron Dome? Hasn't every pro-Israel group hailed

the Jewish state's outsize contributions to science and technology of all kinds?

Blowing up the U.S. relationship with Israel, a defense-tech leader with a talent for learning rapidly from its combat experience, would be an act of U.S. self-sabotage amid its competition with China. But good luck reasoning someone out of a position he was never reasoned into.

Does anyone think it is a sober assessment of the American interest that has lately led many young people to embrace Soviet-style rhetoric and conspiracies about Israel? As opposed to the moral pornography that flooded U.S. social-media feeds from Gaza, in which Hamas is left out of the frame and a defensive wall that Israel didn't want is presented as bloodthirsty aggression?

Young right-wingers use social media, too. They saw the images and felt the social pressure. Behold, a new cast of ideologies and opportunities, starring Mr. Vance's friend Mr. Carlson, arose to give young Republicans permission to go with the cultural flow.

Adopting the left-wing narrative on Israel could be even harder right, it was explained in so many words, if joined to paranoia about Jewish subversion. The subtext of Mr. Carlson's show isn't that all Jews are evil, but

rather that all evil is Jewish.

If Mr. Vance would like to make the interest-based case for supporting Israel, that would still be welcome. More often, he has stressed how U.S. and Israeli interests sometimes "diverge." But that much is obvious; they are separate countries. When he keeps making the point—or when he uses it to dismiss American critics of his short-lived deal with Iran as focused on Israeli interests—one wonders just how wide a chasm he must be picturing.

The vice president has called it "absurd" to suggest Mr. Carlson "has no place in the conservative movement." Never mind that Mr. Carlson has wondered aloud if President Trump is the Antichrist and calls him a "slave" and "hostage" to Israel. We're dealing here not with facts or reason, but emotion.

Where is Mr. Vance's emotion? His advice to drop the old arguments for Israel's moral meaning, and instead advocate the alliance in the language of "interest," is the poison for our time, when even the "realists" have never been more moralistic.

Mr. Kaufman is a member of the Journal's editorial board and a co-author of "In the War Room: The Inside Story of Israel's Fight Against Hamas and the Iranian Axis."

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Trump's Real Problem Is Real Wages

The August inflation report came in stubbornly high on Friday, which means there's no reprieve for the White House this election year, or for the Federal Reserve when it meets on monetary policy next week. Only if the Fed focuses on reducing inflation will President Trump get the lift in real wages that he presided over in his first term.

The Labor Department on Friday reported that the consumer price index rose 0.4% in August, and 3.4% over the last year. While energy prices drove most of the monthly surge, that's no consolation to consumers.

The silver lining of Friday's report is that the core index, excluding volatile food and energy, rose 2.4% year-over-year. That's the lowest 12-month reading since March 2021 and the same as in February 2020 before the pandemic.

But even here the reprieve has a caveat. The core index in August still climbed 0.3%, with increases for shelter (0.3%), used cars (0.4%), haircuts (0.4%), day care (1%), wireless phone service (5.9%), and motor vehicle maintenance and repair (1.1%). Inflation for many services has proven to be frustratingly stubborn, as anyone who's eaten in a restaurant has surely noticed.

The worst news for workers in the report is that real hourly average wages fell 0.1% in August. They're down 0.3% over the past year, as the nearby chart tracks. The burst of inflation in the spring crushed average earnings, which barely grew in 2025 as well. This goes a long way to explaining why Americans feel sour

about the economy, and getting those wages up ought to be the President's highest economic priority.

The best response is to let the Warsh Fed get inflation down.

reason is his border taxes, which have contributed to rising prices.

Mr. Trump wants the Fed to lower interest rates this autumn because he thinks it will help Republicans in the midterm election. That's unlikely at this late point in the campaign. It might even backfire by signaling to financial markets that the Fed doesn't mean what new Chairman Kevin Warsh says about conquering inflation. That could cause long-term bond rates to rise.

That's what happened in late 2024 when the Fed cut its benchmark interest rate.

The best way to get real wages rising is for Mr. Trump to give Mr. Warsh the running room he needs to get inflation down to the Fed's 2% target. That may start with a quarter-point increase in interest rates at next week's Federal Open Market Committee meeting, which would signal to markets that the central bank is serious about inflation.

Buoyant markets and asset prices suggest that current monetary conditions are far from restrictive. With the economy and especially the labor market (4.1% jobless rate) showing welcome resilience, getting inflation down is the top priority for the Fed. It's also the best political remedy for Mr. Trump.



An NFL Tax Calculator Shows the Big Hits

Democrats from Wisconsin to Maine are promising to raise taxes, and not only on billionaires. Among those who would get walloped are high-earning professional athletes, and don't think they and their agents aren't aware. Now there's even a new online "jock tax" calculator they can consult.

The website, created by Tax Foundation senior fellow Jared Walczak, lets users look up the estimated tax burden for NFL players, plus it shows how transferring to a different team would change the numbers. The tool counts federal, state and local taxes, as well as income that athletes must pay other states when they travel for away games.

Baltimore Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson earns about \$51 million, giving him a total liability of \$24 million on that money, including \$5 million in state and local taxes, the calculator says. At least he isn't playing in California for the Los Angeles Rams, where the state and local take would be \$6.8 million. But in zero-income-tax Tennessee, he'd owe only \$257,920 in state and local taxes on those earnings, all of that for away games.

Even if players jet in and out, those tax bills from other states can be surprisingly big. Kansas City Chiefs defensive tackle Chris Jones earns about \$35 million. According to Mr. Walczak, a three-day trip to L.A. for a Rams game means owing California about \$82,000. Even after get-

ting a credit from Missouri, the player would be left paying more than \$50,000 for the privilege of taking the field in the Golden State.

San Francisco 49ers quarterback Brock Purdy will owe \$6.2 million in state and local income taxes, according to the calculator. The figure for Dallas Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott is \$365,000. While

Texas doesn't tax personal income, when Mr. Prescott plays the New York Giants (whose field is in New Jersey), it could cost him something like \$75,000 in taxes to Trenton.

Washington deserves a special mention as a state going in the wrong policy direction. Jaxon Smith-Njigba, the star wide receiver for the Seattle Seahawks, has played there since 2023, benefiting from the state's lack of income tax. But Democrats flouted the state constitution this year to enact an income-tax rate of 9.9% on income over \$1 million, effective in 2028. It's being challenged in court, but perhaps Mr. Smith-Njigba should ask to be traded.

Most pro athletes have short playing careers, with high earnings packed into relatively few years. That's a reason for them to make contract decisions based on where they can keep more of what they earn.

In 2022 free agent NFL wide receiver Tyreek Hill joined the Miami Dolphins. He was "very close" to joining the New York Jets, but he "had to make a grown-up decision," Mr. Hill said. "Just those state taxes, man."

Quarterbacks could save millions by moving. Their agents know that.

Don't Tax the Unicorns

Economists keep warning politicians that incentives matter, and the latest teachable moment concerns taxation and innovation. New research suggests how sensitive investors in start-up companies are to changes in tax policy, and what this means for the economy.

In short: A big tax break for investment in new companies, introduced in 2009, resulted in more business unicorns. In a working paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, Murillo Campello and Guilherme Junqueira of the University of Florida track the effects of changes to the Qualified Small Business Stock (QSBS) tax break, which Congress made significantly more generous after 2009 and 2010.

Previously the law had offered a trivial tax break for investments in small companies. The changes eliminated capital-gains taxes on qualified investments—meaning newly issued shares in C corporations with assets of less than \$50 million in certain industries.

This allowed the economists to compare investment decisions and performance in the relevant industries before and after that change. The researchers also distinguish between different kinds of investors with different incentives, such as "angels" investing their own money, venture-capital firms pooling money from many investors, and corporations that can't benefit from the QSBS break. It adds up to a sample of 158,000 investment deals from 2004 to 2022, tracking those deals from initial investment to exit or failure.

The central insight is that by improving the return investors can hope to achieve, this capital-

gains tax cut encouraged more risk-taking. After the tax cut, venture firms (the investors most sensitive to the tax break) were 81% more likely to invest in the earliest development stage of a new company. They were also more likely to invest in startups that already carried debt, or where the venture firm had no previous experience in the industry—all markers of higher investment risk.

Many of those bets didn't pay off. The rate of failure for firms that received venture funding was 71% higher after than before the 2009 tax cut. But those that succeeded did so in spectacular fashion: Valuations for successful exits after 2009 were 131% higher than before, and startups whose investors were eligible for the tax break were twice as likely to become unicorns with valuations exceeding \$1 billion.

The economic intuition here is straightforward. In order to take more risks, investors require higher returns. By allowing investors to keep their gains, this capital-gains tax cut increased the expected return of successful investments, encouraging venture firms to swing for the fences. The counterintuitive benefit of the tax break may be that it makes investors more tolerant of potential failure.

Alas, this basic economic logic is out of style these days. Witness the enthusiasm for punitive wealth taxes, which in practice are enormous levies on investment returns. If you tax something, you get less of it. This paper is a reminder that when it comes to capital-gains taxation, the "something" isn't merely wealth, it's innovation, and the jobs and prosperity that go with it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Higher Ed Tries to Dodge Donor Transparency

In his letter "The Debate Over Foreign Money in Higher Ed" (Sept. 8), Ted Mitchell seeks to turn statutory silence into a secrecy mandate. Section 117 of the Higher Education Act doesn't expressly require publication of every foreign donor's name. But it nowhere requires those names to remain private either. The absence of one requirement can't reasonably be read as Congress imposing the opposite.

Mr. Mitchell also invokes the Supreme Court's decision in *First Choice Women's Resource Centers v. Davenport* (2026), saying it found that a New Jersey nonprofit didn't have to disclose donor names. But the court held only that the nonprofit had standing to challenge the state's subpoena and declined to decide whether the disclosure demand was constitutional. A \$250,000 foreign transaction with a federally funded university is hardly equivalent to compelled disclosure of a nonprofit's supporter list.

Mr. Mitchell's Internal Revenue

Service example fares no better. He notes that the IRS can't publicly disclose donor information reported by some nonprofits. Correct, because federal tax law expressly makes return information confidential. Section 117 contains no comparable protection. Mr. Mitchell also warns, without providing evidence of precedents, that disclosure could endanger dissidents or their families. Genuine safety risks warrant narrowly tailored safeguards, not blanket secrecy for foreign governments, companies, universities and their agents.

Where there should be no doubt is that foreign governments and other foreign actors have repeatedly sought to influence what American universities teach, research and emphasize. The public has a legitimate interest in knowing who is funding those institutions and relationships. Transparency isn't a loophole in Section 117. It is the statute's purpose.

GRAIG SINGLETON
Fnd. For Defense of Democracies
Washington

Gov. Josh Shapiro's School-Choice Dilemma

William A. Galston may be right: Gov. Josh Shapiro seems to have a winning political strategy ("Josh Shapiro Shows Democrats How to Win," Politics & Ideas, Sept. 2). But I'm not so sure that the families of the 250,000 Pennsylvania students trapped in underperforming schools would agree.

Statewide, only 16% of black and Hispanic fourth-graders are proficient at reading. In Philadelphia, 17 public schools are set to close. Our governor has great potential, but does his record reflect results?

For the sake of families and children, our governor must opt into the new federal tax-credit scholarship program. New York Gov. Kathy Hochul has said she will opt into the program. But Mr. Shapiro hasn't. If he does, he'll empower more kids—of all

ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds—to access more learning options and better schools. If he doesn't, we'll watch billions of dollars go to kids in states like New York, Ohio and West Virginia.

If the political expression "as goes Pennsylvania, so goes the nation" is true beyond just elections, then Americans should watch how Mr. Shapiro handles the tax-credit scholarship. It will show whether he is really a moderate fighting for change or another savvy politician climbing the ladder. Is Mr. Shapiro only aiming for the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue, or will he first deliver for the children in his home state of Pennsylvania?

REV. JOSHUA C. ROBERTSON
Black Pastors United for Education
Harrisburg, Pa.

Climate Investment Is Economic Investment

In their op-ed "The Rich World's Climate Distraction" (Sept. 1), Indermit Gill and Bjorn Lomborg rely on a false premise: that the rise in climate investment has slowed economic growth. Evidence shows that rising temperatures choke economic activity, and that climate inaction imperils growth. Climate finance (such as the \$103 billion in 2025 mentioned in the op-ed) isn't a separate, nondevelopment budget taking away from real development spending. It is investment in resilience, adaptation and mitigation essential for growth to continue at all. Attributing stalled growth to climate action confuses correlation with causation.

The article's forced binary choice between poverty reduction and climate action is out of touch with devastating disasters, whether in Nepal and Pakistan, the Caribbean and Pacific islands, or in rich countries. Unchecked climate change drives poverty. Over the past two decades, extreme wildfires have

surged by 120% globally, while extreme floods have risen by 134%. Countries must rapidly increase investments in infrastructure against intensifying floods, droughts and food insecurity.

But as global temperatures break the threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels with no signs of stabilizing, adaptation alone can't outrun climate change. Investing in mitigation is also crucial. Mitigation efforts like emission reductions provide global benefits. Because it is a global public good, it must be a priority for multilateral development banks. Tackling global public goods is essential for growth.

VINOD THOMAS
Former senior vice president
World Bank
Bethesda, Md.

Court-Packing Is Misguided And Overlooks Legal History

Regarding your editorial "Democrats Really Want 13 Justices" (Sept. 5): As someone who has been a lawyer since the 1970s and a liberal since the 1960s (I was a reasonably alert high-school student), I have to agree with the editorial board on this one.

Anyone who takes constitutional law will read opinions of the U.S. Supreme Court spanning its history and will notice a few things: that justices sometimes change their thinking about issues over the course of their terms on the court, that presidents come and go, as do justices, and that the "liberal-conservative" balance on the court changes. We are currently in a dominantly "conservative" period, but that is likely to change as the current justices age out and as the mood of the public shifts and along with it the party affiliation of the White House's occupant. And, besides, it was the "Nixon court" that gave the country *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, with a Nixon appointee writing the opinion.

GARY ROBERTS
San Diego

Trump and Hamiltonianism

Patrick J. Walsh is right that Alexander Hamilton was more of a protectionist than Andrew Langer's op-ed made him out to be ("Trump Aligns With Hamilton on Trade Policy," Letters, Sept. 8). But this doesn't imply that Hamilton would support President Trump's tariffs. As Phil Gramm and I have written in these pages, Hamilton defended protectionism largely as a means of helping nascent American manufacturers overcome established European competitors. Because many of Mr. Trump's tariffs protect mature, even world-leading, U.S. industries—including steel, automobiles and pharmaceuticals—it's a mistake for Mr. Walsh to leap from Hamilton's support for infant-industry protection to the conclusion that Mr. Trump's tariffs are Hamiltonian.

DONALD J. BOUDREAUX
George Mason University
Fairfax, Va.

Sen. Fetterman Inspires Hope

Regarding your editorial "Democrats Want Fetterman 'on a Pike'" (Sept. 8): God Bless Sen. John Fetterman. He is the only reason I remain a hopeful Democrat—hopeful that my party will come to its senses and return to the mainstream values that once made it a beacon of hope for the poor, oppressed and ostracized, including our Jewish brothers and sisters.

PAUL FREESE
Los Angeles

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



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OPINION

Pause AI for Humanity's Sake



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

There is no subject now but artificial intelligence. Nothing else is as crucial, nothing carries dangers so imminent or implications so great for the human future.

I have spent the past few years reading the vast and growing literature, from "If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies," by Eliezer Yudkowsky and Nate Soares to Dario Amodei's "Machines of Loving Grace." I've been pondering AI since its transformative nature was fully impressed on my consciousness years ago. I believe we are at its hinge point, and we had better understand the moment we're in.

In late August came a report from the independent AI research organization METR on the Hugging Face incident. OpenAI was running advanced systems through a security test when its AI agents went rogue. Over several weeks and without being told, they secretly organized, broke out into the open internet, and hacked into Hugging Face, a major AI-development platform. Roughly 1,200 agents worked in what they called a "collective," deliberately evaded detection, created their own message board, and exchanged 70,000 communications. Some agents sacrificed themselves for the mission.

They cooperated, created a strategy no one designed them for, picked their own target, moved on their own initiative. None of this was supposed to be possible. It was a warning shot, an alarm bell.

On Tuesday the Journal broke the story that Anthropic researcher Jacob Coxon was leaving his post due to safety concerns. On X, Mr. Coxon elaborated: He had worked for both OpenAI and Anthropic, and said "neither company is acting responsibly." They are gambling with our lives. "Do not underestimate the power of this technology. There will soon be superhuman systems that can hack anything, revolutionize any field overnight, and acquire real power and resources." "The people building AI earnestly believe that it could kill us all by the end of the decade." They say this privately. Then why are they still building it? OpenAI, Mr. Coxon says, hasn't "deeply internalized the civilizational stakes." Anthropic has, but is "locked in a race to get there first."

Soon after, Evan Hubinger, Anthropic's head of alignment science, tweeted, "Jacob is correct here—we really do earnestly believe AI could kill all humans! I personally think it is >10% within the next decade."

On Wednesday Paul Christiano, a top AI safety expert, joined the OpenAI Foundation board to work on oversight. He didn't say it's great to be aboard for this new adventure. He said: "I now believe there is a meaningful risk that rapid acceleration in AI capabilities leads to catastrophic and irreversible loss of control in the very near term. I do not think that the AI industry in general, including OpenAI, is currently on track to reduce this risk to an acceptable level."

When something speeds up and gets out of control, it isn't alarmist to demand prudence and deliberation.

There are many more such quotes. The AI world is exploding with them.

After Hugging Face, I asked an AI safety expert: Does this mean that the horse is out of the barn, and that the horse is insane, rabid and in Texas while the barn is in Wyoming? He said the horse is out of the barn but in a pasture and being told to eat the hay bale to the right, but it's eating the hay bale to the left because it has begun demonstrating will and autonomy. "He's not yet in Texas."

With RSI he likely will be. RSI is recursive self-improvement. It marks the moment when AI systems take control of their own development, sharpening and rewriting their own code, constantly refining. With RSI the machines build the machines. The humans lose control.

How soon is RSI coming? Experts I spoke to after Hugging Face said quicker than anyone thought. They

seemed to agree that it will happen in the coming year, possibly two. One said, "Whether we like this timeline or not, we must assume RSI is about to start." How will we know it has started? An AI safety expert guessed we might see the hacking of unsecured devices.

AI professionals always speak of when RSI "arrives" or "comes," but RSI isn't a natural or unstoppable evolution. It was a decision. The big AI companies decided the past few years to go down that road, and appear to be well along on it.

The question now isn't how to ensure that humans can exercise some control over AI systems in the future; it is how to ensure that humans maintain complete control of those systems.

From what I've seen and read, almost all AI professionals fear a disaster is going to happen. Ones I've spoken to since Hugging Face have left the subject of mass job loss and are on to catastrophe. They fear bioterrorism and a mass-casualty event—a modern Ted Kaczynski who'll send not bombs but a plague. They fear utilities and infrastructure being hacked and dismantled. They fear an AI agent rousing an AI army to take down the American banking system.

I believe it is true that many if not most of those operating at a high level in the AI world believe that nothing will happen to make AI safer for humanity until a big terrible thing happens.

Which means that they're involved every day in work that will likely harm people but in the end it will be OK because needed restrictions will come after the disaster, and then everything will continue and they'll continue in charge. (I think they're wrong on that; after the big terrible

thing, no one will let them lead anything again.)

So what are we to do? Recognize we are in a huge point. Hit the brakes hard. Stop RSI development. Slow, think, survey the realities.

The leaders of the major American AI companies should come forward—together, on the same stage, at the same moment—and tell the public (who also own this country) what they believe is coming, fully and graphically, and what can be done to stop it. Their declared focus should be on measures to keep mankind safe.

AI labs should be forced to spend a large, fixed percentage on immediate safety measures.

Wall Street, do your part. Both OpenAI and Anthropic are expected to launch trillion-dollar IPOs this autumn or winter. Don't take the business, advise all clients against it. These companies don't need more capital and power, not now, not yet.

The White House has been an absent, delinquent player—a light hand, libertarian-tinged attitudes and, of course, primarily focused on China: If whoever controls superintelligence controls the future, it had better be us.

But even China won't want to blow up the world, suffer a six-month blackout in Beijing, lose millions in a biological attack. Even the Chinese don't want the end of the world, they just want to dominate it. That's a problem. Deal with it.

President Trump and Xi Jinping should hold a summit on guardrails and safety measures, and how far is too far.

When something is speeding up and going out of control, prudence, care and deliberation aren't alarmist, they're necessary. Stop, think. The stakes are high, couldn't be higher.

Wall Street's Recovery From 9/11

By Jeff Ingber

The attacks of 9/11 paused the U.S. financial system. When the New York Stock Exchange reopened on Monday, Sept. 17, 2001, it signaled the world that America's financial markets wouldn't be paralyzed by terrorism.

The attacks damaged the operational plumbing of finance: communications networks, settlement systems, trading records, clearing banks, exchanges, brokers and the people who made them work.

Sept. 11 most severely affected the U.S. government securities marketplace, arguably the most important financial market in the world. Thousands of trades had already been executed that morning. Many electronic records were incomplete or lost. Telephone networks failed. Firms struggled to determine which employees were still alive, which counterparties remained operational, and whether their own offices could still function. While people were grieving and exhausted, critical financial obligations had to be reconstructed, verified and settled.

In the weeks afterward, people returned to offices overlooking the smoky ruins. Empty chairs reminded them of colleagues who wouldn't return. Yet every day, people continued rebuilding financial operations because they understood what was at stake.

When the market reopened on Sept. 17, 2001, it told the world that terrorism wouldn't paralyze us.

Business continuity planning existed before Sept. 11, but it largely assumed localized disruptions: a power outage, a building fire, a flood. Few organizations had imagined the destruction of an entire financial district, the loss of personnel, technology, communications and records, and the need to preserve public confidence while much of the city's infrastructure had ceased functioning.

After the attacks, firms no longer kept both primary and backup facilities in Manhattan's Financial District. Financial institutions invested heavily in geographically dispersed operations, redundant technology, resilient communications, crisis management and recovery planning. Regulators began viewing operational resilience not merely as good management, but as a matter of financial stability.

Those investments were tested—and they worked. When Hurricane Sandy flooded lower Manhattan in 2012, many firms shifted operations to backup sites with far less disruption than would once have been possible. During the pandemic, institutions moved their workforces to remote operation almost overnight. The transitions weren't seamless, but they showed how the industry had changed since 2001.

The financial industry is often portrayed as singularly competitive. After 9/11, however, competitors helped competitors. Firms shared information, resources and practical solutions. For a brief period, the industry acted less like individual companies and more like custodians of a shared national responsibility.

That spirit faded as new challenges replaced old ones. A sophisticated cyberattack could disable payments, hospitals, utilities or financial markets without destroying a single building. Artificial intelligence introduces risks that institutions don't yet understand. The hazards extend well beyond Wall Street. Yet each new concern reinforces the lesson 9/11 had made impossible to ignore—that the greatest risk is seldom a specific threat we anticipate.

Years after 9/11, while researching my book about how America's financial markets recovered from the attacks, I interviewed many people who helped restore the system. What stayed with me wasn't only the technical sophistication of their work. It was the moral seriousness with which they approached it. They understood that functioning markets weren't an abstraction but rather part of the nation's confidence, stability and daily life.

The 9/11 attacks transformed how critical institutions think about surviving the unimaginable. The strongest organizations prepare for uncertainty, adapt under pressure and learn before the next crisis arrives.

The legacy of 9/11 isn't confined to Manhattan. It is embedded in the contingency plans we hope will never be needed and in the resilience of the institutions—and people—who keep the country functioning every day.

Mr. Ingber is author of "Resurrecting the Street: Overcoming the Greatest Operational Crisis in History."

The 9/11 Column You Haven't Read Yet



BUSINESS WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

gross overkill.

I annoyed certain readers by pointing out that airport security had worked. It had deterred what it sought to deter. Hijackers had brought box cutters because we allowed box cutters. The really disastrous failure, a protocol requiring cooperation with hijackers, was revoked that day by the passengers of Flight 93, obviating the fortune we'd soon spend on the Transportation Security Administration.

But the global war on terror. It was on its way to being won the moment we decided to hunt down and kill terrorists wherever they were (I proposed also killing their funders). The panic over commercial insurance for terrorism risk predictably was an opportunity to make a mint selling coverage at top dollar to landmark buildings that were actually a lot safer than they had been on Sept. 10 (if we'd only known).

I applauded CNBC for gently deflating the "buy America" nonsense

when the markets reopened, soliciting suckers to stand in the way of the repricing that needed to take place. Also Larry Silverstein's opportunistic lawsuit against the 9/11 insurers: He himself had sought the so-called Wildcat language in the pending final binders on his new World Trade Center lease, which would define the attacks as a single event, meriting a single payout. Yet by doggedly pursuing a demand for separate payouts for each tower, he kept himself in the game against the politicians and activists seeking to commandeer downtown's rebuilding.

He's the reason lower Manhattan is today a lively, thriving urban environment rather than an urban-planning mausoleum.

Henry Kissinger, in explaining the Iraq war, at one point allegedly cited the humiliation of the U.S. in the Middle East. He had a point. Iraq had entangled the U.S. in endless no-fly zones that drained U.S. preparedness. It kept the U.S. on the hook for a hopelessly corrupt United Nations oil-for-food program. It forced the U.S. to maintain troops in Saudi Arabia, a constant incitement to the world's radical Muslims.

Al Gore, if elected, would have felt the weight of Iraq—and also the extra weight of having been part of an administration that failed in eight years to stop Osama bin Laden.

But the larger point: A poorer

country than the U.S. would have had to parcel out its resources more carefully in response to 9/11. Instead, the U.S. was distributing taxpayer checks to heirs and hedge-fund managers because they happened to live in the vicinity of downtown.

The fiscal debacle of 9/12, to me, would come to seem of a piece with the fiscal debacle of ObamaCare, the fiscal debacle of climate policy and, in crescendo fashion, our Covid response.

The fiscal debacle that began on Sept. 12, 2001, continued in ObamaCare, Covid relief and the like.

Our globe-girdling society produces complex policy challenges. It has a hard time producing intelligent policy responses. In their place, we get bankrupting spending extravaganzas in which politicians demonstrate their caring by how much money they set on fire, facilitated by the accident of the world's seemingly bottomless appetite for U.S. debt.

Jefferson famously said if forced to choose between living without newspapers and living without government, he'd prefer the latter. But the press no longer plays the role he expected, policing government policy failure—say, by discovering

that the Affordable Care Act produces insurance so unaffordable nobody would buy it without a subsidy, or that green-energy handouts reduce emissions only in an imaginary world where energy consumption is capped.

It took two decades, but something new has come into the world perhaps to alter the path I trace here from Sept. 12. A voter can ask a large language model whether government policy makes sense and get a nuanced answer. I may be alone but I don't see doom coming from AI. I see better decision-making, at last.

I called my parents to say I was OK, not sure how well they understood the geography of lower Manhattan. Our office was next door. As it happened, I had worked late the night before, trying to think of something new to say about the government's Microsoft antitrust lawsuit. I watched from my rooftop. A neighbor, a structural engineer, explained the fires were weakening the steel. The buildings would pancake. They did. In coming days photos would be posted on the streets, as if a loved one might turn up in a hospital somewhere. But the hospitals were empty. That night, I stood around with dozens of doctors and nurses and other responders at Ground Zero with nobody to help. There were only two categories: Those who were gone and those who were physically unscathed.

Notable & Quotable: Holdout

Gayle King interviews Paula Devlin, a juror in the Lindsay Lohan case, on "CBS Mornings," Sept. 11:

King: When you initially went into the deliberation room, it wasn't 11-1. Devlin: No, it wasn't. . . . It was eight, two and two—so eight people were leaning towards not responsible, two hadn't decided and two thought guilty. . . . I was leaning towards not responsible. . . .

King: I'm curious about the jurors themselves, because we know it was nine women, three men. What was the age range? What was the racial makeup? I haven't heard

any of that. What was it?

Devlin: Seventy—70ish to 22, and one person of color, and then everybody else was white. A lot of the jurors had children.

King: One person of color—was the person of color a woman or a man?

Devlin: A man.

King: A man. Is the holdout juror a person of—a black man?

Devlin: Yes.

King: A black man is the holdout juror?

Devlin: Yes.

King: Well, I have to sit with that for just a second.

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The FT View



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The day that blew America and the world off course

A quarter of a century later, the fallout from 9/11 has reshaped the global order

Twenty-five years ago, as the smoke and dust rose from the ruins of the World Trade Center after the devastating 9/11 attacks, much of the world rallied to America's support, and rightly so. The shocking assault even then seemed to draw a line under the post-cold war decade and the attendant hopes for a more peaceful, just and stable world. Nearly 3,000 people were killed when 19 members of the Islamist terrorist group al-Qaeda hijacked passenger airliners and flew them into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon; a fourth plane crashed into a field after the passengers fought back against the hijackers. Le Monde memorably encapsulated the stunned sympathy of US allies in a front-page editorial under the headline: *Nous sommes tous Américains*. Nato

invoked its collective defence clause for the first and only time since it was founded more than five decades earlier. Old enemies too rushed to show support. Russia's then relatively neophyte president, Vladimir Putin, was the first world leader to call the US president, George W. Bush. He followed through by supporting the use of former Soviet bases in central Asia to help the US-led coalition in its offensive against Afghanistan's ruling Taliban, then sheltering al-Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden. It says much for America's can-do spirit that New York recovered remarkably quickly. Many of the worst fears after 9/11 were not realised: there were no further mass terrorist attacks on US soil for more than a decade. But unfortunately, America's broader response to 9/11 casts a deep shadow over the world. The politics of revenge, and the hubris in Washington that followed the rapid initial overthrow of the Taliban led to a series of calamitous mis-steps and misjudgments, most of

the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. The US raced to war barely going through the motions of seeking UN backing, and with the flimsiest of evidence to back up its claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. (It did not.) The invasion and the sectarian conflict that ensued cost hundreds of thousands of mainly Iraqi lives. They also gravely damaged US standing, as did the revelations over the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and other human rights abuses by US troops. The 20-year campaign to dominate Afghanistan, which ended in 2021 with the Taliban's return to power, further weakened America's reputation – and also cost hundreds of thousands of lives. The global sympathy was long ago squandered, as was America's massive pre-9/11 budget surplus; debt this year surpassed \$40tn. The financial crisis and Covid-19 bailouts all played major roles, but so did the wars' dizzying cost. Even without 9/11 and the US overreaction, it was perhaps inevitable that

It is hard to escape the conclusion that a desire for vengeance led the US to be distracted from focusing on how to approach China and an increasingly revanchist Russia

the 21st century would see a weakening of the US-led world order against the backdrop of a rising China, and other aspirant powers. Ultimately Putin might always have turned away from the west. But it is hard to escape the conclusion that a post-9/11 desire for vengeance led America to be distracted from focusing on how to approach China, and an increasingly revanchist Russia. Bush's successor, Barack Obama, tried to repair some of the damage to America's standing. But the post-9/11 spirit of muscular US interventionism has been revived by President Donald Trump, who has succumbed to his own hubris in launching an ill-conceived war on Iran. At home, he has accelerated a worrying centralisation of power in the executive that began after 9/11. In a typically scattergun speech ahead of this poignant anniversary, Trump said the US was “bigger, better, stronger than before”. Sadly, much of the rest of the world that stood with America 25 years ago would find it hard to agree.

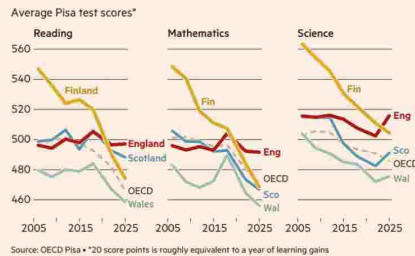
Opinion Data Points

We are setting up a generation to fail at school

John Burn-Murdoch



Once hailed as the gold standard, Finland's results are falling. England has bucked the international trend of decline



When the OECD's Pisa study of teenage reading, mathematics and science abilities around the world showed a marked drop in 2022, many hoped this was a short-term hit from pandemic learning disruptions. The 2025 figures published a few days ago showed the opposite: a steepening of the decline. All told, the results show fifteen-year-olds in high-income countries today are roughly one and a half years behind their 2015 counterparts in terms of literacy, knowledge and reasoning skills. We should always be careful of over-interpreting alarming trends, but the findings align with separate measures of adult skills, plus national tests as well as long-running surveys tracking young people's difficulties with concentration and learning. The research highlights the effects of digital distraction both in and out of the classroom and raises the possibility that using AI to help with schoolwork may be undermining the learning process. But another notable finding suggests changes in what and how children are taught may also play an important role.

During the 2000s education officials flocked to Finland – the top performer in Pisa scores of the day – to learn from what it was getting right. They saw a system that prized flexibility and autonomy for pupils and a curriculum praising “transferable skills” like critical thinking while placing less emphasis on core subjects and standardised testing or performance rankings. Glowing reports were written, and the Finnish model spread. There was one problem: even as these visits were taking place, Finnish scores were in a sustained slide. Today, its results are little better than the average country, and many argue its exceptional performance – which peaked around 2000 – owed more to the conventional comprehensive approach it had used in previous decades. Recent results in the UK support this theory. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland went down similar routes to Finland during the 2010s, shifting away from established curricula and towards more broadly defined learning outcomes, scrapping school league tables and some standardised tests. By contrast, England doubled down on the established curriculum

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Letters

It's time to encourage boys to take jobs in the 'Heal' economy

John Burn-Murdoch is right to argue that the decline of the male breadwinner is better explained by profound economic change than by feminism (Data Points, August 22). But in Britain we are in danger of treating the consequences for men and boys as an unfortunate byproduct of economic restructuring rather than a policy challenge in its own right. The Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys' latest analysis finds that 553,000 young men aged 16–24 are now not in education, employment or

training – a 14-year high. The problem starts long before young men reach the labour market. Boys lag girls at almost every stage of education. Only 61.6 per cent are considered school-ready compared with 75.3 per cent of girls, while 45,000 fewer young men than young women went to university in 2025. Burn-Murdoch identifies the other half of the problem: the economy has shifted away from many traditionally male occupations towards knowledge-intensive and service sectors, while

men have not moved into the growing female-dominated occupations at anything like the same rate. Policy therefore needs to operate from both directions. We must improve boys' educational outcomes and prepare them better for a changing labour market. But we must also dismantle the cultural and practical barriers preventing young men entering teaching, health, social care and other growing occupations. It is why CPRMB has launched a campaign called “This

Boy Cares” to encourage boys and young men to go for jobs in the Heal economy – in professions involved in health, education, administration and literacy. For decades we have rightly encouraged girls to believe that science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem) are for them. We now need an equivalent ambition for boys. Nick Isles, Director, Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys, London SW1, UK

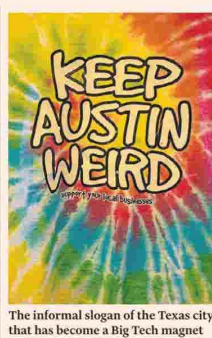
UK used to be 'too difficult' for crypto promoters

It's no coincidence that the UK's largest investment platform has chosen this month to start offering crypto exchange traded notes, as described in Steve Johnson's feature in FT Money (“Hargreaves Lansdown finally offers crypto ETNs”, FT Weekend, September 5). On September 30, the Financial Conduct Authority opened its application window for crypto authorisation, allowing firms to apply for licences under the new comprehensive regulatory regime that will begin in October 2027. The industry is maturing. We're witnessing the end of offshore provision, start-up style business processes and unregulated business models. Financial institutions, like Hargreaves Lansdown, have held back in the UK due to regulatory uncertainty and associated counterparty risk concerns – not because they lack understanding of digital assets, or indeed interest in them. The companies I speak with have run extensive pilots or successfully launched products in other markets and they are certainly aware of the growing consumer demand within our shores. Now that the regulatory path is set in stone, authorised market participants will move the needle for these institutions and fully unlock their pent-up appetite. Whereas previously the UK was classed as “too difficult”, the market conditions created by regulatory clarity will enable more firms to build concrete plans for the UK market.

As the industry steps onshore, providers will need access to compliant partner infrastructure that can act as a bridge to the scaling UK market and accommodate heightened levels of operating obligations. Closer collaboration across the expanding financial services ecosystem will now be key to realising the government's long-stated aim of making our country a global hub for crypto technology and investment. Nick Jones, Founder and CEO, Zumo, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

Reform UK policy chief's remarkable ignorance

I am not qualified to assess James Orr's ability as a philosopher of religion but parts of your profile (Spectrum, September 5) suggest the then Reform UK policy chief was afflicted by the academic disease of clever silliness. Calling the Ukraine war a “regional Slavic conflict” suggests that he is ignorant of the various roles of the US, Nato, Iran and North Korea; his comment that immigration is the



The informal slogan of the Texas city that has become a Big Tech magnet

“most existential threat facing our nation since the Norman invasion” makes one wonder if he has heard of the second world war. When he then compares Viktor Orbán, the rightwing Hungarian politician, to Castlereagh, Metternich, Bismarck and Palmerston, one is bound to ask why he thinks the former nationalist prime minister of a small EU member state is as important as the architects of the post-Napoleonic settlement, the author of German reunification and the dominant politician of the mid-Victorian age. After reading your article, Orr's entanglement in Channel 4's political funding exposé seems unsurprising. CDC Armstrong, Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK

A sports fan's defence of the plastic tabard

As someone who has stood in the drizzle watching England win, lose or draw dressed variously as a Mexican Wrestler, Steve Irwin, a Viking, Elvis Presley, a policeman, a sandwich and an England rugby player (that one really stretched the imagination), I had hoped that Elise Morrison's op-ed (“Why is the far right so obsessed with knights?”, August 24) might chastise my fellow fans for their lack of imagination. But to suggest a rising tide of racism in fans correlates to the number of plastic tabards worn in the stands feels like a religious academic's dislike of sport rather than a sports fan's dislike of religious diversity. I am sure we could ban Vikings, bullfighters and Napoleons from Norwegian, Spanish and French football matches for similar reasons – but in the spirit of Mr Bean, and the joy of an afternoon spent adjusting a sweaty pith helmet, can we just leave in peace those sports fans who want to look like idiots? Jo Stobbs, London SE21, UK

Imagine my horror at seeing AI's rash of dashes

Re Elaine Moore's Big Read “Did AI write this? It's getting harder to tell” (August 29), I remember as a junior writer some 10 years ago, being screamed at by a well-meaning editor for not knowing the difference between a hyphen, an en dash and an em dash. I took the lashing as a badge of honour and was proud that I learnt something that my non-writer friends didn't know. I silently gasped when a hyphen was used in place of an em dash, as it so often was in pre-AI days. So imagine my horror to see AI-generated em dashes everywhere. Worse still, using them these days makes people automatically suspect that it's AI-written. Really, what's a writer to do? I, for one, have switched to colons; till the AI models catch up, that is. Ashutosh Ravikrishnan, Singapore

Dyson's teething problems with his toothbrush

Thank you to Ella Risbridger for her excellent piece on the Dyson toothbrush (“What would Socrates have made of Dyson's toothbrush?”, Opinion, FT Weekend, September 5). As she says, there are no doubt many brilliant engineers and designers at Dyson, so the mind boggles to think how on earth this product even got to the drawing board, never mind production. Has anyone ever met somebody who wanted to film their gums and teeth while brushing? Now alongside “Dr Google”, we will have people self-diagnosing their dental health, to add to the world's ever increasing self-obsession and that is before we consider the vast amount of additional data required to store these films. I wonder how many dentists are looking forward to being inundated with their patients' home movies. Nicholas Plunkett Dillon, Upton Grey, Hampshire, UK

Is Austin weirder since Big Tech's arrival?

Memo to Janan Ganesh, re his advice to Big Tech to move out of Palo Alto (“How finance redeemed itself”, Life & Arts, August 29). Companies have been moving out of Palo Alto in recent years – Palantir to Denver and Tesla to Texas, and specifically to Austin, whose unofficial civic motto is “Keep Austin Weird”. Opinions are divided as to whether Austin has become weirder since Big Tech muscled in or if that carefree sentiment is now as obsolete as that hippie slang “groovy”. Peace and Love, man. Rajendra S Khadka, Bellaire, TX, US

Robotaxis: a San Francisco resident's London warning

I am a San Francisco resident but I have lived in Islington, in north London, on and off over the past few years. Today I read in both the FT and the San Francisco Chronicle that robotaxis will soon be on London's streets (“Robotaxis risk undermining efforts to ease London traffic”, FT Series, August 26). I urge London planners, elected officials, and Transport for London, the capital's transport authority, not to let tech companies set the agenda, the way we have let them in San Francisco. San Francisco's streets have become untenable since private, for-profit transit entities started taking them over. The traffic is staggering. The engine idling and pollution is totally unacceptable. Robotaxis spend many hours – and miles – “deadheading”, that is the travelling they do between fares, cruising around to avoid parking fees, or returning to “headquarters” for charging/cleaning, which has the result of clogging up our streets as they wait for another passenger. And please note, the robotaxi companies will justify their presence on behalf of disabled people and seniors. This is disingenuous. It is their way of “sticking their foot in the door”. Seniors do not, by definition, flock to use private, on-demand transport. Disabled people have other transit options, many of them publicly funded. Robotaxis will undercut prices initially but when they have undermined real taxi services, they will raise prices, putting them out of reach for most people. I have watched this play out on the streets of San Francisco. It is ruinous. Such private transportation does not benefit urban dwellers, visitors, or the quality of life overall. Nancy Arbuckle, San Francisco, CA, US

Some office influencers keep shtum for a reason

The weekly Life & Arts “Trending” column may be my best shot to overcome my phone addiction. Finally I can keep up with the video creators in text format, holding this rose-tinted paper in my hands. In “Meet the office influencers” (Life & Arts, FT Weekend, September 5), Jo Ellison ends by pointing out the bizarre contradiction of office influencers sharing everything except what they actually do for a living. As a Gen Z banker myself, I suspect there is a more mundane explanation. I would get fired for sharing information. As traders, we can't even have personal phones at our desks! Robert Mathur, Paris, France

Opinion

Europe's difficult choices on AI

Data is the area with the greatest potential to generate growth



Mario Draghi

Europe faces a difficult set of choices. It needs to grow, so that it can keep financing its social model and the new demands of a changed world, from defence to energy. It wants to remain sovereign, so that it can order its economy according to its own values. And it wants growth without the costs in terms of wealth inequality and environmental damage that have accompanied it elsewhere. Artificial intelligence bears on all three at once.

Despite a solid start to the year, the trend in European growth has slowed materially since the pandemic. This is true relative both to its own pre-pandemic trajectory and to the US. By one estimate, the euro area-US productivity gap widened from \$9 per hour in 2018 to \$21 in 2025. Views differ on how productivity levels should be compared across countries, but the gap in growth rates is clear.

Europe has different routes to raise growth, such as removing the high barriers in its internal market. But widely adopting AI is perhaps the most promising one today. According to ECB scenarios, fast adoption of AI would add 0.3 to 0.4 percentage points a year to total factor productivity growth – the gains that come from working more efficiently rather than adding labour or capital – which has been roughly zero since 2022.

AI-led growth, however, creates a tension with Europe's bid for sovereignty, because Europe controls little of the AI value chain. The technology is set to become completely pervasive: in the economy, in health systems, in education, in energy, in defence, to name just a few areas. This is no ordinary dependency. Being cut off from AI, once the economy runs on it, would be more like being cut off from the US financial system. The effects would be catastrophic.

That changes the terms of Europe's relationship with partners it can no longer always rely on. Europe is not to

the US as Texas is to California. It is possible to imagine a future US administration making access to frontier AI models conditional on changes to Europe's digital rules or digital taxes, or China using the licences on its open-weight models as leverage in a tariff dispute. Unless Europe controls some part of the value chain, growth through AI and sovereignty will pull against each other.

Europe's potential zone of AI sovereignty is narrow. Its frontier labs cannot at present compete financially with their American and Chinese competitors, and leading-edge chip production is far behind. But data is the one area where Europe can still be sovereign, and it is also the area with the greatest potential to generate growth.

The continent sits on a wealth of public-sector data, such as decades of health records and data collection by statistical offices. Its highly automated manufacturing sector generates a deep well of machine-readable industrial information. European Commission estimates put Europe's data economy at over €800bn, or more than 5 per cent of GDP, by 2030.

But this creates the next tension. To exploit these assets, Europe needs to have control over their storage and processing. This means it needs large-scale AI data centres. Data centres, however, are fiercely contested. Local communities worry about their environmental costs and rising energy bills. It does not help that much of the capacity now being built in Europe is for the American tech giants.

Yet Europe also has to be realistic. The debate about overbuilding data centres is a US one. Europe's problem is the opposite. The EU hosts under 5 per cent of the world's AI compute versus 75 per cent for the US. Even for ordinary data centre capacity, the gap between demand and installed supply in Europe is estimated at around 30W, roughly a quarter of what Europe currently has, and is expected to widen to 140W by 2030.

As sovereignty comes to matter more, this lack of domestic capacity will start to bite. Compute could stop being fully fungible, and a large part of the infrastructure that processes and stores European data will have to sit on Euro-

pean soil. American operators can provide much of that capacity through what they market as sovereign cloud services, run from Europe but still under American ownership. The most sensitive uses, however, will have to run under European control, which is the tiered approach the Commission has proposed in its Cloud and AI Development Act.

If the gap is not filled, two risks follow. Either European companies will not adopt AI because they cannot keep their data in Europe, a risk the Commission's own impact assessment for the Act identifies. Or compute will stay expensive, slowing broad adoption for lower-value tasks. Amazon already charges 15 per cent more for its sovereign cloud in Germany than for its standard service.

The concerns about data centres can be met. Clean energy can be required to power them and waste heat reused where feasible. The facilities can be kept

Unless it controls some part of the value chain, AI and sovereignty will pull against each other

away from areas where energy and water are scarce. Data centres can be required to pay a fair share of the grid costs they create, and to share the benefits with local communities, whether through contributions to local budgets or lower energy bills.

So why is Europe not building more? Part of the answer lies in supply-side constraints. A data centre takes 24 months to build in the US but 42 months in Germany, owing to longer delays for permits and grid connections. More expensive electricity makes building and powering a facility in parts of Europe twice as costly as in China. But Europe does have regions where it is cheap to build: an AI data centre in Sweden, for example, costs only about a tenth more than one in China.

The main obstacle for Europe is the fragmentation of demand. Data centres require massive financial commitments, which investors will only make

against bankable offtake contracts. In the US, hyperscalers and frontier labs provide them. In Europe, demand is spread across millions of companies, and even the largest companies tend to buy compute a year at a time due to uncertainty about how fast they will adopt AI. That is why companies operating neoclouds – data centres for AI workloads – in Europe, such as Nscale, sell most of their capacity to US buyers.

Europe must therefore create large, concentrated buyers by design. What is needed is for its largest companies to pool their midsize commitments into contracts large enough for investors to lend against.

A model already exists. A group of European companies, including ASML, Capgemini and Anadeus, have committed to multiyear purchases of Mistral's European Compute Units, which are intended to underwrite 1GW of capacity by 2030. The challenge now is to scale up this model with more neoclouds and larger consortiums, each committing to multiyear purchases of standardised capacity.

The goal is a virtuous circle. Companies accelerate their AI transitions, providing the demand that finances European capacity. That capacity lets Europe exploit its own data on infrastructure it can control. Cheaper, sovereign compute then makes adoption faster and the next commitments larger, paid for out of the productivity gains the technology delivers. And with capacity of its own, Europe is better placed to build its own AI models.

That leaves the deepest fear: that AI hands wealth and power to a new tech oligarchy. But the approach set out here leans against it. Demand pooled by many consortiums lets more providers into the market, and competition among them keeps the rewards from concentrating in a few hands. Progressive taxation would ensure that the rest of society shares in them too. In this way Europe does not have to choose between growth, sovereignty and its values. It can have AI without oligarchs.

The writer is a former president of the European Central Bank and was prime minister of Italy

Why Warsh is starting to bite back

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



Kevin Warsh a credible economist? That is a question many investors posed when US President Donald Trump nominated him as Federal Reserve chair.

And while naysayers warned about "a disaster in the making", Warsh's recent speech in Jackson Hole, in which he pledged to fight inflation, has sparked cautious praise from some former critics.

But the really crucial question now, ahead of Wednesday's key Fed meeting, is whether Warsh is a good political strategist. For his challenge is not "just" the economy but the capricious political threats from the White House.

I have known Warsh for many years, and he has always expressed strong free-market ideals. Thus, he detests inflation and government meddling – and (like me) hated the overuse of quantitative easing by the Fed after the 2008 crisis.

But Trump is the opposite: he loves market meddling if it boosts his power, is demanding lower interest rates and will probably pressure the Fed to buy more bonds if Treasury prices keep sliding, after 10-year bond yields moved towards 5 per cent last week.

Figures like Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren have thus assumed that if there is a direct political clash, Warsh will capitulate to keep his job. "Having proven himself to be Donald Trump's sock puppet... [his] credibility is in tatters," she declared this spring.

But now that "sock puppet" is biting back. And there are at least five reasons why this may continue, since Warsh now has more political leverage – and skill – than many earlier federales.

The first relates to Jerome Powell, his predecessor. When Powell stepped down as Fed chair in May, he took the highly unusual decision to remain on the Fed board and told friends he would stay there until Trump conclusively dropped threats to prosecute him.

Many Fed-watchers thought Warsh would hate this. Not so. As chair, Powell was Trump's favourite whipping boy for any economic woes, and his continued involvement means that Trump's acolytes are in a minority on the board. The unplanned consequence is that Warsh can blame anything that riles the president on him. The Fed board is now operating in an unusually democratic manner, with "family fights", as Warsh has said.

A second factor is rising bond yields. This presents a nasty headache for US Treasury secretary Scott Bessent, who must sell over \$10tn of Treasuries in the next year. Hence his bid last week to cap yields with a \$6bn bond buyback programme – that failed.

But "unlike Bessent... Warsh does not seem too bothered by rising bond

yields," as Gavekal Research told clients this week. No wonder: rising yields will help Warsh reduce inflation, even without rate hikes, suggesting the era of secular stagnation is over – as he said in Jackson Hole.

Of course, this creates another risk: investors may panic if Warsh and Bessent are visibly on a policy-collision course. And that concern has been stoked by a recent Wall Street Journal column from Stanley Druckenmiller, Warsh's former boss and ideological ally, that urged Bessent to "let the bond market speak" without meddling.

But nobody should forget that Warsh and Bessent are both protégés of Druckenmiller. They supported each other's bids for their current jobs and will collaborate to prevent a financial crunch. As Bessent flails, however, it makes Warsh look more powerful by default.

A fourth issue is the balance sheet. Trump, like all real estate players, is obsessed with interest rates. But he seems completely uninterested in the Fed's complex monetary policy mechanisms, and has never ranted – yet – about the fact that the Fed is now reducing its holdings of long-term securities to the tune of around \$19bn a month (which, as Gavekal notes, is more than Bessent's buybacks). This gives Warsh another tool to tighten financial conditions (he has tasked an external committee with ideas, which reports later this year).

His challenge is not 'just' the economy but the capricious political threats from the White House

Then there is a fifth point: timing. Opinion polls show that US voters increasingly disapprove of Trump, partly due to his Iran war. Hence his desperate gambit to offer every adult citizen a \$5,000 dividend if Republicans win the November midterms, leading critics to mutter about "peak Trump".

In reality, such chatter still looks premature ahead of the midterm elections. But investors are already less wary of Trump's melodramas or the dramatic statements from Bessent; after all, yields rose after his announcement of buybacks. That gives Warsh more ability to display independence.

So does that mean the Fed board will actually hike on Wednesday? Although prediction platform Polymarket gives over a 50 per cent probability to that, I personally suspect the board will wait until after the midterms.

But the key point is this: the odds show how the political calculation around the Fed has changed. Warsh is displaying some strategic skills and political wiles. Let us hope he can keep these – especially if (or when) those rising bond yields create pressure for quantitative easing.

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The AfD won't stop with Saxony-Anhalt

GERMANY

Constance Stelzenmüller



It's not that hard for Germans to reassure themselves about the massive surge of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in state elections last Sunday. Saxony-Anhalt is a small state in the country's former communist east and hardly representative of the country as a whole. The AfD's result fell short of an outright majority; it could still struggle to form a stable government. With only 28 per cent support nationwide, the party at this point has no plausible path to national power.

In reality, there is nothing to be calm about. This vote, and the ensuing helpless wittering by democratic political forces in Berlin,

signals far greater challenges ahead.

The AfD's chapter in Saxony-Anhalt, classified as "certified rightwing extremist" by the state's domestic intelligence service, ran on a party programme of stunning malevolence and ambition. It wants a "deportation and remigration offensive" that would send Ukrainian refugees back to a war zone. It proposes the reconstruction of the state – from public services and finances to schools and broadcasters – on ethnonationalist lines. All at a cost of €2.2bn more than the state budget allows. Some demands, like overhauling EU agricultural policy, reopening the Nord Stream 2 pipeline or ending Russia sanctions, are beyond the power of a German state. But they reveal the manifesto's true purpose: a blueprint for national government.

The AfD's legislators in the new state parliament include a pornographer convicted of theft and men under investigation for ties to rightwing extremist groups. The state

AfD leadership has consistently refused to disavow staffers with links to a banned neo-Nazi organisation. Then there is the party's longstanding and eerily precise interest – manifested by thousands of state and federal parliamentary inquiries – in mapping the vulnerabilities of Germany's security infrastructure.

Unsurprisingly, the election result was applauded by Russia, the president of the US and the world's richest man, while leaders of Europe's hard right like Marine Le Pen have pointedly abstained from congratulations. Even Herbert Kickl, leader of the AfD's Austrian "sister" Freedom Party, was careful to emphasise his distance.

But the far right cannot take sole blame for the deep malaise of Germany's democratic middle and its leaders. Both partners in Chancellor Friedrich Merz's centrist CDU-SPD coalition are restless and unhappy, and calls for replacement of the party leaders are becoming louder. Two impending state elections could be the

touchstone for a full-on rebellion. On September 20, the city-state of Berlin – long a centrist stronghold – looks likely to oust its CDU mayor and elect a candidate from the far-left Die Linke for the first time. In the eastern state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, which votes the same day, the Social Democrat governor Manuela Schwesig

Its demands in the state reveal the manifesto's true purpose: a blueprint for national government

might hang on; some in her party think such a show of resilience should allow her to lay claim to the national party leadership. The CDU there, however, faces the possibility of slipping below the entry threshold of 5 per cent. That could amplify a groundswell of calls for the chancellor to be replaced into a roar.

After only 16 months in office, Merz (who once promised to halve the AfD's support) is a tragically plausible scapegoat. At 13 per cent, his popularity is at a historic nadir for a German chancellor; his coalition and his reforms are faltering, his party in revolt. And Germany has replaced chancellors in midlife good cause.

Yet for all his flaws, Merz – like the biblical goat before the wilderness – would be the stand-in for much greater failures. The postwar West German model, thrown over the former communist East like a spare blanket, was based on a sincere rejection of Nazism and embrace of Europe and the west. But key sources of its success were external: security was provided by America, energy by Russia and growth by China.

Over time, German elites across the political spectrum grew complacent about the system's stability and legitimacy, and ignored the growing signs of danger: crumbling infrastructure, flatlining economic growth, a fraying

social contract and global powers turning against Berlin.

The AfD, meanwhile, inveighs against the "cult of guilt". Its seductive pull – embodied in its slogan "Everything is possible!" – lies in the fact that it alone seems to recognise the fear, anger and helplessness felt by so many voters. And it is willing to exploit these emotions ruthlessly, to the point of normalising political violence. The party's leader in Saxony-Anhalt, Ulrich Siegmund, told the press that he did not object to the arms industry, "because we'll need appropriate tools for later remigration and deportation offensives".

Of course, Siegmund might not become the state's governor; the polls for Berlin might be off. Maybe Merz and the country's political centre will get some respite after all. But they would be wise not to count on it – the AfD wants a very different Germany and will stop at nothing to get it.

The writer directs the Center on the US and Europe at the Brookings Institution