the hindu businessline.
WEDNESDAY - OCTOBER 14, 2026

Unkind cut

No case for making insured patients 'co-pay' hospital bills

After decades of prioritising industry growth over consumer welfare, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) has only recently turned its attention to policyholder issues. The recent consultation paper on reforming selling practices for insurance products sends a firm message that the regulator is now striving to make insurance a more palatable product. However, the insurance industry doesn't seem to have woken up to smell the coffee.

The general insurance industry is piloting a proposal to impose a mandatory 10 per cent co-payment clause on all retail health insurance policies from January 1, 2027. The regulator must push back against this idea. A 10 per cent compulsory co-payment clause on all health policies is untenable on three counts. One, the primary case for health insurance in India is that the average low-income household is only one medical emergency away from penury. The latest 80th round of the NSS Health Survey conducted in 2025 showed that for ailments requiring hospitalisation, nearly 58 per cent of rural patients and 65 per cent of urban ones used private hospitals. Despite 44 per cent of them being covered by government schemes or insurance, they ended up incurring an average of ₹50,508 as out-of-pocket expenses on hospitalisation. This is quite an unaffordable sum for a country where per capita income hovers at about ₹2 lakh per annum. Therefore, the policy objective should be to reduce out-of-pocket expenses and enhance insurance payouts and not the other way around.

Two, even for the fully insured policyholders, health insurers seldom pay claims in full. Data from the latest IRDAI annual report show that in FY25, health insurers settled only 71 per cent of the claims filed, by value. This suggests that health policyholders are already informally 'co-paying' part of the bill. Building in a mandatory 10 per cent co-payment on top of this would place an unfair burden on them. Three, retail health insurance buyers in India are already burdened with steep premium rates and patchy claim payouts that cross-subsidise cheaper group plans. Enforcing a co-payment clause on retail buyers alone would worsen this anomaly.

While proposing this clause, insurers have argued that hospitals tend to over-charge patients by jacking up bills and ordering unnecessary diagnostic tests. But this is not a battle that individual patients can fight when under emotional and physical strain. Meanwhile, a Parliamentary Standing Committee has issued a detailed report on reforming hospitals, with proposals for room rate caps. The health insurance industry must contribute to fine-tuning these proposals, so that insurers and hospitals can agree on reasonable charges for procedures and room rates. As for co-payment, insurers already have optional co-payment clauses in place for policy buyers seeking lower premiums, or those presenting higher risks. This practice can continue on a case-to-case basis without a universal co-payment clause.



AJAI CHOWDHRY



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

India isn't a zero in AI

SHAPING UP. Domestic firms are making progress in sovereign, voice, semiconductor and specialised AI models

There has been talk that India is zero in AI. Chairman of Rockefeller International and global investor Ruchir Sharma's observation that foreign investors view India as a "loser in the AI race" triggered a lively debate, with critics arguing that this underplays India's strengths in AI talent, data, adoption and digital infrastructure. The comments captured an anxiety already playing out in the markets: foreign capital was chasing AI winners elsewhere, while Indian IT stocks faced concerns over AI-led disruption.

But India is not zero in AI. Former Infosys CFO Mohandas Pai has described it as the world's third-largest AI power, a view supported by India's third-place ranking in Stanford University's 2025 Global AI Vibrancy Index. Yes, we have some gaps in compute, frontier models and AI infrastructure, but there are important areas where considerable work is happening.

One is sovereign AI. In February this year, the IndiaAI Mission selected 12 organisations and consortia to develop indigenous foundation models, including large and small language models. A PIB report mentions government support worth about ₹2,194 crore for these 12 projects. Sarvam AI, Soket AI, Gnani AI, Gan AI, Avataar AI, IIT Bombay Consortium (BharatGen), GenLoop, Zenteiq, Intellihealth, Shodh AI, Fractal Analytics and Tech Mahindra Maker's Lab have been selected to develop models using Indian datasets.

The benefit of having our own sovereign LLMs is that no one can deny us access to these technologies tomorrow. There is also a cost advantage, as relying on global LLMs could become increasingly expensive. Geopolitical or national-security considerations could also restrict access, as seen when US export controls temporarily limited foreign access to Anthropic's advanced Claude models in June.

EXPANDING IN INDIA

Look at how global LLMs are expanding in India. ChatGPT has attracted a huge user base, and both OpenAI and Anthropic are pushing their products through advertising and promotion. The strategy is to get users hooked with free or low-cost offerings and as they see value, sell them premium subscriptions, like a land-grab strategy.

This dependence on foreign models could come back to haunt us. Look also at data centres. Why are global technology companies investing over $60 billion in setting up data centres in India? We need to see what India gets in return. These facilities use our land, power and water, while the data generated here becomes valuable to the companies operating them. Also, data centres are highly automated and will not create jobs on a scale commensurate with the resources and investment involved. The whole game in the US is about AI infrastructure. But Indian companies like Yotta, Adani, Ctrl S, Sify and Nextra are shaping up.

There is another area in India that is developing beautifully: voice AI. CoRover, one of the early players in conversational AI, developed IRCTC's AI-powered virtual assistant AskDISHA, in 2018. It enabled passengers to book railway tickets conversationally using voice or chat. Today, companies such as Gnani.ai, CoRover, Sarvam AI, Smallest.ai and Skit.ai are building speech and conversational-AI solutions for Indian and global markets.

The opportunity is significant. Rajan Anandan, managing director at Peak XV Partners, estimates that the addressable market for voice AI in India's BFSI sector alone is at least ₹50,000 crore. "Voice AI will be the first $1 billion revenue Enterprise AI category (outside coding) in India," he recently posted on X (formerly Twitter). India's AI opportunity lies in affordable, localised AI, with voice AI and India-specific applications driving mass adoption. The next wave is moving beyond generic AI 'wrappers' towards AI-native applications that solve local problems. These include startups like Kello, an AI-powered recruitment platform based in Bengaluru, that lets hiring teams search resumes and candidate pools using plain, everyday language, TAL, a conversational WhatsApp agent, for automating recruitment and candidate screening, and August AI, which applies AI to healthcare by combining medical intelligence with physical infrastructure to make care more affordable and accessible.

The benefit of having our own sovereign large language models is that no one can deny us access to these technologies tomorrow.

SEMICONDUCTOR AI LAYER

Significant work is also underway at India's semiconductor AI layer. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), through CDAC, is funding the development of an indigenous Indian GPU, with SD Sudarsan, Executive Director of C-DAC Bengaluru, leading the effort, targeting GPU specialisation by 2029 and a fully indigenous HPC system by 2030. C-DAC's AI inference chip has already entered trial production in partnership with HCL. Alongside this, approximately 20 startups are working on AI accelerators, including Agrani, Morphing Machines, SandLogic, and Netra Semi, many founded by experienced semiconductor veterans returning from global chip companies.

At the Indian AI Research Organization (IAIRO), we have developed SAMVIT, a platform that enables companies to build specialised small AI models faster. For specific enterprise applications, small AI models can be fast and efficient. Small AI could give India an opportunity to carve out a distinct position in the global AI ecosystem. We can be world leaders here.

This becomes particularly important as enterprises worry about sensitive data leaving their systems. Small models can be trained on relatively compact systems, including machines based on AMD's Strix Halo platform and NVIDIA's DGX Spark, reducing dependence on external cloud infrastructure and expensive, data-centre-grade GPUs. Inference can be run on low-cost AI notebooks.

LLMs will continue to serve applications that need them, but enterprises can address many specific use cases with smaller models at significantly lower costs. India does not necessarily have to replicate somebody else's AI model. It can build an AI ecosystem around its own strengths —sovereign models, voice, applications and Indian languages and smaller, affordable AI. So, is India zero in AI? Certainly not.

Chowdhry is Co-founder of HCL, Chairman MGB (Mission Governing Board), National Quantum Mission, Chairman, IAIRO (Indian AI Research Organisation, and author of the bestselling book 'Just Aspire'

What really protects the small investor?

SEBI board's recent guardrails, which fine-tune the ecosystem rather than arm investors, are likely to be effective

Rachana Baid

On September 24, 2026, SEBI issued a press release listing the decisions taken at its 215th board meeting. The list is long: new Portfolio Managers Regulations, new Settlement Regulations, a Common Advertisement Code, FPI entry into commodity derivatives, a stronger framework for vault managers, depository receipts on REIT and InvIT units, easier voting thresholds for REITs and InvITs, relaxed debt listing norms, a wider accredited investor framework, and a settlement scheme for old illiquid stock options cases.

A cursory glance may suggest none of this is meant for the small investor. Portfolio Management Services (PMS) start at ₹50 lakh and accredited investors need ₹5 crore of market exposure. A retail investor with a monthly SIP might ask: how does any of this protect me? I will never sign a PMS agreement, file a settlement application, inspect a vault, or trade a commodity derivative. Almost every decision sits several layers above where I invest.

The reality is just the opposite. SEBI's preamble states that its core objective is "to protect the interests of investors in securities and to promote the development of, and to regulate, the securities market". Getting markets to work well for investors has been the running thread of SEBI's regulation making, and this board meeting added a few more guardrails.

A PUZZLE WORTH PAUSING OVER

Holger Spamann of Harvard Law School offers a useful frame in 'Indirect Investor Protection: The Investment Ecosystem and Its Legal Underpinnings' (2021). His claim is that we look for the direct effect of a rule on the small investor, while the real effect is usually indirect. Market players have no mandate to look after them. Their protection runs through the rules that keep the ecosystem competitive, solvent, accountable and afraid of getting caught. Good regulation, on this view, is less about arming investors than about tuning the machine they ride on.

Seen this way, the press release looks like a systematic servicing of each channel of indirect protection.

Keeping assets real: The vault manager amendments extend custody discipline to the bullion behind gold and silver ETFs. Stronger vaults backed by higher capital protect ETF unit-holders, who never have to inspect a bar themselves.

Keeping managers accountable: The PMS regulations will not apply to the small investor, but they make managers more accountable and harden a principle across the whole fund ecosystem: client money is never the manager's insurance.

Keeping the professionals competent and the pitch honest: The certification amendments keep a competence floor under everyone dealing with the investing public. The Common Advertisement Code disciplines how the industry speaks to investors: celebrity endorsements only with safeguards, and promotion clearly separated from routine investor service.



CORE OBJECTIVE. To protect investors' interest GETTY IMAGES

Keeping enforcement credible: The Settlement Regulations, 2026 replace discretion with a published formula, disgorge wrongful gains separately, and fast-track small matters so that enforcement capacity concentrates where it deters most. Small investors never appear in a settlement proceeding, but anyone who might cheat them now faces a predictable, calculable price for doing so.

Deepening the informed crowd: FPIs in commodity derivatives, depository receipts on REIT and InvIT units, a portable accredited investor regime, simpler debt listing: each adds informed, competing capital to a venue, and every additional sophisticated participant sharpens the prices at which the uninformed investor transacts.

Keeping governance voice effective: The REIT and InvIT amendments make approvals turn on votes cast rather than units outstanding, and give genuine dissenters a full exit. The retail unit-holder who never votes still benefits when the institutions that do vote can actually carry or block a resolution.

What the press release assumes: SEBI's release does not invoke economic theory, and it does not need to. But it is worth noticing what it implicitly accepts. Not one of the decisions asks the retail investor to read more, vote more, or verify more. The people who will keep their holdings fairly priced, safely stored and honestly managed are professional traders, accredited investors, portfolio managers with liability, vault managers with capital at stake, and an enforcement machinery.

That is what good regulation does: tune the ecosystem so that people who read none of it still hold their investments at something close to fair value, in the form they were promised. That is investor protection, and it is the kind that works when the pre-conditions, competitive markets, accountable intermediaries and credible enforcement, are met in practice.

The writer is Dean and Professor, NISM

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. EUROPE

If the Saudis fight the Houthis, the US can help

Missile and drone attacks by Yemen's Houthis over the weekend have Saudi Arabia reeling. The skies over Riyadh emptied after a Saturday strike on the international airport killed 13 and injured more than 300, and a Sunday attack killed one more. Now comes the test for US policy. Asked Saturday about joining Saudi strikes against the Houthis, President Trump said, "We may. We're going to look at it." Yet the last thing he seems to want before midterm elections is a military escalation. That hesitation may be what Iran and its Houthi militia proxies, whom it arms and finances, are counting on. (NEW YORK, OCTOBER 12)

讀賣新聞 THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Unauthorised use of AI-generated imitations must stop

Cases in which third parties use generative artificial intelligence to imitate the voice of a celebrity without permission have become a growing concern. A court ruling that has, for the first time, recognised that a person's voice is protected by publicity rights will likely serve as a deterrent against such actions. In a lawsuit concerning the creation of voice clones, the Tokyo District Court has ruled that a voice is subject to legal protection. In the lawsuit, popular voice actor Kenjiro Tsuda claimed that videos using AI-generated copies of his voice were posted on the video sharing platform TikTok without his permission. Tsuda had called on TikTok's operator to remove the videos. The videos were deleted after the lawsuit was filed, so the court dismissed Tsuda's claim. However, what makes this ruling significant was the court's acknowledgment that "a voice is a symbol of one's personality." (TOKYO, OCTOBER 13)

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

Propping up the rupee

A rupee under pressure is like a bucket with a slow leak: patching it quickly may feel reassuring, but families only relax when they know where the hole is ('Signs of nerves', October 13). The RBI's weekend steps may calm the market for a few days, yet calm that arrives without explanation can look like worry in disguise. The deeper cure lies at home. Every dollar we do not spend on imported fuel is a dollar the rupee need not defend. Faster adoption of electric buses, rooftop solar and home-grown biofuels, along with stronger exports of services and crafts, would give the currency sturdier legs. Households can help too, by choosing public transport and local goods when practical. Central banks can steady a currency for a season, but only a nation's habits can steady it for a generation.

K Chidanand Kumar
Bengaluru

Keynes revisited

This refers to the article 'Nobel prize for macroeconomic stabilisation' (October 13). Robert Hall and Michael Woodford have been awarded the Nobel prize for economics for their work on how governments can manage economies in the midst of crisis. It is in a sense a revisit of Keynesian theory that when markets are extremely volatile, without government intervention they cannot stabilise. It is even more so today with the interconnected global economy. This has been showcased a number of times including during the Lehman crisis, Covid and now during the West Asia crisis.

Pradip Menon
Kochi

Law of demand

The Nobel Prize winners in Economics, have not said anything new. For instance, Hall has said that if people expect increase in future income, they will be optimistic and spend more. This is in fact one of the conditions of the economic law of demand. Actually, if prices of commodities fall, demand for them should contract, provided consumers' income doesn't increase. Put differently, if consumers expect increase in income, they will demand more of commodities even if their prices rise. This (like Giffen's paradox) is an exception to the law of demand.

Similarly, Rutherford has also based his theory on future expectations of business owners. He has said that if a business believes that if interest rates, its costs and competitors' prices would go up, then it would set a higher price for its commodities. This is not a revolutionary idea. Macroeconomic decisions of economies are largely based on microeconomic theories and practices.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

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Ready for business?

Examining what global reforms mean for India

Rohini Rangachari Karnik
Priyanka Goswami



BUSINESS READY. Takes a broader approach BLOOMBERG

As India enters the World Bank's Business Ready assessment, reforms in France, the European Union and the Philippines offer three lessons: decide fundamental questions early, reduce regulatory fragmentation and give investors long-term certainty.

For many years, the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business ranking influenced how governments positioned themselves in the eyes of investors. It measured matters such as starting a business, paying taxes, trading across borders and enforcing contracts before placing economies in an annual league table. The ranking was discontinued in 2021 following concerns over data irregularities and ethical lapses.

A KEY QUESTION

Its successor, Business Ready, or B-Ready, takes a broader approach. It examines regulatory frameworks, public services and operational efficiency across the life cycle of a business. As India joins the assessment in 2026, the important question is not how many reforms it has announced, but whether it has become consistently easier to establish, operate, expand and exit a business in India.

Recent reforms in France, the European Union and the Philippines provide three complementary insights. In May, France adopted its law on simplifying economic life. Among its principal provisions is one that allows critical questions concerning major projects to be considered earlier. For instance, whether a project serves an "imperative reason of overriding public interest" can be examined at the project declaration stage, rather than emerging much later during environmental approvals.

India's renewable energy experience offers a useful parallel. Solar and wind projects in Rajasthan and Gujarat were impacted between 2021 and 2024, after concerns over transmission lines crossing the habitat of the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard.

An earlier, coordinated determination — balancing renewable-energy needs with conservation requirements and identifying permitted corridors and mitigation measures — could have provided greater certainty to developers and conservation authorities alike. France's reform also reflects a broader regulatory principle: before introducing a new rule, governments should assess its necessity, determine whether it duplicates an existing obligation, quantify its likely compliance cost and provide businesses with adequate time to adapt.

India's 2023 laptop import controls, or the quality control orders issued from time to time for different industries, illustrate the point. A new licensing/quality requirement affects several international companies, especially when businesses are given limited time to comply. Following industry representations, the government has often deferred their applicability. This underscores the point that even a legitimate objective to promote domestic manufacturing is more effective when preceded with prior stakeholder consultation and accompanied by a realistic transition period.

The EU has a common market, but businesses continue to encounter divergent national requirements, duplicated procedures and uneven enforcement. Its single market strategy and 'One Europe, One Market' roadmap seek to simplify rules and remove harmful internal barriers.

INDIA'S CHALLENGE

B-Ready allows India to move the discussion from reforms announced to results experienced. France demonstrates the value of early decisions and regulatory impact assessment; the EU, the importance of coordination; and the Philippines, the power of long-term certainty.

India's challenge is to bring all three together. The jurisdictions that attract and retain global capital will not necessarily have the fewest rules, but ones that are clear, coordinated and reliably administered.

Karnik teaches French at the Alliance Française de Delhi. Goswami is a lawyer practising in New Delhi and serves as legal advisor to BORBHAG Consulting

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

October 14, 2006

Now, TV channels at Rs 5 a month a reality

Eleven broadcasting firms, including big ones such as Star India, SET Discovery, ESPN and ZEE Turner, have announced Rs 5 per channel, per month, for their Conditional Access System (CAS) customers in compliance with the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) tariff order of August 31.

Dengue, chikungunya spur mosquito repellent sales

On the back of an increasing number of cases of dengue and chikungunya, the sales of mosquito repellents have seen a huge surge in the past few months. Dabur's Rs 30-crore brand, Odomos, and leader in the cream and gel segment has reported a 63 per cent hike in sales in its second quarter results this year, compared to the corresponding period in the previous year.

Sensex drives past 12,700

The BSE Sensex revved past the 12,700 mark for the first time on Friday, on the back of good corporate earnings, decline in crude oil prices and strong growth in the manufacturing sector. Sensex touched an intraday high of 12,756.23 points before settling down at 12,736.42, up 198.44 points or 1.58 per cent. The previous high was 12,612.38 points on May 10 this year.

Can GOBARdhan fuel efficiency?

THE TEST. The success or failure of transition to circular bio-energy will be decided at the farm gate, not in a boardroom

CAPITAL IDEAS.



RICHA MISHRA



GROUND REALITY. To make GOBARdhan viable, the state must engineer a deep behavioural shift GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Is GOBARdhan the answer to India's energy paradox? The country remains trapped in a stark dual-deficit contradiction: it incinerates millions of tonnes of domestic agricultural residue while exporting billions in capital to import foreign liquefied natural gas (LNG).

Every winter, North India chokes on toxic stubble smoke while urban grids rely on expensive, imported foreign fuel. The Union Cabinet's latest mandate solves both crises at once. Through the newly launched ₹23,731-crore GOBARdhan scheme, India is establishing a massive 10-year circular bioenergy framework.

The goal? Turn environmental hazards into compressed biogas (CBG), boosting rural income and driving true national energy sovereignty. Administered under the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, this 10-year master plan (FY27 to FY36) targets a 10-fold growth in CBG production. It aims to inject over ₹75,000 crore into the national GDP and slash foreign gas import bills by more than ₹40,000 crore. Yet, the policy's ultimate hurdle is not financial architecture or chemical engineering; it is the anthropological and logistical challenge.

VOLATILE ENERGY PRICES

India imports 50 per cent of its natural gas requirements, exposing the economy to volatile international prices and geopolitical risks. "As an example, in FY25, LNG import bill accounted for $15.2 billion (approximately ₹1.28 lakh crore, assuming average exchange rate of ₹84/dollar); though the FY26 data is not yet published, it is surely a sharp jump over previous year, owing to the prolonged West Asia crisis and plummeting rupee against the dollar," according to the Indian Biogas Association (IBA).

"Even with a conservative estimate of 1,500 fully functional CBG plants in the coming years, the trade deficit on account of natural gas import could be reduced by one-third from the current level or $5 billion (approximately ₹40-lakh crore)," said the IBA.

Global LNG operates with centralised efficiency. Supertankers dock at high-tech terminals, immediately gasifying cargo and pumping a steady molecular stream into trunk networks. By contrast, a CBG plant relies on a chaotic, hyper-localised supply chain. To match the energy density of a single gas shipment, an anaerobic digester requires thousands of tonnes of low-density agricultural residue or wet cattle dung, say subject experts.

FINANCIAL RISKS

The policy brilliantly manages financial risk for developers. It enforces a mandatory compressed biogas obligation (CBO) on city gas distribution networks, scaling from 3 per cent to 5 per cent. It sets an administered, stable benchmark price of ₹2,110 per MMBtu (₹105/kg) to shield investors from global price volatility.

However, policy cannot legislate away physical geography. If the village-level supply gridlocks, a multi-crore facility goes cold.

India is trying to substitute liquid, global commodity markets with a highly fragmented and seasonal rural transportation network.

The policy's ultimate hurdle is not financial architecture or chemical engineering; it is the anthropological and logistical challenge

TIME-SENSITIVE LIABILITY

For generations, the Indian farmer has viewed crop residue as an expensive, time-sensitive liability. In the narrow two-week window between the paddy harvest and wheat sowing, stubble is a ticking clock. Setting it ablaze costs a single matchstick and zero labour hours. To make GOBARdhan viable, the state must engineer a deep behavioural shift. Farmers must see this liability as a commercial feedstock. This requires more than an announced procurement price. It demands automated balers, localised storage depots and guaranteed prompt payouts.

If the factory gate price does not comfortably exceed the cost of the labour and diesel required to harvest it, the matchstick will always win. An uncritical look at the GOBARdhan unified registration portal reveals rising numbers, but a deeper dive exposes a sharp geographical skew. Out of the commissioned plants, a vast majority are clustered in industrialised, or highly cooperative dairy States such as Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh.

These regions succeed because they already possess organised agricultural aggregators, or dairy cooperative networks. If the scheme remains confined to these progressive pockets, it will fail its macro-environmental goals.

For GOBARdhan to succeed, it must expand footprint across the eastern and southern agricultural belts. The government must seed units in areas characterised by smaller landholdings and lower mechanisation. This guaranteed structural de-risking has fundamentally altered corporate calculations, drawing India's largest conglomerates into the bio-energy fold.

Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) has announced a massive ₹1-lakh crore capital expenditure in Andhra Pradesh to establish dedicated CBG plants. Adani TotalEnergies is systematically approaching the sector with long-term sourcing models. Rather than relying solely on erratic seasonal residue, Adani has pioneered farming contracts for Napier grass to secure a consistent feedstock baseline for its massive processing facilities.

THE CONSTRAINTS

Even the capital muscle of Reliance and Adani cannot easily bend the physical laws of rural logistics. When shifting from mega refineries to decentralised biogas, industrial players face distinct operational constraints: the sourcing radius paradox, seasonal storage glut and counterparty friction.

Because agricultural waste has a low energy density relative to its bulk weight, transporting it over long distances destroys profitability. Agricultural waste is hyper-seasonal, and aggregating an entire year's feedstock within a brief 20-day harvest window creates massive inventory risks. Industrial giants are optimised to negotiate multi-million-dollar supply contracts with single, corporate entities. In the CBG domain, they must suddenly manage thousands of fragmented relationships with micro-scale farmers and independent tractor operators.

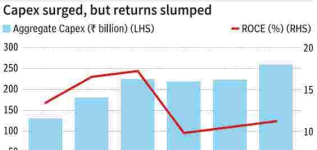
The success or failure of transition to circular bio-energy will be decided at the farm gate and not in a boardroom. It rests upon the efficiency of the humble village trolley, the reliability of the local aggregator and the willingness of the smallholder farmer to participate.

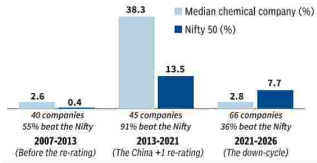
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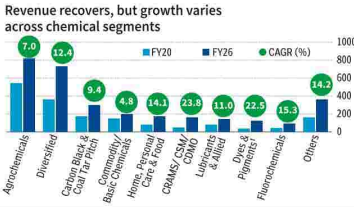
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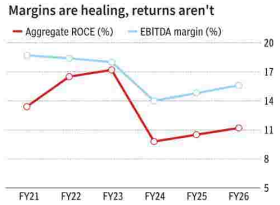
Indian chemicals: From market darlings to a slow recovery

India's specialty chemicals sector is emerging from a downturn marked by excess capacity, weak demand and margin pressure, according to Equirus Capital. Capex doubled between FY21 and FY26, even as returns on capital fell sharply, weighing on investor sentiment. Listed companies' revenue rebounded in FY26, with CRAMS/CSM/CDMO leading revenue CAGR over FY20-26. Margins are now recovering and inventories normalising. Momentum strengthened further in Q1FY27, with broader revenue growth and sequential margin improvement. Despite the recent challenges, the market is projected to grow from $36 billion in 2025 to $61 billion by 2030.









Source: EQUIRUS CAPITAL Universe of 72 listed Indian chemical companies

On businessline.in

RBI's FX defence: After the swap scheme, back to the barricades

Rather than sell reserves endlessly, the RBI is trying to make speculation expensive, separate genuine trade hedging from financial bets, and buy time for the currency, says **Dhananjay Sinha**

https://tinyurl.com/3cssynah

When transfer pricing becomes a tax on Global South

The FM is right to push BRICS on transfer pricing. The numbers show why it cannot stop at a communique, say **Manmohan Mainali** and **Purnadev Jena**

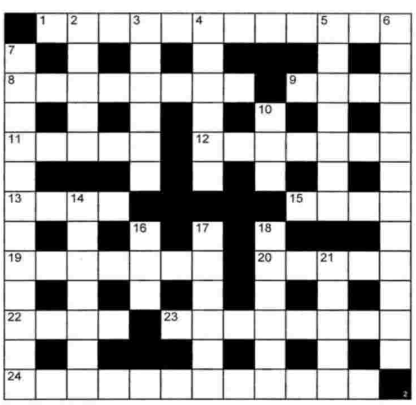
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Who gets to call AI safe?

Unless India gains control over the upstream layers of the AI value chain, it will remain a permanent digital tenant, argue **Vikrant Vig** and **Deepa Mani**

https://tinyurl.com/43zvyrc3

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2756



EASY

ACROSS

1. No longer being produced (12)
8. To the purpose, apt (8)
9. Horizontal band over middle of heraldic shield (4)
11. Man-made fibre (5)
12. One living retired from the world (7)
13. Do without eating (4)
15. Positive quality, term (4)
19. Indiscriminate slaughter of people (7)
20. Type of braidwork (5)
22. Deft, adroit (4)
23. Long, pink-legged bird (8)
24. Full of initiative, adventurous (12)

DOWN

2. Urge one forward (5)
3. A gambling-house (6)
4. Officer certifying affidavits (6)
5. Not the same each side (7)
6. Permission to neglect rule of church law (12)
7. Quality of grandeur, nobility (12)
10. Perform on stage (3)
14. A menial, domestic (7)
16. Substance once used to seal letters (3)
17. Wine store (6)
18. Applies 'Denver boot' (6)
21. Recognised genuine works of author (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Units once did wrong, but that was stopped (12)
8. It's a Pope who can turn it to being to the purpose (8)
9. Heraldic band forming part of wife's scutcheon (4)
11. Material that's new only in composition (5)
12. He lives alone and secure perhaps when about fifty (7)
13. It is quick to go without food (4)
15. Positive it features in addition (4)
19. Rage can bring about such slaughter (7)
20. Type of cleat used for a sort of braidwork (5)
22. One attempt at holding it in, tidy (4)
23. Bird is blazing at nothing (8)
24. Bold, imaginative tennis grip re-adjusted (12)

DOWN

2. Urge one on to make a pile around the motorway (5)
3. A coin's to be changed here for gambling (6)
4. Try, on a different basis, to make a legal officer (6)
5. It is not up to June quality, partially (7)
6. Ground for breaking a rule isn't paid : one's arranging it (12)
7. The grandeur that's facing me, nice as can be (12)
10. A piece of legislation that will play its part (3)
14. The retainer who exercises the ravens at top of Tower (7)
16. Grow more of the stuff bees produce (3)
17. An underground store may have salt in it (6)
18. Stops car from moving its first carbide lights (6)
21. A cathedral dignitary with all an author's works (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2755

ACROSS 1. Polish 8. Truce 9. Medical 11. Detached 12. Snail 15. Alma 16. Any 17. Echo 19. Agile 21. Handbell 24. Each way 25. Fence 26. Denote

DOWN 2. Odeon 3. Inimical 4. Head 5. Steak 6. Push 7. Bend 10. Lemon sole 12. Seat 13. Lengthen 14. Bore 18. Ebbed 20. Least 21. Huff 22. Nine 23. Lard

A ND-NDE

Opinion

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2026



CURRENCY SUPPORT
Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman

I'm sure there are efforts which the RBI would take further to make sure that the rupee doesn't become too volatile

Connecting financial dots

Consolidating financial information will empower savers, but transparency shouldn't be at the cost of data privacy

THE RESERVE BANK of India's (RBI) move to bring bank deposits into the consolidated account statement (CAS) issued by Securities and Exchange Board of India-regulated entities fills a glaring gap in how Indians see their savings. Combined with interoperability among non-banking financial company-account aggregators, it promises a single, more useful picture of financial holdings without tying customers to one platform. RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra aptly called deposits the "missing piece" of the CAS at the monetary policy press conference. The benefit goes beyond convenience. People cannot manage, transfer, or bequeath assets they have lost sight of. For senior citizens especially, a consolidated view of deposits, mutual funds, and other investments could make financial planning simpler and help families identify forgotten accounts. The proposed December 31 rollout deserves support, provided ease of access is matched by control over access.

The scale of unclaimed financial assets makes the case compelling. A December 2025 government release estimated unclaimed bank deposits at roughly ₹78,000 crore, insurance proceeds at ₹14,000 crore, mutual fund balances at ₹3,000 crore, and dividends at ₹9,000 crore. Together, these exceeded ₹1 lakh crore. The government's "Your Money, Your Right" initiative seeks to reunite citizens with these assets, but tracing scattered holdings remains difficult. A CAS that includes deposits could make omissions more visible and prompt customers to update nominees, consolidate accounts, and alert their families. It will not, by itself, identify every rightful claimant or release unclaimed funds. Nor should it be confused with a comprehensive inheritance solution. Nevertheless, better visibility is an essential first step towards preventing today's savings from becoming tomorrow's unclaimed assets.

The risk is that a reform intended to empower savers becomes a powerful tool for profiling them. A consolidated statement can expose balances, investment choices, and financial habits in one place. Banks, insurers, brokers, and advisers may have legitimate reasons to seek access, but they also have commercial incentives to mine this information for cross-selling. Consent, therefore, cannot be reduced to a hurried click on a screen. It must be informed, specific to a stated purpose, limited in duration, and easily withdrawn. No intermediary should be able to demand blanket access to an entire portfolio as the price of an ordinary service. Nor should data obtained for one transaction quietly be reused for marketing, credit scoring, or unrelated products. Interoperability will widen consumer choice only if it prevents lock-in rather than multiplying the number of institutions able to harvest personal information.

The RBI must make these protections enforceable before the new framework goes live. Data minimisation, strict retention limits, auditable consent trails, independent security checks, and meaningful penalties for misuse should be non-negotiable. Institutions should face clear obligations to report breaches promptly and compensate customers where failures cause harm. Reports of sensitive customer records surfacing after a breach involving a public sector bank employee's laptop underline why cybersecurity cannot be an afterthought. Equally important are accessible grievance mechanisms, especially for older customers who may struggle to challenge unauthorised access. Regulators must also clarify who is accountable when information moves across banks, aggregators, and other intermediaries. The measure of success should not be how much customer data the financial industry can access, but how much better citizens can understand and protect their wealth. A genuinely consolidated financial statement should strengthen the individual's ownership of information, not dilute it. Transparency is valuable only when accompanied by trust. That must guide implementation from day one.

When economics lost its swagger



RISHI RAJ
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THE ECONOMICS GRADUATES of my generation had a certain air of superiority over their counterparts studying history or political science. In the royal combination of humanities and social sciences, economics was the subject that came with the added advantage of mathematics. And that, apparently, made all the difference.

During my college days, history, political science, and economics were the preferred combination for students who wanted to study the world, understand power, and make sense of society. But there was an unwritten hierarchy even within this combination. Those majoring in economics often seemed to regard themselves as a cut above the rest. They had equations, graphs, and models to explain why things happened, while the rest of us had to contend with historical narratives, political arguments, and the occasional philosophical detour. Economics was the physics of the social sciences, or so its practitioners liked to believe. The presence of mathematics lent it the aura of a hard science, complete with the promise that human behaviour, markets, and even entire economies could be understood through a set of elegant equations. The fact that the economy occasionally refused to behave as predicted was perhaps treated as a minor inconvenience, much like a lab experiment that had not quite gone to plan.

There are signs, however, that this intellectual swagger is losing some of its edge. Consider the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences over the past few years. This year, Robert Hall and Michael Woodford have been recognised for developing macroeconomic models that improved the ability of governments and central banks to stabilise economies. Their work puts the decisions of households and businesses at the heart of understanding economic fluctuations.

In 2024, Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson won for their work on how institutions shape prosperity. The 2023 prize went to Claudia Goldin for advancing our understanding of women's labour-market outcomes. Go back a little further and Richard Thaler's 2017 award recognised the integration of psychological insights into economics.

These are not all examples of behavioural economics in the strict sense. But they do suggest that the discipline's centre of gravity is wider than mathematical elegance or the assumption that individuals always behave rationally. History, institutions, psychology, and the decisions people make under uncertainty have all claimed their place at the table. Even the latest award, while firmly rooted in economic modelling, reminds us that the economy is ultimately made up of people making decisions, often with incomplete information and imperfect foresight. A household may not spend more just because interest rates fall; a business may not invest simply because a spreadsheet says it should.

This is not to suggest that mathematics has become redundant or that economists should surrender their models to the historians and political scientists they once looked down upon. Mathematical models remain indispensable, just as data and empirical testing are essential to understanding economic relationships. But the financial crisis of 2008, among other shocks, exposed the limits of treating the economy as a system that could be neatly captured by a single framework. Human beings are not particles in a physics experiment. They learn, panic, imitate one another, change their minds, and respond to what they think others will do. Sometimes, individually sensible decisions produce collectively disastrous outcomes.

The challenge for economics is not to abandon the search for patterns, but to recognise that its predictions rest on assumptions about behaviour and circumstances. Perhaps, the old college hierarchy needs a rethink. The economics graduate can still bring equations to the argument, but the history student might explain how we got here, while the political science student points out who holds the power to change things.

The economy, after all, has never belonged to economists alone. And if the Nobel committee's choices are any indication, the discipline is increasingly willing to acknowledge as much. The macho mystique may be fading, but economics could emerge the better for it.

DISTRIBUTION RETHINK

MAKING INSURANCE AFFORDABLE IS THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS *SABKA BIMA, SABKI RAKSHA*

IRDAI returns to its first duty

SUMIT AGRAWAL
MS SAHOO

Respectively Managing Partner, Regstreet Law Advisors, and former Sebi officer; and former Chairperson/Member of IBBI, CCI, and Sebi



LIFE INSURERS PAID more to policyholders who surrendered than to those who held policies to maturity: ₹2.33 trillion in surrender payouts, against ₹2.23 trillion in maturity benefits. Only 48% of life policies survived five years, compared with 71% of policies bought online, without an intermediary. This suggests many policyholders are walking away from cover they no longer find worthwhile, forgoing often accrued benefits to cut future losses.

The long title of the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority Act (IRDA), 1999, states its objectives: "to protect the interests of holders of insurance policies, to regulate, promote and ensure orderly growth of the insurance industry". The sequence is not accidental. The Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha Act, 2025, has reinforced this mandate. Section 40(2A) of the Insurance Act, 1938, empowers the regulator to specify limits on commission, remuneration, or reward in any form, and their disclosure, "in the interest of the policyholders". IRDAI's September 23 consultation paper, "Recalibrating Economics of Insurance Distribution", is the first major exercise of that responsibility.

What sets it apart is candour. In 2023, IRDAI removed the commission limits and allowed insurers flexibility within board-approved policies and overall expense ceilings. The paper concludes that the experiment has not delivered. The expense ratio of private general insurers increased from 29.6% in FY23 to 32.1% in FY26. For private life insurers, it has risen from 18.9% in FY23 to 20.2% in FY26. The paper notes that board approval of commission policies was often a formality. IRDAI has acknowledged the shortcomings, made the analysis public, and attached outcome parameters to its objectives. That is accountable regulation.

The numbers are stark. From FY23 to FY25, new business premium sourced through life insurance corporate agents grew 28%, while distributor remuneration grew 125%, absorbing 27% of first-year premium. Premium routed through general insurance brokers grew 37%, while their commission grew 173%. Commission on motor third-party insurance, a mandatory product, rose from 4.3% to 22%. Meanwhile, general insurance grievances rose 75% over the same period. Further, across general and life insurance, 63% of complaints disposed of through Bima Bharosa in 2025-26 were resolved in favour of policyholders, and of those who remained dissatisfied and approached the Ombudsman, 75% received relief.

Excess distribution cost is borne through higher premiums in general insurance and lower returns in life insurance. As the cost of insurance rises, demand falls; when distribution commissions grow faster than premiums, policyholders may reduce their cover or opt out altogether. This explains, in part, the fall in life insurance penetration from 3.2% in FY22 to 2.7% in FY25, even as commissions continued to grow. A distribution model that makes insurance increasingly expensive risks defeating the very objective it is meant to serve: "Sabka Bima, Sabki Raksha".

> **A policy surrendered early, a product sold because it pays more to the seller, or a mandatory cover carrying a distribution cost does little to advance the policyholder's interest**

The proposals follow from this diagnosis. Commission is redefined to cover every payment to a distributor, by whatever name, preventing rewards and foreign trips from escaping the cap. Mandatory and near-mandatory products, such as third-party motor cover and insurance bundled with loans, carry nil or nominal commission. Open-architecture distributors face lower caps than tied agents, so that customer choice is not converted into an auction for shelf space. Compulsory bundling with loans is prohibited, and volume-linked incentives for bank and non-banking financial company staff are banned. Every policy is tagged to the person who sold it, mis-selling incidents placed on public record, and commissions clawed back. Expense ceilings fall over five years to 12.5% of premium for life insurers and 20% for general insurers, with cost audits to verify the numbers.

Critics argue that caps regulate the quantum paid, not the conduct they reward, and that the pre-2023 regime merely drove payments into disguised expense heads. The objection is fair as history but misses what is different this time. An all-inclusive definition of commission, mandatory cost audits, board certification on both sides, and restrictions on outsourcing to related parties close many of the earlier escape routes. The test now is enforcement, not design.

The direction is right. Four refinements would make it stick. First, the savings must reach the policyholder. The paper caps what insurers pay, but does not require that savings be passed on. A nil commission on third-party motor cover lowers no premium unless the tariff is revised; otherwise, it widens insurers' margins. Lower acquisition costs in life insurance should show up in surrender values and returns. Insurers should disclose how reduced distribution costs have benefitted policyholders. Premia for direct buyers should be correspondingly lower, similar to the direct plan for mutual funds.

Second, reward persistence, not merely the sale. The proposed increase in renewal commission begins only from the sixth policy year, by which time more than half of policies have been discontinued. A part of first-year commission could instead be deferred and vested against persistency over a meaningful period, with claw-back on early lapse. This would align the distributor's interest with the policyholders'.

Third, move towards transparency. The paper acknowledges that specific caps would be less necessary if commission were disclosed in the policy document or paid by the customer as a fee. The National Pension System already works this way, with capped and disclosed charges, including a separate persistency charge. Caps should be a bridge to disclosure, not a destination.

Fourth, sequence and stabilise. The expense glide path begins in 2027-28, while the caps may arrive before Bima Sugam and the Public Insurance Registry are fully operational. The commission regime has moved from caps to discretion in 2023 and is now moving back. IRDAI should commit to a stable framework, reviewed against the outcome parameters it has set.

Comments close on October 25. Beneficiaries of the old order will press for softer caps and a longer glide path, and some calibration may be warranted. The IRDA Act now requires the regulator to publish its response to public comments; that discipline should explain what is accepted and why.

A policy surrendered early, a product sold because it pays more to the seller, or a mandatory cover carrying a distribution cost does little to advance the policyholder's interest. IRDAI's proposed recalibration puts the policyholder back at the centre. It is the condition for the next phase of growth: a market where insurance is bought, not merely sold.

The spectre of 100 to the dollar



JAMAL MECKLAI
CEO, Mecklai Financial
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Reversing the leads and lags will certainly help, but until the market sees sound economic policymaking the rupee will stay under pressure

FOR SEVERAL DECADES, successive RBI governors have trotted out the "we don't target any level for the rupee and just try to manage its volatility" story about its FX policy. It has always worn thin given the RBI's actual market behaviour, but as the rupee approaches the frightening three-digit mark, this explanation has turned into something of a (bad) joke.

Just last week, a (very smart) businessman in Delhi told me that with the 2029 election not far off, there is *no* chance that the government will allow the rupee, which is within touching distance of 100, to get to the three-figure mark—this was his justification for leaving some of his foreign currency borrowings unhedged. This was certainly a persuasive argument, till last weekend's draconian virtual closing of the FX market.

To be sure, taking USD 8-9 billion a month of oil demand out of the market will certainly give the rupee a breather. Again, the introduction of foreign exchange risk reserve (FERR) on banks of 20% on any import hedges would also slow down importer purchases since the premiums would move sharply higher. [Incidentally, this is operationally identical to a suggestion made on July 8 this year by a friend of mine, Srinivas Varadarajan, an MD at Deutsche Bank, who said the RBI should impose additional cash reserve ratio (CRR) on import hedges as a way to reduce the leads (importer covering) and lags (export realisations), which were one of the largest forces pushing the rupee lower. It made sense to me and I forwarded the article to several senior people at the RBI, including the governor, and wrote about it in a column in mid-August.]

Srinivas had pointed out that a significant part of the huge excess demand for dollars was not simply the result of an imbalance of supply and demand but rather of the eagerness of importers to hedge since they believed the rupee was always going to fall, and, correspondingly, exporters to hold back for the same reason. Between April 2024 and June 2026, the leads and lags added up to an "excess" demand of around USD 185 billion, large enough to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Most people plan for the rupee to fall by 3-4% a year, but if the cost of hedging were substantially higher than that (with the new policy) it would make no sense to cover imports, although it would definitely increase nervousness in treasuries across the country.

> **As the RBI governor pointed out, the rupee is starkly undervalued from a real effective exchange rate perspective and, indeed, from any number of on-the-ground cost comparisons**

All of this, together with the hard squeeze on speculation (ban on rebooking of cancelled contracts, reducing the limit for estimated exposure hedging, and the increase of CRR to 99% daily, squeezing bank liquidity to further reduce trading positions), will likely strengthen the rupee in the short term—it is reported that the rupee was about 0.5% stronger on the non-deliverable forward over the weekend.

But this is certainly not a sustainable approach. Firstly, it is important to recognise that despite the huge "success" of the foreign currency non-resident (FCNR) deposit scheme, the usable reserves (that is foreign currency assets) are now just USD 615 billion; deducting the RBI's forward book (increased substantially by the swaps undertaken on the FCNR inflows) of about USD 200 billion effectively brings it to around USD 415 billion, which is just about six months' imports. This would classify our external account as quite "fragile", which is likely to further reduce India's attractiveness to global investors.

Again, the restrictions on the market will also weigh on global investors who are, in any case, not particularly comfortable with the stability of India's policymaking on several issues that concern them. Thus, and despite the fact that our equities are now very cheap in USD terms, it is hard to see inflows picking up any time soon. Further, the generalised geopolitical nervousness augurs against investing in an increasingly fragile country.

On the other hand, as the governor pointed out, the rupee is starkly undervalued from a real effective exchange rate (REER) perspective and, indeed, from any number of on-the-ground cost comparisons. The REER is around 90, which means at an equilibrium level today the rupee should be around 88 or 89 to the dollar. But markets are about supply and demand and sentiment and don't particularly care about model-based valuations.

Reversing the leads and lags (through the FERR) will certainly help, but until the market sees sound, sensible economic policymaking, without the usual "rah-rah", it looks like my old friend, the rupee, will stay under pressure. Perhaps 100 to the dollar could well be on the cards and my friend in Delhi will need to review his business plan.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Rupee defence

Apropos of "Defending the rupee" (*FE*, October 13), a stable rupee is important, but defending it through market intervention alone cannot provide a lasting solution. The RBI must balance exchange-rate stability with the need to preserve forex reserves. Persistent pressure on the currency also reflects India's dependence on imported energy, capital flows, and geopolitics. While curbing speculative activity may offer temporary relief, excessive curbs could affect genuine businesses that need to hedge their currency exposure. India should thus strengthen exports, attract stable long-term investment, and diversify its energy sources. Greater transparency in forex markets and prudent management of external borrowing would also help. A resilient economy, rather than an artificially strong currency, is the soundest defence of the rupee.
—SP Suganya Devi, Coimbatore

Diplomatic duplicity

Apropos of "Mr President, now you understand India," (*FE*, October 13), US President Donald Trump's decision to purchase Russian diesel while pressuring India to stop buying Russian oil epitomises diplomatic duplicity and hypocrisy. If Russian energy revenues allegedly finance Moscow's war against Ukraine, Washington's own transactions expose its glaring double standards. This demonstrates how Western powers subordinate professed principles to geopolitical expediency and commercial interests. India rightly resisted such coercive diplomacy, safeguarding its energy security and strategic autonomy. National interests cannot be sacrificed to appease Washington's shifting demands and self-serving moral posturing.
—N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

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BrandWagon

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2026

NUMEROLOGY

$110.4 bn: Size of global condiments industry in 2025

$176.5 bn: Estimated size by 2034

6.5%: Expected CAGR between 2025 and 2034

— Fortune Business Insights

Quick commerce set for festive surge

BRANDS WILL BE ON THE QUI VIVE WITH AD RATES SET TO JUMP 30-40%

KARTIKAY KASHYAP

ACCORDING TO THE *2026 Festive AdEx* report by Datum Intelligence, brands are expected to spend ₹2,200 crore on retail advertising on quick commerce platforms like Blinkit, Zepto and Swiggy Instamart this festive season. That would mark a 50% year-on-year increase in advertising spending and would constitute almost 19% of the ₹11,500 crore that brands are expected to spend on the overall commerce and retail media this season. In fact, commerce and retail media would likely be among the largest digital ad spending categories.

"Within digital media, q-commerce is currently the best platform where brands see the highest level of ROAS (return on advertising spend) and conversions," says Karan Taurani, EVP, media, retail, consumer discretionary & internet, Elara Capital.

The rising adoption of q-commerce has shot up the advertising rates on retail media by 30-40% during the festive season, data from Datum Intelligence suggests. "It is getting expensive because the inventory is limited—there are only a handful of players in the segment currently," says Satish Meena, founder, Datum Intelligence.

The question is, will brands get the big bang they are expecting from their advertising buck? Or will there be too much noise and wastage?

Experts say brands expect to get 5X to 6X returns on their ad spends on q-commerce this festive season. But here is the catch. Because brand visibility depends on in-app search placement, platforms often put a premium on certain slots and time windows. This forces brands to route 25-30% of their channel revenue back into platform ads just to stay top of mind, say media planners.

Mayank Shah, CMO, Parle Products, says the high cost of advertising on q-commerce will compel brands to pull back on offers and discounts, and premium products, which demand discretionary spending, will see the largest impact of this rising cost.



Betting big on q-commerce

- Q-commerce is likely to take 19% of the overall retail media spend during this festive season
- 35% of online retail buyers discover products they buy on quick commerce
- Brands get a return on ad spends of 5X to 6X on quick commerce, highest in digital media

Smaller and D2C brands will face the biggest challenge. "Only 20% of the brands on q-commerce make up 80% of the business. If the cost of presence on q-commerce continues to rise, brands that do not get a positive ROI will drop off," says Meena from Datum. "High ad expenses may become a challenge for marketing efficiency, especially during the festive season," says Shaily Mehrotra, co-founder & CEO, Fixderma and FCL.

Both good & bad news

Let's face it: Q-commerce is a big deal in India at the moment. According to a recent data released by RedSeer Strategy Consultants, estimated at $9 billion in the first half of 2026 (H12026), it makes up 22% of the total online retail gross merchandise value or GMV of $40.9 billion. RedSeer also estimates that there are more than 60 million monthly users on quick commerce in H1 2026.

Q-commerce applications are becoming the place where consumers discover many of the products they buy. The Datum Intelligence report mentions that 35% of online retail buyers discover products on q-commerce. Needless to say, brands will gravitate to the place where purchase intent is high.

According to reports, platforms like Blinkit, Zepto and Instamart deliver conversion rates of 3% to 8%. Because users mostly click on these apps when faced with some immediate need, the see-buy-delivered loop is really short.

As per media reports, q-commerce now accounts for 60-75% of the overall e-commerce sales for many FMCG players. They are using real-time inventory and location-based data to test new products—quick feedback cycles allow them to tweak discounts and bundle structures on the fly. "Especially during festive times, q-commerce adoption is high due to the convenience of fast delivery," says Parle's Shah.

Amit Relan, co-founder & CEO, mFilterIt, says brands will not necessarily spend less because the cost of advertising on q-commerce is high, they will become more creative and accountable. "Marketers are prioritising high-intent keywords, location-level demand and product availability, while also evaluating campaigns against incremental sales and ROAS," he says.

The high cost of visibility makes a brand like Fixderma mindful of how it allocates the marketing budget, focusing the spends on high-potential SKUs and placements. "We also track incremental sales to understand whether our investments are generating the desired impact," Mehrotra adds.

For the platforms, while the top-line numbers look attractive, net profitability remains some way off. Add platform commissions of 15%-25% to dark store listing fees, delivery costs and the discounts and profit margins erode quickly.

In the end, say experts, success on q-commerce will depend to a large extent on how much the brand has invested outside the q-commerce framework to build its equity and on offering competitive prices on the platform to be part of a customer's shopping basket.

Connected we stand



JEEL GANDHI

FESTIVE SHOPPING IN India has always been social. What has changed is the shape of that sociality. It used to look like family trips to the market, shared wishlists, and advice from an older relative. Today it looks like a creator haul on Instagram, a product link dropped in a WhatsApp group, and a purchase decision made only after the people you trust most have weighed in. The journey is the same. The conversations around it have completely changed.

For Gen Z, the festive season is not a single peak moment. It's an extended series of celebrations, each one an opportunity to connect, discover, and share. The GWI and Snapchat Diwali Gen Z Study 2026 found that nearly 70% of Gen Z consumers see the festive season as multiple celebrations rather than one shopping occasion, with many beginning to plan well before the traditional Diwali window opens. So, the brands that treat Rakshabandhan, Onam, Navratri, and Diwali as one long connected season, with consistent touchpoints throughout, are already ahead of the ones still waiting for the Diwali brief to land in October.

What has shifted most fundamentally is how Gen Z moves from finding something to actually buying it. Creators help them discover. Friends, family, and trusted communities help them decide. A brand can win the discovery conversation and still lose the decision if the product story doesn't hold up when it gets shared in a private group chat. This is why the inner circle matters as much as the influencer.

The same study found that 41% of Gen Z plan most of their festive purchases in advance, while 40% combine planning with spontaneous decisions. Convenience, therefore, is not only about a smooth purchase. It is also about being present at the right time with a product story that is easy to understand, explore, and share. Brands that integrate product storytelling beautifully across the season can stay relevant to both the planner and the spontaneous buyer.



Every Holi, Onam and Navratri produces a surge of organic content. But look closely at what actually gets posted. It's the moments that felt personal, curated, and genuinely special. Not the national campaign. The intimate Onam sadya a brand made possible. The sibling experience that felt designed for exactly them. The opportunity isn't to sponsor a post about these moments. It's to host the gathering that creates them.

Festivals are lived both online and offline, but for Gen Z, they are also internet moments. The brands that understand this are turning massy, calendar-wide occasions into hyper-curated, creator-friendly experiences that young people can participate in. That could mean creating spaces where friends and families come together, bringing creators into the experience, or designing product-led moments that feel specific to the occasion.

That's when marketing stops being something a brand pushes out and starts being something people pull into their own feeds, stories, and conversations. The content then comes from hundreds of people, not one brand handle.

The author is CEO, Under25

GLOBAL SPOTLIGHT

By the hands, for the hands



- **Campaign:** Wear Your Best Life
- **Brand:** Oura
- **Agency:** Nice & Frank

AT A TIME when brands are experimenting with artficial intelligence (AI) to generate moments which are impossible to bring to reality, smart ring brand Oura has gone the other way.

As part of its new brand campaign, "Wear Your Best Life" the brand has released a new brand film used real hands wearing the Oura rings and built a miniature city using physical craft. The miniature city includes a nearly 20-foot city street, working miniature subway cars, a rooftop pool with real water, a skate park, hand-carved brick walls and a motorised miniature taxi. Oura also partnered with Lilach Chen—a creator known for pioneering "fingerbreaking" (finger breakdance). The ad highlighted the daily roitines of the characters ranging from hands stepping through tiny streets, diving into water, and navigating everyday moments.

The brand also stayed away from traditional health-tech marketing which often talks about one single definition of wellness. This new campaign presents a broader, more human view of health—one that makes room for individuality, personality, and the full range of lives people lead and goals they have.

Explainer

TRADE WORRIES



The excess-capacity debate: What it means for India

India has joined a US-led initiative on excess capacity even as its own manufacturing faces US investigation. ***Ajay Srivastava*** explains the potential risks to Indian exports and why India must safeguard its industrial growth

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ECONOMIES AGAINST WHICH THE US STARTED ITS EXCESS-CAPACITY PROBES IN MARCH 2026

INDIA SHOULD DEFEND ITS RIGHT TO EXPAND MANUFACTURING FOR DOMESTIC & EXPORT MARKETS

What is excess capacity, and why is it a concern?

IN TRADE DISCUSSIONS, "excess capacity" refers to concerns that state subsidies allow a country's firms to produce and export large quantities at low prices, dominate global markets and hurt local industries and jobs in other countries.

Steel has been central to this dispute for decades. Concerns grew in 2015–2016, leading to the creation of the Global Forum on Steel Excess Capacity after the 2016 G20 Summit. In 2023–2024, the debate widened to electric vehicles, batteries, solar panels and foundational semiconductors.

How is excess capacity assessed?

THE UNITED STATES and Europe look out for government support that encourages overproduction and harms their industries. Signs include cheap energy, land or loans; rising output despite weak demand; and firms continuing to produce despite losses and falling prices.

The US and Europe see China's aggressive subsidies and industrial policies as major causes of excess capacity and pressure on manufacturing elsewhere. But China's export strength also reflects investment in scale, innovation and efficient supply chains. Subsidies alone do not explain its dominance. The assessment must distinguish subsidy-driven overproduction from competitiveness based on scale, innovation and efficiency.

What is China's response to this?

CHINA REJECTS THE US and EU argument. It says capacity should be assessed against global demand, including future clean-energy needs, rather than domestic demand alone. China attributes its manufacturing success to technology, efficient supply chains, large-scale production and strong competition. It says affordable Chinese products help the world shift to clean energy. It also accuses the US and Europe of double standards because they subsidise their own industries and have long produced for export.

Which products are on the radar?

MAJOR PRODUCTS INCLUDE steel, aluminium, electric vehicles, solar equipment, batteries, foundational semiconductors, petrochemicals, other industrial chemicals, cement and glass. Countries have responded with anti-dumping duties, import quotas and carbon-border measures.

What is the US probe against India about?

THE US STARTED excess-capacity probes against 16 economies including India, China, and the EU on March 11, 2026. Conducted by USTR under Section 301, these examine whether subsidies, government-backed expansion, market-access barriers and other policies have led to excess capacity that harms US commerce. Final findings are due by March 11, 2027. Possible outcomes include additional tariffs, import quotas or other trade restrictions.

The US notice identifies possible excess capacity or export surpluses in India's solar modules, petrochemicals, steel, textiles, health-related goods, construction materials and automotive products. It says solar-module capacity is nearly three times domestic demand and questions expanding steel and petrochemical capacity. India needs to show that its expansion serves domestic, export and future demand. Treating exports themselves as proof of excess capacity would undermine the basis of international trade. An adverse USTR finding could expose Indian exports to additional tariffs or other restrictions.

What is the Oct 7 joint statement?

INDIA JOINED 14 other economies in a US-led initiative announced by USTR on October 7, 2026. It seeks joint action against government-supported overproduction that distorts markets and threatens domestic industries. Its initial focus is automobiles and EVs, batteries, chemicals, foundational semiconductors and solar panels. The statement names no target country, although China appears to be the implied focus.

Why does India's participation raise concerns?

THE US IS apparently taking contradictory steps: investigating economies over alleged excess capacity while asking some of them to cooperate on the same issue. India, the EU, Japan, Mexico and South Korea are both signatories of the statement and subjects of the Section 301 probes. Washington is seeking their cooperation while retaining the option of restricting their exports. Joining the initiative does not end US scrutiny.

India should ensure that cooperation protects its manufacturers and does not imply acceptance of US allegations. It should seek clear criteria for identifying harmful excess capacity and defend its right to expand manufacturing for domestic and export markets. Export growth should not automatically be treated as evidence of surplus capacity. The same scrutiny should apply to US subsidies, industrial policies and trade practices as to those of other countries.

The writer is founder, GTRI



CONTRAPUNTO

The Internet gave us access to everything; but it also gave everything access to us

– JAMES VEITCH

The Right Medicine

To make drugs affordable, price transparency must cover the entire supply chain

Supreme Court, hearing a PIL on the huge gap between what retailers pay for medicines and consumables, and what customers end up paying, wants to know from govt why prices of all medicines, devices, and consumables cannot be capped, given the disparity even for the most basic antibiotic. This comes on the heels of GOI capping the price of certain cancer drugs, a required measure. Additionally, after reports of profiteering by hospitals via exorbitant markups on medicines, Karnataka pricing regulator, this month, directed that hospitals must include both base price (what medicines cost them) and MRP, on all bills for medicines, medical devices and consumables across hospitals. Step back, to recall that in 2018, GOI told Parliament that in a single year, 3.8cr people fell below poverty line due to spending on medicines. And even today, pricing of medicines/devices/consumables is addressed in fits and starts, in a piecemeal manner. The national pricing regulator has capped prices of stents, knee implants, and some essential and cancer drugs. But there hasn't been a whole-of-trade approach.



SC exploring the price capping of all unpatented drugs is timely. As is Karnataka's move. But as industry bodies point out, such measures will have little impact if the price-to-hospital is already artificially inflated. A capping of the mark-up at the point of sale to patients, can hardly fully protect the patient. Hospitals purchase consumables with high MRP and low price-to-distributor. The only way out is to devise an all-India standardised template to track the trade/profit margin from the very beginning of the commercial process, when the drug or device enters the supply chain. Some experts have argued that the first point of sale is where GST is first applied – pharma company to distributor, or for imports, the landing import cost. This is the approach central drug pricing regulator NPPA must take. While Centre has reiterated that enforcement of rates is state responsibility, there are some concerns GOI must address – like medical manufacturers worrying about the skew of a higher GST for inputs, but lower rate for finished products. SC has its finger on the people's pulse. Transparency in the process of costs and trade margins, across the supply chain, can ensure fairness to patients and industry, and help monitor for profiteering, without disrupting supply.

French Fried

Supermarket refrigerator hack in France is a warning for all homes using connected systems. Dumb down

Hundreds of French supermarkets tossed out tonnes of food on Monday, after hackers turned their refrigerators into warmers overnight. They didn't even spare ice cream. How could they! Outrage aside, it was a simple, widespread hack – one of the perils of modern connected life. Around this time last year, PA systems at three Canadian airports and one US airport were hacked, to make pro-Hamas announcements. The Sept 2025 hack of automatic check-in and boarding systems at European airports was more serious. The Aug-Sept 2025 hack of carmaker JLR's systems was catastrophic – production remained suspended at factories in UK, Slovakia, Brazil and India for weeks. In just the last couple of months, we've seen hackers cripple a British gas generator for four days, and now this assault on supermarkets.



Hacks, of course, happen because we live in a connected world. But they're enabled by vulnerabilities in systems. Somewhere amid the thousands or millions of lines of code running equipment, a weakness, a backdoor, exists. Often, it's an oversight. Companies find them and fix them with patches. In the French supermarket hack, the vulnerability reportedly existed on the refrigerators' controllers. They were running outdated firmware, and the patches released by the manufacturer weren't installed. But even the best-maintained system can trip on a "foreign" vulnerability. A staffer wears a knock-off smartwatch to work, connects it to office Wi-Fi, and opens a door for hackers to get in.

We're filling our homes with such trojan horses now – cheap surveillance cameras, smart speakers, photo frames, doorbells, of unknown provenance and with any number of security vulnerabilities. Even reputed firms struggle with security – in 2015, Fiat Chrysler recalled 1.4mn vehicles after security experts showed they could take control of a Jeep Cherokee via its internet-enabled entertainment system. Last month, other experts showed they could hack a BYD Shark 6. And with AI agents, finding vulnerabilities will get easier. What can you do? If you have smart devices, keep them updated. If you don't, think twice before getting them. Supermarkets with thousands of refrigerators need smart controllers – the alternative is more staff – but you can probably manage your fridge efficiently the old analogue way: a to-do list.

I-T's Christmas

Tax man can sometimes be a gift-bearing Santa Claus

Jug Suraiya



For me, Christmas has come early this year. I was visited by an unseasonal, and unlikely, Santa Claus in the guise of the Income Tax department that presented me a gift by refunding part of the TDS, the tax deducted at source from my earnings.

The refund wasn't like winning the lottery, being about equivalent to a weekend in Goa, or the price of a not-too-smart smartphone. But its symbolic value far outweighs its intrinsic worth.

Gift-wrapped in an aura of festive gaiety, the refund morphed the traditional image of the tax man, a dreaded figure like a fiscal Dracula in search of plasma transfusions, into a jovial fellow in a red suit and white whiskers who went Ho, ho, ho! as he distributed largesse to all those who'd been good babalog.

In 1799, Britain became the first to tax incomes as a temporary measure to fund the country's war with Napoleonic France. The impost was made permanent in 1842, and was introduced in India in 1860 to pay for the military expenses incurred after the 1857 uprising.



secondopinion

Like a guest who comes to dinner and takes up permanent residence, income tax became an immovable fixture of the country's economic landscape, reaching its peak in 1973-74 when govt took away ₹97.75 out of every ₹100 earned above ₹2,00,000 a year, thereby effectively turning all those in this bracket into unofficial govt servants, in that the more they earned, the more they served govt.

When it became apparent that such high rates of taxation were killing the golden goose and replacing it with the illegal ghoos of shady wheeling-dealings, compliance substituted coercion as the favoured approach to revenue generation.

The trick in doing this taxational transformation lay in making people feel good about shelling out money to govt. Like bitter medicine becomes less unpalatable when followed by a sweetener, govt bestows a refund every now and then on lucky taxpayers, making them feel they won the kitty in a kitty party.

Or that Christmas has come early, to a background soundtrack of a jolly Ho, ho, ho!

How To Defend The Rupee

RBI's in action mode shoring up the currency. But not all short-term moves are costless. Best option? Small, unglamorous reforms that can revive dollar inflows

Sugata.Ghosh@timesofindia.com



A central bank striving to prop up currency is like a police force trying to fix the mafiosi. Beyond a point, it's an experiment. No monetary authority can treat a structural malady, just as law enforcers can't cure a social ill. Nonetheless, all the king's men and horses in Mint Street are battling a slippery slope to back the rupee.

Amid foreign investors pulling out from the stock market, creeping inflation, and nasty geopolitical choke points, they are using blunt, unusual weaponry, to pre-empt a drift of the dollar-rupee rate towards the optically damaging number, 100.

In Mumbai's money market, the weekend began with RBI taking aggressive steps to clamp down on dollar demand. This is not just demand from punters betting against the rupee. But even from importers, who book dollars in advance to guard against a falling rupee.

About 48 hours later, these measures were extended to 'offshore' forward dollar purchase deals, cut by banks in GIFT City, which under foreign exchange laws is considered an overseas territory.

This spate of actions had a singular aim: to prune dollar demand and arrest a further slide in the rupee, albeit at a price. All this happened a week after RBI hiked the interest rate – a policy decision that's often linked to supporting currency, besides taming inflation – and six months after a drastic cap on banks' net open position, which captures how much a bank is gambling or is exposed to exchange rate fluctuations.

The last few days' announcements, coming in the early hours of Saturday and late Monday evening – probably, to prevent local traders from quickly taking positions – drove bankers into a huddle. As they tried to figure out how to implement the regulations, which kicked in once the markets opened on Monday. The odd timings, the nature of new rules, and the confusion that followed, betrayed an uncommon sense of urgency. What was the trigger?

New Delhi may well be running out of patience. The huge mobilisation of foreign currency deposits from the diaspora didn't solve the problem. Scrapping tax on profits of foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) from govt bond trades didn't help. So, what now? At some point, New Delhi may have asked for quick results.

However, none of RBI's recent measures are long-term solutions. A regulator, like its peers at different points, can come down heavily on speculators. But, raising the cost of hedging foreign exchange risk for bona fide importers, is a skewed regulation to rein in currency.

Under the new rule, banks must park 20% of the amount – for instance, $2mn, when an importer buys $10mn, which would be delivered later, when it pays an overseas seller. This makes forward covers more expensive. Why? Since funds parked with RBI fetch nothing, banks would recover the cost from corporate clients that import.

RBI can take more steps if rupee continues to play truant. For example, central bank can direct exporters to sell their dollars early

Such measures often lose efficacy as markets have a habit of testing regulators. In 2015, after China tried a similar 20% risk reserve, the fall in yuan wasn't reversed, though it became slower. Even the rupee surge, post RBI's curbs in March 2026, fizzled out in weeks.

Will RBI take more steps if the rupee continues to play truant? Well, there's a lot in a regulator's arsenal – forcing exporters to sell their dollars early, restricting outflows by companies setting up subsidiaries and family offices abroad, and by wealthy Indians buying stocks in Nasdaq, and homes in Dubai. But, such measures could put off not only the business elite, but even foreign investors, who could construe them as regressive capital controls.

A more serious, less discussed issue that's come to the fore is whether India would tread the path, something it has rarely done, of raising interest rates to defend the rupee – in the way emerging economies like Indonesia have.

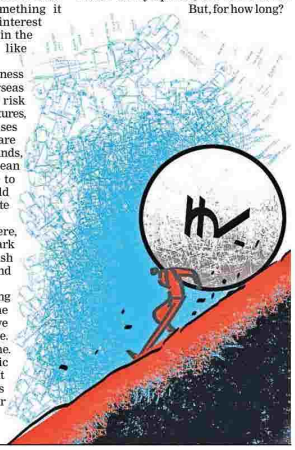
At a time Indian business houses are making large overseas direct investments, global risk capital is moving into AI ventures, overseas private equity houses and venture capitalists are booking profits to transfer funds, and MNCs like large Korean companies are listing here to take the money out, should India consider giving rate shocks to cushion the rupee?

There's no easy answer here, as hikes in RBI's benchmark rate would immediately push up rates on home, auto, and other consumer loans.

Suddenly, we are confronting some home truths, which the volatile rupee and an active RBI have brought to the fore. Low-hanging fruits are gone. The age-old macro arithmetic of filling the trade deficit with surplus capital inflows is under strain. For long, our balance of payments has been in deficit. And, there are fiscal challenges in slashing capital gains tax on stocks.

Only a long, tortuous road with small, unglamorous reforms that don't make headlines, but require the cooperation of state govts, lies ahead. Perhaps, this is the only road that can lead to 'ease of doing business', a slow revival of foreign direct inflows, and persuading domestic business houses to take long bets on India, rather than shifting capital overseas. It's an arduous path, when Centre-state relations are tense. Yet, it's the only road left. Else, RBI would only tackle the symptoms, not the ailment.

But, for how long?



To Make India's Demography A Dividend...

Govts, industry, educators must deliver ASAP on six changes, from getting more women at work to apprenticeship programmes to bigger incentives for small firms

Paul Alapat



Nations, like individuals, occasionally encounter transformational opportunities that demand decisive action. Demographic dividend – a period when a country's working-age population expands while the *proportion* of young and elderly dependents shrinks to historic lows – is one such. Properly leveraged, it can dramatically boost a nation's economic trajectory, raising productivity, increasing savings and investment capacity, strengthening tax revenues, and easing pension burdens. However, this window opens only rarely in a nation's history, making its utilisation critical.

India's demographic dividend began in 2005, and is projected to last till 2055, with the peak expected around 2036. We're near the midpoint of this favourable period, and roughly a decade remains before the dependency ratio starts climbing again. This raises two urgent questions: does favourable demographics automatically translate into economic gains; if not, is India capitalising on this opportunity?

Not a sufficient condition | A growing working-age population creates only the potential for accelerated growth – it does not guarantee it. In Africa, countries like Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Mali, and Angola, experienced favourable demographic shifts, but failed to convert them into economic prosperity.

Nigeria is a cautionary tale. While East Asian nations and China successfully harnessed their demographic dividends starting in the 1980s, Nigeria couldn't because 1) its fertility rate declined too slowly, 2) the economy remained overly dependent on oil without diversifying into job-creating sectors, 3) the education system produced graduates lacking employable skills, and 4) governance failures, combined with infra deficits and regional security problems, created additional obstacles.

Closer home, Sri Lanka's demographic advantage peaked around 2010, but benefits were largely negated by civil war, Covid, and the severe economic crisis of 2022.

Where India stands | Among major South Asian economies, both India and Bangladesh currently have expanding working-age populations. However, there's a growing consensus that India has not fully capitalised on this demographic opportunity yet.

GDP growth since 2005 has been robust. Falling dependency ratios account for nearly 20% of per capita GDP growth since the 1980s, and the expanding workforce has supported growth in IT services and manufacturing. But job creation is the core problem.

India needs to generate employment to keep pace with its expanding working-age population (15-64 years). But, in sharp contrast to China and East Asia, where export-oriented manufacturing booms readily absorbed surging worker populations, India's manufacturing sector continues to underperform despite govt incentives and policies.



There are several reasons for this: difficulties in conducting business, inadequate infra (particularly unreliable power supply), and an education system – especially govt schools – that struggles to produce employable graduates. Additionally, India's female labour force participation ranks among the lowest globally, representing a significant underutilised resource. The large informal employment sector further limits productivity and economic value addition.

Things to do | With the demographic window narrowing, India must pursue simultaneous reforms across multiple fronts, treating this as an urgent national priority:

- As India transitions from youth-heavy to working-age-heavy demographics, dramatically **improving education quality** – particularly in govt schools – becomes essential. This must be paired with expanded vocational training and apprenticeship programmes, requiring close collaboration between govt, NGOs, and industry. India should rapidly adopt successful strategies from East Asian economies.
- Complexity of starting and operating businesses in India calls for **business environment reform**. Common complaints centre on excessive approval requirements and sluggish bureaucratic processes, compared with other nations. Multiple regulatory bodies and complicated tax, labour and other laws should be streamlined and aligned with global best practices.
- Labour-intensive **manufacturing**, particularly in the MSME sector, deserves stronger incentives, as do employment-heavy sectors like tourism and other **services**.
- Substantially increasing **women's labour force participation** requires expanded skills training programmes, and improved child support infra. These can enable greater workforce engagement.
- **Addressing infra bottlenecks** is critical, including reliable non-fossil-fuel power supply, adequate water availability, robust transportation networks, and improved access to global supply chains.
- **Regulatory simplification** is equally important. Labour, tax, and regulatory obstacles that currently constrain services sector expansion, must be systematically removed.

The measures needed to capture India's demographic dividend are largely well understood and documented. What remains lacking is genuine urgency – a recognition that transformational opportunities of this magnitude arise infrequently in a nation's history. India owes it to both current citizens and future generations to seize what remains of this window before it closes.

Perhaps, most importantly, policymakers and citizens alike must internalise that a demographic dividend is not an entitlement guaranteed by favourable population statistics alone; it must be actively earned through sustained, coordinated effort across education, business environment, infra, and social policy.

Nigeria and Sri Lanka are sobering reminders that demographic opportunity, without decisive action, simply passes by, leaving behind unrealised potential and a harder path forward once the window shuts.

The writer is an angel investor

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



I am afraid that if you don't find peaceful domestic solutions to our inequality and social problems, then it's always tempting to find other people responsible for our problems.

Thomas Piketty

Navratri: Journey From Form To Formless

Anandmurti Gurumaa

The universe, and everything within it, exists in three fundamental states: gross, subtle, and causal. Just as the five elements manifest in these three forms, so does the supreme cosmic energy we revere as Goddess Durga. While some traditions envision the Divine strictly in a masculine form, our profound spiritual heritage has worshipped the supreme as feminine – Bhagavati.

In her causal, cosmic form, she is the golden womb from which the entire universe is born. The very name Durga signifies the one who resides within the fortress of this physical world. Because the human mind cannot easily comprehend this boundless energy, sages gave her a beautiful, visible form so we could connect with her through devotion.

Yet, the divine extends far beyond this physical representation. Consider the mechanism of your own vision: you can look in a mirror and see your physical eyes, which is the gross form. However, you cannot physically capture or see the actual power of sight – the subtle energy that communicates with your brain and allows you to perceive the world. Similarly, while we worship murtis of goddess, the subtle cosmic energy she represents remains invisible, functioning silently and continuously throughout the universe.

Most of us remain focused on the gross, visible form of goddess, approaching her merely out of fear or greed. True devotion is never born from a transactional desire for protection or material gain. The wise seeker does not pray out of fear, but instead seeks the ultimate, causal truth: *Satchidanand*. This divine presence is not a distant deity residing in heavens; she is the life force blooming in leaves, flowing in oceans, and acting as the very power of sight and speech within you. In yogic tradition, she is recognised as dormant kundalini at the base of the Sushumna Nadi, waiting to be awakened through sincere practice. She resides within the fortress of your own body and mind.



THE SPEAKING TREE



To awaken this inner power, Navratri provides a framework of profound physical and mental discipline. Ancient sages recognised the delicate relationship between human health and nature's rhythms, placing Navratri at junctions of seasonal change when the body's internal fire naturally weakens. This is the time for fasting. Today, fasting has often been distorted into an alternative feast of heavy, substitute grains. A genuine fast is a conscious withdrawal. When the body rests, it triggers autophagy, clearing out dead cells, balancing glucose, and healing from within. We draw inspiration from the Goddess herself, who, in her ultimate state of penance, gave up even leaves to sustain herself, earning the name Aparna.

Alongside purifying the body is anchoring of mind. During these nine days, rituals we perform are deeply symbolic. We do not light a pure ghee lamp merely to illuminate an idol; we light it to perform *tratak* – gazing steadily at the flame to centre our scattered awareness and improve our physical and inner vision.

Ultimately, these nine days are a journey from ordinary human to spiritual aspirant who has mastered the senses and the mind. When the mind is purified and the body is cleansed, you realise that Devi is not outside. The infinite, *Satchidanand*, is within.

Spiralling food prices

Rural households have felt the greatest impact of rising inflation

September's retail inflation, at 5.54%, an almost two-year high, marks the fourth consecutive month that price increases have kept headline CPI above the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) 4% target. The impact has been particularly severe for rural Indians, whose inflation rate reached 6.08%. Rural food inflation rose almost two percentage points between August and September, touching 8.06%. Onion (108.09%), garlic (54.62%) and ginger (62.85%) drove the surge, even as potato (-11.50%) and tomato (-8.62%) prices remained below year-earlier levels. The festive season ahead will be expensive for rural households already facing the uncertainties of a deficient monsoon, El Niño-related risks to harvests and incomes, and unusually high temperatures. Headline CPI is now just 0.46 percentage points below the RBI's upper tolerance limit of 6%. The Monetary Policy Committee raised the repo rate by 25 basis points to 5.50% in October, ending a pause that began after its previous increase in February 2023. Another increase in December cannot be ruled out if price pressures continue to broaden. Chief among the factors driving inflation since the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran have been fuel, food and transport, compounded by a depreciating rupee.

The Indian crude basket, according to the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell, rose from $82.04 a barrel in July to $116.09 in September – a 41% increase – with economy-wide implications for freight, production and distribution. The RBI's special dollar facility for oil marketing companies may ease spot-market pressure on the rupee, but only temporarily if the underlying import dependence and geopolitical risks persist. The crucial subgroup, transport services for goods, recorded inflation of 14.73% in September, up from 14.64% in August. Restaurant and accommodation services inflation has reached 9.36%, while inflation in personal care, social protection and miscellaneous goods and services, which include precious metals, has moderated to 13.75%. Core inflation, excluding food and fuel but including precious metals, rose to 4.6% in September from 4.16% in August, suggesting that price pressures are broadening. Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have pulled a record ₹3.08 trillion ($32.73 billion) out of Indian equities in the nine months ending September this year, which is almost double that of the whole of CY2025. FPIs have been net sellers in six of the past nine months as they seek safe havens, stronger dollar-denominated returns, and bond yields. Selling resumed in October, adding to pressure on the rupee, which weakened by about 7% against the dollar over the year to early October, despite RBI interventions such as direct dollar sales and attracting foreign-currency inflows. The central bank's latest steps have helped the rupee recover, but cannot resolve the underlying pressures. With crude prices elevated, the rupee vulnerable and no clear end to the West Asia conflict, imported inflation is likely to continue shaping domestic prices in the months ahead.

Sound and fiery

Green crackers do little to curb air and noise pollution

As Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) head into another winter, they must brace for the return of a foe kept on a leash that is alternately loosened or tightened. In November 2016, the Supreme Court of India suspended licences for the sale of fireworks in the NCR after Deepavali celebrations pushed $PM_{2.5}$ levels above 700 µg/m³. The Court relaxed the suspension in September 2017, partly to protect existing licence holders and livelihoods, but restored the suspension for Deepavali in October. In 2018, in its judgment in *Arjun Gopal and Others vs Union of India and Others*, the Court allowed only reduced-emission and "green" crackers, banned joined firecrackers or *laris*, and imposed a two-hour window. The latest order permits specified next-generation joined green crackers, while declining a total ban on fireworks, invoking public sentiment. Fire crackers are far from the smoking gun of Delhi's air-quality crisis. Construction dust, vehicles, stubble burning and stagnant, cold air all contribute to winter pollution. But when these push the air towards "severe" levels, crackers can produce an acute spike. In 2025, the first Deepavali after the Court permitted limited use of green crackers, Delhi's post-Deepavali $PM_{2.5}$ average reached 488 µg/m³, the highest since 2021, while hourly concentrations peaked at 675 µg/m³.

There is no gainsaying that green crackers are a pyrrhic green. The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research-National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (CSIR-NEERI), which promoted them, says the newer generation promises a 45%-60% cut in PM_{10}. These figures, however, do not reflect real-world conditions, and when "cleaner" crackers are burst in greater numbers, the savings in particulate pollution evaporate. This is without accounting for noise pollution. There is also the difficulty of enforcement. The Commission for Air Quality Management has stated that QR codes had been sold to unregistered manufacturers – registered manufacturers reportedly sold them, allowing unauthorised firecrackers to be passed off as certified green crackers. The explosives regulator had no testing facility in Delhi. In 2018 and 2019, the police could not distinguish green crackers from conventional ones. Unless fireworks manufacturing moves into the formal sector, regulations are followed in practice, and awareness of the toll on public health spreads among those who love the sound and fury of crackers, air and noise pollution are here to stay.

India's problem of overtreatment, overmedication

Modern medicine has never been more capable than it is today. Tests detect illness earlier, scans reveal invisible abnormalities, medicines prevent and treat diseases, and interventions and procedures can save lives within minutes. Yet, the same system that can do more is increasingly tempted to overtreat and overmedicate.

Overtreatment and overmedication are not simply the use of an unnecessary medicine but often a chain: a test detects an incidental abnormality, which leads to another test, a diagnosis and then a prescription that may become permanent. What begins as prevention can end in long-term medication or surgery. Then, in India, overtreatment coexists with undertreatment: unnecessary interventions are offered to some, while many others still lack essential primary care, affordable medicines and timely treatment.

Health packages and tests

The rise of overtreatment is the result of a convergence of several factors. The first driver of overtreatment is unnecessary and excessive testing – both screening and diagnostic – which creates a cascade of care. A review article in the prestigious *National Medical Journal of India* in 2016 found that routine health-check packages often include unwarranted tests that can lead to false-positive results, anxiety, further investigations, overdiagnosis and overtreatment. The truth is that the ability to test has expanded faster than our ability to decide who actually needs testing.

The second driver is the fragmentation of health and medical care. Its most visible manifestation in India is an excessive focus on specialist and super specialist care. A person with a common health problem often goes directly to a specialist or superspecialist. A person with chronic conditions may consult several specialists, each optimising one part of care without necessarily paying attention to the person's other health problems. The patient is treated in parts, while the human body does not live in specialties.

This matters particularly in older adults. A systematic review and meta-analysis of Indian studies, published in *Frontiers in Pharmacology* in 2021, reported polypharmacy in about 49% of older adults. Another study, published in Scientific Reports in 2025, found that roughly one-third of older adults were taking five or more prescribed medicines (polypharmacy), with potentially inappropriate medicines identified in 28.8% of cases.

These figures do not mean that everyone taking several medicines is being overtreated. They do, however, show why medication reviews and deprescribing must become routine.



Chandrakant Lahariya

A practising physician and the author of 'Pill-Free: You Don't Need Everything You Have Been Prescribed' (2026)

Unnecessary tests, prescriptions and procedures are part of the growing overtreatment problem

A third force is the transformation of health care into a marketplace. Laboratory tests, radiological investigations, procedures, supplements and monitoring devices have become products to be sold – sometimes products in search of potential customers. As a result, the boundaries between those who genuinely need these interventions and those who do not can become blurred. A linked aspect is that much of health care and medical care in India operates on a fee-for-service model, which can reward activity rather than restraint. Many patients consider a medical consultation complete only when several medicines and investigations have been prescribed.

Health insurance is a proven solution for financial protection from health-related expenses, as the cost is borne by the insurer. However, it can create both 'ex-ante' and 'ex-post' moral hazards, discouraging preventive care and encouraging hospitals and patients to favour costlier interventions. What is forgotten is that while someone else may bear the financial cost, it is the patient's body that undergoes the intervention. Paying insurance premiums for years does not mean that one must 'recover' the money by undergoing a relatively unnecessary procedure or surgery.

Fourth, patient beliefs and expectations arising from advances in medical care where people want certainty when they are worried and may feel that something tangible should follow a consultation. Reassurance can look like inaction; observation can feel inferior to a scan; lifestyle advice can appear less serious than medication. Doctors may respond to these expectations, particularly in crowded clinics where explanation requires time.

The fifth driver is the rise of 'defensive medicine', in which clinicians, fearing that they might miss a rare diagnosis, may consider ordering another test as the safer option. What is often forgotten, however, is that every test carries potential risks, both from the test itself and from the discovery of abnormalities that may never have caused harm.

Choosing wisely

India is not alone in facing this problem. Overtreatment first became widely recognised in high-income countries and is now increasingly visible across many middle-income nations. This gave rise to the global Choosing Wisely movement, which encourages people to choose health-care interventions more carefully. It is against this backdrop, between 2012 and 2023, that nearly 80 specialty societies worldwide published close to 700 recommendations identifying hundreds of tests and treatments that clinicians and patients should question. The message is that medicine requires stronger mechanisms for self-correction. The solutions are about practising better medicine. Halting and reversing overmedicalisation requires the engagement of all stakeholders, including individuals, communities, professional societies and health policymakers.

First, India needs to rebuild stronger and functional primary care and restore the family physician as the first point of contact for most non-emergency health needs. A general physician can decide which problems require specialist expertise, reconcile multiple prescriptions and recognise when treatment can safely be reduced. Initiation of care by a general physician, followed by continuity through the referral pathway, protects patients against overmedication and excess surgeries.

Second, every medical prescription should carry a review date and, where appropriate, a possible stop date. Medicines should not become lifelong simply because nobody asks whether they are still needed. Older adults and people taking five or more medicines should periodically undergo a structured medication review assessing indication, benefit, duplication, interactions and opportunities for deprescribing.

Develop India-specific lists

Third, professional medical societies and the Indian Council of Medical Research should develop Indian lists of low-value tests, treatments and procedures – similar to Choosing Wisely – and embed these principles in medical training, accreditation and quality-improvement programmes. Hospitals should measure not only whether recommended care was provided, but also whether unnecessary care was avoided.

Fourth, before starting any test or treatment, patients should note that these four questions matter: Why do I need this? What happens if I wait? What are the possible benefits and risks? What are the alternatives? These questions can substantially improve clinical conversations and outcomes.

Fifth, payment systems and health insurance must reward outcomes, clinical reasoning and continuity of care rather than volume alone. A health-care system should not make it financially easier to order a scan than to explain thoughtfully why that scan may be unnecessary.

Medical advances will continue – and they should. However, the next stage of medical progress will come not only from discovering more tests, medicines and procedures, but also from learning when not to use them. Good medicine requires action when action helps. In an age of medical abundance, it increasingly requires something more difficult – restraint.

India-U.S. ties and the hurdle of American unilateralism

Have ties between India and the United States reached a breaking point? Where do they go from here? These and many other questions are being intensely debated following the U.S.'s announcement on October 8 that it had suspended the Permanent Labour Certification (PERM) programme for eight global IT companies, including some Indian-headquartered companies, accusing them of misusing immigration and labour-certification systems. The Indian companies named were Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services, Wipro, Cognizant and HCL.

The PERM programme allows tech companies to hire non-U.S. professionals to work in the U.S. and is a step in a employer-sponsored green-card application. According to the U.S. government, tthe companies had received more than 2,30,000 H-1B visa approvals and over 1,00,000 permanent labour certifications since 2009. Indian professionals account for more than 70% of approved H-1B petitions annually.

This episode, however, is not an isolated incident but part of a series of actions and decisions taken by the U.S. in recent years, including the ill-treatment of Indians and racist attacks against them that are placing bilateral ties under severe strain.

Trade ties, visible discord

Trade has emerged as a visible source of discord and asymmetry for three main reasons. First, India recorded a trade surplus of $33.8 billion in bilateral trade exceeding $140 billion in FY 2025-26. Second, the U.S. is seeking access to India's dairy and agriculture sectors in ongoing trade negotiations, which India cannot afford to concede. Third, India has refused to halt Russian oil imports despite additional U.S. tariffs and sanctions.

Despite a framework for an interim agreement on reciprocal and mutually beneficial trade announced in February 2026, the strain in trade ties persists. Last week, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said that trade talk negotiations had "plateaued", with little scope for give-and-take.



Rajeev Agarwal

A retired colonel and a strategic affairs expert. He is the author of the book, 'Between Tehran and Tel Aviv – Gaza's Story of Unending War'

Washington wants a subservient India, but New Delhi must draw the line

Defence and security cooperation has emerged as a key pillar of relations. Over the past two decades, India and the U.S. have expanded military exercises, logistics arrangements and intelligence-sharing. American weapons platforms have also become increasingly important to India's military modernisation.

Since 2002, India has acquired over $22 billion worth of American military hardware, but meaningful co-production and technology transfer remain elusive. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington in February 2025, the U.S. agreed to expand defence sales and co-production in India, including Javelin anti-tank guided missiles and Stryker infantry combat vehicles. The two countries subsequently signed a 10-year Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defence Partnership on October 31, 2025.

However, a strategic defence partnership of this magnitude must be assessed by what it delivers, not merely the number of agreements signed. Prolonged delays in the supply of GE F404 engines for India's Tejas fighter aircraft highlight the risks of relying on foreign suppliers for critical military components and the strategic cost of supply-chain vulnerabilities. Despite initiatives such as the India-U.S. Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X), launched in 2023, co-development and technology transfer remain an issue.

The Pakistan factor

Pakistan has always been a politically sensitive source of friction between India and the U.S., particularly since Operation Sindoor (May 2025). U.S. President Donald Trump's repeated claims that he ended the conflict have irked India, although New Delhi has refrained from direct confrontation. The U.S.'s courting of Pakistan's top leadership, especially its Chief of Defence Forces, Asim Munir, has also been a major irritant. The signing of the Mecca Pact between Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye, reportedly with Washington's blessings, has raised further security concerns for India.

High-end technology is another area in which India has often been forced to look to the U.S. – a situation that Washington has sought to exploit. Although the 2008 India-U.S. civil nuclear agreement was a historic breakthrough, its commercial promise of American-designed nuclear reactors in India remains largely unrealised. The Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), launched in 2023, was cited as an attempt to deepen cooperation in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, defence innovation, space and other advanced technologies, but much remains on paper. The India-U.S. Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology (TRUST) Initiative, signed on February 13, 2025, also raised hopes of greater technology transfer and integration. The key challenge, however, remains translating declarations into measurable outcomes.

Need for mutual respect

India-U.S. relations are entering a phase in which India's strategic restraint and efforts at accommodation are increasingly met with American pressure, unilateralism and outright disregard for India's strategic interests. Whether this is a difficult phase or a deeper structural problem remains to be seen. The relationship between the world's oldest democracy and the world's largest democracy can flourish only through equality, respect and trust, not unilateral imposition of will. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's recent observation that the U.S. is "deliberately becoming a lonelier power" may convey more than what the words suggest.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Young voices, new politics

What the stir over the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls has achieved is the emergence of several charismatic young faces whom Gen Z can rally around. This could well shape the political narrative of the future. Staying relevant will be a formidable challenge for all political parties, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party. What is remarkable about these young voices is the depth of their leadership pool. Detain one set of leaders and another steps forward to address the media. That kind of a resilience is remarkable. Their clarity of thought, confidence in expression and ability to articulate their concerns suggest that this is not merely a moment of protest but potentially the beginning of a new political narrative.

Pavan Kumar N.R.,
Shivamogga, Karnataka

Visual indictment

The Hindu's illustrator deserves compliments for a brilliant and piercing visual (Inside pages, 'On the draw', October 11). The depiction of the Chief Election Commissioner of India, Gyanesh Kumar, as a fly ruining a glass of milk has captured public anger directed at the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the controversy around the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. The cartoon reminds us that democracy cannot function when the very umpire tasked with keeping the pitch clean is seen as the contaminant. The Supreme Court of India's recent questions on voter roll modifications only add weight to this powerful visual.

Instead of clamping down on dissent, the government and the ECI must answer why a routine exercise has instead left lakhs of genuine voters out in the cold.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

A day for dam safety

The Srisailam dam across the Krishna river experienced an unprecedented peak inflow of about 25.50 lakh cubic feet per second during the October 2009 floods, with high inflows for nearly 78 hours. On October 3, 2009, the reservoir level reached 896.50 feet, 11.50 feet above the Full Reservoir Level of 885 feet. This extraordinary event underscores the importance of dam safety and resilience. October 3 should therefore be observed every year as India's National Dam Safety Day.

Y. Abdul Basheer,
Hyderabad

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

Why Congress must not smear CJP



Vanya Vaidehi Bhargav

Historian at the National Law School of India, Bangalore, and the author of 'Being Hindu, Being Indian: Lala Lajpat Rai's Ideas of Nationhood'

Something unprecedented is afoot. India's opposition parties and thousands of ordinary citizens are finally galvanised against the Modi government. They are speaking in one voice against voter suppression and for India's democratic future. The staggering police counter-mobilisation suggests the once-invincible government feels threatened. Yet, Opposition parties may squander this opportunity. Hints are evident on Twitter, where some Congress supporters are attacking the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP).

The conspiracy theory being peddled is that the CJP was created by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and their supposed 'B-team', the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), to draw youth support away from Rahul Gandhi. This ignores the fact that Abhijeet Dipke, CJP founder, has accused Amit Shah of turning the Delhi Police into a 'bunch of criminals', and called Prime Minister Modi a "psychotic dictator" lacking the *aukaat* (worth) to become greater than Nehru, and who became Prime Minister due to vote theft. The unprecedented police repression of CJP's October 10 protest too contradicts this theory. However, this attempt by some Congress supporters to discredit the CJP is significant; it reveals their insecurity, that CJP leaders, some of whom had previous affiliations with the AAP, will repeat AAP's history of undercutting Congress's support base in Delhi and Punjab. They intend to discredit the CJP in order to keep youth support safe for Mr. Gandhi. It will instead erode it.

The CJP is popular because it is perceived as prioritising people's interests. Mutual criticism is democratic, but smear campaigns will be read as reflecting the petty insecurity of Congresspersons

The youth had grown frustrated with India's education system, economy and infrastructure. This was worsened by relentless propaganda denying people's reality, a stifling atmosphere of fear, and the closure of all channels of democratic dissent. The CJP's call to assemble at Jantar Mantar came as a new lease of life to a dying democracy. The youth expressed relief at the opening of a democratic space after years of oppressive silence to which many had resigned. The increased freedom to speak, disagree, and criticise was palpable and contagious. The CJP provided a common platform for a diverse coalition of dissenters to coalesce, and express dissent in personalised, creative ways under one banner.

Need to stand together

This does not deny Rahul Gandhi's work on paper leaks, institutional capture and voter suppression. Yet, the Congress would be deceiving itself if it believed that - after the Bharat Jodo Yatra in 2022 - it has consistently prioritised calling a cross-section of ordinary citizens onto the streets under its banner and organising India's diverse dissenters into a popular coalition. The CJP, in doing that, has punctured the BJP's aura of invincibility, creating a juncture pregnant with opportunity for the Opposition. If the CJP is a plot to undercut Mr. Gandhi, it is currently achieving the opposite. That his decency, fearlessness and ideological commitment had had an impact is evidenced by several Gen Z youth expressing support for Mr. Gandhi during the CJP's July protest. His *Chhatron Ki Goonj* rallies have been boosted by the CJP's youth galvanisation.

But the obsessive attacks by some Congress supporters on the CJP threaten to squander this opportunity. The CJP is popular because it is perceived as prioritising people's interests. Mutual criticism is democratic, but smear campaigns will be read as reflecting the petty insecurity of Congresspersons, and as disregarding the agency and intelligence of dissenters to judge who inspires and represents them authentically. This threatens the goodwill Mr. Gandhi has earned by prioritising people's causes and platforming citizens galvanised by the CJP. While he has not smeared the CJP, such impressions may attach to Mr. Gandhi. The protestors' independence of mind make it clear that they will reject anyone suspected of placing personality cult or partyism over authentic concern for India's dissenting people. In his own interest and his party's, Mr. Gandhi must rein in his social media supporters.

Rahul Gandhi must accept the challenge of his youth support being undermined. No party is entitled to the support of India's dissenting citizens. It must be earned. If Congress claims to represent the youth, it must persuade them it does so best. The CJP resonates because it offers an open, accessible space that amplifies rather than dwarfs ordinary citizens' voices. Mr. Gandhi will similarly win goodwill by inspiring dissenting citizens and non-party opposition groups to treat Congress as an umbrella platform for expressing their dissent creatively.

Nobel lesson: value of stabilisation models



Sushanta Kumar Mahapatra

Associate Professor of Economics at the ICFAI School of Social Sciences, IFHE, Hyderabad

Economic fluctuations, in addition to being reflected in GDP numbers, inflation, and unemployment rates, impact household budgets, hiring decisions of companies, and the ability of families to save money. This year's Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel (2026), given to Robert E. Hall and Michael Woodford for "microeconomic foundations of macroeconomic stabilisation", highlights an essential concept – successful economic policies require an understanding of how individual households and businesses make their economic choices.

Importance of their work

Governments have spent many years attempting to reduce the size of both the 'peaks' (highs) and 'troughs' (lows) that occur in the business cycle. In times of low economic activity (which is characterised by weak demand), central banks use their power to cut interest rates; in times of strong economic activity (characterised by strong demand), policy changes may need to be made to restrict further growth.

However, the oil crises of the 1970s demonstrated that there were weaknesses in the models that were being utilised at that time. It became clear that the relationships between inflation, unemployment, consumption, and production were far more variable than had previously been believed. During this period, inflation continued to rise with unemployment levels also rising.

The reason why central banks' credibility and communication is important is because a central bank's decision on interest rates does more than explain what its policy rate is today

Additionally, growth rates were declining. Therefore, stimulating an economy at the wrong time could result in even greater problems.

Mr. Hall and Mr. Woodford advanced macroeconomic stabilisation through their focus on placing household and business decisions at the centre of economic studies.

Mr. Hall's research demonstrated how consumption patterns reflect people's expectations of future earnings. However, he acknowledged that many households are unable to smooth out their spending due to a lack of savings and credit. In India, then, policymakers should consider the variations among households with different levels of financial security (that is high-income vs. low-income), instead of making decisions based upon what is considered to be the "average" consumer.

John Maynard Keynes was the first to recognise the importance of stabilising an economy. Following a similar line, Mr. Woodford developed his ideas within a practical new Keynesian model which links consumer spending, inflation and the overall level of economic activity. It allows policymakers to analyse how changes in interest rates could impact the economy. An important part of the model is that prices are "sticky", which means that firms do not immediately change their prices when there is a change in demand or cost. Firms set prices based upon what they believe their future costs, demand and competitors' prices will be. Therefore, expectations set for the future can affect today's inflation.

Central banks' credibility and communication is important because a central bank's decision on interest rates does more than explain what its policy rate is today. Such announcements will affect people's expectations for future interest rates and inflation which will again ultimately influence their decisions today. Clear and consistent communications from central banks allow households and businesses to make plans.

On the other hand, unpredictable signals from central banks or announcements of policies that are not followed through with actions can reduce the effectiveness of monetary policy.

Supply issues too

The model warns that not all shocks should be viewed as being caused by demand. Disruptions to supply may also lead to higher prices, lower levels of output, and an increase in unemployment at the same time, which would need to be tackled with other available policy options than just adjusting interest rates. Stabilisation models for India must take into account what is happening within the country, as well as be backed up with a strong monetary policy, responsible fiscal management, access to reliable data and specific assistance provided to those who are the most at risk of losing their jobs.

In the end, the value of the Nobel prize is in encouraging disciplined policymaking that takes into consideration the context in which it operates, while protecting price stability, job security and people's livelihoods.

Legal aid cuts jail time for undertrials, but help often arrives late

Reaching prisoners soon after arrest is key if free legal aid is to reduce the human and economic costs of pre-trial detention

DATA POINT

Indulekha Guha
Trisha Chanda

India jails fewer people than most countries – about 41 for every 1,00,000 people – yet more than three-quarters of its prisoners in 2022 were awaiting trial. That places India fourth in the world in the share of undertrials in its prison population. Many of them are poor, poorly educated, or from marginalised communities and remain in jail not because they have been convicted but because they cannot navigate the system or afford a lawyer.

Free legal aid is meant to close this gap. The Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 created the National Legal Services Authority to provide free legal services to weaker sections of society. But three decades on, limited outreach, low awareness and uneven quality mean that many undertrials still go without timely help.

A legal aid programme run since 2018 across eight prisons in Maharashtra offers insights into what such help can achieve. Implemented by Prayas (Tata Institute of Social Sciences) and the Fair Trial Fellowship (National Law University, Delhi), and funded by the Azim Premji Foundation, it targets those least able to secure representation: casual workers, women abandoned by their families, minorities, or migrant workers.

By analysing the records of over 22,000 undertrials assisted between 2018 and 2023, it was found that the typical participant is 29 years old, and that close to half have studied only up to primary school. Further, 18% are women and 57% are casual wage workers. By comparing their outcomes with the district court records in Maharashtra and used national labour force and time use surveys, the costs of detention were estimated.

To begin with, programme participants obtain bail far more often than the average applicant. Across 29 districts, 84% of participants' bail applications succeeded, compared with 26% of all applications in the same district courts between 2015 and 2020. Participants did better in 28 of the 29 districts. The gap persists even within categories of offence severity, so it is not simply because the programme serves people accused of minor crimes. Within the programme, bail outcomes change sharply at intake. Before intake, the share of participants granted bail ranged from about 1% to 6% across groups by gender, income, education and occupation. After intake, it ranged from 61% to 92%.

Timing, however, matters a great deal. Participants spent on average 171 days – more than five months – in jail before they entered the programme. Those released on bail spent a further 115 days in custody on average, taking the total from arrest to release to about eight months. In 2018, about 37% of Maharashtra's 26,898 undertrials had been held for more than a year **(Table 1)**.

The cost of detention

Detention before trial is costly for people who mostly live on daily earnings. The wages participants lose in custody was estimated by matching them to similar workers in the Periodic Labour Force Survey and multiplying their daily wage by the number of days they were detained. The losses are large relative to their incomes. From arrest to release, average losses reach up to about ₹2 lakh for some age groups, while more than 60% of participants earn less than ₹80,000 a year. Losses rise with age and peak among workers in their 50s **(Chart 2)**.

Losses also vary by group. After intake alone, those facing the most serious charges lose about ₹80,000 on average, nearly four times the ₹21,000 lost by those accused of the least severe offences. This is driven mainly by longer detention rather than higher earnings. Graduates and regular wage workers also lose more, since their wages are higher **(Chart 3)**.

The uncomfortable question this raises is: why do so many undertrials wait months for help that is already their right? Legal aid is usually seen as a matter of rights. These findings suggest it is also an intervention with economic returns. By helping undertrials file bail applications, coordinate with advocates, gather documents and meet release conditions, the programme appears to cut through the procedural frictions that prolong detention.

Shorter detention can ease prison overcrowding, lower public spending on prisons, and limit income losses for vulnerable households. The most actionable lesson concerns timing. Legal aid can improve outcomes after intake, but it cannot recover the months already spent in jail. Identifying eligible prisoners at or soon after arrest could substantially raise its impact. Better data would also help. Caste, religion, income and migration status are missing for much of the sample, which limits what can be said about who benefits most.

Comparing participants with similar defendants in court records would allow a rigorous evaluation of the programme's effect, and tracking people after release would show whether the gains last. As governments seek to widen access to justice, legal aid works best when it reaches undertrial prisoners early enough to prevent unnecessary detention.

Note: Programme participants are not randomly selected, so the comparisons are descriptive rather than causal. Wage and time losses are accounting estimates of the value of time spent in custody: predicted daily wages from the PLFS 2017-18 multiplied by days detained. Since undertrials differ from the general population, they should be read as upper-bound estimates. Each period is averaged over participants with valid dates for that period.

Cost of delayed justice

Data for the charts were sourced from authors' calculations using Azim Premji Foundation programme records and the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017-18



Table 1: Time spent in custody by programme participants (in days)

Period	Participants	Average	Maximum
Arrest to programme intake	18,093	171	1,843
Intake to release on bail	8,987	115	1,122
Arrest to release on bail	8,921	239	2,039

Durations after intake are for participants with a recorded release date

Chart 2: Age-wise predicted wage loss of participants during their detention for the period between intake to release. After intake alone, those facing the most serious charges lose about ₹80,000 on average, nearly four times the ₹21,000 lost by those accused of the least severe offences.

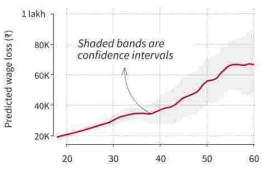
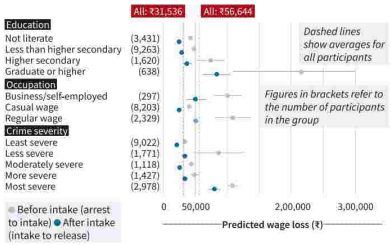


Chart 3: Predicted wage loss before and after programme intake by group. Each participant is counted once, by their most serious case. The chart excludes unemployed participants and those outside the labour force



Indulekha Guha is an Assistant Professor of Economics at Azim Premji University. Trisha Chanda is a Research Scientist in the Department of Sociology at The Ohio State University. The views expressed are personal.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO OCTOBER 14, 1976

Inadequate library services in Asia and Africa

Lusaka, October 13: The Pro Vice-Chancellor of the University of Zambia, Mr. Moses Musonda has underlined the need for greater efforts by developing countries in Asia and Africa to develop their information systems to get over the woefully inadequate situation in this field.

The state of libraries and information services in Africa – and indeed in developing countries – are appalling, he said, in a closing speech to the six-day standing conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African librarians here yesterday.

Equally frightening, he told the delegates, was the paucity of trained and qualified personnel to man these services which made the running of the libraries and information systems poorly co-ordinated. The main reason for this situation developing, Mr. Musonda said, could be attributed to the fact that some governments had not recognised the importance of these systems. Mr. Musonda said, another reason was that personnel training has not been encouraging since there were very few people who understood or appreciated the importance and implication of developing information systems for the benefit of developing countries.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO OCTOBER 14, 1926

Astronomical research and industrial development

The extensive use which is now being made of research facilities for testing materials destined for industrial use was recently illustrated in the sending of samples of rubber from England to Switzerland to be tested for moisture absorption.

This was undertaken by Dr. Kollieker, the Swiss Government astronomer, at the observatory situated over 11,000 feet above sea-level 2,000 feet or so beneath the crest of the Jung-frau mountain in the Bernese Oberland. Here weather conditions and atmospheric effects are studied, the station being fitted with a high-power telescope for astronomical research.

During the summer this is frequently used for sweeping the mountain side in search of belated travellers, thousands visiting the Jung-frau observatory to obtain the view which extends beyond the French Vosges mountains and to the Black Forest in Germany.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Healthy life-years saved by limiting global warming

1.89 billion years. Limiting global warming to around 1.8 degrees Celsius, instead of allowing it to reach 4.4 degrees Celsius, could prevent the loss of 1.89 billion years of healthy life to causes such as extreme heat and air pollution, according to new Lancet Commission. PTI

Increase in power demand in T.N. due to El Niño heat

30 in per cent. Rejecting the allegations of high-cost power purchases, Minister R. Nirmal Kumar defended the government's decision to call for short-term power tenders. He attributed the strain on the grid to a 30% spike in demand driven by El Niño-induced heat. PTI

IMF's lowered forecast of China's economic growth this year

4.5 in per cent. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) lowered its forecast for China's economic growth this year to 4.5% on Tuesday, as higher energy prices due to the West Asia conflict and a domestic spending slump weigh on activity. AFP

The value of hydrocarbons Russia exported to Europe

320 in $ billion. Russia said it has sold European countries over $320 billion worth of hydrocarbons since 2022. "For the period from 2022 to today, this figure amounts to $320.7 billion. This is the volume of energy resource deliveries to European Union countries," Russia said. AFP

Farmers on third list for Maharashtra crop loan waiver

3.51 in lakh. The Maharashtra government has released the third list of 3,51,192 farmers eligible for benefits under the Puneashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar Loan Waiver Scheme, State Cooperation Minister Babasaheb Patil said. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What is preventive detention?

What does the law permit, and where must the State draw the line? What safeguards does the Constitution provide against arbitrary detention? How has preventive detention evolved in India? What is the difference between preventive detention and prohibitory orders?

EXPLAINER

Rizmi Lia M.

The story so far:

The Delhi Police detained more than 5,000 protesters as they tried to reach Jantar Mantar for the protest demanding the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and a rollback of the SIR. In the lead-up to the protests in Delhi, there was a nationwide crackdown on protesters by the police force. Among those detained and brutally manhandled by the Delhi police were leaders of various political factions, former Chief Ministers, the Leader of the Opposition, lawyers, journalists, students, activists, and reportedly people who were not even part of the protest. Police detained people at representatives' residences even before the protest started, and en route to the protest site. However, the Supreme Court on October 11 directed the Centre and the Delhi Police to ensure free movement of people 'subject to law and order'.

This prompts an understanding of what preventive detention is, how it can be imposed, and how it came into practice.



AISA's Neha Bora during a protest march at Connaught Place in New Delhi. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

What is preventive detention?

'Preventive detention' means detention of a person without a trial or conviction by a court. The primary objective of preventive detention is not to punish an individual for a past offence but to prevent him from committing an offence in the future.

Power of preventive detention can be exercised by the authorities on the grounds of public order, security of the State, and law and order.

The National Security Act, 1980 (NSA) allows for preventive detention if the government is satisfied that a person's activities are prejudicial to the defence of India, the relations of India with foreign powers, or the security of the State.

What is a prohibitory order under the BNSS?

Section 163 of the BNSS largely retains the spirit of its predecessor, Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973. It empowers a District Magistrate, a Sub-Divisional Magistrate, or any other Executive Magistrate specially empowered by the State Government, to issue orders when there is sufficient ground for proceeding and immediate prevention or speedy remedy is desirable. The primary objective is to prevent obstruction, annoyance, or injury to any person lawfully employed, or danger to human life, health, or safety, or a disturbance of the public tranquillity, or a riot, or an affray.

The provision is preventive in nature, designed to avert potential harm rather than to punish past acts. The Magistrate must be satisfied that there is an urgency that necessitates an immediate order, even without prior notice to the affected parties.

The power is extraordinary and is intended for situations where the normal course of law enforcement might be too slow to prevent immediate harm. The order must clearly state the material facts upon which it is based, ensuring transparency and providing grounds for potential challenge.

Furthermore, orders under Section 163 BNSS are subject to judicial review by the High Courts under their revisional jurisdiction. The Supreme Court, in cases like *Babulal Parate v. State of Maharashtra* (1961) and *Madhu Limaye v. Sub-Divisional Magistrate* (1971), has consistently emphasised that these powers must be exercised judiciously, proportionately, and only when there is an imminent threat to public order, and not as a routine measure.

How has preventive detention evolved?

Preventive detention in India has evolved from a colonial tool used to suppress political dissent into a legal mechanism intended to protect national security and public order. During British rule, laws such as the Rowlatt Act, 1919, and the Defence of India Act, 1939, allowed the authorities to detain individuals without trial, often targeting freedom fighters and political opponents.

After Independence, India retained preventive detention, introducing the Preventive Detention Act, 1950, which remained in force until 1969. The Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), 1971, further expanded detention powers and was widely used against political opponents during the Emergency (1975-1977). It was repealed in 1978.

The National Security Act (NSA), 1980, subsequently established a continuing legal framework for preventive detention. Other laws, including the Conservation of Foreign Exchange and Prevention of Smuggling Activities Act (COFEPOSA), 1974, also authorised preventive detention for specific purposes.

Meanwhile, amendments to the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967, expanded the state's powers to address terrorism and unlawful activities.

Over time, the Supreme Court's interpretation of personal liberty has also evolved. *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India* (1978) established that procedures restricting personal liberty must be just, fair and reasonable. However, concerns over prolonged detention without trial, inadequate judicial oversight and the potential misuse of these laws continue to raise questions about the balance between national security and fundamental rights.

What did the Supreme Court order on October 11?

With respect to the Delhi protests, the Supreme Court convened what it called an "extraordinary, exceptional" Sunday (October 11, 2026) hearing to direct the Union government and the Delhi Police to stop illegal detentions and allow free and smooth movement of people and traffic, as well as the operations of Metro and rail services, but "subject to law and public order".

The Supreme Court directed that Delhi Metro and railway services operate normally, and that internet services remain available in accordance with the law. It said the movement of people and vehicles across Delhi must not be unnecessarily obstructed and that barricades must be reviewed based on law-and-order and traffic requirements. The court said there must be no unlawful detention and that all detentions must follow the procedure established by law. It also directed that peaceful assemblies be allowed in accordance with the law, except in areas where prohibitory orders under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) are in force. Any notice board announcing Section 163 restrictions near the Supreme Court must be removed, if still in place, to ensure access to the Supreme Court and other courts. The court also recorded the assurance that lawyers, journalists and other professionals would not be prevented from performing their duties.

The court issued notice in contempt proceedings alleging violation of its October 9 order and directed the authorities to submit a compliance report by October 13, including details of Metro restrictions and railway advisories. Habeas corpus petitions alleging mass detentions will also be heard with the main cases on October 13. The court said the State must explain the circumstances, manner and legal justification for the alleged detentions, emphasising its duty under Article 32 of the Constitution to protect and enforce fundamental rights.

What have the courts said about preventive detention?

Earlier, in *Babulal Parate v. State of Maharashtra* (1961), the Supreme Court upheld the constitutional validity of Section 144 CrPC but said it could be used only in emergencies to prevent specific threats to public order. The court held that the power was not "unlimited or untrammelled" and had to be exercised within the limits set by law.

In *Khudiram Das v. State of West Bengal* (1975) Supreme Court observed that the requirement of communication of grounds of detention acts as a check against arbitrary and capricious exercise of power. The detaining authority cannot whisk away a person and put him behind bars at its own sweet will. It must have grounds for doing so and those grounds must be communicated to the detenu, so that, not only the detenu may know what are the facts and materials before the detaining authority on the basis of which he is being deprived of his personal liberty, but he can also invoke the power of judicial review, howsoever limited and peripheral it may be. The detenu has to be afforded an opportunity of making a representation against the order of detention.

In 2012, the Supreme Court criticised the government for imposing Section 144 against a sleeping crowd at Ramlila Maidan in New Delhi during protests against the Congress-led UPA government. "Such a provision can be used only in grave circumstances for maintenance of public peace. The efficacy of the provision is to prevent some harmful occurrence immediately. Therefore, the emergency must be sudden and the consequences sufficiently grave," the court said.

In *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan v. Union of India* (2018), the Supreme Court set aside a National Green Tribunal order banning all protests along Jantar Mantar Road. The court said a complete ban was excessive, observing that the "solution was not to ban the demonstrations altogether". It directed the authorities to create a system to regulate protests and grant permissions.

The Supreme Court in the case of *Shaik Naznen v. State of Telangana* (2022) observed that powers to be exercised under the preventive detention laws are exceptional powers which have been given to the Government for its exercise in an exceptional situation as it strikes hard on the freedom and liberty of an individual, and thus cannot be exercised in a routine manner.

According to *Ameena Begum v. State of Telangana* (2023), Supreme Court observed that to unchain the shackles of preventive detention, it is important that the safeguards enshrined in our Constitution, particularly under the "golden triangle" formed by Articles 14, 19 and 21, are diligently enforced.

Article 14 ensures equality before the law, Article 19 provides important freedoms such as freedom of speech, expression, assembly, and movement, and Article 21 guarantees the right to life and personal liberty.

What are the safeguards against preventive detention in the Constitution?

Article 22 of the Constitution provides safeguards against arbitrary preventive detention. Under Article 22(4), a person generally cannot be detained for more than three months without an Advisory Board reviewing the case, subject to the constitutional requirements and exceptions. Under Article 22(5), the authorities must communicate the grounds of detention to the detainee as soon as possible and give them an opportunity to make a representation against the order. The grounds must be communicated in a manner that allows the detainee to effectively challenge the detention.

Preventive detention orders are also subject to judicial review. Courts can examine whether the authorities followed the law, considered relevant material and complied with constitutional safeguards. Therefore, the power must be exercised carefully and cannot be used arbitrarily.

THE GIST

- Preventive detention allows authorities to detain a person to prevent anticipated threats to public order or security, but it must be distinguished from prohibitory orders and other police action against protesters
- Article 22 of the Constitution provides safeguards for detained persons, while laws such as the National Security Act set out the grounds and procedures for detention
- Courts can review state action to protect individual liberty, emphasising that restrictions on protest and preventive detention must remain within legal and constitutional limits

CACHE



Elon Musk claimed that Starlink has not been licensed in India, in spite of spending five years complying with the government laws and requirements. REUTERS

Why is Musk taking on Mukesh Ambani over Starlink in India?

Elon Musk has accused Mukesh Ambani of using his influence to keep Starlink out of India to protect Jio's market dominance, even as Starlink awaits security clearances to begin operations; the spat comes as Jio prepares for an IPO, raising questions about competition and regulatory hurdles

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far:

SpaceX owner Elon Musk has never shied away from starting a social media spat, be it with his own family members or U.S. President Donald Trump.

Mr. Musk has now taken aim at India's billionaire Mukesh Ambani, accusing the chairman and managing director of Reliance Industries of being the real "boss" of India and playing a role in keeping Starlink's satellite internet out of the Indian market to favour Jio.

What has Mr. Musk said about Mr. Ambani?

On October 9, Mr. Musk posted on X a mockingly subservient tweet addressed to "Prime Minister Ambani," apologising for "not realizing that you are the real boss of India," and accused him of wanting to maintain his "monopolistic exploitation of the great people of India," before asking him for permission to allow Starlink to compete in the market. Mr. Musk claimed that Starlink would help close Internet connectivity gaps across the country and could help save lives during natural disasters.

Critics of Mr. Musk were infuriated by what they felt was the undermining of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as well as the accusation that India's government is under Mr. Ambani's influence. Others flagged that the price of Starlink's service, both hardware and subscriptions, was



Elon Musk. REUTERS

many times more than the services offered by India-based Internet service providers.

On October 11, Mr. Musk posted that competition would benefit Indian customers by giving them more choices and that prices would be adjusted accordingly.

"Ambani's profits will be lower, but he is not going out of business. And, obviously, if Starlink is too expensive in India, no one will buy it, so SpaceX will need to make pricing affordable," stated Mr. Musk.

What is the status of Starlink's licence in India?

Mr. Musk claimed that Starlink has not been licensed in India, in spite of spending five years complying with the government laws and requirements.

In March 2025, SpaceX announced that it had partnered with Jio Platforms to offer Starlink broadband Internet service to customers in India, subject to SpaceX receiving separate authorisations to offer Starlink in India. (A similar agreement was also signed with Bharti Airtel.)

Under the 2025 agreement, the two companies were set to explore service collaborations so Jio Platforms would make Starlink solutions available through its own retail channels.

It is unclear whether that agreement will hold after Mr. Musk's gibe against Mr. Ambani and the Indian government.

Apart from the deals between the two companies, SpaceX has a Global Mobile Personal Communications by Satellite (GMPCS) authorisation from the Department of Telecommunications (DoT), *The Hindu* reported this month, but security clearances are pending.

Similarly, ANI reported that licensing was complete for Starlink, Reliance Jio Satcom, and Eutelsat OneWeb, while security checks are in progress.

Why is the timing of this clash significant?

The timing is crucial as Jio Platforms is preparing for an initial public offering (IPO), which is expected to take place later this month, per media reports; a company at this stage likely prefers a stable regulatory environment and positive media coverage.

A world-famous billionaire attacking an IPO-bound company by accusing it of undermining India's market sovereignty could make the situation tenuous. Mr. Musk's intimacy with the White House could potentially escalate the online spat.

Mr. Trump has in the past threatened penalties when other countries – such as Australia and the U.K. – slowed the foreign operations of U.S. tech giants.

Another factor to consider is the ongoing protest against Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar over allegations of irregularities in the electoral rolls vetting process. Delhi residents have been affected by one of the largest Internet shutdowns in the capital's history.

By contrast, Starlink has been used to access the Internet during times of war and civil unrest, such as (legally) during Ukraine's defence against Russian invasion and Iran's anti-government protests (illegally). For the Indian government, ensuring that all telecom companies comply with its Internet blackouts is a serious priority.

Mr. Musk has stressed that Starlink beams are turned off over India, and that illegal use is not possible.

For the time being, the Starlink app remains available for download in the country, advertising a starting price of $55 per month for 100Mbps and unlimited data.

Meanwhile, the Indian government denied that it allowed monopolies to form in any sector.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Please send in your answers to dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

A quiz on the much-loved bear and his world on the centenary of the publication of the evergreen children's classic 'Winnie-the-Pooh'

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1
It is well-known that the name Winnie was derived from Winnipeg, the name A.A. Milne's son gave to his teddy bear. Where does Pooh come from?

QUESTION 2
The Winnie-the-Pooh stories are set in Hundred Acre Wood, also referred to as 100 Aker Wood. Name the beautiful landscape that inspired this setting of his beloved stories.

QUESTION 3
In the original stories, what name is painted in gold letters over the door of Winnie-the-Pooh's house?

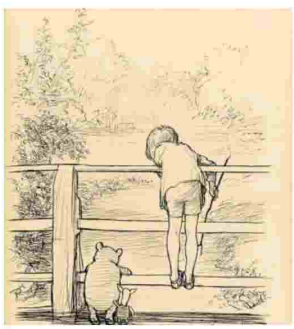
QUESTION 4
Where can one now see the original stuffed animals that inspired Milne's stories, and which character was added by Queen Camilla in 2026 to complete the set?

QUESTION 5
Name the nook close to Pooh's best friend Piglet's home where the two consider the day's possibilities.

QUESTION 6
Name the other two books featuring the lovable bear and his friends, and which hyperactive character debuted in the final work.

QUESTION 7
What is the contribution of Ernest Howard Shepard to the success and legacy of the Winnie-the-Pooh series of books?

QUESTION 8
Who played the role of an adult Christopher Robin in the eponymous 2018 film in which he is reunited with Winnie-the-Pooh?



Visual Question:
What is the setting for this illustration from one of the original works? AFP

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Considered the oldest Indian club in existence, this team made history in 1911, becoming the first Indian club to win the IFA Shield. Name the club and the nickname given to the winning squad. **Ans: Mohun Bagan, 'Immortal Eleven'**
2. Name the first club from South India and the State in which it was set up. **Ans: RB Ferguson FC, Keralam**
3. The Durand Cup was won by a domestic club for the first time in 1940. Name the club that beat the Royal Warwickshire Regiment 2-1 to end the British monopoly. **Ans: Mohammedan Sporting**
4. This club was named the best in India by the English FA in 1951 after it won the IFA Shield three times in a row. Name the club. **Ans: East Bengal**
5. Name the team of under-15s who defeated its corresponding squad of European powerhouse Liverpool 6-0 this year. **Ans: Minerva Academy**
Visual: Name the club, which recently went through a management crisis, and the UAE-based group that acquired its ownership last month. **Ans: Kerala Blasters, Al Fursan Group**
Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan | Arun Kumar Singh | Tamal Biswas | Erfanally Oosmany | Sudhir Thapa



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

Is it ok to say, "hook, line, and bait"? (Dr. S. Jayaraman, Chennai)
The correct expression is "fall for something hook, line, and sinker". The word "fall" here means "to believe". So when you fall for a story "hook, line, and sinker", you believe the story completely, although it sounds pretty far-fetched. The expression means the same thing as "lock, stock, and barrel". When you say that someone fell for something hook, line and sinker, you are passing a judgment on the individual. You are indirectly saying that he/she is pretty gullible; he/she is willing to believe anything somebody tells him/her. One can also say "swallow/buy something hook, line, and sinker".

Shyam expected his students to swallow his explanation hook, line, and sinker.

Another common expression is, "fall hook, line, and sinker in love with someone/something".

This is an expression that comes from the sport of fishing. I understand that sometimes a fish not only swallows the hook to which the bait is attached, but also some of the "line". The sinker is the weight that is used to take the fishing line to the bottom. It is, however, very uncommon for a fish to swallow the "sinker". So, if someone swallows your story hook, line and sinker, he/she believes your tall tale.

What is the difference between "cost" and "price"? (Usha Karthikeyan, T.N.)
Most people tend to use these words interchangeably when they want to mean the amount of money required to buy something. For example, we can say, "What is the price of the car?" or "How much does the car cost"? In business, however, the two words have a different meaning. When you talk about the "cost" of something, what you are referring to is the amount of money that you spent to make that particular thing. For example, when businessmen talk about the cost of a car, they are referring to the amount they spent manufacturing it. "Price", on the other hand, refers to the amount of money that the car is sold for. It is the amount that the customer pays. A toy may cost Rs. 200 to manufacture, but it may be priced at Rs. 500.

The word "cost", unlike the word "price", is normally used with services. For example, one talks about the cost of getting one's car repaired, and the cost of going on holiday. "Cost" is also used with abstractions; one talks about the "cost of living", the "cost of war", etc. When you wish to use an adjective, then it is "price" that is used. For example, you talk about "exorbitant" prices, "great prices", and "bargain prices". As everyone knows, every politician has his/her price. Yes, the word price is normally used when you wish to bribe someone. You can tell the individual to name his/her price.

Is it ok to say, "All classes are suspended in the aftermath of the All India elocution competition"? (V. S. Uday, Sringeri)
The word "aftermath" was first used to refer to the second crop; that is, the crop that grew after the first crop was cut. These days the word is figuratively used to refer to the period that follows an event. But what is important to remember is that the preceding event is usually associated with something terrible - an earthquake, an explosion, a war, etc.

Published in The Hindu on April 2, 2002

Word of the day

Dilettante:
an amateur who engages in an activity without serious intentions and who pretends to have knowledge

Synonyms: inexperienced, unskilled, unprofessional, inexpert

Usage: *He is a dilettante who paints for fun.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/dilettante

International Phonetic Alphabet: /dɪlɪtæntɪ/

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

To outsiders, they were just vacationers living it up during Goa's off-season — lounging in the pool or going to casinos. Until the police blew their cover. MOHAMED THAVER & PAVNEET SINGH CHADHA on the team that played a key part in a cyber crime chain: moving defrauded money at lightning speed into thousands of accounts

HOW THEY MOVED THE MONEY

INSIDE A MULTI-CRORE SCAM RUN OUT OF GOA VILLAS



ILLUSTRATION: SUVAJIT DEY

CASA DE Nicole is a picture of North Goa's laid-back charm — two storeys tall, with off-white walls and garden beds. Just the kind of villa vacationers in Goa prefer during the monsoon, when off-season prices plummet. So when a dozen young men lived it up here for days, lounging by the pool or stepping out to visit casinos and nightclubs, none of the neighbours paid any attention.

Until August 4, 2026, when a team of the Mumbai Police's Crime Branch raided Casa De Nicole. The 'vacationers', it turned out, were a key cog in a much larger cybercrime machine, one that spanned Gujarat, Goa, Mumbai, Dubai and beyond.

The cybercrime chain is by now all too familiar: conmen pose as law enforcement and terrorise the victim into transferring their life savings into a specified bank account, from where the money splits and gets transferred into thousands of bank accounts — a blitzkrieg operation that leaves banks with little time to react.

It's for the first time, police say, that they have cracked down on the latter part of the operation — the team involved in moving money at lightning speeds into smaller accounts.

What stunned the police was that the men carrying out these fraudulent transactions weren't those working in the shadows in Jamtara, Nuh or many of the other cybercrime hubs, but living it up in Goa's villas. When the Mumbai Police team cracked down on the Candolim villa, they found 12 youngsters, 11 from Gujarat and one from Jogeshwari in Mumbai. "Some whose 'working hours' were over were lounging on the terrace. Others were in the pool," says Inspector Prashant Gawde, who was part of the team that conducted the raid.

Since then, police have cracked down on at least one more villa in Goa and arrested 10. Police have filed two FIRs across both cases, estimating that the two gangs defrauded people of a combined Rs 900 crore.

A trail from Mumbai

It all began in Mumbai.

In July this year, DCP (crime) Raj Tilak Roushan received a tip-off that something suspicious was going on at a company in South Mumbai — Office No. 303 at Parsvnath Chambers, Masjid Bunder. On July 3, a Mumbai Crime Branch team raided the office that bore an adhesive sticker for 'G.D. Overseas'. The company turned out to be a sham; it existed nowhere except on that single piece of paper.

The investigators found 10-12 employees whose job was to open new current accounts across banks in Mumbai. Upon checking the transactions, a peculiar trend stood out: while the accounts were opened in Mumbai banks and activated by 'G.D. Overseas' employees, they were later operated from Goa. The investigators also found that the 'G.D. Overseas' employees bought the SIM cards that were linked to the bank accounts — typically for OTPs and banking authentication — and sent them to Goa, where the accounts were later operated.

During interrogations, Mohammad Shabbir Sheikh, one of the arrested employees from the south Mumbai office unit, told the police that while he was employed in Dubai, he met a 'Ranveer Kapoor', who advised him to go to Mumbai and create the bank accounts. The bank welcome kits and account-linked SIM cards were to be handed over to another person who would take them to Goa. The FIR in the case, filed at the Pydhonie police station, quotes Ranveer Kapoor as telling Sheikh, "In return, I will give you Rs 50,000-70,000 per account."

Following the Goa trail, the police reached Casa De Nicole, which falls in the jurisdiction of Goa's Calangute Police Station. The Mumbai Crime Branch team, led by Senior Inspector (Unit II) Dilip Tejankar, conducted the raid. They seized 15 laptops, 128 ATM cards, 85 mobile phones, 76 SIM cards, 22 cheque books, 77 passbooks, six routers, and three keyboards from the villa.

The account numbers the youth had with them were used in 186 cybercrime cases across the country, it was found. The police went on to freeze Rs 120 crore spread across 7,500 bank accounts. The police believe nearly Rs 500 crore were moved by the accused living in the villa.

The good life in Goa

Mumbai Crime Branch officers say that Casa De Nicole appeared to be a villa from outside, but was an office space inside. "Every room had five to six laptops, and they had created a cabin-type setup, where they would sit and transfer money," says Inspector Prashant Gawde.

It was a 24x7 operation, with the youth working in three eight-hour batches. At any time, at least four men were ready to move money from a victim's account to thousands of others. This was required, as it could not be predicted when a cybercrime victim would take the bait and transfer money, say officers.

Gawde says that some of those arrested at the Goa villa said their workdays were taxing, with some days extending to 12 hours. But there was a pay-off: they could step out of the villa and splurge in their free hours. "They would go to nightclubs and casinos; sometimes, they would even bring people over to the villa," he says.

The men earned Rs 35,000 a month and a three per cent share of the money they moved each day.

Casa De Nicole owner Francis says he had no idea a cybercrime racket was being run from the villa until a police call in August.

"They rented the villa for two months for Rs 1 lakh. Initially, when they approached me, I told them I rent the villa only for short durations. But I changed my mind later. They paid rent for two months upfront, but had stayed only for one month when the police raided the premises. I had no clue that they were involved in cyber fraud," says Francis.

A resident, requesting anonymity, says, "They were a noisy bunch. They had rented vehicles. I would see them coming and going at odd hours, but did not think much of it."

The villa has since been locked.

A Mumbai police officer said that an absconding accused in the case, whose identity they refused to reveal, had approached the villa owners claiming to be the manager at a multinational company and saying he wanted to book the villa to enable his employees to "work from home" in a relaxed environment.

But something still puzzled the officers: moving money manually across thousands of accounts would require far more people. This, they soon found, was where the 'company' stepped in.



Casa De Nicole, the villa from which the youth operated; (inset) one of the accused, Bua Smith or 'Ashwathama', who was tracked down in Jaipur

It was a 24x7 operation, with the youth working in three eight-hour batches. At any time, at least four men were ready to move money, as it could not be predicted when a victim would take the bait

The gang, the network

The youth, police found, reported to a Dubai-based Indian who called himself 'Ranveer Kapoor'. Police claim to have identified him, and they are trying to get him back in coordination with the authorities in Dubai. He, along with other Dubai-based operators, ran what the accused called the "company".

The "company", police found, was at the head of the cyber fraud pyramid, followed by the "administrators" (the men arrested in Goa), the "masters", "super masters" and the "customers".

At the bottom, or the first level of the fraud, were the "customers", people who, in exchange for money, handed over their accounts for fraudulent transactions. These were the mule accounts into which the "administrators" would, at the click of a button on their app, transfer the money.

A level above them were the "masters", essentially agents working on the periphery of the banking system in Mumbai, who would procure the 'mule' accounts from customers, either by force or lure.

The "supermasters" were the ones responsible for keeping the bank accounts ready for transactions. They collected welcome packs for newly opened accounts, activated the accounts, and set up OTPs.

"A regular flow of mule accounts was needed to run this network," a police officer says.

"Administrators", the youth arrested in Goa whose job was to move money between accounts, formed the next level and held 'franchises' of the "company" they reported to. The arrested administrators told police they paid Rs 50 lakh upfront to obtain the 'franchise'.

As they probed further, police realised that the men in the Goa villa could not realistically have logged into and operated thousands of bank accounts one by one. They found that the Dubai-based company had given their administrators in Goa access to an app especially developed for cybercrime, called Banker Panel.

On the app, the youth entered the account into which the victim was made to transfer money in one box and listed the accounts to which the money would be sent in another. "Once the set-up was ready, they only needed to click once, and the money would be transferred to thousands of accounts in an instant. The chain continues," the police officer says.

This ensured the victims' money would be untraceable, even if law enforcement officials were alerted within the "golden hour", the first one to two hours immediately after a fraud, when banks can block or freeze the money.

The money transferred to different accounts was eventually withdrawn at ATMs or through cheque-books.

Another group, police say, would send the money onwards to Dubai via the 'angadia' network — an unofficial, trust-based courier system, often used to send unaccounted money without alerting authorities.

The cybercrime network, the officer says, had a unique method to pay commission to 'franchises' like the Goa one in 'white'. For this, the Dubai-based 'company' operated gaming platforms. On these platforms, a youth in Goa would pay Rs 1,000 to bet on a race. The 'company' would return Rs 900 and add Rs 100 to the bet, creating a legitimate-looking transaction through which the franchise could receive its commission in 'white'.

The police found gaming portals like 'XXX247', '900 Panel' and 'Rudra' linked to the cybercrime network. "Though online gaming has been banned in India (the Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Act was passed in 2025 and came into effect on May 1, 2026), it is not banned abroad, so they would use that loophole. We have since blocked the gaming websites," the officer says.

As they dug deeper, the Mumbai Police team kept bumping into a shadowy figure, 'Ashwathama', on several WhatsApp groups the youth used.

"Since the accused would ensure one 'level' did not meet another, no one knew who this person was," an officer says. "This person played an important role in these WhatsApp groups, in organising mule account holders and telling those on the lower levels what was to be done."

In the first week of September, the police tracked down 'Ashwathama' in Jaipur. He was identified as Bua Smith, who hailed from Ahmedabad. He told police that he was sure that he, like Ashwathama, the immortal warrior in the Mahabharata, would not be found out, even if all others were arrested.

Beyond Casa De Nicole

Police say Casa De Nicole, run by the Dubai-based 'company', is not an isolated case. Other 'companies', they say, have begun to operate from countries such as Sri Lanka. They eventually convert money into cryptocurrency and send it to a third country, like China, using crypto wallets.

After the raid on Casa De Nicole in August, there was a similar raid at a Goa villa called Sea Coast in September. Investigators uncovered the same modus operandi: men in their thirties operating out of a villa, moving money across thousands of accounts. The accused, police found, changed villas when owners or neighbours suspected that something was amiss. The police suspect they moved around Rs 400 crore of fraudulently obtained money.

In September, the Mumbai Crime Branch (Unit V), led by senior Inspector Rohini Potdar, raided Sea Coast villa and arrested the accused. "They were given a monthly salary of Rs 25,000 and a percentage of the money they moved. Every person ended up earning anywhere between Rs 1 and 1.5 lakh a month," says a police officer.

"Unlike the lot in Casa De Nicole who splurged on casinos and nightclubs, police say the men arrested from Sea Coast were older and told them that they wanted to send money back home," says Assistant Police Inspector Sachin Barate, who was part of the team that raided Sea Coast villa.

For Goa Police, which assisted their counterparts from Mumbai in the raids, the shadowy activities in the villa are a growing headache. "The ease of 'working' from a villa, close to the beaches and casinos, is what draws young men to take up this job," says a Goa officer posted in the cyber cell.

The youth, police found, reported to a Dubai-based Indian who called himself 'Ranveer Kapoor'. Police say they have identified him and are trying to get him back in coordination with the authorities in the UAE

The operation

TRICKING VICTIMS: Conmen posing as law enforcement officials intimidated victims into transferring money into bank accounts controlled by them

OPENING THE ACCOUNTS: For this, others in the network opened accounts across Mumbai banks, collected the bank welcome kits, arranged SIM cards for OTPs and banking authentication, and sent them onward to Goa

MOVING THE MONEY: In Goa villas, young men worked around the clock, moving defrauded money to thousands of accounts almost instantly

OPERATION CENTRAL, DUBAI: Dubai-based operators gave the Goa team access to Banker Panel, an app that distributes money across accounts

WITHDRAWING THE MONEY: The stolen money was withdrawn through ATMs or cheques and sent to Dubai through the informal angadia network

MAKING THE MONEY 'WHITE': Gaming platforms were used to pay the Goa operators through transactions that appeared legitimate

WEB EXCLUSIVE
'Israel and the US see Navi Pillay's Peace Prize as a verdict against them — rightly so' — *Saptarshi Basak*
Log on to www.indianexpress.com

WORDLY WISE
The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.
— *Martin Luther King Jr*

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IN 1932
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

In Manipur, the work of peace is still to be done

REPORTS THAT at least nine people were killed in the latest outbreak of violence across Manipur's hill districts on the night of October 9 point, yet again, to the state government's incapacity to heal or contain schisms in the state. By all accounts, the violence between the Kuki and Naga communities spanned three districts — Kamjong, Kangpokpi and Ukhrul — and involved ambushes and gunfights by armed groups. It is disturbing that even after three-and-a-half years of ethnic violence, there is only a fragile calm, and little progress seems to have been made towards an enduring end to the conflict.

After the N Biren Singh government was dissolved in February 2025, it was hoped that President's Rule would make space for an administration seen to be less partisan to stabilise the situation. But while large-scale violent clashes declined, normalcy remained elusive, and the deep divides that had taken hold since May 2023 persisted. As calls for an elected government grew louder, Yumnam Khemchand Singh, a Meitei like his predecessor, was chosen as chief minister. The appointment of a Kuki and a Naga deputy CM gave hope that political representation would pave the way for a lasting settlement. But the old Kuki-Naga fault line that fuelled bloodshed in the 1990s has been reopened. Since February, dozens of people from both communities have been killed and houses torched. The Meiteis, Kukis and Nagas are now caught in overlapping conflicts, with civilians bearing the brunt not only of the violence but also of blockades across the hill districts that restrict access to essential supplies.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi met CM Y Khemchand Singh on Saturday and promised all possible assistance to the embattled state government. But a return to normalcy will remain out of reach without a concerted effort, first, to demilitarise society and re-establish the state's authority. In August, Singh issued a 15-day ultimatum for the voluntary surrender of illegal firearms, thousands of which have been looted from state armouries since the conflict began. This was not the first such appeal: Soon after President's Rule was imposed in February 2025, Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla had also called for the surrender of weapons. The continued prevalence of gun violence suggests that such appeals have not worked. Disarming armed groups and punishing those responsible for the killings must be an immediate priority. But the government must also create the conditions for sustained dialogue. Restoring the freedom of movement and making it possible for people to live safely alongside one another will have to be step one in a long process of reconciliation.

Inflation inches up, can rate hike be far behind?

RETAIL INFLATION continues to inch upwards, rising to 5.54 per cent in September, up from 4.83 per cent in August, according to data from the National Statistics Office. With this print, inflation came in at 4.9 per cent in the second quarter, in line with the central bank's most recent projection. Much of the increase in the headline inflation number is being driven by food prices. But price pressures are being felt in non-food categories as well. And with expectations of inflation firming up in the months ahead, it increases the odds of a tighter monetary policy.

Food inflation has surged to 7.74 per cent in September, up from 6 per cent in August, driven by items such as onions, ginger, garlic and lemon. The FAO food price index has also jumped 5.8 per cent, pointing towards an uptick in international prices. Weak rainfall will weigh heavily on output. The outlook remains uncertain. According to Crisil, "concerns over the rabi crop are also mounting amid low soil-moisture levels and elevated temperatures". Early indicators for October point towards continuing price pressures. Rating agency ICRA expects food and beverage inflation to exceed 8 per cent in October. Alongside, global crude oil prices remain elevated. As on October 12, the price of the Indian crude oil basket was $125.7 per barrel. This will add to the pressures in the economy. Core inflation is also moving upwards to 4.3 per cent, which indicates the pass-through of higher costs. Higher food and cooking fuel prices have kept inflation in the restaurants and accommodation services category elevated.

Over the coming months, inflation is likely to rise further. Economists at SBI have projected CPI at 6.5 per cent in the third quarter and 5.6 per cent in the fourth quarter, while ICRA expects inflation at around 6 per cent in the third quarter. This raises the possibility of another rate hike when the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee meets next, in the first week of December. While most expect the MPC to hike rates by 25 basis points, some suggest the likelihood of a 50 basis points hike. To what extent the committee tightens over the coming months will depend on its expectations of how inflation will evolve going forward.

There are plenty more fish in the sea

IF BEING omnivorous gave human beings an advantage in the high-stakes game of evolution, what is to be made of the growing evidence that the species' palate has, in this age of plenty, narrowed rather than expanded? Consider, for example, the British palate, which according to research published this week in *People* and *Nature*, enjoys so little of what it once prized that fish and seafood consumption has effectively been reduced to a small group of fish. Gone are the plaice, herring and oysters, replaced almost entirely by the "Big Five": Cod, haddock, salmon, prawns and tuna.

This is a paradox of the modern age, where a mindboggling diversity prevails everywhere, from fashion and pastimes to media and medicines, but the dinner plate — whether one is in New Delhi or New York — looks increasingly the same. There is of course, as there always is in the tangled web of the global economy, a range of reasons, including the dominance of monocultures. Humans now get the bulk of their calories from just eight crops: Rice, wheat, maize, potatoes, barley, palm oil, soy and sugar.

Beyond its implications for health — and there are many, given the ballooning global obesity crisis — the restricted diet of the contemporary human blunts the very evolutionary edge that helped ensure *Homo sapiens*' success. The lessons are clear, especially in light of the monoculture-related food disasters of the modern age, such as the great banana epidemic that once wiped out entire plantations in South and Central America or the African swine fever that swept through Asia in 2018, leading to the culling of millions of pigs and disruption of the global food supply: There are plenty of fish in the sea, if only humans would pick a wider variety.

The other G2, and three lessons for India



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

FEW IDEAS cause greater anxiety in the Indian strategic community than a "G2". It invokes fears of a US-China partnership that might produce geopolitical duopoly over Asia. But Delhi should also reflect on another G2 — a strategic accommodation between America and Russia. India has fewer reasons to fear it, although it would bring complications of its own.

US President Donald Trump's decision last week to ease sanctions on Russian diesel puts that possibility, distant though it might be, back in focus. After a telephone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump announced Russian supplies for American and global markets. Washington authorised diesel imports until April 2027. With diesel above $6 per gallon and the question of inflation hovering over congressional elections on November 3, cheaper fuel for farmers and truckers is an urgent political priority for Trump.

The irony is plain. Just weeks ago, Trump signed legislation giving him sweeping powers to impose tariffs of up to 100 per cent on countries like India buying Russian oil. Hypocritical? Of course. But hypocrisy is part of international life. For all the grandstanding on global issues by major powers, we know that all politics is local.

For Delhi, better US-Russia relations could reduce the friction its Russian partnership creates with Washington. Many would hope that, having carved out an exemption on diesel for himself, Trump would hesitate to impose fresh oil sanctions on India. More interesting, though, is the prospect of an entente between Washington and Moscow that Trump has long championed.

Trump's desire for better relations with Russia is hardly a secret. In his first term, he pressed for Moscow's return to the G8, which suspended Russia after its annexation of Crimea in 2014. At Helsinki in 2018, he resisted calling Russia an adversary. He has repeatedly invoked the US-Soviet alliance in World War II as a sensible precedent for a new partnership.

But Trump's first term also showed how difficult it is to build an internal American consensus on engagement with Russia. Democrats devoted considerable energy to portraying Trump as "Putin's puppet" and arguing that Russian interference had helped put him in the White House. After taking the House in 2019, they pursued investigations into his Russian connections. If Democrats regain Congress, or even the House, they could use investigations, sanctions legislation and control over spending to obstruct a rapprochement with Moscow. Entrenched Republican opposition to concessions for Putin adds another constraint.

Some on America's Christian right favour engagement with Putin, whom they see as a defender of traditional Western values against liberal cultural extremism. But that support cannot overcome the wider opposition.

Despite Washington's well-known resistance to Russian engagement, Trump wasted no time in his second term pursuing better relations with Russia. Talks in Riyadh in February 2025 reopened high-level engagement. Putin's investment envoy, Kirill Dmitriev, offered opportunities in energy, Arctic development and minerals. The Alaska summit that August brought the two presidents together but failed to end the war so far.

Trump's envoys, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, met Putin in Moscow last month. Trump could meet Putin at November's APEC summit in Shenzhen, where the Kremlin has floated a meeting including China's Xi Jinping. He might also host Putin at December's G20 summit in Miami. Moscow has yet to accept that invitation. Neither encounter is assured, but the diplomatic possibilities are expanding.

Commerce is central to Trump's outreach to Russia. He wants economic cooperation to open a path to peace, rather than follow a settlement. Profitable ventures, he believes, can soften political antagonisms. American access to Russian energy and minerals could create a constituency for better relations. Trump also sees the Ukraine war as an obstacle to business and has pressed Kyiv to stop attacking Russian refineries.

Putin has reasons to bargain. Sanctions relief promises revenue, investment and technology. Engagement with Washington restores standing and could reduce dependence on China. A settlement recognising Russian territorial gains would let him claim victory at home. But translating these shared interests into concrete results has proved difficult. Ukraine will resist a bargain that rewards invasion or compromises its security. Just as Asian countries worry about a US-China compact, Europeans fear that a Trump-Putin bargain could leave them exposed to Russia's geopolitical assertions.

> Just weeks ago, Trump signed legislation giving him sweeping powers to impose tariffs of up to 100 per cent on countries like India buying Russian oil. Hypocritical? Of course. But hypocrisy is part of international life

Three lessons follow for India. First, US-Russia relations are not static. Their confrontation need not last forever. Delhi should consider the opportunities from US-Russian cooperation as carefully as the costs of hostility. A thaw could ease American pressure on India's Russian energy purchases and defence ties.

Second, Moscow does not see confrontation with America as a "sacred ideological obligation", as some in Delhi might believe. Russia values engagement with America as a great-power peer, even if it is no economic equal. In the early 1990s, Russia's eagerness to build relations with America pushed India down Moscow's priorities. Delhi should remember that experience.

Third, India's stakes in Europe have risen dramatically. Trade, technology, investment and defence give Delhi a direct interest in European stability. Even if Trump and Putin strike a deal, Russia's confrontation with Europe could continue. An American-Russian accommodation would therefore meet only part of India's needs.

Delhi should contribute wherever it can to peace in Ukraine. It should also encourage direct dialogue between Russia and Europe on ending the war in Ukraine and shaping a sustainable security order in Europe and more broadly in Eurasia.

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When the state paints dissent as disorder



FAIZAN MUSTAFA



AYAN ADITYA GIRI

EVERY DEMOCRACY, sooner or later, confronts the same difficult situation: A crowd on a public road, a police battalion, and a vehicle at the kerb. The mass detention of Opposition leaders, students and other demonstrators in the ongoing protests in Delhi seeking the resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar, has brought that scene into Indian lives now. We do not weigh the protestors' grievance, nor the necessity pleaded by the authorities. We ask the prior question: What does the Constitution say about the street and about the detention cells?

Peaceful assembly is a settled commitment of constitutional democracies, but like other rights, it is never an absolute right. The First Amendment to the US Constitution protects the right to "peaceably assemble". American courts permit reasonable regulation of time, place, and manner, yet since *Brandenburg vs Ohio*, they punish advocacy only when it is directed at, and likely to produce, imminent lawless action. Article 8 of the German Basic Law protects assembly "peacefully and without arms". In the *Brokdorf* decision (1985), Germany's federal constitutional court treated demonstrations as integral to democratic order and required that restrictions be proportionate, with outright ban as "last resort". Our Supreme Court, too, on October 9, clarified that only regulation, not prohibition, is permissible.

The common thread is simple: Protest is presumptively protected; peacefulness is the condition of that protection.

The framers of India's Constitution confronted the same tension — many of them had been detained without trial themselves. Draft Article 15A, which became Article 22, was debated in September 1949. H V Kamath and Pandit Thakur Bhargava, among others, warned that a Constitution should not authorise detention on mere executive whim. B R Ambedkar's answer was that a young state facing the violence of Partition could not be denied a power of preventive detention, but that the power should be hedged. The Assembly settled on safeguards: Grounds must be communicated, and detention beyond three months requires an advisory board's approval. Preventive detention entered the Constitution as an acknowledged exception, not as an ordinary instrument of governance. Unfortunately, the 44th Constitutional Amendment of 1978 providing additional safeguards has not yet been notified.

> The peaceful Delhi protests are at best a question of maintaining law and order. The way the police have treated MPs, lawyers and journalists despite the SC's directions can't be justified in the name of public order

The Supreme Court has since policed that exception. In *Ram Manohar Lohia vs State of Bihar* (1960), it held that even the detention on the call not to pay irrigation rates was illegal. In *Ram Manohar Lohia* (1966), the SC distinguished between "law and order", "public order" and "security of the State" as three concentric circles, so that not every disturbance of peace justifies drastic measures. Only an aggravated situation of law and order can be termed a public-order issue. The peaceful Delhi protests are at best a question of maintaining law and order. The way the police have treated MPs, lawyers and journalists despite the SC's directions cannot be justified in the name of public order.

In *Himat Lal K Shah* (1973), the Court held the right to assemble peaceably to be fundamental yet regulable, but not subject to an official's arbitrary refusal. *Ramlila Maidan Incident* (2012) affirmed that peaceful protest cannot be extinguished by arbitrary executive action. Justice D Y Chandrachud's opinion in *Arnab Goswami* (2020) reminded us that even a day's deprivation of liberty is a grave matter, while Justice H R Khanna's dissent in *ADM Jabalpur* (1976) remains the standing answer to any suggestion that liberty rests on executive grace.

In the light of this jurisprudence, three questions follow: Was the assembly peaceful? Was the apprehension of disorder specific and imminent rather than vague and general? And was the police response proportionate, with custody limited in duration, grounds communicated, and production before a magistrate within 24 hours as Article 22(1) and (2) require? Unlawful detention, even for an hour, is deprivation of one's liberty. This right cannot be restricted to just one Arnab Goswami.

A democratic state shows its strength in tolerating the dissent it hears, and a democratic citizenry in keeping that dissent peaceful. Our Constitution asks both to remember that order and liberty are not rivals but co-tenants of one republic, and that each is safest when the other is respected.

Mustafa is a constitutional law scholar, and Giri is a scholar at Chanakya National Law University, Patna. Views are personal

CSR is at Rs 40,000 crore. Now, count the impact



PURVI MEHTA

INDIA HAS quietly created one of the world's largest pools of private sector-led development finance through its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) law. What began as corporate compliance legislation in 2014, where companies crossing any of the three thresholds — Rs 500 crore in net worth, Rs 1,000 crore in turnover or Rs 5 crore in net profit — are mandated to spend 2 per cent of their net profits on CSR, has mobilised Rs 2.6 lakh crore in 10 years. Reports indicate an annual CSR spend of Rs 40,794 cr in 2024-25, contributed by 29,500 companies supporting 72,000 projects. This is perhaps the world's largest example of mandatory private-sector contribution.

India Inc. deserves credit. This is is a significant source of development capital. The success of the CSR experiment in mobilising money must now evolve to maximising impact across the country and sectors. The latest numbers show why: Maharashtra received Rs 8,631 crore, Gujarat Rs 4,549, Karnataka Rs 3,395 and Delhi Rs 2,753 crore of CSR funds last year. Together, these four states accounted for more than Rs 20,000 crore. Where companies are located can become a stronger determinant of CSR deployment than where India's development deficits are greatest.

Optimising the impact of the CSR funds will be a crucial opportunity. The issue is not that CSR money is being poorly spent; much of it is extremely valuable in supporting education, health, and livelihoods. The larger question is what the thousands of individual projects are adding up to. That requires greater attention to where the money goes and what outcomes are ultimately deliver. This points to three reforms for the next decade.

First, the accountability framework that measures the amount spent will have to be combined with stronger outcome indicators and standardisation of what they measure.

Second, 72,000 projects provide enormous innovation and effort. But fragmented activities must turn into longer-term, strategic interventions. The CSR law permits companies to collaborate. India Inc. should build on this by creating aggregations and combining funds and efforts around major themes and geographies. Ten companies investing Rs 10 crore individually on unrelated projects may each produce useful outputs without changing the underlying system. Ten companies together investing Rs 100 crore against a common results framework can potentially change a district system and have a much larger impact.

Third, CSR is likely to create greater impact when companies deploy not just money, but also their knowledge, networks and managerial capabilities. An agriculture or food company may be better placed to support farmer productivity, value chains or climate-resilient agriculture than to fund an unrelated education programme. Aligning CSR more closely with a firm's core competency can make each rupee more strategic and scalable.

The real headline is not simply that Indian companies now spend over Rs 40,000 crore annually on CSR. It is what this could achieve to move national indicators — not as a substitute for public expenditure, but as a supplement to it. It comes as a reminder that profit and purpose reinforce each other in creating value not only for the country but also for the companies standing by it.

> This is a significant source of development capital. The success of the CSR experiment in mobilising money must now evolve to maximising impact across the country and sectors

The writer is a senior technology advisor. Views are personal

40 YEARS AGO
October 14, 1986


INDIAN EXPRESS
Call for global meet on Indian Ocean
Security man had strayed from post
Summit broke on verge of agreement

Call for Indian Ocean meet

INDIA AND INDONESIA called for greater cooperation among developing countries to reinforce their demand for an equitable international economic order through a North-South dialogue. PM Rajiv Gandhi, speaking at a banquet hosted by Indonesian President Suharto, said that advanced economies were working against the concerns of the economically weak.

Security lapse at Rajghat

A SECURITY officer posted just below the creeper where a gunman hid at Rajghat on the morning of October 2 had strayed several metres from his post. This primarily led to the failure to pinpoint the source of the gunshot, and could have been fatal for the Prime Minister, police sources said.

US-USSR talks collapse

THE UNITED STATES and the Soviet Union were close to a major agreement on nuclear disarmament when the summit broke down over the US refusal to yield on its Star Wars research. The Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev told newsmen in Reykjavik at the end of the summit that the two sides were about to agree on a plan to cut strategic weapons by 50 per cent in five years, eliminate medium-range missiles in Europe and reduce the number of warheads on Soviet medium-range missiles in Asia to 100, TASS reported. But while he demanded that these cuts be linked to a ban on Star Wars, Reagan rejected it outright.

India worried over impasse

THE PRIME MINISTER, Rajiv Gandhi, expressed India's concern at the breakdown of the talks on disarmament between the United States President, Ronald Reagan and the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, in Reykjavik.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

The IDF must enable the Palestinians to harvest their olives from their own lands.

— Haaretz, Israel

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Going forward, all protests must be one, coordinate efforts and energies



DESHKAAL

BY YOGENDRA YADAV



ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

WHAT NEXT? What should we expect now in the medley of protests? Sitting in Bengali Market, I munched over this question, a good distraction from the chhole bhature that did not live up to their fame.

It was a good moment to ask this question. Monday, October 12, was the death anniversary of Rammanohar Lohia, who famously said "*zinda kaumein paanch saal tak intezar nahin karti*" (A living people do not wait for five years). Over the previous 10 days, I had been detained five times — grabbed, dragged, pushed and shoved into police vans — for peacefully protesting against the Chief Election Commissioner. This was one of those lucky days when I did not end up in a police station.

We had just returned from the march to the Supreme Court. This was not a protest against the judiciary, least of all an attempt to put pressure on the courts. If anything, it was to restore the majesty of the Supreme Court that lay tattered on the streets of Delhi this weekend. Above all, it was to assert our fundamental right to peaceful protest in the national capital that was placed under a virtual curfew and experienced a reign of terror in miniature. We had reclaimed the streets.

What should be the next move? Obviously, the movement has to be expanded both in geographical and social terms. Some new forms of action need to be devised, besides a routine of street demonstrations. Some new institutional pressure points need to be identified. While the strategy and tactics of the protest are being worked out, an understanding of the destination and route might help navigation.

Suhas Palshikar characterises the present protests as a moment of "redemocratisation", as the way of opening the multiple systemic "closures" that we have witnessed ('Crackdown on Jantar Mantar 2.0, amid other closures, calls for redemocratisation', *IE*, October 13). These "closures" are a consequence of what I have called "democracy capture" that began in 2014 — a capture of democracy by using seemingly democratic means. The key instrument was "election capture": Elections are held regularly, but the playing field is tilted progressively to insulate the regime from electoral defeat. It began with the taming of mass media and monopoly over money power, was supplemented by the capture of the Election Commission and misuse of the CBI and ED, and is finally taking the shape of permanent architectural changes by way of the SIR, delimitation and One-Nation-One-Election. The current protests are against this design to ensure a permanent majority for the BJP.

The protests are about restoration of electoral integrity. No more. No less. Although there is no official charter, three demands are shared by all the protesters. First, the resignation or impeachment of CEC Gyanesh Kumar, a symbolic act towards restoring the proper functioning and credibility of the ECI. Second, the rollback of the SIR, so as to undo the largest ever disenfranchisement in the history of democracy. Third, the repeal of the 2023 Act, which grants the regime unfettered powers to appoint anyone to the ECI and complete immunity to those appointed. The basic impulse underlying these demands is the quest for free and fair elections, at least as free and as fair as the election that brought the BJP to power in 2014. Nothing less would do.

> The movement has to be expanded in geographical and social terms. Some new forms of action need to be devised. New institutional pressure points need to be identified

At the same time, this protest is not about regime change. Many of the forces behind the protest may wish to see an exit for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, sooner rather than later. But this is not the sentiment that drives ordinary citizens to the streets. Not yet. As of now, it is about restoring a system that keeps open a fair possibility of a democratic and peaceful transfer of power. If this bare minimum demand is frustrated, and every legitimate avenue for redress remains closed, the present protest may morph into a popular upsurge for regime change. The human and systemic costs of that kind of upheaval would be terrifying. Thankfully, we are not there yet. We should continue to hope that the residual capacity of regulatory institutions and the sheer long-term self interest of the ruling party would prevent such a catastrophe. Popular mobilisation on the streets does not bypass the constitutional order. It generates countervailing pressure that can strengthen institutions against the overwhelming power exerted by the regime.

Steering the protests towards this objective would require a realignment of forces. So far, these protests are a textbook example of "spontaneous synchronisation", where orderly collective action emerges without any central command or coordination. This happens when different actors, responding to one another, gradually align their actions without any conscious design or plan. The spontaneous call by "concerned citizens" (including this writer) leading to street action on October 2 to 4, the October 10 protest originally called by the CJP and the series of actions by the INDIA coalition from October 6 to 12 were not coordinated decisions. But the outcome appears like an orchestra or a relay race where the baton keeps changing hands.

That cannot be the way forward. If the regime has decided not to yield an inch, the protesters have to find a mechanism to coordinate their efforts. The CJP, the INDIA bloc, youth organisations and civil society may not and need not come under one umbrella, but they must ensure that they do not work at cross-purposes, that their energies cannot be deflected against one another. Fortunately, Rahul Gandhi has opened a window in this respect by stating that there are no separate or parallel protests, that all protests are one. Also, the relative strength of different strands of this movement has undergone a shift this time. This makes a realignment possible. The success of this movement hinges on this. The strength of organic or self-mobilised protesters, who were the backbone of the July youth protests, is critical here. These young protesters are not wedded to any organisation and their enthusiasm could be dampened if they find conflicting signals. Instead of an organisation- or party-led movement, they would like to see a citizens' movement supported by parties and organisations.

My train of thought stopped here as the insipid "machine coffee" I was sipping got over. I resolved not to order anything except South Indian filter coffee. And not to take *chhutti* till Gyanesh Kumar gets his *chhutti* from the Election Commission.

The writer is member, Swaraj India, and national convenor, Bharat Jodo Abhiyan

The only path to lasting peace is one state of Israel-Palestine



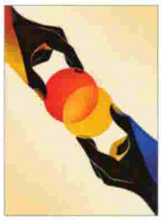
RAMESH VENKATARAMAN

EARLIER THIS month, the Green Party of England and Wales voted to declare Zionism a form of racism. The reaction was ferocious, well out of proportion for a party with only five MPs. Jewish groups condemned the motion as antisemitic. The Israeli government branded the Greens a body legitimising terrorism and banned its leader, who is himself Jewish, from entering Israel. Lost in the uproar was the truly significant wording in the resolution's text. For the first time, a mainstream Western party was calling "for the establishment of a single democratic state throughout historic Palestine." In short, a "one-state solution".

The conventional wisdom that has dictated international diplomacy, including India's, for three decades — the two-state solution — is well and truly dead. PM Benjamin Netanyahu's repeated insistence that Israeli security leaves no room for Palestinian sovereignty stated aloud what 30 years of policy had achieved. With elections imminent, Israel's political opposition has failed to present a clear mandate for Palestinian statehood. Public support for two states, low to start with, has collapsed — dropping to 17 per cent in recent Pew polling as security concerns continue to escalate three years after the October 7 Hamas attack and the devastating Israeli retaliation on Gaza.

The unworkability of a two-state solution goes beyond Israeli domestic politics. A separate Palestinian state, along the borders prior to the 1967 Six-Day War, is no longer viable. Anyone who has travelled through the West Bank knows that 30 years of expanding hilltop settlements, military outposts and dividing fences have fractured the territory into an absurd patchwork quilt of jurisdictions. You cannot build a coherent, sovereign state with a sustainable economy on a land so fragmented. Getting the 750,000-odd Israeli settlers in the occupied territories to relocate to Israel's legal borders is well nigh impossible.

Israel cannot occupy Gaza indefinitely. It may have degraded Hamas militarily, but it cannot crush the humiliation and despair that feed Palestinian militancy. Continuing down this path will only cement Israel's status as a global pariah. As the Greens' resolution proposes, the only available path to lasting peace is a single, secular, democratic state of Israel-Palestine.



Sceptics will point out that this is unrealistic: Israelis and Palestinians are too deeply divided by decades of trauma to share a single country. But every other option is even more delusional. Ask Israelis: Would you prefer an armed, hostile neighbour on your doorstep, or integration with 5.5 million Palestinians alongside the 2 million Arab citizens already living more or less peacefully in Israel, albeit as second-class citizens? Ask Palestinians: Would you prefer to cling to the illusion of having your own country, or gain equal rights in a prosperous power?

These are difficult questions and it will take time to change hearts and minds on both sides. But history demonstrates that entrenched ethnic and sectarian conflicts can transition into shared democratic governance. Democracies like Belgium have managed complex linguistic and cultural divisions within a constitutional framework that guarantees protections for different groups. Israeli Jews would need these safeguards, ideally underwritten by acceptable foreign powers, to overcome their fears over being outnumbered. Northern Ireland showed that after decades of sectarian violence, former enemies can share power under a democratic system overseen by Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Other precedents — South Africa, Bosnia, even fragile Lebanon — are far from perfect, but they prove that shared governance is possible, and vastly superior to endless war and misery.

A shared state is not an anti-Zionist anomaly; it echoes Zionism's founders, many of whom were democratic socialists rooted in liberal, humanistic values. In his 1902 utopian novel *Altneuland* ("Old New Land"), Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism, envisioned a secular state where Arab citizens held equal voting rights, sat in parliament, and benefited from economic advancement. Herzl would be appalled to see his vision hijacked by ethnonationalists like Netanyahu.

Persisting with the myth of two states only guarantees endless bloodletting. The Green Party's resolution should be seized as a catalyst to kick-start the process of building consensus around a single democratic state where Israelis and Palestinians share peace, dignity, and equal rights. India can play a critical role in this. Despite its recent tilt towards Israel, India's historically staunch support for Palestinian rights gives it sufficient credibility to take the lead in evolving a one-state solution. This might just be the bold leap of political imagination required to return India to the top table of multilateral diplomacy.

The writer is an investor

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Wrong message

CERTAIN PLACES capture our imagination and hold immense symbolic value ('Crackdown on Jantar Mantar 2.0, amid other closures, calls for redemocratisation', *IE*, October 13). Jantar Mantar is one such place. It has hosted many protests that have asserted people's power and brought about many changes. In denotifying Jantar Mantar as a protest site, the government has matched the "provocation" of the place having been used for protests by the opposition parties and the Cockroach Janta party with overreaction. The government now seems to have taken the decision based on the saying "Out of sight, out of mind".

C David Milton, Maruthancode

Police conduct

THE CREDIBILITY of police reform in India rests not on judicial pronouncements alone, but on their translation into accountable, impartial and professional policing ('Police must protect individual rights, not political interests', *IE*, October 13). The Supreme Court's 2006 *Prakash Singh* judgment laid the foundation for transformation, yet implementation gaps persist. Recent protests have brought renewed attention to police conduct during demonstrations, the proportionality of crowd-control measures and the delicate balance between maintaining public order and safeguarding civil liberties.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

THE POLICE must remain impartial, particularly when peaceful protests challenge those in power ('Police must protect individual rights, not political interests', *IE*, October 13). Clear rules for crowd control, independent inquiries into alleged misconduct and regular human-rights training can improve accountability. Police leadership should be insulated from improper political pressure, while officers must remain answerable for unlawful actions.

A D Nithish Kumar, Neelambur

What universities need to learn from IITs



SUDHIR K JAIN

IN THE 1950s and early 1960s, the IITs entered an academic landscape in which several universities already had distinguished reputations, outstanding faculty and long-established traditions. Yet over the decades, the IITs built formidable reputations while some institutions that had once been among India's best lost ground. What lessons do they hold for India today as it seeks to build universities among the world's best?

Three things, in my view, determine whether an institution can achieve and sustain excellence: Talent, resources, governance and culture. All three matter, but governance and culture determine how effectively an institution can attract, develop and use the other two. There is no upper limit to excellence: However good the talent, resources, governance or culture, there is always room for each to improve.

Universities depend on faculty, students, non-teaching staff and members of governing boards. Strong institutions are serious about whom they bring in and continually seek to raise the quality of their people in all these roles. At leading universities, there is often an implicit aspiration that every new faculty appointment should be at least as good as, and preferably better than, those already there. A mediocre appointment can affect an institution for decades. Recruiting outstanding people is only the beginning. A strong institution should enable talented people to become even better over time, expanding their capabilities and ambition rather than allowing them to stagnate.

> A strong institution should enable talented people to become even better over time, expanding their capabilities and ambition rather than allowing them to stagnate

Universities also need resources: Buildings, hostels, laboratories, libraries, scholarships and research support. These come not only from government grants or tuition fees; alumni, donors and industry relationships are important institutional assets. A strong university will probably never feel that it has enough resources, because greater ambition creates new possibilities and new needs. It must keep building resources and directing them to the right academic priorities.

This is where governance and culture become crucial. Universities need sufficient autonomy for decisions to be taken close to where information and responsibility reside. They need transparent processes, appropriate delegation and clear accountability. Culture is less visible but equally consequential. When people are respected, information is shared, participation is sought and differing views are genuinely considered, they are more likely to feel ownership of the institution. That ownership brings the ideas, energy and passion of faculty, staff and students into building the university.

The IITs benefited from substantial public investment and, compared to typical Indian universities, had a strong resource base. They attracted highly capable students and were exacting in faculty recruitment, with a strong norm that positions need not be filled if suitable candidates were not found. They also enjoyed considerable academic autonomy, with substantial freedom to shape curricula, teaching, faculty recruitment and internal academic practices. Uniformity in curricula, grading or recruitment practices across the IIT system was not the guiding principle; each institution had room to innovate and develop its own identity. This combination helped the IITs build strong institutions. But they are not permanently protected from decline. If recruitment standards weaken, governance deteriorates, culture erodes or autonomy becomes less purposeful, they too can lose ground.

The three pillars reinforce one another. Institutions with sound governance and a strong culture find it easier to attract good people. Better people strengthen teaching, research and reputation, while greater trust helps mobilise resources. Better resources make more ambitious work possible, which, in turn, attracts still better people. If India wants universities among the world's best, the answer cannot simply be more money or better ranking strategies. Talent must keep improving, resources must keep expanding, and governance and culture must keep evolving. There is no finishing line.

The writer has been vice-chancellor, Banaras Hindu University and founding director, IIT Gandhinagar

In Nepal, a majority government in search of stability



YUBARAJ GHIMIRE

TWENTY YEARS ago, Nepal's leaders, buoyed by their success after deposing King Gyanendra, declared that democracy would be a permanent feature in the country's governance. The current regime is now defining democracy rather uniquely. In six months, Prime Minister Balendra Shah showed up in parliament just four times, spoke briefly twice, and left the House once when the President was still at the joint session. He has not called on the President even once.

Shah is, in fact, doing things only slightly differently from the governments led by the Maoists, Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal (UML) in the past 20 years. They too used the legislature as a rubber stamp and scuttled Members' right to move amendments, even when the constitution-making process was on.

On September 27, the police arrested former chief justice Cholendra Shumsher Rana without a warrant. He was let off 12 hours later, after he gave the authorities a letter that his detention was at his own request. Days later, Rana's relatives and close contacts are being searched and investigated for wide-ranging charges, including an attempt to influence *subjudice* cases and subvert the government in collaboration with some ruling-party and opposition leaders.

Home Minister Sudhan Gurung is personally supervising surveillance and the investigation. Why the government chose not to inform parliament about the conspiracy remains a mystery. But in a highly polarised political climate, Shah remains a "hero" and Rana the opposite.

Gurung's warning that the misuse of information accessed through people holding certain official positions will not be condoned offers a clue about the course the case may take. While nothing much has been revealed yet, the investigation is likely to take cognisance of the growing dissent within the ruling Rastriya Swatantra Party and criticism of the government by MPs who are supporters of party leader Rabi Lamichhane. In addition, UML chief K P Sharma Oli is demanding the revival of the parliament that was dissolved on September 12 last year after he was forced to quit as PM in the face of the "Gen Z" anti-corruption protest.

> Shah is doing things only slightly differently from the governments in the past 20 years. They too used the legislature as a rubber stamp

The perceived conspiracy seems to have multiple dimensions, and, going by the actions so far, the government is trying to link them together. Naturally, Lamichhane would be as much of a suspect as Oli and Maoist leader Prachanda.

Way back in 2006, when the political parties of the day ousted the king, they also moved towards controlling the judiciary. The new government asked Supreme Court judges to take a fresh oath, which was seen as a pledge of loyalty to the new regime. A proposal put forward by the Maoists that the judiciary be answerable to parliament did not find support from other parties. But in 2013, Chief Justice Khil Raj Regmi took over as the PM, with nominees from the four major parties in the cabinet — an experiment that has not only ruined the reputation and independence of the judiciary, but also injected political ambition among judges. Sushila Karki, a retired CJ, took over as PM last year despite the constitution clearly disqualifying judges from any constitutional or political position even after retirement.

These experiments at the cost of the principle of separation of powers have brought judges and politicians together. The landslide victory in favour of a single party last year was a rare outcome in Nepal. But perhaps it is no guarantee of political stability.

The writer is the Kathmandu-based contributing editor for The Indian Express

• ECONOMY

Inflation generalisation: Why economists gauge the 'spreading' of price pressures

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, October 13

HOUSEHOLD INFLATION jumped to 5.54% in September from 4.83% in August, data released Monday showed. One phrase is now on everyone's lips: price pressures are generalising, or spreading. This is important, as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) last week admitted there is "some evidence of elevated inflation expectations and generalisation of inflation".

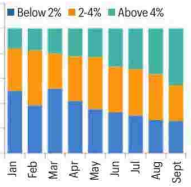
The RBI's admission marked a U-turn of sorts after it had said as recently as August that there were "little signs of generalisation of price pressures so far" — something a few economists could not digest. Economists from ICICI Securities Primary Dealership said the "insistence on waiting for generalisation of price pressures and downplaying current bout of inflation as supply shock does not hold up to scrutiny."

The latest Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation data and the RBI's concession have given rise to a consensus of sorts on price pressures spreading. CPI inflation measures the year-on-year change in the general level of retail prices of selected goods and services consumed by households. But what exactly is generalisation of inflation and how is it identified?

Inflation generalisation

Generalisation of inflation simply refers to when higher prices begin spreading across the household consumption basket in a sustained manner. This requires the price rise to move from categories most susceptible to price increases, such as food and fuel, to others, like consumer goods and services.

Sharp inflation generalisation in September



NOTE: DATA IS FOR HEADLINE CPI DIFFUSION INDEX; SOURCE: RBI

There are many ways to check if inflation is spreading across the CPI basket. Consider the simplest first: how many items are seeing above 4% inflation. Why 4%? Because the RBI's medium-term target for the inflation rate in the economy is 4%, in a band of 2-6%. In January, 65 of the 358 items in India's CPI basket clocked an inflation rate of 4% or more. By September, this number rose to 129.

Inflation, however, isn't the best measure of price momentum. As it is the year-on-year price change, it depends on what the price was in the year-ago period. For example, if prices were unchanged in September 2025 compared to the previous month, it creates an unfavourable base for inflation in September 2026. This is why policymakers want to know how prices are moving from one month to another, called price momentum. In February, 236 of the 358 items in India's CPI basket saw prices rise compared to January. By September, it rose to 319.

Diffusion indices

These methods to understand the generalisation of inflation are still rather simplistic. Economists thus have other gauges, such as diffusion indices. These map the breadth of price increase. In doing so, they account for the weight of each item in the basket. So, a good that makes up 0.01% of the CPI basket does not get the same importance as one that accounts for 1%.

These weights are those assigned to each of the 358 items, decided by the statistics ministry's Household Consumption Expenditure Survey. The current CPI basket and its item weights are based on the survey conducted from August 2023 to July 2024.

Going by the RBI's own diffusion index for the CPI, as seen in the *chart*, almost 46% of the CPI basket registered 4%-plus inflation in September, up from 37% in August. However, Nomura economists say that their India Inflation Generalisation Index is suggests that while price pressures are rising, "they are still below the long-term average". Such assessments matter because they determine how much the RBI may raise interest rates — the broader the pressures, the higher the repo rate may be. After Monday's data, the consensus is towards another 50-75 basis points of rate hikes in the next 4-6 months.

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• CLIMATE

Flash flood in Nepal again: For India, a warning

Vidheesha Kuntamalla
New Delhi, October 13

A SUDDEN surge of water, mud, boulders and debris swept through settlements along Nepal's Budhi Gandaki river in Gorkha district last week, causing damage to infrastructure.

The fresh incident has renewed concerns about sudden floods across the Himalaya, where retreating glaciers, unstable mountain slopes and large quantities of loose sediment can combine to produce destructive flows.

What caused the Gorkha flash flood?

The immediate trigger appears to have involved a sudden release of water and debris, but the precise mechanism has not been conclusively established.

Manish Mehta, a glaciologist at the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology in Uttarakhand's Dehradun, told *The Indian Express* that based on the available visuals and reports, the event appeared consistent with a possible glacial lake outburst flood or an avalanche involving ice and rock.

Why do these floods carry so much mud and rock?

Mehta explained that high-altitude Himalayan terrain contains large quantities of loose material shaped by erosion and past glacial activity. Glaciers transport and deposit sediment, while weathering and erosion continue to break down mountain slopes.

The loose material in upper mountain valleys can be mobilised by rainfall or a sudden release of water. As the surge moves down the valley, it picks up additional sediment, boulders and vegetation, turning into a dense slurry.

ROLE OF WARMING

- Climate change is altering the conditions in which Himalayan hazards develop.
- In areas where ice helps bind material together, changes in temperature and melting can make slopes more susceptible to failure.

P D Pant, director of the School of Earth and Environmental Science at Uttarakhand Open University, also highlighted the sediment content visible in footage of the flood going around on social media.

Thus, the danger is not determined by water volume alone. A flood carrying heavy rocks and dense sediment can exert enormous force on houses, bridges and roads.

What is the danger in India?

The same broad categories of hazards exist across the Indian Himalaya, including Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh.

The 2013 Kedarnath disaster involved exceptionally heavy rainfall, flooding and the mobilisation of sediment and debris.

The 2021 Chamoli disaster involved a massive rock-and-ice mass movement in the Rishiganga valley that generated a destructive downstream surge. Pant said "similar hazards could occur across the Himalayan arc, from Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh, including Uttarakhand."

How much is climate change responsible?

Climate change is altering the conditions in which Himalayan hazards develop, but it does not establish the cause of any individual flood. In areas where ice helps bind material together, changes in temperature and melting can make slopes more susceptible to failure. Pant said climate change was the biggest factor behind retreating glaciers.

Scientific research, including assessments by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, has documented glacier loss across the Hindu Kush Himalaya and other mountain regions. This supports the conclusion that warming is changing the physical environment in which mountain hazards occur.

What is the way forward?

For Uttarakhand and the other Himalayan states in India, the challenge is to identify vulnerable lakes and unstable slopes, monitor changes and ensure that information reaches downstream settlements quickly enough for people to act. Satellite observations can help map lakes, track glacier retreat and identify changes in the landscape. But satellite monitoring alone may not provide the real-time information needed to detect a rapidly rising lake or an impending failure of a natural dam. This is where ground-based sensors can help.

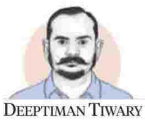
Mehta emphasised the need for early-warning systems across the Himalayan terrain. Pant similarly said sensors could, where conditions allow, provide warnings hours in advance, giving authorities time to evacuate vulnerable settlements.

FULL REPORT ON
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• LAW

Protests vs 'public order': Prevention and policing

The protest restrictions in Delhi raise questions about the right to peaceful assembly, preventive policing and the Supreme Court's proportionality test



DEEPTIMAN TIWARY



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi heading towards the Supreme Court on Monday. PRAVEEN KHANNA

THE SWEEPING restrictions imposed in Delhi amid protests demanding the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar — prohibitory orders, detentions, barricades, Metro restrictions and cancellation of trains — and the denotification of Jantar Mantar as a protest site have brought an old constitutional tension back into focus.

The Constitution guarantees citizens the right to speech and peaceful assembly. But these rights are not absolute, and the police are not required to wait for violence before acting: preventive policing is both a power and, in certain circumstances, a statutory duty.

Can the State stop a peaceful protest in absence of permission?

Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(b) guarantee freedom of speech and expression and the right to assemble peacefully and without arms. But Articles 19(2) and 19(3) permit reasonable restrictions, including in the interests of public order.

This means the right to protest does not translate into a right to assemble at any place, in any number and under any conditions.

A former Delhi Police Commissioner told *The Indian Express* that from a policing perspective, whether a gathering is peaceful is not the only question. If protesters have permission to assemble at Jantar Mantar but begin marching towards Parliament, "even if peacefully", they have breached the conditions under which the assembly was permitted, the officer said.

The Supreme Court has accepted the principle of regulation. In *Himat Lal K Shah vs Commissioner of Police* (1973), it held that the State can regulate assemblies on public streets since streets have competing public uses. But regulation cannot become an arbitrary power to prohibit assemblies altogether.

That distinction returned in *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan vs Union of India* (2018), concerning protests at Jantar Mantar. The court rejected a blanket prohibition and required authorities to devise a regulatory mechanism balancing protesters' rights against those of residents and commuters.

"If police consider a venue inappropriate because of its capacity or security concerns, an alternative should ideally be provided — for instance, Ramlila Maidan for a gathering too large for Jantar Mantar," the former Delhi police commissioner said.

Can violence at an earlier protest justify restrictions on the next one?

Delhi Police has cited events during the July 20 protests in assessing the risks surrounding the latest mobilisation.

Legally, the police can take past conduct into consideration. Preventive policing itself has statutory backing. Section 168 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), replacing Section 149 CrPC, requires police officers, to the best of their ability, to prevent cognisable offences.

But previous violence does not create an unlimited power to prohibit every subsequent gathering.

The Supreme Court has long required a close relationship between the anticipated danger and preventive action. *In Madhu Limaye vs Sub-Divisional Magistrate* (1970), while upholding the predecessor Section 144 CrPC, it stressed the urgency and gravity necessary to exercise such extraordinary power.

In *Anuradha Bhasin vs Union of India* (2020), the court said preventive orders could be passed against an apprehended danger — the State need not wait for violence to actually occur — but the danger must warrant emergency action and restrictions must satisfy proportionality. Section 144, it said, could not be used to suppress legitimate democratic expression.

The Supreme Court's intervention arising from the July protests is significant.

Discretion question

Over the weekend, the Court intervened again over restrictions surrounding the latest protests, stressing free movement and lawful policing.

•

"The problem is SC has itself not yet spelt out restrictions to Article 19 (2). The principle of proportionality is not clearly defined. As long as it remains so, the State will have discretion," a former UP DGP said.

In August, it constituted a High-Powered Enquiry Committee whose terms include examining blanket Section 163 [Power to issue order in urgent cases of nuisance or apprehended danger] orders so that they do not become a routine or pre-emptive means of foreclosing peaceful assembly.

How far can preventive policing go?

Delhi Police had sought the closure of entry and exit gates at 57 Metro stations, saying protesters could use the network to gather and move towards sensitive areas. Indian Railways also cancelled 245 trains originating from or terminating in Delhi.

Police sources have told *The Indian Express* that the railway decision followed an analysis of the July 20 mobilisation. According to that assessment, a protest that began with the pressure group Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) subsequently drew manpower from Opposition parties.

Party workers travelled to Delhi from several states over days, including by train, swelling numbers beyond what the police had anticipated.

The law allows police to anticipate such situations. The former Delhi Police Commissioner recalled earlier rail roko, chakka jam and Bharat bandh agitations where thousands were preventively detained.

On October 9, however, the Supreme Court questioned the proposed transport restrictions, cautioning against using a "hammer to kill a fly". It said measures could regulate transport where necessary but should not indiscriminately shut it down.

A former Uttar Pradesh DGP put the counter-question, "How can the State presume that thousands of ordinary people travelling in Metro trains and railway coaches will be violent? The principle of proportionality has to apply."

He added, "The question to be asked is could the perceived threat have been dealt with through targeted policing of particular stations and routes, crowd caps, selective access restrictions or interception of identified groups rather than disruption affecting large numbers of unrelated passengers?"

What about the sensitivity of Delhi's VIP zone?

Parliament, Rashtrapati Bhavan, Central Vista, the Supreme Court and other sensitive establishments lie within a relatively small area of central Delhi. Police therefore have concerns that do not necessarily arise at an ordinary protest site.

Crowd size matters too. The former Delhi Police Commissioner pointed out that a designated site has finite capacity. "Physical restraint may become necessary when agreed conditions break down," he said.

The Supreme Court's Shaheen Bagh judgment similarly made clear that the right to dissent does not permit indefinite occupation of public roads. But there is another side. Protest is not merely physical assembly; it is communication.

"Protesters naturally seek to be near the institution from which they demand action. Sending demonstrators to a remote location where they can keep sitting till eternity without being noticed can render the exercise meaningless," he said.

Who decides what is 'too far'?

Ultimately, the police make the first call. But their assessment is not beyond judicial review.

"Yes, there is another view, which the CJP articulates. Why should you need permission for a peaceful protest in a democracy. For that, there should be a new law. As long as there is a law asking police to do something, it will do it," the former Delhi police commissioner said.

That is where the courts come in. Constitutional courts can examine existing provisions and determine whether the restrictions were necessary and proportionate.

The SC has taken cognizance of this. Its committee examining the July violence has been asked to scrutinise both alleged excesses by security personnel and violence attributed to protesters, while separately examining the use of blanket Section 163 orders.

• DEFENCE

How INS Mangrol plugs gaps in anti-submarine operations

Sushant Kulkarni
Pune, October 13

IN A boost to India's coastal defence and Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) capabilities, the Indian Navy commissioned INS Mangrol at Mumbai's Naval Dockyard on Monday.

The third Mahe-class ASW Shallow-Water Craft (SWC) can track and hunt underwater threats, strengthening maritime surveillance and safeguarding critical coastal approaches — especially in the littoral zone, the strategically and economically critical shallow and near-shore maritime zone.

Latest Mahe-class ship

INS Mangrol is the third of the eight indigenously designed and built Mahe-class ASW-SWCs being built by Cochin Shipyard Ltd (CSL) at Kochi.

In total, 16 ASW-SWCs are being constructed by the CSL and the Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers (GRSE), Kolkata. With over 80% indigenous content, the programme reflects India's expanding capabilities in defence shipbuilding, the Ministry of Defence has said.

INS Mangrol is named after the prominent fishing harbour of Mangrol in Gujarat's Junagadh, reflecting the region's rich maritime heritage.



INS Mangrol at the Naval Dockyard in Mumbai on Monday. PTI

Features of the Mahe class

The Mahe-class vessels adhere to the classification standards of Det Norske Veritas (DNV), an internationally recognised body that certifies ships against rigorous technical and safety requirements.

They are the Indian Navy's largest warships to use a diesel engine-waterjet propulsion system, combining improved manoeuvrability with reduced underwater noise. While their primary role is anti-submarine warfare in coastal waters, the vessels are also designed for underwater surveillance, search and rescue (SAR), Low Intensity Maritime Operations (LIMO) and mine-laying.

Crucial for India

- The fleet of anti-submarine warfare Shallow-Water Craft addresses a critical capability gap by tracking and engaging submarines.

CSL has stated that each vessel is 78 metres long, has a beam, or maximum width, of 11.36 metres, and a displacement ranging from 896 to 1,100 tonnes. The ships are equipped to operate indigenously developed sonar systems that use sound waves to detect underwater objects.

Their advanced sensors, weapons and communication suites enable the detection, tracking and engagement of underwater threats. The class also features sophisticated systems for sustained operations in shallow waters. Its armament includes torpedoes, multifunctional anti-submarine rockets.

Managing sub-surface threats

Before the ASW-SWC programme, the Indian Navy relied on four Abhay-class corvettes (faster and smaller ships) for coastal patrol and ASW.

After decades of service, they were decommissioned between 2017 and 2025. To replace them and bolster coastal defence, the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) approved the procurement of 16 ASW-SWCs in December 2013 for Rs 13,000 crore.

Contracts were subsequently awarded to CSL and GRSE to build eight vessels each. With a coastline stretching approximately 11,000 km, 12 major ports, 184 minor ports and 1,197 islands, India requires specialised platforms for underwater threats.

The 16 vessels are divided into two classes. GRSE is building the Arnala-class, comprising INS Arnala, Androth, Anjadip, Amini, Abhay, Agray, Ajay and Akshay. CSL is constructing the Mahe-class, comprising INS Mahe, Malvan, Mangrol, Malpe, Mulki, Magdala and Machilipatnam. The fleet will likely be inducted over the next three years.

It addresses a critical capability gap by tracking and engaging submarines, particularly stealthy diesel-electric types close to shore. Their shallow draught, advanced sonar systems and high manoeuvrability make them well-suited to safeguard harbour approaches, shipping lanes, offshore energy installations and key naval bases.

The Navy will thus gain a dedicated force for coastal anti-submarine operations, freeing larger warships to focus on missions in deeper waters. The fleet will also complicate covert underwater approaches by adversaries, strengthening India's maritime security posture in the Indian Ocean Region. Working alongside coastal radar networks, underwater sensors and maritime patrol aircraft, the vessels will contribute to a layered, largely indigenous ASW capability.

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{ OUR TAKE }

Practical issues in allowing crackers

If the State cannot check before sale whether a cracker is green, misnomer notwithstanding, it should not be sold

The Supreme Court wants a "pragmatic and practical" way to regulate firecrackers. On Monday, a bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant said it would respect religious sentiments and warned that people would see a restrictive order as coercion. It then tied the Delhi-NCR case to the national one before Justice MM Sundresh, whose bench cleared "next-generation" *laris* (string fireworks) across the country on September 30, and both will be heard on October 15.

The most practical words in the courtroom came from the *amicus curiae*, senior advocate Aparajita Singh. "It is nice to say that crackers should be burst for (only) two hours. Cops cannot be there on every street," she told the bench, and asked that the Commission for Air Quality Management report on the matter.

Last year bears her out. In October 2025, the court allowed green crackers in Delhi-NCR for three days, within fixed hours. Conventional firecrackers were sold openly beside boxes stamped "green" with no certification behind them, licensed makers sold the QR codes meant to vouch for genuine products, and Delhi had no laboratory to test any of it. The Capital went on to record its worst Diwali pollution peak since 2021, despite weather conditions that would normally reduce pollution.

Workable enforcement has to start where a firecracker can still be caught. Before it reaches a street, a firecracker passes through a factory, a wholesaler's godown and a licensed shop, and at each of these points, the State can take samples, seal stock and cancel licences. Once it is in a household's hands, enforcement depends on a beat constable standing on the right street, which, as the *amicus* pointed out, is impossible.

To be sure, the supply chain leaked last year too, with QR codes resold and firecrackers coming in from outside the region. Fixing it requires testing laboratories, which Delhi lacked, and inspections that actually take place. The court should demand that before it permits a single additional firecracker, not resort to fuzzily warm statements about religious sentiments. CAQM's report should begin with what the State can enforce: how many samples it can test before Diwali, how many shops it can inspect, and what it will do with the fakes it finds. A regime that leaves the policing to millions of households has not kept Delhi's air breathable before, and there is no reason to expect it will now.

If the State cannot check before sale whether a cracker is green, however much of a misnomer that is, it should not be sold.

Of protest sites and power corridors

When Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II built the Jantar Mantar in 1724, little did he imagine that his astronomical observatory would one day be synonymous with dissent in the world's largest democracy. Since 1993, the lane behind the site has housed thousands of ordinary Indians with extraordinary dreams — women fighting for a more equal world, victims demanding justice, LGBTQIA+ communities dreaming of dignity, youth hoping for a future free of corruption and students angry at the callous handling of their careers.

The Centre's decision to denotify Jantar Mantar as a designated protest site has called time on that legacy. The intentions behind the October 11 order — which also designates three new spots, all requiring tens of thousands of rupees to pre-book and two of which are on the fringes of the city — are clear. The new sites are sprawling, some host various commercial activities, and they are far from the nerve centre of the power corridor — no doubt an important consideration for the authorities who have privileged maintaining order over upholding the right to protest. Clearly, the administration believes protests to be an irritant and reducing their visibility and access is a way to smother their reach. There is no doubt that protest sites in the heart of a city hold some risks of congestion and law and order. Yet, major world capitals designate sites near their seats of power because free expressions of dissent provide moral legitimacy to power in a democracy. The unfortunate impulse to take this away — which is responsible for shifting protesters out of the Boat Club, then India Gate and now finally Jantar Mantar — pervades every ideological spectrum and is decades old. It refuses to recognise that the proximity of Jantar Mantar to Parliament is a feature of a democracy, not a flaw.

Preparing for a super, monster, Godzilla El Niño

The aim is to act on evidence that already exists, before the price index or the next dry well spells out the damage

We are lost for names and adjectives, as an exceptionally strong El Niño evolves in the Pacific Ocean.

The Pacific Ocean usually goes through a cycle of warm and cool phases every few years. An El Niño is its warm phase and a La Niña is its cool phase. When a large part of the ocean warms, it changes where clouds form and rain falls. The changes reach far beyond the Pacific, altering the chances of drought or heavy rain in different parts of the world. In India, El Niño often weakens the summer monsoon.

So, what is special about this year? Many earlier El Niños peaked with central Pacific waters about 1°C warmer than usual. Several in recent decades have exceeded 2°C. The current El Niño, however, has already exceeded earlier observed peaks. Forecasts indicate that the central Pacific could be nearly 4°C warmer than usual by November or December, when El Niño usually peaks.

And why does this matter now? Human-caused global warming has heated up our oceans, which absorb over 90% of the excess heat trapped by greenhouse gases. El Niño releases some of that extra ocean heat into the atmosphere, and the effect often lasts for months after the event peaks. Meteorological agencies predict that 2027 will be the warmest year on record, as a result of unabated global warming and an exceptionally strong El Niño. This means that the coming seasons may unfold in a world unlike any in the past several thousand years.

The southwest monsoon closed with a 13% rainfall deficit. Punjab, Bihar, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and the northeastern states recorded stark rainfall deficits. Meanwhile, Odisha received 30% more than usual. Bihar and Assam experienced severe floods in a monsoon that remains markedly deficient overall.



Roxy Mathew Koll



Mohammad Rafiuddin

The effects could creep into coming seasons through crops, water, heat, food prices, forests, and seas. In parts of Maharashtra, soybean farmers have already had to contend with long dry spells. A late shower cannot save a crop that lost moisture at a critical stage, and rain at harvest can cause fresh damage. The winter (*rabi*) crops that follow, including wheat, chickpea, and mustard, will depend on the moisture left in the ground and the water available for irrigation.

The economic costs begin before a harvest is counted. Less fodder raises the cost of keeping livestock. More pumping for water means more spending on electricity or diesel. A smaller harvest reduces farm income and spending in local shops, while shortages of particular foods can raise prices in towns and cities. A household may face dearer pulses or vegetables even when the national foodgrain total looks reassuring.

In August, the Reserve Bank of India flagged El Niño and uneven rainfall as risks to agriculture and inflation. It projected consumer inflation at 5% for 2026-27 and pointed to grain stocks and timely supply management as buffers. In the El Niño drought of 2009, the monsoon was 22% below normal. Foodgrain production fell by 17 million tonnes and wholesale food inflation reached 20% in December 2009. The drought was not the only cause, as bottlenecks in the supply of essential commodities also mattered.

India in 2026 has more ways to respond than it did in 2009. Irrigation covers about 56% of the gross cropped area. Grain stocks, food security law, crop insurance, farm credit and better forecasts give governments more options. Decisions about water, crops and food supply can address shortages before they appear in an inflation reading. These tools need to reach farmers and districts whose losses do not show up in national totals.

October-December brings the northeast monsoon, the main rainy season for Tamil Nadu and parts of the southeast coast. El Niño can bring more rain there, sometimes in intense spells. A state dealing with water shortage after the summer monsoon may also need to prepare for floods.



The effects of El Niño could creep into coming seasons through crops, water, heat, food prices, forests, and seas. AP

In the north, the coming winter brings a different risk. A CEEW analysis found slightly weaker winds over Delhi during El Niño than La Niña winters, which can make pollution harder to disperse. If *kharif* harvesting is delayed, the time before *rabi* sowing becomes even tighter, adding pressure to burn crop residue. Farmers need timely help to manage residue, while cities must cut local emissions.

The water that remains after winter will matter in the summer heat. If soils, reservoirs and aquifers enter the pre-monsoon months with less water, heat will place additional demands on people, crops and electricity. Health departments can prepare clinics for heat illness and identify older people and patients with heart or kidney disease who may need help early. Cities can provide drinking water and public cooling spaces, and keep electricity reliable during the hottest spells.

The Indian Ocean can remain unusually warm after the Pacific El Niño begins to fade, influencing weather into the following year. Marine heatwaves may put coral reefs around Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands under stress. Changes in the sea can affect where fish are found and how far boats must go to catch them.

In September, we were among 188 researchers who called on India's ecologists to follow this El Niño through forests, grasslands, rivers, wetlands and reefs. The point is not only to observe what changes, but also to protect what is already under strain. Preparation for fires in dry forests, care for freshwater habitats and rapid checks on reefs are practical tasks for the coming months. A forecast can be useful to ecosystems as well as farms, if the work begins before the damage is obvious.

Before winter sowing, districts can put actual reservoir storage, groundwater conditions, crop stages and likely drinking-water needs on one public map. Crop-loss assessments, credit and insurance support can reach farmers before they take on debt for another season. The aim is to act on evidence that already exists, before the price index or the next dry well spells out the damage.

Roxy Mathew Koll is a climate scientist at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, lead author of recent IPCC reports, and scientific advisor to the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW). Mohammad Rafiuddin is programme lead at CEEW.
The views expressed are personal

Moving governance from welfare to empowerment

"The land north of the ocean and south of the snowy mountains is called Bhārata, where the descendants of Bharata dwell."
— *Vishnu Purana*

In February 2016, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi touched the feet of a woman more than a hundred years old. Kunwar Bai Yadav of Kotabharri village, in Chhattisgarh's Dhamtari district, owned about two dozen goats — the savings of a long life. She sold seven of them to build a toilet at home. Her example helped her village end open defecation.

For any household in India, four things decide whether life is secure: the kitchen, the toilet, the doctor's bill, and the means to earn. For generations, each was a source of drudgery or dread for poor households. In the Andamans, A Venkatalakshmi cooked on a wood-fired *chulha* until a gas connection under Ujjwala freed her from harmful smoke.

In Meghalaya, Pooja Thapa paid nothing for kidney-stone surgery under Ayushman Bharat. In Manali, a Mudra loan of ₹2.5 lakh enabled a vegetable-seller to open a ration shop of her own. All these women lacked access, not aspiration. For decades, the poor were handed relief without choice or voice.



Jyotiraditya Scindia

Our nation-builders never accepted this development model. Mahatma Gandhi wanted an India "in which the poorest shall have an effective voice". Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya put forward the idea of *antyodaya*, the rise of the last person. PM Modi has turned this philosophy into a method of governance. Its focus is the poor, women, the young, and farmers. Its standard is saturation for every eligible household. Its instrument is direct delivery, so that what the State sends is what the citizen receives. In 1985, the then PM admitted that only about 15 paise of every rupee meant for the poor reached them. Today, through Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and the mobile phone, nearly ₹50 lakh crore has gone straight to beneficiaries' accounts. The scale has no parallel in any democracy.

The governance focus has changed from welfare to empowerment. Each scheme removes one barrier. Together, they form a ladder: from security to capability, opportunity, self-reliance and, finally, to participation. Ujjwala began in the kitchen and ended up changing the household. More than 105 million poor women have received deposit-free LPG connections. Swachh Bharat restored dignity. Rural India became defecation free by 2019. Nearly 120 million household toilets have now been built, and with the provision of *izzat ghars*, daughters need no longer wait for nightfall.

Under Ayushman Bharat, 120 million hospital admissions have availed of the scheme's cashless cover of up to ₹5 lakh a year per family, bringing down out-of-pocket health spending from 64% in 2013-14 to about 43% in 2022-23. MUDRA, through its silent revolution, opened the doors of the bank. It provides funds to all eligible, who were once deemed un-bankable.

More than 590 million collateral-free loans have been sanctioned; this credit comes through India's own Mudra Card, a RuPay card, which ensures that the data of all transactions remains within India. With free accident insurance of up to ₹2 lakh and no merchant fee, the indigenous RuPay payment card has taken a significant leap from local to global — empowering India's last mile to be accepted in over 180+ countries worldwide.

Beneath all this lies an economic transformation of a scale India had never seen. In rupee terms, the economy has nearly tripled since 2013-14, to ₹331 lakh crore, powered by a massive expansion in road networks to take farmers' produce to distant markets, 223,000 startups that have created over 2.3 million jobs, and women's participation in the workforce almost doubling in six years, among other factors. More than 30 million rural women have become Lakhpati Didis through self-help groups.

A bank account for every home, money that moves without middlemen, and a ration card that works for a migrant worker in any state are what Nobel-winning economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson call "inclusive institutions" that are the bedrock of prosperous nations.

When citizens see that the nation works for them, their sense of belonging deepens, and that belonging becomes the foundation for the next round of reform.

Swachh Bharat turned that belonging into a public movement — Jan Bhagidari, a governance model in which citizens are active producers of economic and political capital.

This is at the heart of the PM's vision of Viksit Bharat: Inclusive and Collective. "Resolve for a Viksit Bharat will be fulfilled only when development reaches the last person," he says, emphasising that Viksit Bharat will be realised through *sabka prayas* (with the contribution, efforts, and participation of 140 crore people of our nation). This is a nation whose progress will be written by many hands.

Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and China achieved unprecedented change only when each gave its last citizen something to own, something to learn, or something to decide. "This is the period in the history of India," the PM has said, "when the country is going to take a quantum leap." That leap must be made with the consent of the governed, which is why the goal is not only a Viksit Bharat, but a Sashakt Bharat.

Former president APJ Abdul Kalam asked Indians to dream, because dreams become thoughts and thoughts become action. This tenet has been lived by PM Modi in its truest sense. There are, as Robert Frost wrote, "miles to go before I sleep," and the journey will be complete only when every citizen has some ownership in it. Kunwar Bai Yadav passed away in 2018, at the age of 106. With seven goats, she brought dignity to her family, and her example moved a whole village.

Schemes give citizens like her the tools to build the nation. That is nation-building in the true sense. That is the Bharat we are building together: not only *viksit* but also *sashakt*.

Jyotiraditya Scindia is Union minister of communications and minister of development of north eastern region.
The views expressed are personal

{ ELINA VALTONEN } MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, FINLAND

It is not right that Russians can travel to Europe to enjoy the freedoms here while Russia bombs the Ukrainians

Calling for a EU ban on Russian tourist visas



HT

New conflict in Ethiopia can become a global problem

As conflict returns to Ethiopia after a fragile peace of four years — a devastating civil war started in 2020 and ended only in 2022 after the Pretoria Agreement was signed in November 2022 — and threatens to widen, it is important to remember what is at stake here. One, Ethiopia is part of the Horn of Africa; its proximity to the Red Sea — one of the most important corridors for global maritime trade — means a wider conflict here can potentially disrupt global commerce further even as the Strait of Hormuz stalemate continues. And two, given the nature of the conflicts in the broader region, including parts of West Asia, the threat of deepening radicalisation can't be completely eliminated.

Ethiopia is currently witnessing fighting in its Tigray province that borders Eritrea, renewed tensions in Amhara, and the formation of an extraordinary alliance of armed groups opposed to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government. What makes the situation particularly dangerous is that the old battle lines have shifted, and regional alignments around Ethiopia have been redrawn.



Gurjit Singh

The Pretoria Agreement, signed under the African Union (AU)'s auspices, provided a framework for cease-fire after the two-year civil war, but did not settle fundamental questions such as the status of Western Tigray, displacement rooted in the war, and the mistrust between the federal government and the Tigrayan leadership. In May 2026, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) reasserted political authority and control in the region, while Addis Ababa accused it of violating the peace agreement.

A striking feature of the current crisis is the shift in Ethiopia's internal alliances. During the earlier war, the federal forces fought alongside Amhara militias against the TPLF. After the war, Abiy's attempt to dismantle regional special forces and strengthen federal authority alienated sections of the Amharas, fanning a separate insurgency in the province. Meanwhile, the Oromo Liberation Army has continued its armed struggle in Oromia.

Now, seven armed groups, including the TPLF and the Amhara Fano National Movement, have announced the Ethiopian Peoples' Forces Alliance for Survival, seeking to remove Abiy's government. The coalition includes groups from Oromia, Afar and Benishangul-Gumuz. Forces that fought each other during the last civil war are now allied. At its heart is the unresolved tension between Ethiopia's federal structure, based substantially on ethnic and regional identities, and Abiy's effort to create a stronger, centralised national order.

The regional dimension further complicates the situation. Eritrea, which fought alongside Abiy against the TPLF in the earlier war, is now at odds with Addis Ababa. The relationship deteriorated after Eritrea was excluded from the Pretoria settlement and as Abiy increasingly asserted Ethiopia's interest in obtaining access to the Red Sea. Asmara views Ethiopia's sea-access ambitions with suspicion. Ethiopia, on the other hand, has accused Eritrea of supporting armed groups, including Fano. The accusations demonstrate how Ethiopia's internal conflict is becoming entangled with the strategic contest over the Red Sea.

In the larger Red Sea region, Egypt has another set of calculations. Its principal strategic concern remains the Nile and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The dam's inauguration has not resolved the dispute between Addis Ababa and Cairo over water management and downstream security. So, Egypt has cultivated closer relations with Ethiopia's regional rivals. Now at the Alamein consultations, Egypt led Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia in aligning on curbing Ethiopian ambitions on several counts.

Sudan, similarly, adds another layer of instability. Its civil war has provided space for arms networks, refugees, and armed actors to move across the Ethiopia-Sudan border: the conflict in the two countries could increasingly interact rather than remain separate.

Gulf States' rivalry may also play a role. The UAE rivalry with Saudi Arabia prompted Abu Dhabi to build a relationship with Addis Ababa. At the same time, it has strategic and commercial interests across the Red Sea and the Horn, as well as in Sudan and Somaliland. Gulf powers have their own interests, and their relationships often cut across African rivalries.

Where, then, do African institutions fit in? The AU has called for immediate restraint and direct talks. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has called for immediate return to the Pretoria framework, while urging neighbouring States not to contribute to escalation. The problem is regional organisations can mediate only when their members have sufficient political convergence; the Horn today is characterised by precisely the opposite.

Ethiopia now needs a political settlement that addresses the federal question, disputed territories, regional security forces, displaced populations and the relationship between the centre and Ethiopia's constituent regions. At the same time, the country's neighbours must resist turning Ethiopian divisions into another arena for regional competition.

Gurjit Singh is an author and a former Indian ambassador to the African Union.
The views expressed are personal

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Global growth resilience

Headline numbers mask vulnerabilities

The October edition of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF's) World Economic Outlook (WEO), released on Tuesday, underscores the broad resilience of the global economy. Despite several disruptions over the past few years, economic growth has broadly held. India has exhibited strong growth performance. According to the IMF's latest assessment, the global economy is expected to grow at 3.1 per cent in 2026, 10 basis points higher than the July update. Growth is expected to increase to 3.4 per cent in 2027. The IMF has increased India's growth projection for the current year to 7 per cent, as against its July estimate of 6.4 per cent. Growth in the next financial year too is expected to be 7 per cent, 30 basis points higher than the IMF's July projection. The upward revision, among other things, is based on resilient domestic demand.

As the WEO explains, two sets of factors have helped the global economy withstand the latest price shocks in energy and commodities. The first is the rerouting of energy supplies, which has meant higher energy production in other countries. Inventory drawdown in many countries also helped. Further, substitution through other sources such as renewables has helped reduce the impact. The second factor is sustained investment in artificial intelligence (AI) and related areas, which has given a significant boost to global economic activities and trade. However, it is worth noting that these factors have limits. If energy supplies from West Asia are not restored quickly, falling inventories could soon get reflected in prices and availability. Further, the AI boom and the lofty valuations of related companies are already raising concerns. If these companies fail to meet expectations, there could be severe disruption in financial markets.

Besides, as the IMF has highlighted, growth is concentrating in a select few countries. Notably, only 32 economies now account for 95 per cent of global growth. This level of growth was spread among 54 economies as recently as April. The percentage of countries with downgraded growth projections has also increased. Thus, growth is being reallocated across countries, depending on their exposure to AI and their ability to deal with war-related supply shocks. The concentration of growth in a few countries, largely driven by an investment boom in a single sector, could pose significant risks to global growth and macroeconomic stability. It is also important to keep in mind that this is happening against the backdrop of elevated public debt, particularly in advanced economies, which is, in part, pushing up interest rates. Tight global financial conditions, owing to large borrowing requirements of governments in advanced economies and the substantial investment needs of AI companies, could affect capital flows to small and emerging-market economies, impacting their growth prospects. It could also increase risks to financial stability.

What does all this mean for India? It is expected to grow at a healthy pace, which the IMF's projections and revisions have acknowledged. However, it must be noted that India is significantly exposed to disruption in energy supplies and is not a significant beneficiary of the AI boom. In fact, the AI boom elsewhere is partly affecting capital flows, which is impacting both its stock and currency markets. India raised a substantial sum of foreign currency, mainly through non-resident bank deposits, to bolster its reserves to deal with pressures on the balance of payments. However, as recent central-bank intervention in the foreign-currency derivatives market suggests, it has not fundamentally changed the dynamics. Thus, sustaining growth and maintaining macroeconomic stability will require considerable policy agility.

Human rights restored

Navi Pillay is a deserving Nobel Peace Prize winner

In an ideologically fractured world, the award of the Nobel Peace Prize often attracts controversy. Last year, for instance, the award to a Venezuelan Opposition leader, the right-wing Maria Corina Machado, met with substantial reservations from global liberal establishments. The reservations were confirmed when she gave her medal to United States (US) President Donald Trump after he had invaded her country and captured its President. Mr Trump, of course, thinks he was due to receive the "Noble Prize", as he termed it, for "stopping eight wars" — though his machinations in West Asia have sent the region and the global economy into turmoil for the foreseeable future. But, barring Mr Trump and the Israeli ruling establishment, few people would quibble with this year's winner, South Africa's Navanethem "Navi" Pillay, 85, human rights jurist extraordinaire.

Ms Pillay heard she had got the award when the citation was read in Norway, and her response reveals a wry sense of humour. At the Nuremberg Palace of Justice — where the first Holocaust trials were held — she initially thought it was a joke and then told those who had gathered to applaud her that she might share the prize with Mr Trump if they clapped a little harder. But the gravity of the issue for which Ms Pillay won the award is not in doubt. It comes at a time when the world is facing more war and conflict than it has seen in a long time and when the bastion of democratic freedom, the US, is committing human rights violations on its own soil. Ms Pillay's sterling contribution to shaping the multidimensional facets of human rights law deserves the highest recognition. Most recently (2021-25), she chaired the United Nations (UN) independent enquiry commission on Occupied Palestinian Territory, which accused Israel of committing genocide in Gaza. This finding contradicted entrenched Western assumptions (and tacit approval) of Israel's actions and marked the first official recognition of Israel's disproportionate response, especially in targeting Palestinian children, following the Hamas massacre of October 7, 2023.

Ms Pillay, granddaughter of Indian indentured labourers, is the fifth South African to win the Nobel Peace Prize. She shares the honours with Albert Luthuli, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and F W de Klerk. Apartheid was the leitmotif on which she built her work as a human rights champion. She was the only non-white woman to open her own law practice in Natal province, principally because no law firm wanted its white employees to take instructions from a woman of colour. As a lawyer, she defended several apartheid detainees, including Nelson Mandela, and exposed the use of torture against them. Ms Pillay later graduated from Harvard Law School and became a high court judge after the African National Congress came to power. Her work in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda brought women's rights front and centre of human rights debate for the first time by recognising that rape and sexual assault could constitute acts of genocide. Her subsequent work on gender justice at the International Criminal Court — which, ironically, India does not recognise — and focus on caste discrimination as UN Human Rights Commissioner (2008-14) added new dimensions to the issue. By recognising Ms Pillay, who serves as an ad hoc judge at the International Court of Justice in the genocide case against Myanmar over its treatment of the Rohingyas, the Nobel committee has delivered a much-needed restorative to the primacy of human rights in the global discourse.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



The inadequacy of climate action

With the 1.5°C threshold expected to be breached within years, India must pay greater attention to adaptation and resilience



NITIN DESAI

Sustainable development is defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The threat of climate change, however, requires something more than this. The issue is not just avoiding things today that will worsen climate in the present or the future. Our actions now have to take into account the established probability of climate worsening for humans in the near future. That is why the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was negotiated and ratified a little over three decades ago. Its preamble stated that "responses to climate change should be coordinated with social and economic development in an integrated manner with a view to avoiding adverse impacts on the latter".

This has not happened. The integration of climate action with development has contributed to the growth of renewable energy, though even here, the boom may be attributable more to improved commercial prospects resulting from lower capital costs. The reality is that policymaking for climate action is separated from development policy formulation.

In practice, development needs and profit potentials drive both present and future actions. That is why the performance of the member states of the UNFCCC on climate mitigation are abysmal. An independent organisation, Climate Action Tracker, evaluates the performance of major countries towards the goal of 1.5°C set in the Paris Agreement in 2015. In its assessment, the actions of practically all the major states are insufficient.

The United States, Russia, the Gulf States and much of Southeast Asia are rated as "critically insufficient"; India, China, Egypt, Brazil, Argentina, Canada and Mexico are rated as "highly insufficient"; most of Europe, Australia and South Africa are rated as "insufficient". If all countries followed the level of climate action associated with each category, the resulting global temperature rise would be 4°C for the "critically insufficient" category, be 3-4°C for the "highly insufficient", and be 2-3°C for the "insufficient" category. The issue is not whether the countries will reach what they have promised for 2030. India will and may even exceed the target. The real issue is that the stated targets for 2030 are inadequate for reaching the global limit of 1.5°C. The situation now has worsened with the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement and from the UNFCCC, which will take effect in January 2027. Their malign impact will be seen in this year's meeting of the UNFCCC in Antalya, Türkiye.

Quite frankly we must accept that because of their limited promises, the world will not succeed in limiting future temperature increases to the goals set in the Paris Agreement. On September 2, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) published a report recognising for the first time that the 1.5°C threshold will be breached within a matter of years, not decades. Climate policy must now focus as much on building up resilience to higher temperatures and adaptation as on climate change mitigation. This is part of the agenda for the UNFCCC. But the actual design and implementation of resilience and adaptation will differ greatly depending on local conditions. This is what India should now pay greater attention to in its climate policy. Are we doing enough on adaptation and resilience? An index measuring a country's exposure, sensitivity and capacity to adapt to the negative effects of climate change across six sectors — food, water, health, ecosystem services, human habitat, and infrastructure — places India at level 28 out of 48 in Asia-Pacific. Its neighbours, other than Sri Lanka, are below this level and even more vulnerable to climate change risks.

In India, we need to raise the importance of a climate change management strategy that connects it more directly with the main framework of development policy. Looking at the long-term trend of development requires proper integration of climate change management with traditional development actions, such as agricultural growth targets and the adaptation of agriculture to rising temperatures, which may go up to 50°C in summer, their impact on health, and the energy demand they will generate for cooling. We must recognise that cooperation between neighbouring countries on interlinked climate-related impacts, such as those affecting shared rivers, may be necessary and useful. The most important planning need is to raise the importance of climate change management by setting up a National Climate Management Body involving the Centre, states, and the municipalities of very large cities to review and evaluate the adequacy of adaptation and mitigation efforts and secure agreement on future plans for climate management. A major reason for this is that the formulation and implementation of adaptation actions and building up resilience have to be at the local level and involve sectors that are well within state control and management.

Since climate action generally aims at future challenges, we must design climate management programmes that deliver more immediate benefits. For example, forest restoration and strengthening can increase carbon sequestration while also improving water supply; renewable energy can improve the availability of local power supplies; and electric vehicles can reduce running costs. Such co-benefits will make long-term actions more acceptable.

While adaptation and resilience management can be led by state governments and local authorities, the continuing drive for climate change mitigation must remain a central responsibility. So far, much of the focus has been on the promotion of renewable energy. But there are now programmes involving compliance standards and carbon pricing. These include the Carbon Credit Trading Scheme, which imposes emission-intensity targets on several energy-intensive industries and allows trading to address surpluses and deficits, and the Environment Audit Rules, 2025, which provide for environmental audits of industries with a potentially adverse impact on climate change, along with a host of other activities. Placing these under the oversight of the National Climate Management Body suggested above can strengthen pressure for compliance. One must also recognise that carbon capture, utilisation and storage (CCUS) may be a necessity for major carbon-emitting industries such as steel and cement. At present, India's share of global CCUS activity is negligible, and the Union government must vigorously pursue the five-year provision of ₹20,000 crore made in the 2026-27 Budget.

The Centre can play a major role in helping states, not just by providing sufficient finance for their broad-based climate action, but also by using satellite imagery and artificial intelligence to improve information on climate impacts and actions, link climate action with development activities, and improve the effectiveness of climate-related policies and programmes.

I have focused on national action. But we must recognise our continuing need for more effective global cooperation on climate change mitigation and on the provision of technology and finance required for both mitigation and adaptation. Right now, the prospects for effective global cooperation appear bleak. But as the impacts of climate change become more evident — as seen recently in the high temperatures experienced in the northern states — global cooperation may become more effective. Hopefully, we will see some early signs of this at next month's UNFCCC meeting.

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The medical poverty trap is real

The latest findings from the National Sample Survey's 80th Round, covering January-December 2025, raise uncomfortable questions about the accessibility and affordability of medical services in India. The survey highlights two important trends: A substantial rise in reported morbidity across the country and continued reliance on private health care providers. More importantly, treatment at private facilities imposes a significantly higher financial burden on patients than treatment at public hospitals.

Rising morbidity: The proportion of people reporting an ailment during the preceding 15 days increased considerably in the 80th Round compared with the 75th Round (July 2017-June 2018). In rural India, it nearly doubled, rising from 6.8 per cent to 12.2 per cent, while in urban India, it increased from 9.1 per cent to 14.9 per cent. At first glance, this increase might appear entirely negative. However, higher reported morbidity does not necessarily mean that Indians have suddenly become less healthy. It could also reflect an ageing population and greater health awareness, allowing illnesses to be reported more frequently.



VACHASPATI SHUKLA & SANTOSH KUMAR DASH

Private providers dominate: According to the latest NSS estimates, 65.4 per cent of treated non-hospitalised ailments in rural India were managed by private providers. In urban India, the figure was 74.8 per cent. The state-level differences are particularly noteworthy. In rural Odisha, 60.9 per cent of treated ailments were handled by government-run facilities. Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh also recorded public health care utilisation above 50 per cent. By contrast, public health care accounted for only 15.8 per cent of treated ailments in rural Punjab and less than one-fourth in several other states. This tells us that public health care utilisation is not simply a function of income or geography. It is not simply a matter of consumer preference — it is a verdict on availability, waiting times, perceived quality and the uneven reach of public facilities. This has major implications for household finances, as treatment in private hospitals requires substantially higher out-of-pocket expenditure.

Unequal health care burden: For a treated non-hospitalised ailment, the average out-of-pocket expenditure in India was ₹304 in rural government facilities and ₹257 in urban government facilities. The corresponding expenditure at private hospitals was ₹1,541 and ₹1,343. These gaps also vary widely across states. In urban areas, treatment at a government hospital cost ₹47 in Tamil Nadu but ₹830 in Bihar; at a private hospital, it ranged from ₹834 in Kerala to ₹3,509 in Bihar. The cost of falling ill depends not only on the provider but on the state — a second layer of inequality.

High cost of hospitalisation: In-patient treatment is far more punishing. The average out-of-pocket expenditure per hospitalisation, excluding childbirth, was ₹31,484 in rural India and ₹38,688 in urban India. But the average expenditure in private hospitals was ₹47,710 in rural areas and ₹54,999 in urban areas, compared with only ₹6,905 and ₹6,032, respectively, in government hospitals. A family facing a large medical bill has limited choices. It may borrow money, postpone other essential expenditures, or sell productive assets. For households already living close to the poverty line, a serious illness can, therefore, become an economic shock from which recovery is difficult. This is the so-called medical poverty trap: Illness reduces a household's economic security, while economic insecurity, in turn, makes it harder to obtain timely and quality health care. This risk is greatest in economically weaker states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, which depend heavily on private care despite lower household incomes. This creates a fundamental policy contradiction. The households that can least afford expensive medical treatment are often the households most dependent on providers who charge considerably more than public facilities.

Insurance is not enough: This is where schemes such as Ayushman Bharat have an important role in improving financial protection. But an insurance card cannot compensate for the absence of a functioning public-health facility nearby. Nor can insurance by itself ensure the availability of medicines, diagnostic services, doctors, and quality primary care. Health care financing and health care delivery must, therefore, be considered together. Health insurance and financing schemes, meanwhile, have expanded. Coverage rose from 14.1 per cent in 2017-18 to 47.4 per cent in 2025 in rural areas; and from 19.1 per cent to 44.3 per cent in urban areas. While this is a substantial change, the reported out-of-pocket medical expenditure remains high. This does not mean that insurance has failed; it means that nominal coverage is not the same as effective financial protection.

Ayushman Bharat and other schemes can reduce catastrophic expenditure only if eligible households know how to use them, if hospitals are available and empanelled, and if covered services match actual needs. The survey's numbers, therefore, point to a broader problem. India has expanded the architecture of health financing faster than it has repaired the everyday capacity of public care.

Way forward: India needs to strengthen public health care at every level, from Ayushman Arogya Mandirs to district hospitals, so that facilities deliver timely, quality care rather than merely exist. The aim is not to eliminate private health care, but to make the choice between public and private genuine. Universal coverage must mean that seeking treatment does not threaten a family's economic survival. Absent this, the private sector will remain the default provider and households will remain the default financiers.

The writers are, respectively, assistant professors at Sardar Patel Institute of Economic and Social Research, and the Institute of Rural Management Anand

Rights as freedoms, not freebies

BOOK REVIEW

NEHA BHATT

Cash transfers and welfare perks have long served as political tools to gain votes, particularly among women. While these measures do offer some tangible relief, their public framing remains problematic. In the book *Freebies or Rights*, economist Reetika Khera sets out to question this framing and raises a crucial question: When the state provides essential services like food, health care, and education, are these political hand-outs or fundamental rights? Can they create more dependency or offer opportunity?

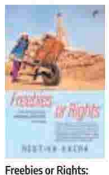
Through this lens, the book introduces readers to social policies and the role of the state in shaping everyday lives. It relies on primary data from field studies since the 2000s, layered with Ms Khera's anecdotes from across rural India and secondary data. The book also draws attention to the lack of social policy departments in our central universities, which has created a vacuum in our understanding of how important it is for true nation-building.

The book investigates the implementation of core government programmes that offer social support to the remotest corners through food security, nutrition, public health, social protection, and employment, including during the Covid-19 pandemic. These include schemes such as maternity benefits, child development services, mid-day meals, the public distribution system, the national rural employment guarantee programme, the national social assistance programme, and public canteens. Many of these schemes that existed during the United Progressive Alliance's time and were renamed under the National Democratic Alliance have not necessarily improved. How successful have these schemes been? Has government funding and coverage increased over the last few decades? Are tech interventions as impactful as they are made out to be? How well has the funding been spent? Ms Khera examines each core policy in detail. Written in a conversational tone, her analysis, layered with plenty of data and illustrative graphs, makes complex social policy accessible and interesting even to a lay reader.

Among her overarching arguments is the worrying development that our social spending may not be going to the right places — and instead, be "funnelled back to corporates and philanthropic-capitalists". She calls attention here to the flagship nutrition programme, POSHAN Abhiyaan, launched in 2018.

In theory, she says, it brought some useful interventions, including mass campaigns to raise awareness and support behaviour change. One of these was to encourage six months of exclusive breastfeeding for an infant. Yet from 2015-16 and 2019-21, this proportion increased only marginally from 55 to 64 per cent. This is because, she argues, a significant amount of funding was used to give smartphones to Anganwadi workers to record their work. Research suggests this perhaps hindered their work — often, these gadgets could not be used due to connectivity issues, and a software system that did not take into account the varying needs of different regions.

Ms Khera also draws our attention to an issue that is not adequately discussed: India's nutrition agenda is increasingly driven by international agencies and development organisations, with a top-down approach. While corporations and philanthropist-capitalists can help with funding, "they also use it to advance their own agendas", she says, such as their business interests and to influence government policies to suit them.



Freebies or Rights: Understanding Social Policy in India
by Reetika Khera
Published by Speaking Tiger
408 pages ₹599

Another major thorn in the social policy landscape is the lack of credible data to understand the real impact of certain social policy schemes. Creating such "data blackholes", says Ms Khera, is an "easy way to suppress failures and create fanciful narratives, or in other words, "to hide realities and avoid accountability".

What is the way forward then? She cites three model states that have done better than others when it comes to implementing social policies and creating lasting impact that we could draw a few lessons from: Tamil Nadu, Odisha, and Himachal Pradesh.

The interventions that have worked in Odisha, for example, are simple yet effective: Including eggs not only in mid-day meals but as part of ration for children under three and pregnant and lactating mothers, ensuring pensions to elderly widows and disabled come on time every month, and maternity benefits reaching a majority — two-thirds of mothers who gave birth in 2021-22. Himachal Pradesh, meanwhile, has fared well in educational levels, with improvements in children's reading, writing, and math skills in government schools. Additionally, the state's efficient and extra nutritious public distribution system that goes beyond the basics is worthy of note. Tamil Nadu, too, is leaps ahead in offering reasonable meals through its system of public canteens and a breakfast scheme in schools.

By opening up key debates in social policy, Ms Khera brings a neglected field of study into light, offering a ripe opportunity to strengthen social protection, equality, and freedom in a way that is not framed as charity, but as basic rights.

The reviewer is a journalist and author

The Economics of Standing Alone

Selling a masterpiece at a time, not a roomful

Auction house Volte Una introduced its inaugural auction as 'One lot, one hour'. On Sunday, when bidding closed, the late Tyeb Mehta's 2002 painting 'Rickshaw Puller' fetched $7.15 mn (₹69.1 cr). The work, depicting a tired rickshaw-wala, carriage and carrier almost fused into one, of course, lies at the centre of what is now the 4th-most-expensive Indian artwork sold at auction. But perhaps more startling is the intriguing reversal in the economics of selling expensive things by this new Indian platform specialising in single-lot sales.

Traditional multi-lot auctions exploit economics of reflected glory. Lesser-known artists or obscure vintages benefit from sharing a catalogue with celebrated names. Bidders arrive for a Ganesh Pyne, and discover someone special but considerably cheaper. Auction houses benefit from economies of scale, spreading marketing and organisational costs across numerous transactions.



Single-lot auctions invert this arrangement. No competing masterpiece distracts the buyer. No lesser work dilutes the occasion. Curatorial storytelling, provenance, exclusivity and carefully cultivated anticipation transform an object into an event. Volte Una's model could extend beyond art to exceptional vintage automobiles, rare manuscripts, celebrated musical instruments.... Indeed, private treaty sales and dedicated trophy-asset auctions already exploit variations of this logic. A maharaja's Rolls-Royce may command more attention as the sole attraction than as 'Lot 47' between two Bentleys.

Concentrated marketing *is* expensive. Thin bidding can undermine price discovery. And Mehta's record doesn't, by itself, prove the format caused the premium. Yet, the commercial proposition is compelling. Where supply is genuinely scarce, and buyers exceptionally wealthy, maximising attention may matter more than maximising inventory. Mass markets sell by offering choice, while luxury markets increasingly sell by eliminating it. The ultimate auction catalogue may contain just 1 page. And an extraordinarily large number.

Listen to Consumer Feedback, It Helps

Whether for a company or government, having a system in place that allows for 'consumer' feedback is vital. Acting upon the feedback — especially critical ones — is what makes such entities be trusted, or not. The trick, of course, is to listen *before* complaints become a brand-damaging chorus, as has been the case with SIR. But better late than never, as EC has — lately — demonstrated. Facing heavy criticism over its handling of SIR of electoral rolls, the poll panel reportedly eased verification procedures in Delhi in late September. The result: of the 33 lakh Delhi voters who were issued notices under logical discrepancies/unmapped cases, more than 60% (some 20 lakh) have now had their cases resolved. Booth-level officers (BLOs) are now visiting homes to collect documents, minor discrepancies are being corrected without Byzantine paperwork, and voters needn't always appear for hearings in person. This, EC has stated, was being done under its objective, 'No eligible voter to be left out of electoral roll' promise. Excellent.



EC's turnaround — after 'stakeholder' pressure — extends well beyond electoral rolls. Governments that dismiss public grievances invite dissent. Companies that ignore customer complaints risk losing customers. Airlines that leave stranded passengers without information or assistance turn an operational problem into a reputational one. Institutions must distinguish between defending a legitimate objective and becoming prisoners of the machinery built to achieve it.

Negative feedback isn't an admission of failure, but opportunity for course correction. The customer may not always be right. But treating every complaint as coming from an ill-wisher is hardly a recipe for good business, or governance. Listening is good.



JUST IN JEST

Like in physics, the most cutting-edge of culinary arts should be theoretical

The Proof is in the Pudding, Or is It?

Cooking has suffered for centuries from one tiresome requirement: food must actually be cooked. This insistence on physical execution has held back culinary imagination, shackling gastronomic genius to such vulgar considerations as ingredients, kitchen equipment, temperature and, worst of all, whether anybody would eat the resulting dish. It's time to liberate cuisine from the kadhai. Welcome to theoretical cooking, a new discipline in which recipes are conceived, debated, peer-reviewed and awarded Michelin stars without ever approaching a stove. Much as theoretical physicists need not personally collide particles, theoretical chefs should not be expected to boil potatoes.

A theoretical biryani might contain 37 spices, 6 varieties of rice, and a philosophical objection to saffron. Its excellence would be judged not by taste or presentation, but by conceptual audacity, ingredient compatibility and sophistication of its accompanying explanatory notes. And master chefs could finally concentrate on what they do best: talking about food. Critics (read: gluttons) will complain that cuisine without eating is meaningless. But literature needn't be performed, architecture needn't be built, and economics seldom requires its theories to work. Theoretical cooking's greatest triumph? A perfectly satisfying meal that leaves everyone licking their lips.

Demonstrate why global institutions should allocate capital to Indian firms and not elsewhere

Go On, Show Us the Money!



Joe Wallen

There's nothing to gain from avoiding the numbers. FPIs have withdrawn more than ₹3 lakh cr from Indian equities in the first 9 mths of 2026, already the largest annual exodus of foreign portfolio capital since records began. It's a figure that has caused concern among international institutional and retail investors alike, and understandably, closer to home, in the corridors of power in Delhi.

"There are some concerns. Foreign capital has not been very forthcoming of late,' acknowledged Alok Tiwari, joint secretary in finance ministry's Department of Economic Affairs, in late August. For a country now increasingly viewed as one of the world's great economic powers by East and West alike, there is rightfully cause for unease. Record outflows should prompt introspection after years of seemingly uninterrupted macroeconomic tailwinds around the India Story.

Yet, the investment landscape is nowhere near as gloomy as some headlines suggest. While foreign investors have withdrawn a significant amount of capital from India's secondary equity market this year, they have simultaneously invested more than ₹47,000 cr in Indian IPOs.

So, while we see record levels of foreign portfolio outflows, this year has also seen India become the world's busiest IPO market. The India Story hasn't collapsed. On Tuesday, IMF raised India's growth forecast for 2026-27 to 7%, from 6.4% projected in July. Neither have international investors suddenly stopped believing in India's long-term economic trajectory. PwC's latest global CEO survey found that India had risen to 2nd place among preferred destinations for international investment, level with Germany and Britain, and behind only the US. Instead, global investors are becoming more selective about what they buy, where they invest, and what returns they expect to receive.

In India, foreign investors are simultaneously selling parts of the old economy and buying pieces of the new. They are offloading expensive existing stocks in historically favoured sectors, such as IT and consumer businesses, while securing allocations in new businesses at predetermined prices.

New offerings have increasingly provided access to sunrise sectors including electronics manufacturing, consumer technology and renewables. India is also operating in a very different international investment environment from even a year or two ago.



Indian firms must become considerably more sophisticated in international investor relations, transparency and reputation management

Rise of contemporary India has seemed inevitable, and the country's proposition to global capital is self-evident, from its enormous consumer market to the opportunity presented to global companies diversifying supply chains away from China. But with the advent of AI, rupee volatility and a host of short-term cyclical factors, India now faces much greater competition for global capital. Simply put, every institutional investor deciding to allocate a dollar, dirham or euro elsewhere is doing so because they view the alternative as more compelling rather than to an increasingly compelling universe of alternatives. There is already an encouraging domestic blueprint in smartphone manufacturing. As recently as a few years ago, India had a negligible presence in iPhone manufacturing and exports. Today, iPhone is India's largest branded export, and more than 40 domestic companies form part of Apple's supplier ecosystem.



India, time to play hard ball

This transformation did not happen solely because India told one of the world's biggest companies about its enormous population or favourable demographics, but because it identified a strategically important global industry and constructed a clear, investable proposition around it. This gave international capital a reason to choose India. AI and other industries must now do the same.

Long-term, the India Story remains one of the most compelling investment opportunities in the world. But its narrative must mature as oil prices, US bond yields and geopolitics evolve in ways Delhi cannot control. Reputation management must increasingly be understood as part of the competition for international capital. Articulating India's opportunities to global investors and providing evidence, rather than relying on assumption, that its companies and industries offer advantages competing markets cannot.

For years, international investors would worry about missing India's rise. Now, increasingly, India must demonstrate why they should prioritise it.

The writer is partner and India head, Michael Macfarlane Associates



India now faces much greater competition for global capital. Every institutional investor deciding to allocate a dollar, dirham or euro elsewhere is doing so because they view the alternative as more compelling

Slow Outflows, Sure, But Inflows?



M C Govardhana Rangan

Inflows of $144 bn in a matter of weeks should ideally have ensured a good night's sleep for Sanjay Malhotra. Instead, it appears to have become a nightmare. Just when the stage was set for a rally in rupee against dollar — now an all-too-familiar pattern during sudden gushes of the greenback — RBI is having to dust off a playbook it uses only during a crisis.

Suddenly, rupee's weakness is the talk of the town. The money market is swimming in cash. RBI's market operations are not helping interest rates to be aligned with its goals. Inflation is round the corner due to sticky oil prices, El Niño and geopolitical disturbances.

Thanks to 'Operation Midnight' late last Saturday, which imposed restrictions on forex transactions, including a risk reserve requirement, RBI seems to have signalled there are fault lines running under the surface of the economy that's growing at 7.8%. Headline growth has papered over external weakness.

These are not actions of a central bank that believes the external sector is in the pink of health. These may change the timing and cost of funding of external trade, but aren't going to eliminate basic demand driven by trade and capital flows.

While GDP numbers, driven by domestic factors, have been holding up, the external sector has been flashing amber — relentless capital outflows and a rising CAD. That RBI had to subsidise investors to bring in dollars through special deposits, captures the state of affairs. Bond yields in the US, Japan, France and Germany are soaring to levels not seen in two decades. India, a net capital importer, can't be blind to such developments around the world.

Overseas investors, who took India to top of the EM heap with the highest premium, are queueing up for exit. They have sold shares worth $83 bn since Oct 2024. The economy may be humming but the plumbing needs fixing.

Indian monetary policy framework, which targets inflation at 4% in a +/–2 percentage point band, was born out of the 2013 taper tantrum crisis when ignoring inflation came home to roost. Although MPC brought credibility, it seems to have acquired a blinkered view of inflation and growth, ignoring the role of interest rates on currency.



More plumbing required

As far as equities are concerned, experts peddling that PE ratio for Nifty below the long-term average of 21× is attractive may be good enough to lure gullible retail investors, but not global investors. India, without an AI trade, is still at a premium to China, South Korea, Indonesia, Brazil and MSCI EM Index.

Saturday's midnight measures can slow outflows. But what's needed is to draw inflows. Forex reserves adjusted for forward book is about $420 bn, enough to fund 6 mths of imports, similar to 2013. Capital flows are driven by returns, and little else. Global risk-free return — US treasuries — are yielding 5.35%. The Indian equivalent is at 7.3%. If historical difference of 450 bps is any guide, this setting won't lure funds.

Scope of MPC needs to be widened beyond inflation and growth to include financial stability. Setting rates on the basis of domestic inflation may meet the mandate, but not a correct one. When price of money has been shooting through the roof everywhere, a quarter-point increase and 'calibrated tightening' stance seem afterthoughts.

The *colour* of FDI is more important than just the FDI. Much of it over the past decade has been in the nature of financial FDI from PE and venture funds, which have a 5-7-yr lifespan. A vibrant market with SIP flows into MFs may have helped them get unseen valuations, but may end up making retail investors the proverbial lambs in a slaughterhouse. GoI needs to prioritise FDI that not only brings in capital to manufacture but also tech, and capital that stays for decades, instead of PE funds that find their way to Haldiram's and diapers-seller FirstCry.

Another thorny issue is taxation. The state may have arguments to retain securities transaction tax (STT), and both long-term and short-term capital gains taxes. But when the need to compete for funds arises, India must be on the same platform as, or better than, its peers.

Rupee may gain in the short run. Last month, US treasury secretary Scott Bessent may have challenged the bond market with his 'I am the house now' line. But the market slid after an initial blip. And that truth about financial markets is universal.

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Taking the Fear Out of GST





V Anantha Nageswaran & K Balasubramanian

A year ago, GST Council lowered rates and moved to a simpler structure with two main rates. It expected that lower rates would bring more economic activity into the tax base, and that a wider base would support revenue over time.

Figures for the year since Sept 2025 bear this out. Gross GST collection grew by 11.6% in H1 2026, and growth rose to 15% in Q2 2026-27. Average monthly taxable supply between Oct 2025 and Aug 2026 grew 25.6%. Effective tax rate on domestic taxable supply, including exempt supply, fell from 11.74% to 10.84%.

Taxable supply growing by a quarter in one year is well ahead of growth in nominal terms. Part of it is higher activity. Part of it is likely to be earlier existing activity that wasn't reported. A business decides how much of its sales to report on two counts: rate of tax, and expected cost of being visible to the tax administration. Rate rationalisation dealt with the first. The latest GST Council decisions attempt to deal with the second.

The council recommended that power of arrest be removed from GST law. Its presence weighed on genuine businesses, and kept some small traders away from GST altogether. Small traders can now register and grow within the system without that fear. This should bring many more of them into the GST base.

Removing fear doesn't mean ignoring fraud, which, because it can't be eliminated, must have effective deterrence. Fraud must be kept small enough not to compromise the system's integrity. Focus now will be on fewer cases, stronger evidence and faster trials. This gives honest businesses assurance that the law will be enforced fairly, without unnecessary hardship on compliant taxpayers.

Technologically, India is better placed for this today than in 2017. Invoices a seller reports can now be matched against credit a buyer claims. e-Invoices and e-way bills track movement of goods, and analytics can flag a cluster of registrations issuing invoices without any real purchases. Changes to returns now approved by the council will tighten this further.

Sales to consumers (B2C) are the next area of focus. Consumers don't claim input tax credit (ITC). So, when a retail sale is not reported, it doesn't show up in invoice matching. A trader may sell goods to consumers without a bill and then issue invoices for the same goods to other businesses that never received them.

In this way, a B2C sale is shown as a B2B sale, and the fake ITC passes to a business not entitled to it. Reported B2C supply rose from ₹45.91 lakh cr in 2022-23 to ₹86.55 lakh cr in 2025-26. Better B2C reporting compliance will widen the tax base and reduce the scope for fraud. e-Invoicing for B2C supplies is expected to be ready for roll-out by Apr 2027.

Nirmala Sitharaman also announced that GoI will move CGST administration for taxpayers spread across several jurisdictions to a centralised, faceless platform. This will make compliance easier for medium and large businesses with a presence in several states. For example, a mid-sized company with units in 5 states may have to deal with 5 different commissionerates. This results in multiplicity of proceedings.

Under the proposed centralised and faceless administration, each issue will be examined once, rather than separately by several offices. Similar cases will be decided in the same way. That consistency is one of the main benefits of a faceless system. I-T and customs already run faceless processes. Their experience shows what works and what needs care. The CGST design will draw on those lessons.

The council's other decisions follow a single approach — moving toward trust-based administration. These include automatic registration amendments, a threshold for notices, correction of return errors, faster refunds and limits on vehicle interception. Trust extended in this way places obligations on both sides. The administration must keep its detection capacity sharper; act on evidence and decide cases on time. Businesses must use the room now given to them responsibly.

If fraud were to rise, the case for harsher tools would return. The reform will last only if both sides keep their part of the bargain.

Significant changes to ITC rules would free up working capital for many firms, especially those facing an inverted duty structure and those exporting. The decision to allow refund of ITC on capital goods would also encourage investment.

Rate rationalisation showed that a lower rate yields more revenue as the base widens, and process reforms rest on the same principle. A business that doesn't fear the tax office is more likely to register, report its full sales and grow within the system.

Nageswaran is chief economic adviser, GoI. Balasubramanian is joint secretary, Department of Revenue, Ministry of Finance, GoI



Now we can hang out

THE SPEAKING TREE

The Invincible Adya Shakti

NARAYANI GANESH

The Markandeya Purana's Devi Mahatmayam, also known as Chandi or Durga Saptashati, narrates the story of how Goddess Ambika was created, in the second canto, Madhyam Charita, verses 6-13. The devas come to Shiv and Vishnu and tell them, how Mahishasur has thrown them out of heaven. 'We seek shelter under you both,' they say. 'May both of you be pleased to think out the means of his destruction.' Hearing this, Vishnu was angry and so was Shiv, and Brahma, whose faces became fierce and full of frowns. A great light issued forth from the angry faces of Vishnu, Shiv and Brahma. The devas witnessed a blazing mountain of light whose raging flames pervaded all quarters. Then, that unique light that emerged from the bodies of angry devas and the teen murtis, its lustre pervading all three worlds, merged into one and thence emerged a fiery female form. Ambika was born. She is also known as Ma Durga who, with her multiple hands carrying weapons of different kinds from the gods, overpowered Mahishasur.

Ambika is really Adya Shakti, the primordial energy force. In metaphorical sense, her energy is meant to protect us and strengthen our inner nature, making it a great source of internal power. Whether she is invoked as Durga, Kali, Bhagwati or Ambika, she is seen as the provider of strength and confidence, hence, she is shown seated on a tiger or lion, having sublimated negative emotions and forces.

PEAS IN A PODCAST

A Magical Listen

India's multilingualism is a cultural treasure, but it can also keep readers from accessing literary riches beyond their own languages. Literature Trails, a podcast that brings stories from Hindi and Urdu literature to listeners, helps bridge this divide. Featuring celebrated writers such as Munshi Premchand, Saadat Hasan Manto, Bhisham Sahni, Ruskin Bond and Jaishankar Prasad, it offers an opportunity to discover stories that might otherwise remain inaccessible to those who aren't comfortable reading Hindi.



The episode, **Chota Jadugar**, features a short story by Jaishankar Prasad that explores the world through a child's eyes. The story follows a young boy who tries to earn money by performing small tricks at a fair, revealing his resourcefulness and circumstances that shape his life. It offers a glimpse of Prasad's ability to weave human emotion and social realities into a simple narrative. Born in Varanasi in 1889, Prasad was a major figure in modern Hindi literature and theatre, and one of the leading figures of Chhayavaad, the romantic movement in Hindi poetry.

The podcast's appeal lies in making stories accessible to those who may not read Hindi fluently, while reminding us that good stories need no single language to find a home.

Chat Room

Add 'Domestic' To Our GDP

Apropos 'Inches, Not Just Percentages' by Ashish Gupta (Oct 13), economic growth figures often conceal the difference between national progress and household experience. A rising GDP does not necessarily mean that families can afford better housing, quality education or nutritious food. Policymakers should, therefore, look beyond headline growth rates, and examine real wages, employment security, productivity and the cost of essential services. Reliable household surveys can reveal whether prosperity is reaching lower-income groups. Better public healthcare, education and transport can improve living standards without depending entirely on income growth. GDP remains an important measure, but it should inform policy rather than dominate it. Development must ultimately be judged by improvements in people's everyday lives.

K Sakunthala
Coimbatore

OUR VIEW


AP

RBI's big rupee booster: all it does is buy us time

The central bank's emergency measures to shore up India's currency hint of panic and could make risk-hedging dearer. For real relief, macro dynamics need to move in the rupee's favour

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) emergency measures to support the rupee have boosted its value, but are unlikely to do very much beyond buying us time. On Saturday, barely three days after Governor Sanjay Malhotra declared that he thought the currency was undervalued, the central bank announced a set of new props. True, the rupee might have been trading below its 'real effective exchange rate' (REER), but markets go by supply and demand as well as sentiment, not artificial constructs like the REER, which tracks a trade-weighted basket of currencies. And the harsh fact is that today's forces of demand and supply do not favour our currency. On the contrary. For too long have successive governors said RBI does not target any level for the rupee but only manages its market volatility. Few believe that. Yet, its latest move came as a surprise. More so since RBI had not just wrapped up one of its largest ever exercises to shore up its forex reserves, it raised its policy rate last week. On Monday, the rupee rallied almost 1% against the dollar. On Tuesday, it gained another 0.4%.

Key among the measures is a special dollar window for state-run oil companies to buy dollars. This means that Indian Oil Corp, Hindustan Petroleum and Bharat Petroleum will no longer buy forex in the spot market for their imports, and to that extent, pressure on the rupee will ease. The three oil companies are estimated to require about $300 million daily to pay their crude import bills. Their heavy and recurring demand for dollars adds to buying pressure in the spot market, which weakens the rupee if it is not balanced with dollar supply. By selling oil importers dollars directly, RBI aims to moderate that weakening force and help the rupee attain stability. How long the effects last, of course, would depend on larger factors. The last time RBI hit such an emergency button was in 2013 during the 'taper tantrum,' when its clutch of actions slowed the rupee's slide temporarily. The key word here is 'temporarily.' The reality is that the domestic currency will not be relieved of pressure so long as global oil prices rule high (India imports almost 90% of its needs), global bond yields harden, capital inflows sputter and the dollar index stays high. Another significant factor in all this is the government's effort to shield fuel users from this year's oil shock. If retail prices are allowed to rise, a reduction in discretionary demand may help reduce energy imports. But that's a call for central policymakers to take.

The forex window is only one of the measures taken by RBI to bolster the rupee, which has dropped by almost 6% in 2026 so far. Among other steps, the most important is a drastic reduction—to $5 million from $100 million—of RBI's cap on the size of derivative transactions that can be done without proof of underlying exchange risk exposure. Plus, RBI barred authorized dealers from letting traders rebook cancelled rupee-linked forex derivative contracts, thereby making currency management vastly more expensive and rigid for businesses. Grumbles have arisen over a 20% forex reserve requirement placed on some derivative trades; this acts as a tax on risk mitigation in its effect and is likely to drive up hedging costs that banks will likely pass on to clients. These moves may give the rupee breathing space today, as they already seem to have, but do not address the currency's underlying stress points. For a reliably stable exchange rate, macro dynamics must shift in the rupee's favour.

THEIR VIEW

Listed debt gets six shades from India's capital markets regulator

Sebi's colour-coded bond risk gauge could do with some tweaks to prove itself useful for investors



KRISHNAN RANGANATHAN
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Last week, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) launched 'Samajh Se Investing Simple,' the newest campaign under Project Jagrook, its investor education drive. Every listed corporate bond must carry a 'Credit Risk-o-Meter,' a six-colour dial from Irish green for AAA paper, through chartreuse, neon yellow, caramel and dark orange, to red for B- and below. It will appear in offer documents, advertisements and bond apps.

Why now? Until 2022, privately placed bonds came in ₹10 lakh lumps, which kept small savers out. Sebi cut the ticket size to ₹1 lakh in October 2022 and to ₹10,000 in 2024. A retired schoolteacher can buy a 12% non-banking financial company bond on her phone faster than she can order *biryani*.

What Sebi got right—Colours beat an alphabet soup: Few know that AA-minus sits above A-plus. Everyone knows red. Sebi uses such a dial for mutual funds, so investors have seen one before.

One scale for everyone: Instead of each app's home-made 'risk badge,' there is now one scale, built only from ratings by Sebi-registered agencies.

The toughest umpire wins: If rating agencies disagree, the meter shows the lowest rating. Global bank-capital rules are softer: given three ratings, banks may use the second-best.

Hard-won warnings: Unsecured bonds must say so in bold red. Issuers that stop cooperating with their rating agency will be flagged. Bond apps must update the dial automatically within 24 hours, with no manual overrides, and place it before the 'invest' button. Additional Tier-1 (AT-1) bank bonds must carry a warning of total loss.

Gates where paint is not enough: Since the Yes Bank wipeout of 2020, only institutions may buy new AT-1 bank bonds, and in ₹1 crore lots. The UK and Hong Kong keep ordinary savers out in much the same way. The new warning is a belt worn over braces.

The trouble, though, is the wiring.

One, a light that cannot blink: Henry Ford gave buyers the illusion of choice; Sebi is giving investors the illusion of insight. Behind the six colours lies just one rigid metric: the rating. On average, ratings sort risk well. Their failing is speed. Enron was investment grade four days before it went bust. IL&FS was AAA until August 2018 and in default by 17 September: a move from Irish green to red with no caramel stop. A rating's own early warnings, its 'negative outlook' and 'rating watch' flags, appear nowhere on the dial. The fix: add an amber flag when a rating is on negative watch, printed in the issue prospectus and turned live on bond apps thereafter. It won't catch every collapse, but it will buy savers time.

Two, adjectives in place of numbers: BBB is 'moderate credit risk' and BB 'moderate risk of default.' In plain English, these are synonyms, yet the line between investment grade and junk runs between them. The gap is anything but moderate. In Crisil's record for 2014-24, about 2 in 100 BBB-rated borrowers defaulted within three years, against 6 in 100 for BB and 15 in 10,000 for AAA. The single red band lumps B, where one in 10 defaulted, with C, where nearly three in 10 did, and D, which already has. The fix: print each band's record on the dial in plain frequencies (say, "of 100 borrowers rated like this, about 6 defaulted within three years"), draw a bold line where investment grade ends, and give "already in default" a colour of its own. Agencies already publish these figures in a Sebi-prescribed format.

Three, six boxes invite yield-chasing: Twenty rating notches are squeezed into six colours, so A-plus and A-minus both glow neon yellow. Within a colour, the bond paying the most is often the riskiest, and the colour dominates the rating printed beneath. And a rating speaks to whether you get repaid, not to whether the bond is worth its price. Economists Bo Becker and Victoria Ivashina found that US insurers, whose capital rules sorted bonds into broad rating buckets, bought the top yielding bonds in each bucket, taking extra risk without earning better returns. The colour bucket becomes a shopping aisle, and the highest number on the shelf wins. Expect apps to advertise "neon yellow at 11.5%." Fix: point the arrow at the exact notch, not merely the band, and make platforms flag any bond paying well above others of its colour, with two words: "Ask why."

Four, the meter stops at the app but misselling doesn't: Yes Bank's ₹8,415 crore AT-1 loss showed that the danger lies in who sells as much as what is sold. More than 97% of individual buyers were the bank's own customers, and a fifth had broken fixed deposits to buy. They trusted the branch desk, not an app. A bank selling its own bonds must now show the dial, but brokers, wealth managers and relationship managers selling other people's bonds need not. It is the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), not Sebi, that governs bank branches. Fix: Sebi can extend the dial to brokers and advisors on its own; only bank branches need RBI. Project Jagrook should teach what each colour leaves out.

Will Rogers is believed to have said he cared less about the return *on* his money than the return *of* his money. Bond investors need a signal for that worry. Sebi has handed them a rainbow. Now it must make sure they know what is, and isn't, at the end of it.

10 YEARS AGO


mint
Inflation at one-year low

JUST A THOUGHT

An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

The Nobel and the endless quest for economic stability

AJIT RANADE



is senior fellow with Pune International Centre

The 2026 Nobel Prize in Economics has been awarded to Robert Hall of Stanford University and Michael Woodford of Columbia University. Their research helps explain how decisions of households and firms collectively influence inflation, employment and economic fluctuations, and how policy can moderate them. The prize marks another chapter in a century-old debate on how economies function and whether governments can stop recessions.

Keynes revolutionized economics in 1936 by arguing that economies could remain trapped in prolonged unemployment, requiring government intervention to revive demand. His ideas dominated post-war policymaking. But the oil shocks of the 1970s produced stagflation, the coexistence of high inflation and unemployment, undermining the presumed stable Phillips curve trade-off. Milton Friedman had already challenged that trade-off, and Robert Lucas subsequently led a revolt against Keynesian macroeconomics.

Lucas argued that conventional Keynesian models were unreliable because they ignored how people change their behaviour in anticipation of government policy. If people expect inflation, for instance, they adjust wages and prices accordingly. Thus began the rational expectations revolution, asking for macroeconomic theories to be grounded in individual decision-making. Others in this intellectual tradition, including Thomas Sargent, Finn Kydland and Edward Prescott, were to follow.

Hall and Woodford carried this enterprise forward, but with a twist. Hall's 1978 research challenged conventional theories of consumption. Households do not necessarily spend in proportion to current income. They consider expected lifetime income and seek to spread consumption over time. His key finding was that, under rational expectations, changes in consumption should be largely unpredictable. Only genuinely unexpected information should alter spending plans. Hall's wider work on unemployment and labour-market frictions helped connect individual behaviour with economy-wide fluctuations.

Woodford's contribution was particularly influential in monetary policy. His 2003 book *Interest and Prices* helped establish the New Keynesian framework widely used by central banks. Prices and wages do not adjust instantaneously. Hence, interest rate (policy) changes can affect output and employment. Crucially, expectations of future interest rates matter alongside current rates.

This makes central-bank credibility vital. A promise to maintain low rates can stimulate investment today, even if rates cannot fall further (the zero lower bound). But will markets believe that promise? Once the economy recovers, the central bank may be tempted to abandon its commitment. This is the problem of time inconsistency and the dilemma of rules versus discretion. Woodford gave these questions a rigorous theoretical foundation.

The work of Hall and Woodford helped revive Keynesian economics but this field still has a long way to go

There is an irony here. Lucas's revolution sought to dethrone Keynes, but the New Keynesians absorbed his mathematical methods while restoring a central role for stabilization policy. Keynes has proven remarkably resilient. Governments across the world still resort to fiscal stimulus when confronted with severe recessions.

Yet, important questions remain. Modern macroeconomic models typically assume economies fluctuate around an underlying equilibrium, albeit with imperfections. Disequilibrium economists challenge this. They argue that economies may continually lurch from one disequilibrium to another, characterized by credit rationing, involuntary unemployment and financial instability. Equilibrium may be the exception rather than the rule.

The 2008 financial crisis showed the limitations of mainstream models. In particular, models built primarily around interest rates and expectations did not adequately capture the role of banks, credit creation, liquidity and fragile balance sheets. Subsequent pandemic disruptions and supply shocks exposed further weaknesses. Elegant mathematical models do not always capture the complexity of actual economies.

These issues are relevant to India. A household dependent on uncertain wages cannot smooth consumption over a lifetime. A small enterprise denied bank credit cannot respond to a decline in interest rates. Food and fuel inflation may persist despite monetary tightening. An affluent household responds differently to interest rates and asset prices than one that's struggling to meet basic expenses.

Woodford's emphasis on credibility raises another question. The Reserve Bank of India has an inflation-targeting mandate and a monetary policy committee, half of whose members are appointed by the government. It also manages government borrowing and transfers substantial surpluses to the exchequer. With persistent fiscal pressures, the distinction between monetary independence and fiscal accommodation becomes important. Can a central bank credibly commit to its policies when financial markets perceive it as constrained by fiscal needs?

Beyond this year's Nobel Prize lie other fertile areas, including financial instability and the economics of artificial intelligence. Economic science has many unfinished tasks. Economics is not merely about mathematical elegance or intellectual consensus. It's about better anticipation and the ability to mitigate instability that threatens employment, incomes and livelihoods.

THEIR VIEW

India has been out of fashion but that could change quite quickly

Sentiment towards Indian assets is poor. The reasons are real but mostly external. Each of them can turn within 12-18 months



V. ANANTHA NAGESWARAN
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HT

Few markets are as unloved as India's right now. In the 12 months to August, the MSCI India index lost about 2% in dollar terms. The broader emerging-market index gained 36%. The Sensex is still below the peak it reached in September 2024. Talk about India these days is mostly about what it lacks. The gloom is not baseless. Three things weigh on India. None of them is of its own making.

The first is an unsettled relationship with the US. India has faced American tariffs and sanctions. Portfolio and direct investors alike see that as a risk. The second is energy. India's landed cost of crude averaged about $116 a barrel in September, after dipping to about $82 in July. Supply disruptions and higher freight and insurance costs have kept it high. The third is the absence of an "AI play." In a gold rush, the steady money is made by those who sell shovels and jeans. India has neither the AI models nor the chips and memory that go into them. Korea and Taiwan do. Their chipmakers have helped the emerging-market index close much of its long-term gap with India. Some also fear that AI will hurt India's IT services.

Each of these can change. That is the case for looking at India with fresh eyes.

Start with oil. The consensus forecast puts crude at $70 to $75 a barrel in 2027. If prices ease even part of the way, India gains more than most. A lower oil bill helps the current account, inflation and the rupee at once. We had a small preview this summer. In July and August, oil fell sharply and doubts surfaced about the AI spending spree. Foreign investors put $5.2 billion into Indian equities in those two months.

Next, the AI trade. The boom is no longer only a stock-market story. It has become a borrowing story. Spending on data centres, chips and power is expected to reach $7.6-8 trillion by 2030. About $450 billion of AI-related debt was raised this year by early September, more than double all of 2025. The Bank of England now counts AI among the risks that could strike together with others.

The arithmetic is hard to make work. Analysts expect the tech sector's yearly operating cash flow to rise by about $1.26 trillion by 2028. They expect its customers in eight other sectors to add only about $690 billion between them. Both cannot be right. Who will write the cheques? Aswath Damodaran of NYU Stern points to a deeper problem. The outcome that best justifies today's prices is one where AI replaces workers on a large scale. That same outcome would hurt jobs, spending and tax revenues, and with them the very revenues AI firms are counting on.

None of this means a crash is due on a set date. Booms often run longer than sceptics expect. A disorderly unwinding would not spare India in the first few weeks either, because fear typically hits every market. But once prices begin to reflect what AI can realistically earn, investors will look for growth that does not rest on that one bet. Few large markets offer that as clearly as India.

The third headwind, relations with Washington, is the hardest to call. An interim trade framework was agreed on in February. The direction is right, even if the pace is uncertain.

Meanwhile, India's own numbers have held up well through a hard year. Real GDP grew 7.8% in April to June, above the Reserve Bank's projection of 7%. Manufacturing grew 9.2%. Inflation in 2025-26 was the lowest in 47 years. The fiscal deficit has come down from 9.2% of GDP in 2020-21 to 4.4% in 2025-26. Tax relief, GST rationalization, rate cuts and easier regulation in 2025 built a cushion before the shock. Resilience is built in good times. Its value shows in bad times.

Bond markets have noticed. Ten-year government bond yields have risen this year in 21 of 22 major markets. India's rose by 64 basis points. Many developed countries saw theirs rise by more than 100 basis points. S&P upgraded India last year. This year, the Japan Credit Rating Agency rated India A-, its first A rating in three decades.

Now the rupee. It has weakened and that has hurt investors. But the Reserve Bank does not target a level and flexibility has done useful work. In real trade-weighted terms, the rupee fell about 17.5% from a high in November 2024 to May 2026. A competitive rupee has helped exports. India's exports of goods and services rose 15.6% in April to August—to $399 billion. Higher prices for refined fuels and strong electronics flatter the picture somewhat. Even so, manufactured exports outside petroleum and gems and jewellery are growing at double digits. Non-petroleum merchandise exports grew 14.4%. Net exports added about 3 percentage points to first-quarter growth. Trade agreements help too. The agreement with the UK came into force in July. The EU deal has been concluded, but is not yet in force. The smartphone story shows what is possible. Scale, production-linked support, trusted-partner standing and a growing component base gave India the biggest gain of any country in US smartphone imports from 2017 to 2024. This year's budget cut duties on many inputs and components to repeat that model elsewhere.

For the rupee, the outlook is sober but reasonable. Much of the adjustment has already happened. A competitive real exchange rate, steady growth and reserves well above $700 billion make for a sturdier rupee than the mood suggests. If oil eases and capital returns, the pressure on it should ease.

There are no guarantees. Oil could stay high. Ties with Washington could stay unsettled for longer. The AI boom could keep drawing money away for another year. India also has work to do. It has to turn a currency tailwind into lasting competitiveness, by taking the smartphone model to components, machinery and labour-intensive goods.

In the short run, markets follow the mood. Over the long run, they follow the fundamentals. In the 15 years to August, $100 put into Indian equities grew to $282 in dollar terms, against $239 for emerging markets. India's case did not vanish in the last two years. It was crowded out.

Investors walked away from India because it had no shovels to sell in the AI gold rush. They may come back because it has no hangover to nurse.

These are the author's personal views.

MINT CURATOR

Singapore is being shaken by a platform for perpetual futures

It will be a challenge to regulate the techno-anarchy of Hyperliquid



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Decentralized trading venues like Jeff Yan's offer instant gratification. BLOOMBERG

A crypto bro seeking to reinvent finance from first principles? That is nothing new. Many in the blockchain world want to loosen Wall Street's stranglehold on wealth creation. But when Hyperliquid Labs CEO Jeff Yan spoke on that topic in Singapore last week, there was a catch. That morning, *Financial Times* had run an article on how the Asian city-state was trying to distance itself from the new-age bourse and its most revolutionary offering: perpetual futures (or perps), which the newspaper described as the "most dangerous product in crypto."

Perps are highly leveraged gambles on equities, commodities, interest rates or crypto... basically anything with a price tag. Unlike standard futures, they never expire. Nor do they transfer ownership on any underlying asset. Traders can jump in and out in minutes or hold positions forever. On a decentralized exchange like Hyperliquid, there's no broker or clearinghouse holding the user's cash. An algorithm simply locks the collateral in smart contracts to ensure losers automatically pay winners. Those who run out of capital are liquidated.

I imagine the sheer techno-anarchism of Hyperliquid, which has made Singapore its home according to *FT*, poses a unique challenge to the city. In June, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) added the bourse to the "investor alert" list of companies that may be perceived to be regulated by it when they aren't really. "We are not aware that Hyperliquid is regulated in any major jurisdiction," the MAS told *FT*.

But so what? Any local investor who has access to a 1:1 dollar stablecoin like USDC can bet on crude oil prices over weekends when war news breaks—often courtesy of US President Donald Trump's pronouncements—while traditional commodity exchanges remain shut.

Therein lies the tension. Singapore once aimed to be Asia's digital-asset hub, but scaled back after 2022. The collapse of Sam Bankman-Fried's FTX empire—where state investor Temasek Holdings took a bath—was a wake-up call. Authorities still wanted innovation, but the bar for touching local mom-and-pop investors went up. Crypto ads were banished from the city's marquee Formula One night race.

Still, Singapore can't afford to sit out the future. Since 1968, when it beat Hong Kong to set up a market for dollar-denominated assets during Asian hours, the city has been a big beneficiary of the 'follow-the-sun' model of traditional trading. But the blockchain is threatening to end that edge by being always awake. While Singapore must embrace 24x7 markets, hosting Yan and his team invites disquieting questions about competition for Singapore Exchange Ltd.

SGX, the local exchange, launched its own perps on Bitcoin and Ethereum last year for "accredited, expert, and institutional investors." It now wants to offer these instruments to US institutional investors.

Yet SGX perps merely borrow the math of their blockchain cousins and wrap it around traditional dollar-settled contracts. Funds must still flow through standard bank accounts. That appeals to global institutions seeking crypto exposure without having to transact with counterparties whose wallets may have been used for money-laundering and sanctions-busting activities.

But for retail investors, decentralized trading venues like Hyperliquid offer what traditional exchanges never will: instant gratification. Free from identity checks and regulatory gatekeepers, Gen-Z traders can stake Hype tokens to spin up new trading pairs and speculate on Anthropic's market value long before traditional investors have even seen a draft prospectus.

Is such unbridled democratization the future of finance, or is this a return to a past riddled with lawlessness?

Stamford Raffles, who landed in the fishing village of 200 people in 1819, hoping to establish a rules-based British state on the Malayan peninsula, was annoyed by the cock fights he encountered. As Singapore grew, unregulated gambling became a major menace until 1968, when Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew consolidated lotteries under state control. "Over my dead body," Lee famously warned Macau tycoon Stanley Ho about opening a casino.

Decades later, Singapore reluctantly permitted two casinos as part of integrated resorts to promote tourism. One of them, Marina Bay Sands, was Yan's stage last week. Standing at the heart of a tightly regulated gambling complex, the CEO pitched his permission-less betting engine. With perpetual futures having already become the hottest thing in crypto trading, his next goal, he said, was to offer options.

That's the vexing part: Singapore's third casino—one it never allowed and can't regulate—promises to keep growing. The city's conservative financial mandarins will be hard-pressed to keep any control on these modern-day cock fights. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Human relevance in the age of AI: focus on judgement

RAHUL MATTHAN



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On the last day of their meeting in Prague in August 2006, 424 astronomers of the International Astronomical Union voted to demote Pluto from its current status. Having grown up, as so many of us have, believing that Pluto was the 9th planet in the solar system, the fact that it had been reduced to a hunk of rock came as a rude shock. The fact is that wherever there is no definitive way to verify what is what, we are forced to depend on the consensus of experts to know what the truth is.

Earlier this month, in a paper I wrote for Observe Research Foundation titled *The Absorption Frontier*, I made the argument that the reliability of AI systems was critically dependent on the extent to which their outputs can be verified. While verifiability is often deterministic and empirical, there are situations—such as was the case with the Prague Consensus—that call for it to be done by humans. If AI absorption depends on the verifiability of outputs, the domains where machines will struggle are those in which humans will remain relevant.

Coding is the best example of deterministic verification—where things either work or do not. Since software outputs can be checked instantly, AI can learn from its mistakes as it codes, improving the code it generates until it eventually excels at programming. In other, more empirical domains, truth is only observable long after the decision has been made—as with the creditworthiness of borrowers or the efficacy of medical treatment. But even when verification is delayed, it should be possible to design AI to learn and improve.

This is a lot harder to do in consensus domains, where truth is whatever qualified experts agree it is (as with the demotion of Pluto) or in adversarial domains, where outcomes are reached in response to the arguments of counterparties. In 1950, the mathematician John Nash showed that whenever two parties stand to gain by agreeing, there is always a bargain they can arrive at—but what exactly this negotiated solution ultimately ends up being depends on inputs only the parties themselves can supply. There is, as a result, no ground truth against which to check what a group of experts will agree on tomorrow or what the other side of a negotiation will be willing to accept.

That said, we must not be so bold as to presume that AI systems will never be able to do this. In 2017, a model trained on two centuries' worth of US Supreme Court decisions predicted case outcomes with over 70% accuracy. But as good as these systems are, they are, at best, making a calculated guess about a decision that has not yet been made. In every instance, it will be the judges who actually decide, and since we have no way to look into their minds, they could still rule otherwise.

It is also tempting to believe that it should be possible to train AI agents to negotiate transactions on our behalf. For as long as there have been lawyers, we have engaged them to do precisely that—negotiate commercial and other agreements on our behalf. Surely, it should be possible to get AI to do the same. But as anyone who has done this will tell you, lawyers have to keep going back to clients for instructions, and every time the other side makes an unanticipated offer, it is the client who decides whether to accept it or push back. If the AI agents that negotiate for me behave the same way, or end up doing so, the inputs necessary for a Nash bargain will still come from me.

As we gain experience of deploying AI at work, what all is best not automated is getting clearer

There will be domains where a conclusion must be reached afresh each time by the people in the room, based on what each of them brings to it. And since that conclusion cannot exist until it is reached, no AI system can learn from it in advance. Since neither consensus nor adversarial domains offer ground truths that AI can rely on to train and improve, might these be the domains where human judgment will always remain relevant?

Last month, I pointed out in this column that we train young professionals by allowing them to learn by doing. This is why skilling programmes in most disciplines are designed to have them perform relatively mundane work until they acquire the skills senior professionals need. Since this is also the sort of checkable work that AI does well, the more we incorporate AI into our professional lives, the fewer opportunities our young professionals will get to gain the experience they need to forge careers.

The solution, as I presented it in that article, was to ensure that we reserve some of this sort of work for the young professionals in our organizations—even if that means forgoing some of the efficiency gains that AI makes possible—because we know of no other way to train them.

But if it is clear that there are some domains in which AI will, for the foreseeable future, be unable to match what experienced humans bring to the table, should we not focus our training on building skills in those domains? We should design our training programmes so that young professionals can learn how experts reach agreement on contentious issues and how to hold their ground against pushback.

AI will inevitably get better at anything that can be verified, and will probably do so faster than most of us expect. But the work that will continue to elude AI is the kind that has to be agreed upon or argued over, where people still have to decide among themselves what is true. To remain relevant in the age of AI, these are the skills we will need.

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Health threats

Failure to act will magnify human, financial costs

THE Lancet Commission's warning about 17 catastrophic threats to global health should be viewed as a clarion call for timely, collective and evidence-based action. Humanity's future depends not only on medical advancements but also on the choices governments make today. From climate change and antimicrobial resistance to nuclear conflict and the malicious use of artificial intelligence, these interconnected risks could inflict enormous health losses. Prevention must become a priority, not an afterthought.

Many of these hazards are already claiming lives. Air pollution, hypertension, obesity, childhood malnutrition and poor mental health impose a heavy burden on health systems. Climate change is compounding these challenges through extreme heat, food insecurity and environmental degradation, while conflicts are disrupting vaccination programmes and medicine supplies. Antimicrobial resistance threatens to render once-treatable infections increasingly dangerous.

For India, the implications are immediate and far-reaching. A vast population, unequal access to healthcare and persistent socioeconomic disparities make preparedness essential. The coexistence of childhood undernutrition and rising obesity illustrates the country's double burden of malnutrition. Rapid urbanisation, polluted air and worsening heat stress further threaten public health, particularly among poorer communities and outdoor workers. India must move beyond fragmented interventions towards a long-term strategy. Strengthening primary healthcare, expanding disease surveillance, improving nutrition and mental health services, and ensuring affordable treatment should be the central priorities. Heat action plans, cleaner transport and stricter pollution enforcement can reduce preventable illness. Schools and communities should be involved in promoting health literacy. Essential public health funding must be treated as an investment in economic stability and human well-being. The greatest danger lies in treating these threats as distant possibilities. Delay will only magnify the human and financial costs.

Activist's killing

Who protects those fighting drug menace?

THE killing of anti-drug activist Parvinder Singh, popularly known as Jhota, in Mansa shows that Punjab's battle against drugs is far from over. Shot dead during an argument with a chemist over the alleged sale of addictive medicines, Jhota's death raises troubling questions about the state's ability to act on complaints and protect those who speak out against the drug menace. Earlier killings of village anti-drug volunteers in Punjab suggest that the risks are not new. What makes the incident more disturbing is the history between the two men. In 2023, Jhota had complained against the same chemist, Ashwani Kumar, accusing him of selling banned capsules. The police registered a case against the shop owner, but also booked Jhota for allegedly taking the law into his own hands by parading him through a market with shoes around his neck. Three years later, another confrontation at the same shop ended in Jhota's death, with four of his companions injured. In 2023, anti-drug volunteers Harbhagwan Singh in Faridkot and Jasvir Singh in Bathinda also died in attacks reportedly linked to their opposition to drug peddling. These cases demand closer scrutiny.

The investigation must establish what led to the shooting and whether there was a history of threats. Equally important is finding out what happened to the earlier complaint. Was the alleged illegal sale of medicines properly investigated? Did drug-control officials inspect the shop? Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's meeting with senior officers must lead to concrete action, not another round of assurances. Complaints about illegal drug sales need timely investigation, prescription and stock records must be checked and officials found negligent held accountable.

Punjab's anti-drug campaign cannot be measured by arrests and seizures alone. It must also be judged by whether drugs become harder to obtain and people can report suspected offenders without fear.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1926

Future of agriculture

IN his interesting speech at the opening of the Agricultural Commission at Simla on Monday, Lord Linlithgow claimed that the Commission over which he presided was one that was entitled to command a wide measure of public confidence, which was requisite if they were to succeed in the task to which they had set their hands. His lordship would have been on surer ground if instead of claiming a wide measure of public confidence in advance, he had claimed a wide measure of public sympathy, and had expressed the hope that the proceedings of the Commission would be watched and the results of their deliberations awaited with the keenest and most energetic interest. India has many outstanding problems, but with the single exception of the question of freedom, which lies at the root and is an essential pre-condition of the solution to all other problems, she has no problem of either greater importance or urgency than the problem of agriculture, none with the successful tackling of which the well-being, happiness and progressive self-realisation of her millions is more intimately bound up. His Excellency the Viceroy did not in the least exaggerate the truth when in his address to the Conference of Ministers and Directors of Agriculture from the province, he said that "the Indian agriculturist is the foundation upon which the whole economic prosperity of India rests, and upon which the structure of her social and political future must in the main be built."

India must stay engaged with the US

Rubio's upcoming visit will be a reality check on the trajectory of the troubled relationship



C UDAY BHASKAR
DIRECTOR, SOCIETY FOR POLICY STUDIES



DIPLOMACY : India is a swing power in a multipolar bargain. This is the status of many major US allies. FILE PHOTO

THE India-US relationship is going through a turbulent phase, but this is not something new. The world's largest and oldest democracies have a history of bitter estrangement and prickly engagement over the decades. Currently, a number of contentious issues need to be addressed.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio is scheduled to arrive in New Delhi on October 19; the visit is aimed at emphasising the strength of the partnership. US officials have described India as one of America's most important strategic partners/allies, citing President Donald Trump's relationship with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

On the ground, the picture is more opaque. In Jodhpur last week, six US F-35As flew for the first time as part of Exercise Tarang Shakti 2026 with around 200 American personnel, the first such deployment. At the closing press conference, Air Chief Marshal AP Singh, when asked if Washington had offered the F-35, replied with a remark that made headlines: "Your people don't even let us go near the aircraft, and you are talking about selling it to us."

The IAF Chief clarified that no formal offer had been made, despite what President Trump had said earlier in the year, while the visiting US defence officer, Gen Kevin Schneider, indicated that current classification guides prevented closer cockpit access. This vignette captures the current India-US moment: high symbolism, low transfer.

Three tracks form the core of the bilateral and all of them are under stress. On the official Track 1, the language has moved from "strategic partner" to "indentured servants". On October 8, at a White House Task Force to Eliminate Fraud press meet, US Vice President JD Vance announced the suspension of eight firms from green card sponsorship under the Permanent Labour Certification (PERM) programme — TCS, Infosys, Wipro, HCLTech, Cognizant, Capgemini, Microsoft and Adobe. He disparagingly said the US could not lay off American workers and then replace them with foreign indentured servants.

The response of India's Ministry of External Affairs on October 9 was unusually sharp: "We believe that such descriptions are unwarranted and ignore the fact that Indian professionals in the United States are highly educated and skilled contributors to its economy." It added, "Resorting to terminology that carries painful historical and colonial legacy connotations is deeply offensive."

The semantic choice matters. Roughly 70 per cent of the recent H-1B visa approvals have gone to Indians who enter the US workforce as highly skilled human resources. Calling them "indentured" in 2026 reopens a historical chapter in a callous manner. Washington may say that India is among its strongest partners, but its Vice President is using the vocabulary of the plantation for the partnership that built Silicon Valley.

> The US remains India's largest export market and the anchor of the Indian diaspora.

The second strand is the statutory sword. On September 18, President Trump signed the SRIA (Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act), which authorises tariffs up to 100% on top importers of Russian oil and gas. India, which bought roughly 2.1 million barrels per day from Russia in August, is squarely in the US crosshairs.

On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York last month, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar told Rubio precisely this: "Reiterated India's interests and concerns with regard to SRIA. Also discussed the Gulf and Ukraine situations." Rubio's readout omitted SRIA and spoke of "building on the US-India strategic partnership."

That asymmetry and the irony that the US has now concluded a diesel supply arrangement with Russia (with temporary sanctions relief) have compelled New Delhi to caution Washington that the use of SRIA against India could affect bilateral ties.

Yet this US law now hangs like the sword of Damocles — not imposed, but usable at any moment to exert pressure on Delhi over energy. SRIA is bipartisan, backed by Congress, and it signals a structural shift in Washington from strategic altruism to economic nationalism.

With the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz disruptions already squeezing Saudi supplies, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman admitted what the industry already knew: India-US trade talks have "reached a plateau."

The third track is military hardware, which was seen as an indicator of the relationship's robustness, but is a case of high on joint exercise and low on critical technology transfer.

Admiral Samuel Paparo, Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, recently concluded a six-day India visit, his second this year. He said military ties would remain insulated from trade friction, but the reality is that equipment and tech transfer remains sluggish.

The GE F-414 engine co-production for LCA Mk2/AMCA (advanced medium combat aircraft) is at the commercial/negotiations stage three years after the 2023 announcement. The MQ-9B, Stryker and P-8I procurement is progressing, but at a bureaucratic pace, even as China has reportedly discussed or offered around 40 J-35 stealth fighters to Pakistan.

Given this turbulence and setbacks, Delhi needs to make an objective and prudent assessment about the way ahead. The US remains India's largest export market, the largest source of advanced technology and the anchor of the Indian diaspora that remits ideas and capital.

The critical policy approach for India is to revisit the central assumption that has guided the bilateral relationship since 2005: India and the US have corresponding security objectives vis-a-vis China, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. That assumption is no longer valid.

The Trump-Xi meeting in Washington last month eased US-China trade tensions (via an extension of the existing trade truce). It is evident that the US will now weaponise trade and tariffs, while monetising security imperatives in ways that leave allies and partners like India exposed.

India describes itself as a "resident power" in the Indo-Pacific, seeking freedom of strategic action without a bloc mentality. The US increasingly wants bloc discipline when this suits it and flexibility when it deals with Beijing.

India is not a trusted partner but a swing power in a multipolar bargain — which is the status of many major US allies. Rubio's visit is more than a review — it will be a reality check on the trajectory of the troubled India-US relationship.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"The India-US relationship has had its bumps over the pace & complexity of trade negotiations. — S Jaishankar"

A drive that made the border vanish

CHITVAN SINGH DHILLON

ON a sabbatical from work, I had an urge to return to academia, libraries and books. On the first day of my stay in England, I booked a cab from the bus stop to my hotel. The chauffeur conversed in clipped Queen's English, but his subcontinental accent gave him away. We exchanged pleasantries and parted ways.

The following day, I booked a cab to ferry me from the hotel to my college residence. Lo and behold, it was the same cabbie. He instantly recognised me, a turbaned Sikh. He loaded my baggage and we got talking. I enquired about his geographical antecedents. "Lahore", he said. "*Fir assi angrezi vich gall kyu kar rahe haan?*" I asked (Why are we speaking in English?).

He looked at me through the rear-view mirror and laughed. And just like that, quick as a flash, his English disappeared in an instant. Here we were, two *desis* conversing in chaste Punjabi in *vilayat*. As we drove through picturesque boulevards, he told me that his maternal aunts and grandparents hailed from Jalandhar and Ludhiana before Partition. I told him about my maternal grandfather, who had come from Lyallpur, near Toba Tek Singh.

A muted sense of nostalgia pervaded the atmosphere. Our grandparents had lived in places that, for them, were simply home. Then history drew a line across Punjab and turned familiar journeys into international travel. Now, decades later, two of their descendants were sitting in a taxi in Oxford, discussing the places they had left behind.

Talking about his family, he summed up his predicament in one sentence: "*Masla ae hai ki meri wife America jana chaundi hai, mein Lahore te bachche UK de ho gaye*" (My wife wants to go to America, I want to go to Lahore, and the children have become British).

We laughed out loud. I realised that this is what migration eventually does to families. Members of the first generation long for the places they were forced to abandon abruptly. The second divides its holidays between continents. The third acquires an accent, a different passport and a completely different answer to the question: "Where are you from?"

For me, Lahore is a place I have never visited. Pakistan's Punjab province exists in family folklore: Lyallpur, Gujranwala, Toba Tek Singh. Places that were once ordinary addresses and now have a mythical appeal buried in the deepest recesses of my grandparents' memory. For the cabbie, Jalandhar and Ludhiana perhaps had a similar resonance.

Before we knew it, the cab reached my college residence. I paid the fare. He helped unload my three suitcases. "*Milde rawangey!*" he chimed (We will meet again). I smiled.

In Oxford, of all places, a turbaned Sikh from India and a Punjabi from Pakistan had found each other in a taxi. For 20 minutes, the border had ceased to exist. And, mercifully, so had my English.

The writer is an officer of the Indian Economic Service

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Protest sites near power centres

With reference to 'A democracy needs its *kopagriha*'; people have the right to protest at Jantar Mantar because this site is close to Parliament. Democracies across the world prove that protest sites must be near centres of power: Trafalgar Square and Parliament Square in London; France's Place de la Bastille in Paris: Union Square Park in Manhattan, New York city; Taksim Square, Istanbul. If Westminster can tolerate 250,000 people shouting near Parliament, if Washington can allow protest at Lafayette Square without closing metro stations, then why Delhi needs 40,000 personnel, Internet shutdown and cancelled trains to stop citizens from reaching Jantar Mantar? Our democracy is becoming allergic to its own people. The public has a right to protest at Jantar Mantar because Parliament is a temple of democracy.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Rights merely on paper

Refer to 'A democracy needs its *kopagriha*' ; drawing on constitutional principles and Supreme Court judgments, one can argue that the right to assemble peacefully cannot remain merely theoretical, when designated protest sites are inaccessible. Restrictions must be reasonable, proportionate and justified, rather than imposed arbitrarily. A transparent, accessible protest policy, independent review of police decisions and time-bound permissions could strengthen accountability. Democracy demands rights not merely on paper, it needs meaningful spaces where citizens can exercise these rights freely.

SIKANDAR BANSAL, SHIMLA

Tactic to dilute right to dissent

The decision to denotify Jantar Mantar as a designated protest site raises a constitutional question that extends beyond traffic management and administrative convenience. The places where citizens are permitted to demonstrate are as important as whether they are permitted to demonstrate at all. Public protest derives much of its democratic significance from visibility, accessibility and proximity to institutions of power. Delhi requires a transparent and predictable framework that distinguishes peaceful assembly from genuine threats to security.

YASH PAL RALHAN, JALANDHAR

Weakening governance

Apropos of 'Dissent hub Jantar Mantar denotified as protest site'; while managing public order and urban convenience are valid concerns, shifting agitations to distant outskirts of the city borders on suppressing the fundamental right to freedom of expression and assembly. The government must strike a thoughtful balance between maintaining civic order and preserving open spaces for airing public grievances. Depriving citizens of a central, accessible platform for peaceful protest weakens democratic governance. The authorities should reconsider this abrupt decision and ensure that a viable, central space remains available for citizens to make their voices heard.

VANDANA, CHANDIGARH

SIR fair in Punjab

Refer to '13.6 L voters deleted in SIR'; all political parties have expressed satisfaction with the transparent conduct of the SIR in Punjab. At the ground level, the BLOs deserve special appreciation for their honest, fair, dedicated and cooperative efforts. In many other states, where there were objections and doubts, the BLAs tried to browbeat the BLOs. No eligible voter can be denied the right to vote. A good number of voters were added back after being deleted from the draft that demonstrates the fair and focused conduct of the election commission.

GS MANN, NANGAL

Rectify errors in electoral rolls

Refer to 'The unequal burden imposed by SIR'; once voting rights have been granted to registered voters after proper verification by the Election Commission, the presumption of electoral eligibility is in their favour under law. That being so, the burden should be on the Election Commission to prove eligibility. Disenfranchisement should be done only after the affected voters have been given an opportunity to be heard. Wherever needed, course correction must be done.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.
These should be cogently written and can be sent by **e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com**

The tech-talent irreversible tango



DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

THE Trump administration has announced a freeze on visas for foreign workers under the permanent labour certification programme. This move will affect top American technology firms as well as leading Indian outsourcing companies. The justification is that the technology industry has misused the employment-based labour programmes to replace American workers. The new restrictions are likely to adversely affect the hiring of foreign technology workers, including a large number of Indians, who used H-1B visas to earn a green card and ultimately citizenship.

This is not the first time that the US has introduced such protectionist measures. Successive Presidents have dangled the H-1B visa quotas for domestic political purposes. In 2008, President Obama had announced ending tax breaks for companies that shipped jobs overseas and so did Joe Biden.

Historically, American technology companies have looked to leverage the availability of cheap labour. In the 1960s, they did so with semiconductor manufacturing, which was heavily labour-intensive work back then, and later they did so with software services and programming.

Robert Noyce, president of Fairchild Semiconductor, visited India and countries in the region in the 1960s to establish manufacturing facilities. India said no, so he went to Hong Kong. Noyce founded Intel a few years later. Other US companies chose Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan for electronics and IC (integrated circuits) manufacturing, making these countries hubs of technology manufacturing over the next two decades.

India caught up in the 1970s and 1980s with semiconductor design, software services and programming for US clients.

India's engagement with the American technology industry has undergone several iterations and evolved with the needs of the market.

It started in a small way with 'body shopping', wherein Indian engineers worked for US clients on a contract basis for short periods and returned after the job got completed.

In the next stage, this grew into an onsite model in which Indian companies sent workers who were embedded in the workforce of US companies while working on long-term projects onsite.

As Indian firms gained the confidence of their clients and communication infrastructure improved, some of this onsite work began to be executed from India. This came to be known as the offshore model.

Soon, American companies realised that instead of hiring Indians in the US and depending on Indian companies, they could directly hire Indians and set up operations in India. This was even more cost-effective.



INTERDEPENDENT: The process of technology outsourcing is deeply entrenched in the US and India. PTI

Microsoft set the ball rolling in the late 1990s, and a host of other tech firms followed. So did banks, insurers, logistics companies, airlines, legal firms, global consulting and auditing giants and others. They all moved a bulk of their backroom operations or business processes to Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai, Noida, etc.

The outsourcing business got further diversified in the past two decades with outsourcing of engineering, R&D and product development. Large corporations set up dedicated units in India to handle some of their core operations.

This was a major shift, moving away from cost savings alone to innovation, research and IP (intellectual property) creation. Today, almost every Fortune 500 company has a fully-owned Global Capability Centre (GCC) in Bangalore or Hyderabad. In 2025, the count of such centres was over 2100, employing 2.36 million people and generating revenues close to $100 billion.

> If visa restrictions don't allow firms to hire Indian engineers in the US, they will recruit more of them in India and there will be more GCCs operating here.

In every technological transformation — mainframe to mini- and microcomputer, internet and dotcom, Y2K, mobile and social media, cloud and big data — Indian technology companies have played a critical role.

Now they are doing the same with the rollout of agentic artificial intelligence (AI) and deep tech deployment across sectors.

So, the process of technology outsourcing is deeply entrenched in the US and India, and is irreversible. The US and India are interdependent. Big tech companies need Indian engineers and tech talent for faster rollout and global support, scaling up and other advantages.

Indian companies need American business to sustain revenues, access operating systems (Windows, Apple iOS, Android) and cloud infrastructure for development. Clearly, it is a two-way street.

Over the years, Indian engineers have demonstrated clear advantages, such as their availability in large numbers, which helps companies scale up, knowledge of the English language, adaptability in different working environments and a problem-solving approach.

Apart from the outsourcing business, the technology powerhouse of Silicon Valley is largely run by talent from immigrants from India, China and other countries. The talent pipeline from American universities to the technology industry is populated by students from these very countries. Dozens of start-ups in the valley are founded or run by Indian-origin entrepreneurs.

The market logic is simple. Tech businesses will follow talent. If visa restrictions don't allow them to hire Indian engineers in the US, they will hire more of them in India and there will be more GCCs operating from India. US companies may also choose to expand in other markets, say Europe, and work with an international workforce, including those from India.

If opportunities arise in markets other than the US, the Indian workforce will take advantage of that. They may stay in India and those in the US may return if challenging and attractive opportunities arise for them in India.

So, this tango between talent and technology firms may take a different form, but it is not going to end.

A question that keeps popping up whenever the visa issue becomes hot is whether Indian companies continue to depend on western markets so much. Indian companies started with services exports and outsourcing because there was no domestic market for technology products and services. Nor was there an ecosystem that supported local technology and product development.

This has changed in the past two decades. There is a sizeable local market and support systems for start-ups, such as access to venture capital. As this grows further and India market matures, the dependence on outsourcing and uncertainties associated with it will come down.

In this process, the experience of outsourced product development, IP creation and research accumulated over the years will come in handy. India is in the midst of this transformation.

What the police gain by allowing a protest



SATISH KUMAR SHARMA
FORMER DGP, GUJARAT

BACK in the 1980s, police officers in Gujarat found an accountability-dodging way of dealing with unwanted marches and processions. It went like this — first deny the permission but if the marchers persist, let them pass with police *bandobast* and after it is over, file FIR against the organisers for the minor offence of the violation of police orders.

It avoided public-police confrontation but eroded the authority of the police so much that few took the denial of a permission to take out a rally seriously. It had adverse implications for law and order.

In 1985, in the midst of communal tension when parts of Ahmedabad city were under curfew, police denied permission to take out the annual rath yatra but did little to stop it.

As a result, people came out in large numbers, defying curfew, and joined the procession. When the yatra entered the communally sensitive Dariyapur area, there was trouble. Communal clashes broke out and continued for many days.

This background helped the police in dealing with the issue of permitting rath yatra in 2002 in the aftermath of the Godhra riots. The riots, which had begun in February, had continued to rock Ahmedabad through the second week of May.

A new team of officers, of which I was a member as Additional Commissioner of Police, restored peace.

But it was a fragile peace and the atmosphere was not conducive for risking a one-mile long rath yatra procession on its 14-km long route that passed through city's most communally sensitive areas.

Our apprehension was that if the yatra was disturbed, our gains in restoration of peace would be wiped out. But on the other hand, it was riskier to invite a confrontation with the public, which was sure to follow if the permission was denied.

So, the rath yatra was allowed but the police negotiated with the organisers and reduced the number of vehicles in the procession and planned the *bandobast* meticulously.



ROUTINE: It is the duty of the police to uphold people's fundamental right of assembling peacefully. FILE

For the first time, we tried a dynamic deployment of forces, which involved repeated shifting and redeployment of manpower to ensure their maximum concentration on the stretch through which the yatra was passing at any given point of time.

The experiment was successful. The rath yatra passed peacefully. It concluded even before sunset, ie, hours before the usual time. "Peace is real", went the message and the decks were cleared for the timely holding of Assembly elections, which were due later in the year.

> By allowing a march, the police not only avoid confrontation but also express their good intent, which builds a bridge of trust.

In 2017, during the Gujarat Assembly elections, Hardik Patel, leader of the ongoing Patidar agitation for reservation, sought police permission for a rally in Surat.

I was police commissioner there and Surat was the epicentre of the agitation, which had been going on since 2015 and had often taken a violent turn. My first instinct was to deny the permission because if the rally turned violent, it would impact the peaceful conduct of the polling.

We could legitimately disallow the rally because though supporting Congress covertly, Hardik was neither contesting the election nor his outfit had officially aligned with any political party.

But if we denied the permission, confrontation was sure to follow, vitiating the atmosphere for peaceful conduct of polling.

I discussed the question with my officers. All of them favoured allowing the rally. So, we permitted it with the condition that it would not be used for canvassing. The rally passed peacefully.

In November 2023, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner of London, Sir Mark Rowley, faced a similar dilemma when permission was sought for a pro-Palestinian march in London on Armistice Day. The then Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, publicly advised against giving permission, but Sir Mark realised that confrontation between the police and marchers posed a greater threat to peace than the march itself. He allowed the march and it passed peacefully. It is the duty of the police to uphold people's fundamental right of assembling peacefully.

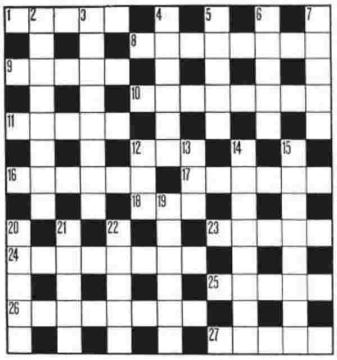
It should disallow a march only in exceptional circumstances and chiefly to avoid violence by or against the marchers if there is reliable intelligence.

By allowing a march, the police not only avoid confrontation but also express their good intent, which helps in building a bridge of trust with the agitators/ organisers.

It gives the police an upper hand in laying down conditions for the conduct of the march and enforcing them and puts the organisers under a legal and moral obligation to cooperate with the police.

And it leaves the police free to devote their energy and resources in ensuring that the march passes peacefully.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Come into conflict (5)
8 Lawless (8)
9 Austere (5)
10 Unexpected financial gain (8)
11 Natural ability (5)
12 Recently made (3)
16 Early enough (2,4)
17 When one chooses (2,4)
18 Plaything (3)
23 Recant (5)
24 Definite (8)
25 Poisonous (5)
26 Tip (8)
27 Great pain (5)

DOWN

2 Not to mention (3,5)
3 Italian island (8)
4 Burning (2,4)
5 Group of lions (5)
6 Large group of fish (5)
7 A graduated measure (5)
12 After all deductions (3)
13 Route (3)
14 Farewell performance (4,4)
15 Breed of guide dog (8)
19 Recently (2,4)
20 Theatrical (5)
21 Freely available (2,3)
22 A corrupting influence (5)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1Bogged down, 6 Rasp, 10 Chaos, 11 Extrovert, 12 Tell-tale, 13 Set on, 15 Omitted, 17 Standin,19 Sceptic, 21 Attempt, 22 Quake, 24 Interval, 27 Exonerate, 28 Brook, 29 Teem, 30 Topsy-turvy.

Down: 1 Back, 2 Grapevine, 3 Easel, 4 Diehard, 5 Witness, 7 Adept, 8 Put an end to, 9 Constant, 14 Consequent, 16 Tattered, 18 Demeanour, 20 Chicago, 21 Aptness, 23 At one, 25 Rebut, 26 Okay.

SU DO KU

4		1		6				
	9	6			3			
3			1					
	8				5	7		9
	5						1	
2		7	8				5	
					8			6
			2			8	7	
				4		5		3

HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

5	7	9	1	4	6	2	3	8
6	2	4	3	7	8	5	1	9
8	1	3	5	2	9	4	6	7
7	5	2	9	6	1	3	8	4
1	3	6	2	8	4	7	9	5
4	9	8	7	3	5	1	2	6
2	4	5	6	9	3	8	7	1
3	6	1	8	5	7	9	4	2
9	8	7	4	1	2	6	5	3

CALENDAR

OCTOBER 14, 2026, WEDNESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Ashwin Shaka 22
- Ashwin Parvishte 28
- Hijari 1448
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 4, up to 1:14 pm
- Ayushman Yoga up to 8:39 pm
- Anuradha Nakshatra up to 4:03 am
- Moon in Scorpio sign
- Gandmoola start 4:03 am

FORECAST

SUNSET: WEDNESDAY 17:53 HRS
SUNRISE: THURSDAY 06:25 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	33	20
New Delhi	34	21
Amritsar	29	21
Bathinda	33	18
Jalandhar	29	20
Ludhiana	30	20
Bhiwani	32	20
Hisar	32	20
Sirsa	32	20
Dharamsala	23	16
Manali	20	09
Shimla	23	14
Srinagar	22	11
Jammu	23	17
Kargil	20	05
Leh	16	02
Dehradun	30	22
Mussoorie	19	13

TEMPERATURE IN °C

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

Open Skies

India's emerging satellite internet market presents a test of whether the country can reconcile national security, commercial competition and the public interest. The confrontation between Elon Musk's Starlink and Mukesh Ambani's Reliance is significant not simply because two of the world's wealthiest entrepreneurs are involved, but because the rules governing access to a strategically important market will shape its future.

This is where the commercial contest acquires a wider significance. Reliance Jio transformed India's telecom market by making mobile data dramatically cheaper, forcing competitors to respond. Starlink brings a different proposition: satellite connectivity that can reach places conventional networks struggle to serve. The two models could complement each other, but they could also compete for customers, infrastructure partnerships and regulatory advantages. Ambani's position deserves scrutiny because Reliance is already a powerful force in telecommunications, retail and digital services. However, market dominance alone does not establish that the group has obstructed a rival. Musk's rants of protectionism require evidence, not merely the dubious authority of the man making them. Equally, the absence of proven wrongdoing by Reliance should not prevent scrutiny of whether India's regulatory framework gives every qualified entrant a fair opportunity.

The government's responsibility is therefore central. Satellite communications involve legitimate security concerns, including the potential misuse of equipment and the difficulty of monitoring networks operating across national boundaries. India cannot be expected to waive safeguards simply because a company operates in numerous other countries or because its owner feels entitled. Nor should regulatory approval be treated as an indefinite privilege that can be withheld without clear explanations.

A transparent process would specify security requirements, explain the stages of approval and apply consistent standards to Starlink, Eutelsat OneWeb and Jio Satellite Communications. Where decisions are delayed, regulators should communicate the reasons and provide a credible path towards resolution. This would protect national interests while reducing suspicions that commercial influence can determine market access.

The dispute also exposes a policy dilemma over spectrum allocation. In 2025, Reliance and the Bharti group challenged aspects of the proposed satellite-spectrum fee structure, arguing that satellite operators should not enjoy an advantage over terrestrial telecom companies that have paid heavily for spectrum. This is a legitimate question of competitive fairness. Satellite and terrestrial networks have different technical and economic characteristics. The objective should be a rational, technology-sensitive framework, not identical rules regardless of circumstances.

The stakes extend beyond the fortunes of three companies. With satellite communications increasingly important to disaster response, strategic infrastructure and rural connectivity, India must retain control over security-sensitive networks while remaining open to technological innovation. The regulatory framework offers an opportunity to establish predictable rules that encourage investment without compromising public interest.

Ultimately, neither Musk's crass posturing nor the domestic incumbents' commercial interests should determine the outcome. India must demonstrate that security scrutiny is genuine, regulation is impartial and competition is encouraged on merit. The measure of success will not be which billionaire prevails, but whether consumers gain reliable connectivity at affordable prices without compromising national security.

Sweet and sour

India's festive economy depends on more than consumer confidence. It also rests on the affordability of the ingredients, gifts and rituals through which families express generosity and belonging. Rising sugar prices therefore expose a policy dilemma: how should India balance energy security with the affordability of food? The timing is significant. Durga Puja, Navratri, Dussehra and Diwali bring a seasonal surge in demand for sweets and confectionery. Manufacturers and retailers face higher input costs just when customers are preparing to spend. Large businesses may negotiate bulk purchases or absorb some of the increase. Small sweet shops have fewer options: raise prices, reduce margins or offer smaller portions. Weather-related production losses and depleted inventories have tightened domestic supplies, while festive demand has intensified pressure on prices. But the debate cannot end there. India's drive to achieve 20 per cent ethanol blending in petrol, known as E20, has created competing demands for sugarcane. Diverting cane juice and molasses towards fuel can reduce the quantity available for sugar production, particularly when harvests disappoint.

The policy has a compelling rationale. India imports substantial quantities of crude oil, leaving its economy vulnerable to international price shocks and geopolitical disruption. The conflict and instability in West Asia underline the strategic attraction of reducing petroleum dependence through domestically produced ethanol. Yet energy security cannot be pursued without considering consequences for food supplies. The government disputes the claim that ethanol diversion is the principal cause of the sugar-price surge, pointing to lower production, weather damage, festive demand and market manipulation. That distinction matters. E20 should not be blamed for every increase in sugar prices, particularly when the government says the share of sugar diverted to ethanol has declined. Nevertheless, the competing uses of sugarcane deserve scrutiny whenever domestic supplies tighten.

The answer is not to abandon ethanol blending, but to make the policy more responsive to agricultural conditions. Diversion targets should reflect credible production forecasts, inventory levels and expected domestic consumption. When supplies become precarious, the government must be prepared to adjust the allocation between fuel and food. Transparent data on production, stocks and diversion would help establish whether intervention is justified and prevent political claims from substituting for evidence. For affluent households, costlier sweets may be a minor inconvenience. For families with limited disposable incomes, higher prices can make customary purchases harder to afford. Festivals are not merely occasions for consumption; they reinforce family relationships and community participation. Economic pressure can make that participation more unequal.

India cannot control the weather or insulate itself entirely from geopolitical turmoil. It can, however, coordinate its energy and agricultural policies more intelligently. The success of E20 should not be measured solely by the volume of ethanol blended into petrol. It must also be judged by whether the benefits of reduced oil dependence outweigh the costs imposed on food affordability. Energy security is important, but it should not come at the expense of the household's ability to celebrate.

Losing our kidneys

Knowledge of the nitty-gritty of the ecosystem has almost completely been obliterated from institutional, administrative and public memory. Therefore, there is a pressing need to remind all the stakeholders, especially the administrators, that this ecosystem and the community that earns a livelihood and so works to preserve it, bring down the city's cost of living, even as it serves as its lungs and kidneys





The 25th anniversary of the Ramsar recognition of the East Kolkata Wetlands as a 'Wetland of International Importance' went almost unnoticed by the citizens of this more than three-century-old city, which owes its sustainability in a large measure to the wetlands.

Anchoring the municipal waste disposal of more than 10 million people, the city sends the bulk of its sewage to the wetlands for treatment. Kolkata is unusually blessed with what used to be earlier called the Salt Water Lakes that went on to become a part of what is known as the wetland ecosystem. A long-time recipient of city sewage, these wetlands were much larger than the 12,500-hectare boundary that is today recognised as the administrative space of the ecosystem.

To travel back in time, the British thought of the wetlands as a site for sewage treatment and solid waste management and, in 1865, formed the Salt Lake Reclamation Company to utilise these wetlands for productive purposes, especially agriculture.

In 1879, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation granted use rights of over one square mile of 'Crown' (tax-free) land to Baboo Bhabanath Sen, a Bengali entrepreneur who started what became known as the practice of co-recycling, using city sewage and solid waste that was mostly ~ about 90 per cent ~ organic in nature.

The initiative on the Dhapa Square Mile was a practical response involving waste utilisation and preventing solid waste and sewage from flooding back into the city, especially during the monsoons. In the process, it prevented the frequent cholera outbreaks and deaths of many of the resident British population.

Sewage lines would bring in grey water into a space that was in the form of elongated, finger-shaped ponds, alternated by a cluster of finger-shaped substrates laid out by the Dhapa Light Municipal Railway, which brought garbage from the city and spread it in long, finger-like shapes.

After city sewage was utilised to grow fish in ponds for six months, leading to recovery of nutrients for fish production, the fish crop was harvested and sold in the markets. The remaining water was then utilised to grow vegetables, round the year. This was co-recycling, possibly the earliest such known practice in any metropolis.

A fine crop of farmers evolved through experience and achieved some of the most nuanced peri-urban farm practices. In the process they upheld a livelihood that contributed immensely to strengthening the relationship between the core city and its peri-urban fringe.

In 1994, The Ramsar Convention Manual: A Guide to the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, written by Tim J. Davis, carried 17 case studies of tutorial wetlands around the world. The East Calcutta Wetlands (its former name) was the only entry from India.

The world recognised the value of these wetlands through the eyes and writings of late ecologist Dhrubajyoti Ghosh, whose untiring advocacy for international recognition brought in an attentive international audience, while most of the intelligentsia of the city chose to forget the services rendered by these wetlands. The irony was that there was small but consistent coverage of these wetlands and their value in the media, led by *The Statesman*.

What happened in Dhapa is called Integrated Farming System (IFS) in the modern language of agriculture. Looking back on the wetlands after a quarter century of recognition, it is obvious that the knowledge of the nitty-gritty of the ecosystem has almost completely been obliterated from institutional, administrative and public memory.

Therefore, there is a pressing need to remind all the stakeholders, especially the administrators, that this ecosystem and the community that earns a livelihood and so works to preserve it, bring down the city's cost of living (fish and vegetables at the doorstep), even as it serves as its lungs and kidneys.



DHRUBA DAS GUPTA

The writer is an ecologist, nature educator, writer and grassroots activist working in the East Kolkata Wetlands

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 55 per cent of the world's population resides in urban areas and urban and peri-urban agriculture offers a fundamental strategy for building the resilience of a city's food supply.

In West Bengal's uneven but continually urbanising landscape, the importance of the peri-urban cannot be overstated.

The most important guarantor of the sustainability of cities and towns lies in the proximity of the food production space and the effectiveness of waste management in the urban ecosystem. It is here that the IFS has a key role to play.

The IFS is a sustainable agricultural system that integrates livestock, crop production, fish, poultry, tree crops, plantation crops and other systems that benefit each other.

It is based on the concept that 'there is no waste' and 'waste is only a misplaced resource. "This means that waste from one component becomes an input for another part of the system.

The key components of the IFS are enhancing productivity per unit area, proper waste management, generation of continuous income round the year, reducing use of chemicals, maximisation of yield of all component enterprises and soil health management.

The best way to ensure conservation of the East Kolkata Wetlands, so that the sustainability of the city as an urban habitat continues unhindered, is to practice the IFS in an effective way all over the wetlands. Years of creeping urbanisation and administrative apathy, along with the unending greed of realtors and politicians, have continuously downplayed the importance of this ecosystem and the valuable services it provides, including employment.

Urban disruptions have impeded the smooth flow of sewage and created a sewage crisis. Canals now urgently need to be restored and the sewage flow brought back to enable implementation of IFS on a large scale.

Positive efforts by local institutions such as a local farm science centre, Sasya Shyamala Krishi Vigyan Kendra, are an important first step. In collaboration with Hyderabad-based ICAR-National Academy of Agricultural Research Management (NAARM), efforts have been initiated to train and build capacity of the wetland farmers to do IFS and also build institutions that will help in market linkage. This is a regeneration of the old wisdom of waste utilisation in an organised manner, linking the wetland community, scientists and local community-based organisations.

What is urgently needed for the success of this initiative is the restoration of sewage flow by the administration, enabling excavation of sewage-carrying canals at the earliest. Only then can the base resource of the ecosystem be ensured and, alongside, the sustainability of the wetlands and the survival of the city in more ways than one.

Việt Nam News

Planning strategy gives Hà Nội room to raise stature

Hà Nội now stands at a new turning point with a 100-year planning vision for the capital. Dr. Đào Ngọc Nghiêm, Vice President of the Viet Nam Urban Development Planning Association and former Director of the Hà Nội Department of Planning and Architecture, explains how the latest plan demands greater resources, urban renewal and a better quality of life for residents.

Right after peace was restored, planning the capital received special attention. President Ho Chi Minh personally reviewed the plan drawn up in 1961 and instructed that planning must go one step ahead, to avoid building something only to tear it down and start again.

Since then, Hà Nội has been through nine rounds of planning. Each round was never simply a matter of organising space but always involved two parallel elements: the economic development orientation of Viet Nam, the north and Hà Nội in each period, and changes in the capital's boundaries and scale.

The 1973 plan, for instance, was drawn up as the country prepared for reunification, when Hà Nội had to serve as the solid home front with a stable economy. By the 1998 plan, amid the city's expanding links with the north and the Red River Delta, Hà Nội shifted towards developing both banks of the Red River. In 2003, Long Biên District was established, the first time the central urban area crossed the river to the north.

A crucial feature of the current 100-year vision is the integration of the economic, cultural and social fields into a single unified whole. Hà Nội is leading the country in this integrated approach. On that basis, it must give the plan concrete form through 81 further plans, including an underground space plan, zoning plans and sectoral plans.

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First, it has a 100-year vision, whereas previous plans looked ahead only 40 or 50 years. To ensure feasibility, the vision is divided into stages: short-term to 2035, medium-term to 2065 and then the long term. The second and critical innovation is the development structure. Whereas Hà Nội previously developed as a cluster of the central city, satellite towns and eco-towns, this time the model is multi-polar, multi-centre and multi-tier. It takes shape as nine economic growth poles, nine centres and three tiers ~ not only above ground but also underground and elevated space ~ with an emphasis on transit-oriented development and special economic zones.

In the past, satellite towns still depended on the central city. This time, under the multi-polar model, the growth poles can be more proactive and independent. The plan also places greater emphasis on urban renewal and positions Hà Nội in relation to the Capital Region, the Red River Delta and the Northern Key Economic Region.

Hà Nội leads the way in researching underground space. As far back as the French colonial period, many public works and villas had basements. After peace was restored, use developed step by step, and in 2022 the city raised the matter of tapping underground space to a depth of about 15 metres.

The important point now is that underground works must form an interconnected system serving not only transport but also economic, service and commercial development.

There have also been significant changes in elevated space. Whereas Hà Nội's tallest colonial-era building was about seven storeys, there later appeared 11-storey and then 44-storey buildings, with orientations towards even taller works. So when we speak of multi-tier development, we cannot look at Hà Nội only at ground level.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Valid questions

Sir, V.Jayaraman's letter (*The Statesman*, 11 October) conveniently equates questioning the Election Commission with undermining democracy.

In any democracy, demanding accountability is not a personal attack, and allegations of electoral irregularities cannot be dismissed merely because they are voiced at press conferences rather than in court.

The crucial question is whether the EC addresses legitimate concerns transparently and impartially. Undeniably, removing duplicate, deceased or ineligible voters is necessary to maintain the sanctity of the electoral rolls; but ensuring that genuine voters are not arbitrarily deleted is equally vital. The question is often raised why the issue has not been taken to the Court. However, a legal mandate is no substitute for public confidence, and judicial scrutiny of an exercise does not grant every aspect of its implementation immunity from criticism.

Therefore, the real issue is not whether the Opposition or the CEC deserves our unquestioning faith, but whether every Indian voter can trust the electoral process.

Electoral integrity must be demonstrated by evidence, not merely asserted through press statements. As a Constitutional institution, the Election Commission's status demands greater accountability and those who question it may not be brushed aside as "anti-national".

Yours, etc., L Gopalakrishnan,
Kolkata, 11 October.

Safeguards

Sir, In upholding the Election Commission's authority to conduct a Special Intensive Revision (SIR), did the Supreme Court err by giving greater weight to the EC's constitutional status and stated purpose than to the foreseeable risks of exclusion? Its misreading, if any, was not in recognising the EC's power to revise electoral rolls; but perhaps in entrusting a process capable of disenfranchising citizens to administrative discretion without robust safeguards against wrongful exclusion.

A legitimate objective ~ removing ineligible entries ~ cannot, by itself, validate every means adopted to achieve it. The Court's task was not merely to validate the power, but to rigorously test the safeguards governing its exercise.

Yours, etc., R.Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai, 12 October.

Many hats

Sir, I refer to "Patekar's legacy". The actor was a national-level rifle shooter, served as captain of the Indian Territorial Army, was a forensic sketch artist for Mumbai police and a great philanthropist. He truly lived a life that defined what it means to wear many hats.

Although he was well-known to millions of fans for his powerful performances, his real brilliance was found off-screen. He lived by the principles of social justice and patriotism that he expressed in his speeches, making him a unique model of social activity. He supported farmers affected by the drought and their widows through the NAAM Foundation.

While others were only making speeches, he went to their communities, gave them cheques, and had their houses restored. Nana Patekar demonstrated that stardom can entail service at a time when it was only associated with luxury.

Yours, etc., Bal Govind,
Noida, 10 October.

Ballot to barricades is a dangerous drift



TUHIN A. SINHA

India is witnessing an unsettling contest in which political opposition increasingly risks being reduced to a competition in disruption. The Congress and the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) appear to be converging on a common strategy of street mobilisation, confrontation with constitutional institutions and relentless amplification of allegations. The question is no longer merely whether the Opposition can challenge the government, but whether it is willing to respect the democratic processes through which governments are elected and disputes are resolved.

The BJP's recent by-poll victories in Assam and West Bengal, including in minority-dominated constituencies, have challenged entrenched political assumptions. These results reaffirm that voters cannot be taken for granted. Faced with a BJP that continues to demonstrate electoral resilience, the Opposition appears increasingly tempted to substitute street spectacle for a persuasive political alternative.

The examples of Nepal and Bangladesh offer a cautionary tale. Rahul Gandhi has previously invoked youth-led upheavals abroad while addressing young Indians. But India is a constitutional democracy with an elected Parliament, an independent judiciary and established mechanisms for peaceful political change. Importing the vocabulary of street-driven regime change into Indian politics risks blurring the distinction between democratic protest and destabilisation. Disruption cannot become a substitute for democratic persuasion.

Consider Rahul Gandhi's reported remarks following his interaction with the President. Expressing surprise that the President had not rebutted his allegations of vote theft after receiving a memorandum betrays a fundamental distinction: receiving a representation is not the same as endorsing its contents. Constitutional office-holders routinely receive memoranda without certifying the claims they contain. The President's courtesy cannot be converted into an implied admission of the Opposition's allegations.

This is not the first controversy involving Rahul Gandhi's interpretation of constitutional institutions. His earlier remarks concerning the Supreme Court's Rafale proceedings led to an apology. Political leaders have a responsibility to distinguish between allegations, demonstrable facts and what constitutional authorities have actually said. Repeating an accusation does not make it true.

The present protests raise another troubling question: why escalate street mobilisation when the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls is already under the Supreme Court's scrutiny? If the Opposition possesses compelling evidence of electoral wrongdoing, it should present it before the Court. If the Election Commission's explanations are inadequate, the shortcomings must be demonstrated. The judicial process must be allowed to run its course.

By seeking to amplify political pressure while proceedings are underway, the Opposition risks creating the impression that it is more interested in shaping the public narrative than awaiting judicial findings. A courtroom is where evidence is tested; the street cannot become an alternative route to a judicial outcome. Constitutional institutions must be permitted to function without being overshadowed by political brinkmanship.

The Modi government was justified in taking firm action to prevent demonstrations from degenerating into a law-and-order crisis in the national capital. Governance requires prevention, not merely a response after disorder erupts. When protesters threaten to breach barricades, obstruct essential routes or disrupt public institutions, the administration cannot remain a passive spectator.

Delhi is not an open-air political theatre available for indefinite occupation by any party seeking confrontation. It is the capital of the Republic, where



hospitals, courts, schools, offices, transport networks and diplomatic missions must continue to function. Millions of ordinary citizens cannot be made collateral damage in a partisan political contest.

The police have a duty to maintain public order, enforce lawful restrictions and prevent foreseeable escalation. The claim that every firm police response constitutes an assault on democracy distorts the relationship between liberty and responsibility. The right to protest is not a licence to paralyse public life, disregard lawful orders or compel constitutional institutions to submit to street pressure. Peaceful democratic engagement is welcome; disorder and unlawful obstruction must invite firm, lawful action.

Social media has made this challenge more acute. Viral videos, slogans and short-form content can create an impression of certainty long before evidence is examined. From the Citizenship Amendment Act to reservation policies and now electoral-roll revision, complex issues have repeatedly been reduced to inflammatory narratives. Young Indians deserve facts and context, not to be mobilised through misinformation for the political ambitions of others.

The costs of perpetual agitation extend beyond law and order. India is investing in infrastructure, manufacturing, energy security and technological competitiveness. Where is the Opposition's credible roadmap for employment, economic growth and preparing young Indians for an economy transformed by artificial intelligence? When every institutional disagreement becomes a conspiracy and every administrative action is portrayed as repression, substantive debate is crowded out by manufactured outrage.

Public patience, too, has limits. Citizens have jobs to reach, schools to attend, businesses to run and families to care for. Public spaces belong to everyone, not exclusively to professional political protesters. When agitation becomes an end in itself, it ceases to serve the public and begins imposing costs upon it.

India needs an Opposition that scrutinises the government, exposes wrongdoing and offers credible alternatives. But criticism must be backed by evidence, allegations must be established and political mobilisation must remain within the boundaries of democratic responsibility. No party can claim a monopoly over democracy or demand that constitutional rules be suspended whenever they become inconvenient.

India stands at a decisive inflection point. The Viksit Bharat mission requires institutional confidence, sustained economic momentum and a national focus on the opportunities ahead. The country cannot afford to have its aspirations derailed by a politics of perpetual confrontation.

The choice before India is between democratic competition that strengthens institutions and a politics that risks weakening them through relentless disruption. A confident democracy accommodates dissent while enforcing the law. It does not confuse anarchy with accountability.

Viksit Bharat cannot be built by paralysing the present. It must be built by debating the future—and refusing to let the politics of anarchy derail the aspirations of a nation.

The writer is a national spokesperson of BJP and an acclaimed author.

Recognising a remarkable life

SANTHOSH MATHEW

Civilians in Israel, civilians in Gaza, children on both sides have a right to live. These words from Navi Pillay, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, capture the spirit of her lifelong struggle for human dignity. In a world torn apart by wars and violence, her message is simple: every human life matters and no one should be denied justice because of their identity or nationality.

Navanethem "Navi" Pillay, a South African jurist of Indian origin, has won the 2026 Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to promote peace and international law. Her recognition brings global attention to a woman who has spent decades fighting racial discrimination, defending political prisoners and helping strengthen international justice. Her life shows that the fight for peace begins with the protection of human rights.

Born in Durban, South Africa, on 23 September 1941, Pillay grew up in a modest family. Her father was a bus driver, while her mother looked after their eight children. Her grandfather had migrated from Tamil Nadu to South Africa as an indentured labourer. The family faced financial difficulties, and the racial discrimination of the apartheid era made life harder for people of Indian origin and Black South Africans.

Pillay refused to let these barriers determine her future. She studied law at the University of Natal and, in 1967, opened her own legal practice. At a time when racial discrimination shaped almost every aspect of life in South Africa, she stood beside those who challenged the system. She defended anti-apartheid activists and political prisoners and spoke out against the ill-treatment of people in custody.

For Pillay, the law was not simply a profession. It was a way to protect people who had little power to defend themselves. Her work taught her an important lesson: justice must be available to everyone, not just the rich and powerful.

She later pursued higher studies at Harvard Law School, earning a master's degree in law and a doctorate in 1988. In 1995, she became a judge of the South African High Court, marking another milestone in her remarkable career. Her contribution to international justice became especially important during her service at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. She served as its president from 1999 to 2003. The tribunal was established to



prosecute those responsible for the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which hundreds of thousands of people were killed.

One of the most important legal developments associated with the tribunal was the recognition that rape and sexual violence could form part of genocide. The landmark Akayesu judgment helped establish this principle. It was a major step towards recognising the suffering of women during wars and ensuring that sexual violence could not be ignored in the pursuit of justice.

Pillay went on to serve as a judge at the International Criminal Court from 2003 to 2008. She then became the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, holding the position from 2008 to 2014. In this role, she raised concerns about human rights violations in conflict zones and called for greater protection for vulnerable communities.

Her message was clear: governments must respect human rights, and those responsible for serious crimes must be held accountable. Peace cannot last when victims are forgotten and perpetrators escape justice. Pillay also supported women's rights through her association with Equality Now, an international organisation working to end discrimination against women and girls. She contributed to efforts against the death penalty and took part in international initiatives promoting freedom of information and democracy.

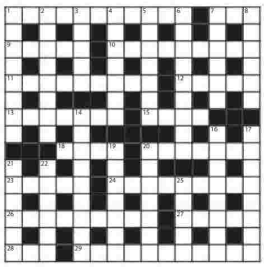
Her career reminds us that peace is much more than the absence of war. A ceasefire may stop the guns for a while, but lasting peace requires justice, dignity and trust. When innocent people suffer and serious crimes go unpunished, the wounds of conflict remain open. Independent courts and international institutions can help victims seek justice and make it harder for powerful individuals to act without fear of accountability.

Pillay's Indian roots make her story particularly meaningful to readers in India. From a family whose history began in Tamil Nadu to the highest levels of international justice, her journey reflects the power of education, determination and public service. She has shown that a person from a modest background can make a difference far beyond national borders.

The 2026 Nobel Peace Prize recognises not only Pillay's achievements but also the importance of defending human rights in an increasingly troubled world. Her life carries a message that is relevant to every nation: peace cannot be built on fear, discrimination or silence. As wars continue to displace families and claim innocent lives, the world needs voices that remind leaders of their responsibilities. Navi Pillay has spent much of her life being such a voice. Her journey offers a simple but powerful lesson: lasting peace begins when every human being is treated with dignity and justice is denied to no one.

The writer is Professor, School of International Studies & Social Sciences, Pondicherry Central University.

Crossword | No. 293606



Yesterday's Solution



ACROSS

1 No other movie leaves one cracking up and delighted (4,3,4)
7 Very variable, casual apology (3)
9 Moor that is covered in sheep ... (5,2)
10 ... sheep circling about in pursuit of a drink (9)
11 Bird and small horse lying around in pool next to river (9)
12 Singer's album downloads exceed low expectations at launch (5)
13 Comic routines consisting of extremely slapdash moments (7)
15 Cope with basic accommodation, but not at first (4)
18 Politicians north of the border taking a break (4)
20 He's a rubbish worker and must get reassigned (7)
23 Language of south India (5)
24 Moderate old gallery contains space for all to see (9)
26 A serious drunk devouring five sausage rolls? (9)
27 Jack returned to deck of cards (5)
28 Everybody said it's a boring thing (3)
29 Oppressed, unhappy staff hiding in back of secret lair (11)

DOWN

1 Hope the majority of time in work isn't so manic initially (8)
2 Damn, this is what a senior manager charges?! (8)
3 One way you could begin to characterise 'aggressive'? (4,1)
4 Passes English, with minor mistakes? (7)
5 Without exception, skill is seen in a certain hospital (2,5)
6 Bothersome individuals – ones going into the finer details (9)
7 Bald-faced liars finally take note (6)
8 Online chat with journalist went by quickly (6)
14 Carried on working unnoticed (9)
16 Spoilt, naughty child shown on TV (8)
17 Fancy bun scoffed and not licked! (8)
19 Sample survey given to people up front (7)
20 Lots of information somewhat rejected by firm (4,3)
21 Some hash is handy for a pipe (6)
22 Before I have left at the end, he's certain to cry (6)
25 Explosive start sees the two leaders switching places (5)

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

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 14 October 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE Government of India is highly effective when it sets itself to expose misstatements, nor could anything be more conclusive than its reply to the majority report of four nonofficial gentlemen who recently went to the Andamans to inquire into the condition of the Moplah convict settlers. The majority report appears to bristle with misstatements as to soil, physical well-being, position of women, medical facilities, taxation, moral conditions, willingness of the Moplahs to go back to jail, and various other matters. Otherwise it is fairly accurate; and in any case it is contradicted at every point by the minority report presented by Dr. Mugaseth. The Government discusses every misstatement with a gravity which is not without a humour of its own, being at special pains to prove that the Moplahs have no craving to return to jail so long as they are per-mitted to live in villages, occupy theselves with cultivation, and have their women-folk with them. The "sob-stuff" of the majority, of course, portrayed them as yearning to get back to jail rather than continue the settlement experiment. Experience has apparently convinced the Moplahs that the jails are by no means the comfortable hotels they used to be.

News Items

MADRAS WATER SUPPLY

CHLORINATION TO BE RESUMED

MADRAS, OCT.

DURING the debate in the Madras Corporation on the defective water supply in the city during the past few weeks, Mr. Hensman, Corporation Engineer, said that the presence of vibrios in water was reported in July last. The Corporation started chlorination, but as there was not sufficient bleaching powder to continue the process and as they could not get chlorine from anywhere in India, water was now being treated with potassium permanganate. The Corporation hoped to get a supply of bleaching powder about October 20. when chlorination would be resumed.

PUJA REVELS

CALCUTTA IN A HOLIDAY MOOD

THE Puja holidays began in earnest in Calcutta yesterday, when a peace like the Sabbath reigned over the city. Clive Street, the hub of commercial Calcutta, was given over to merrymaking durwans, and although Burra- bazar did a considerable amount of retail Puja trade, it was shorn of the wholesale activities carried on usually, barge commercial houses throughout the city were closed and will remain so up to the end of the week.

In marked contrast to the atmosphere in the business areas, the Bengali residential districts were alive with bustle and excitement. There, the amusements attendant on the Puja were in full swing, and crowds of care-free people thronged the streets.

A gratifying feature was that communal good-will prevailed throughout the day, and though small processions to the accompaniment of music moved along the streets during the early morning there were no untoward incidents.

TED MOORE BEATEN

MILLIGAN STILL MIDDLE WEIGHT CHAMPION

LONDON, OCT.

AT the Albert Hall in a twenty round contest for the European middleweight championship Tommy Milligan (Scotland), holder, beat Ted Moore (Plymouth), the referee stopping the fight in the thirteenth round.

It was a rough fight from the start, neither boxer showing much science. Milligan frequently drove Moore to the ropes, and the latter received a good deal of punishment.

Milligan attacked relentlessly, but he got a nasty cut on the right eye in the eleventh round.

In the thirteenth round, Milligan drove Moore to the corner sending in smashing right and left blows. Moore was very weak, and the referee intervened.—Reuter

Editor's TAKE

Tame inflation before it turns into anger

The Government must act swiftly to protect purchasing power before the squeeze on livelihoods turns into wider economic and political discontent

One thing that affects every Indian more than anything else is the rising cost of everyday living. There may be many other issues, but none has a more immediate effect on citizens than inflation. It not only destabilises the budget of an ordinary citizen but also causes anger, which can quickly turn into outrage.

India's retail inflation has risen every month this year. From 2.74 per cent in January, the Consumer Price Index reached 5.54 per cent in September, the highest reading of 2026 and well above the RBI's 4 per cent target.

Food inflation leapt to 7.74 per cent, with onion prices more than doubling over the previous year. This is not a blip but a situation that can get out of hand if immediate action is not taken. The causes are not mysterious. The war in West Asia and the disruption around the Strait of Hormuz, the route for most of India's crude oil, have kept oil prices painfully high. Wholesale prices show what is coming down the pipeline: WPI inflation stood at 9.92 per cent in August, its fourth consecutive month above nine per cent, with fuel and power prices up nearly 23 per cent.

Diesel moves freight, while fertiliser shapes the next harvest. A deficient and uneven monsoon under El Niño conditions has added a food shock to an energy shock.

Salaried workers watch their real incomes shrink, small businesses face dearer inputs and weaker demand, and savers see returns eroded. Prolonged price pressures also breed anger.

Governments in the past have lost elections over onions in this country, and anger over food prices has fuelled street unrest elsewhere in the world. For a young population anxious about jobs, a ruinous grocery bill can turn quiet frustration into protest. Given the ongoing protests, it can add yet another dimension to them.

The response must be quick and layered. First, trim excise duties on petrol and diesel, with the Centre and states sharing the revenue sacrifice, so that fuel costs stop feeding into the prices of everything else. Second, release buffer stocks of onions, pulses and grain, ease import duties on edible oils and pulses, and allow states to act against hoarders.

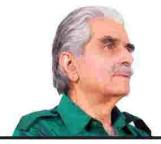
Third, protect the poorest through targeted transfers rather than blanket subsidies that inflate the deficit. Fourth, secure crude oil from diverse sources, keep strategic reserves topped up, and build up fertiliser stocks before rabi sowing.

The RBI, which held its policy rate at 5.25 per cent and projected retail inflation of 5 per cent for this financial year, must remain ready to act if price pressures persist. A Government is judged at the vegetable stall and the petrol pump long before the ballot box.

Controlling inflation is not charity. It is the first duty of economic stewardship. Delay compounds the cost, and public patience is finite.

Naga peace in peril

The decade-old Framework Agreement remains hostage to disagreements over sovereignty, a separate flag and constitution, and a deepening trust deficit. With NSCN (IM) threatening to revive insurgency, the Government must seize the latest initiative to negotiate a durable political settlement before the window for peace closes



ASHOK K MEHTA



The appointment last month of former Director, JIC, Ajit Lal, as interlocutor, along with additional political representation to kick-start the Naga peace process, stalled since 2021, has been welcomed by the Nagas. On October 26, 2025, the frail but spirited 92-year-old NSCN (IM) supremo Thuingaleng Muivah returned to Somdal village, his birthplace in Tangkhul Naga district, Manipur, and issued his sternest warning against the 'use of force' in the face of 'ultimatums from GoI' because of its difficulties 'in accepting their demand for a separate flag and constitution', adding, 'We will not surrender.' Muivah's most recent and dire threat to restart the insurgency, which PM Narendra Modi had intended to end with the big-bang Framework Agreement (FA) of August 3, 2015, one year after he came to power, came in his June 2026 interview with The Week magazine. Terminating the mother of all insurgencies was not going to be simple; it would entail 'sharing of sovereign power', which NSA Ajit Doval and principal interlocutor, IB Director RN Ravi, had assured they would be able to accomplish.

Ravi engaged Muivah and his team from 2014 to 2021 without achieving any breakthrough, even though he wore the additional hat of Governor of Nagaland from 2019 to 2021, when he was appointed Governor of Tamil Nadu. Strangely, the text of the FA was never made public, even as IB Special Secretary AK Mishra, on taking over from Ravi, informed Muivah that 'no record of GoI competencies submitted by Ravi was available'. In November 2024, Mishra retired and was downgraded from interlocutor to representative. He was also made an adviser to the North-East and diverted to Manipur. In despair, Muivah sought third-party intervention for the first time, though he and his people met Mishra in perfunctory, closed-door meetings between 2022 and October 2025 to ensure there was no 'breakdown' in talks.

The Nagas declared an insurgency in 1955, drawing Indian troops into the then Tuensang and Naga Hills, with PM Nehru's message to soldiers to 'win hearts of the people, not to frighten or terrify them'. The shooting down of an IAF Dakota in 1960 escalated the insurgency as I joined pacification operations with my battalion. The Indian Army fought one of the most intense insurgencies of all time, even after the Shillong Accord (1975) with the Naga National Council, which Muivah opposed, until the Ceasefire Agreement (1997), which, after 80 rounds of talks, culminated in the FA with NSCN (IM). Muivah points to the earlier Amsterdam Joint Communiqué with the Vajpayee Government in 2002, which recognised Naga sovereignty. In 2017, Ravi signed the Agreed Position with the seven Naga groups called the National Naga Peoples Group (NNPG), which Chairman of NSCN (IM) Q Tuccu called the 'Centre's deceitful agreement, created as a counterweight to the FA to divide the Nagas'. Recall that the FA was signed only with NSCN (IM) and not with NNPG, which was an afterthought. The GoI has said that both groups have to agree for the FA to be consummated, thereby changing the goalposts.

People in Somdal said, 'Muivah must apologise for coming back empty-handed after 55 years.' A stalemate has existed since Ravi resigned as interlocutor. The FA's failure can be attributed to the absence of a full-time negotiator and the lack of a peace process focused on addressing political and administrative autonomy. Ravi was in a hurry to provide the Government with the FA, for which he allegedly ran roughshod over the NSCN (IM), creating distrust. He was unable, or more unwilling, to accommodate the constitutional issue of shared sovereignty, even as including Naga sovereignty in the Indian Constitution and accepting the Naga flag as a cultural symbol did not satisfy Muivah. He insisted on a Naga constitution and flag, which became impossible after the abrogation of Article 370, when the Nagas began to fear that even the constitutional safeguard of special status under Article 371A might be withdrawn. The Neiphiu Rio-led Nagaland Government is today opposition-less and aligned with the BJP. Rio has sought Home Minister Amit Shah's help to catalyse the FA. Muivah was deeply hurt when Ravi, as Governor, asked legislators to call NSCN (IM) 'lawless gangs' and accused Ravi of closing down talks at the behest of the RSS and NNPG. The NSCN (IM) says the Centre is using the Kuki and People's Defence Force against its camps in Myanmar's Sagaing region. The blame game goes on, even as 25 MPs urged Shah in February 2025 to disclose the FA's status in Parliament.

Twenty-five years of the CFA were celebrated in 2023, with Lt Gen Bedi (retd), who headed the Ceasefire Monitoring Group (CFMG), in attendance. NSCN (IM) sent long-range patrols to its camps in Myanmar and to one camp in Bangladesh. It has approached the International Court of Justice in The Hague and hired the services of legal luminary Michael Van Valt, who also represents the Free Tibet cause. Nearly 100 rounds of talks have failed to untangle the Naga issue. On the contrary, positions have hardened, and trust has become the biggest casualty. 3 Corps, which is in operational command of the North-East, is prepared for various inimical contingencies involving NSCN (IM).

On Naga Independence Day, August 14, 2026, Muivah reiterated his quest for strategic autonomy, hinting at GoI betrayal and threatening to revive the insurgency. The Naga Army paraded some 2,500 armed cadres camped at Mount Hermon near Dimapur's 3 Corps headquarters. Four to five smaller camps are located outside Nagaland and are also monitored by the CFMG. The Nagas are equipped with AK-47/56 rifles, M16 rifles, RPG-7s and even drones, and have caches in Myanmar. After Muivah, the line of succession is loaded with hard-line generals: V Atem, Anthony Shimiray, Q Tuccu and James Swu. The Naga Army's motivation and capability to fight an insurgency, though limited, pose a danger and could prove escalatory, given the irreversibly divisive situation in Manipur and the lawless, junta-controlled India-Myanmar border. Even after Operation Sindoor, J&K remains terrorism-primed, while Ladakh has been clumsily destabilised, alienating both Kashmiris and Ladakhis. With both the eastern and western frontiers on a razor's edge, the FA requires Doval's immediate attention, as waiting for Muivah 'to go' would not be a good idea.

The new political initiative, when operationalised, must include constitutional experts to accommodate the complex political Naga demands for shared sovereignty, a flag and a constitution to mutual satisfaction, with a compromise solution helmed by Shah himself. The military option is unthinkable, and time is running out.

ON NAGA INDEPENDENCE DAY, AUGUST 14, 2026, MUIVAH REITERATED HIS QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY, HINTING AT GOI BETRAYAL AND THREATENING TO REVIVE THE INSURGENCY. THE NAGA ARMY PARADED SOME 2,500 ARMED CADRES CAMPED AT MOUNT HERMON NEAR DIMAPUR'S 3 CORPS HEADQUARTERS

The writer, a retired Major General, served as Commander, IPKF (South), Sri Lanka, and was a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, now the Integrated Defence Staff

Daiv Vani

WISDOM FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Knowing When Enough Is Enough

Contentment is not having a great deal;
it is knowing when we have enough.

In Kalidasa's Raghuvamsa, a young scholar named Kautsa finished his studies and insisted that his teacher accept a fee. The teacher, irritated by his insistence, demanded fourteen crore gold coins, one crore for each branch of learning. Kautsa went to King Raghu, who had just given away all his wealth in a great sacrifice and was left eating from earthen vessels. Though his treasury was empty, Raghu considered it a greater shame to send a scholar away disappointed. He asked Kautsa to wait three days and prepared to obtain the gold from Kubera, the lord of wealth.

Before he could set out, gold coins are said to have rained down upon his treasury. Raghu offered all of it to Kautsa. Kautsa took only the fourteen crore he needed. Raghu insisted that he take more, but Kautsa refused, and the remainder was given away to the people.

Kautsa could have walked away rich,. He understood that a gift taken beyond need becomes a weight, and that gratitude is best shown through restraint. The scholar's refusal is the real wonder of the story. Tradition says this is why, on Vijayadashami, people exchange the leaves of the apta tree as a symbol of gold, a gesture that reminds us of sharing and sufficiency.

This Navaratri, name one thing you have been accumulating beyond your need, and share some of it with someone who has less.

–DAIV

PIC TALK



Workers prepare effigies of demon king Ravana ahead of the Dussehra festival in Patna. PHOTO: PTI

Repeating story of human birth – uncontrolled mind



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

2ND OPINION



Imagine yourself riding in a chariot travelling along a road of peace, bliss and liberation (Kathopanishad 1.3.3-4). You have decided to give the reins (mind) to the chariot driver (intelligence). The mind is uncontrolled; that is, the reins are loose. The chariot driver is foolish and allows this to happen. The horses (senses) go crazy, attracted by the illusions of the material world (The Bhagavad-Gita 7.14). They leave the road and enter a wild forest full of ferocious animals (lust, greed and anger). All are devoured; the soul loses its material body and takes rebirth with the same senses, mind and intelligence (15.8) in a new body (chariot), and another journey begins.

What should have been done? The soul, a part of God (15.7), should have taken shelter in God — the Almighty- while travelling on the road full of dangers (8.15) all around it. God would then have become the chariot driver of life, as Lord Krishna became for Arjuna. The mind would have been controlled with the help of God — the Omniscient. The senses would have been forced to behave and not get distracted by the all-pervading 'Maya' (material attractions). And the soul would have continued along the road of peace (18.62), bliss (5.21) and liberation (18.62).

For this to happen, one must be very determined. Let us consider the degree of difficulty. What is the mind like? It is a faculty created by God for us souls to think, feel and will freely. The mind is part of our subtle body (7.4), along with intelligence and 'ahankar' (ego). It is fickle, forceful, strong and obstinate. It is extremely difficult to control (6.34), being subtle and, therefore, very powerful. It must be controlled; otherwise, it can cause a great deal of trouble, and it does.

Why is the mind so difficult to control? Because it has to be purified through spiritual practices, especially chanting (10.23). Ahankar will not let us take shelter in God, who alone can help us control the mind (7.14). Without God's help, our nature, controlled by the three modes, would not even allow us to want to control the mind.

What happens as a result of an uncontrolled mind? The mind favours the world over God, and thus the soul becomes bound to the world. Lust is already present in the mind, intelligence and body (3.40). One comes under the control of lust, greed and anger (16.21), and one becomes one's own enemy (6.6). Diseases are caused by imbalances in 'kapha' (cough), 'pitta' (acidity) and 'vata' (gas). Greed causes cough, anger causes acidity, and lust causes gas (Shri Ramcharitmanas, Uttar Kand, 120 Kha 15). Mental diseases take charge.

How, then, can the mind be controlled? Lord Krishna has given detailed instructions in the sixth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita. Spiritual practices, especially meditation, really help, as does 'pranayam'. God provides spiritual intelligence to help us control the mind. Human life is then well utilised in the present, and one will be on the path to attaining liberation.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a columnist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Jantar Mantar: A space for dissent

Apropos the news report 'Jantar Mantar: End of an era for Delhi's heart of dissent' (October 13), the de-notification of Jantar Mantar as a designated protest venue marks a setback for democratic dissent in India. For 33 years, this iconic site near the seat of governance served as a beacon for citizens, former soldiers, students and marginalised groups seeking accountability from those in power.

Relocating demonstrations to venues on the fringes of the capital, such as Burari Ground or CBD Ground, effectively dilutes the visibility and impact of peaceful public protests. Dissent loses its fundamental purpose when exiled far from the corridors of power where decisions are made. While maintaining public order and urban convenience are valid concerns, shifting legitimate agitations to distant outskirts risks undermining the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

The Government must strike a thoughtful balance between maintaining civic order and preserving open spaces for public grievances. Depriving citizens of a central, accessible platform for peaceful protest weakens democratic governance. The authorities should reconsider this abrupt decision and ensure that a viable, centrally located space remains available for citizens to make their voices heard.

SANJAY CHOPRA | PUNJAB

Digital sovereignty at risk

This refers to the article 'Digital sovereign...', which makes interesting reading. Musk's statements on India's internal affairs must be viewed from various angles. Whether successive governments in independent India have functioned as captives of big business houses is for the people to decide. However, India's prevailing economic order limits its control over its own economy, allowing powerful economic forces to shape policies in their favour and potentially influence governments.

In the absence of meaningful economic control, monopolies emerge and increasingly fall under the influence of multinational and transnational corporations. Musk's statements signal potential dangers. If permitted to expand in India, his communication empire could gain considerable influence over communications and digital transactions. The Government's policies on foreign direct investment in sensitive sectors, including communications and defence, raise concerns about its ability to limit Musk's influence. Its own policies warrant scrutiny. Moreover, perceived concessions in bilateral trade with the US fuel fears of growing economic dependence. Musk could eventually challenge Ambani's dominance in India.

AG RAJMOHAN | ANDHRA PRADESH

Navratri: Faith, strength and triumph of good

Navratri is celebrated with devotion and enthusiasm across India, highlighting its religious, cultural and social significance.

Meaning 'nine nights', the festival honours Goddess Durga and her nine divine forms, collectively known as Navadurga. It symbolises the triumph of good over evil and righteousness over injustice. Devotees worship the Goddess, observe fasts, offer prayers and participate in cultural programmes, Garba and Dandiya dances. Each day represents a distinct virtue, from Shailaputri's strength and Brahmacharini's discipline to Chandraghanta's courage, Kushmanda's creative energy, Skandamata's compassion and Katyayani's determination. Kalaratri represents the destruction of darkness, Mahagauri symbolises purity, and Siddhidatri signifies wisdom and spiritual fulfilment. Navratri celebrates women's strength and dignity. Its true spirit lies in opposing violence, discrimination, corruption and other social evils.

Let us celebrate responsibly by reducing waste, avoiding excessive noise and maintaining cleanliness. May Navratri inspire us to overcome inner weaknesses and build a society founded on peace, justice, equality and mutual respect.

JUBEL D'CRUZ | MUMBAI

Geopolitics – need for a new communication strategy

As artificial intelligence and disinformation reshape the geopolitical landscape, the need for an integrated geostrategic communication architecture has become urgent. The challenge is to build a credible, coordinated and inclusive framework that aligns information, influence and public diplomacy without compromising truth or trust



CHAITANYA K PRASAD

The world today is in a state of constant and consistent flux, wherein disruption and distortion dominate proceedings, ideas and outreach simultaneously. Geopolitics today is witnessing an unprecedented 'tug of war': a war of ideas, resources, markets, communication tools and narrative-building. It is a battle of perception, survival and struggle across the borderless world, with the objective of attracting attention, reinforcing legitimacy and restoring credibility on a sustainable basis.

In such a scenario, the moot question remains: what should be the ideal 'Geopolitical Communication Architecture' that explains policies, actions and outreach with clarity and conviction? How does the architecture bring about 'Geopolitical Convergence' on narratives that dominate the power-play matrix globally? What should be the inputs, partnerships and scale of measurement that reinforce the story foundation of geopolitics and narrative-building strategy? The challenge in the remaining months of 2026 is to design a geostrategic communication structure that integrates perception, influence and information under one roof. The idea is to create an inclusive structure that brings all stakeholders together under one communication architecture.

When we talk about global power today, we rarely talk just about weapons or borders any more; we talk about stories. We talk about who controls the narrative. That is essentially what geostrategic communication is: shaping how a country is perceived in the global mind space and making that perception work in its favour.

Today, geostrategic communication has become a unique matrix, a blend of old-school credibility and new-age immediacy. On one side, you have in-depth think-tank reports, policy briefs and scholarly analyses; on the other, the rapid-fire social media blitzes that can alter global narratives in hours. Both coexist; both influence. Enter the era of podcasts, YouTube diplomacy, Twitter handles run by embassies, and viral reels of leaders meeting citizens. Communication is no longer just press releases and speeches; it is about aesthetics, relatability and digital fluency. Hence, do we need a strategic communication secretariat, a one-stop solution to all?

The reasons are manifold. Geopolitics today is no longer a mere messaging process. It serves several purposes and addresses diverse themes that shape perceptions in the long run. Hence, the narrative-building process in the geopolitical space requires multi-level interventions, tools and levels of mobilisation. The emerging perception is critical to understanding the role of geostrategic communication in the process.

While geostrategic communication is critical in defining outcomes and results, the structure to support it should be inclusive, innovative, visible and integrated. The structure should have the inherent capacity to understand real-time analytics, delve deeply into predictive analysis and study audience reactions. It should be able to comprehend the depth and dimensions of algorithmic tabulation, and the role of AI in facilitating the search for solutions, while avoiding technological overload and dependence. In view of the large-scale flow of content, any structure for geostrategic communication should be able to dissect and separate rhetoric and fakery from reality. The credibility quotient remains the key challenge in reducing the trust deficit in communication.

Any geostrategic communication structure needs to be adaptable to communication challenges and crises. There needs to be a clear understanding of the mandate and areas of coverage. While long-term objectives qualify as strategic goals and vision, there is an urgent need to address issues related to global monitoring, an aspect sometimes ignored due to the multiplicity of issues. Strategists ignore the impact of reputational risks and perceptions when viewed vis-à-vis social media tools, international media reportage and disinformation arising from negative perceptions. A critical component of the structure requires engagement at the people-to-people level, which, in diplomatic parlance, is called 'public diplomacy', utilising the dynamics of soft power, the diaspora and institutions. The structure should also incorporate the dynamics of crisis communication.

A new geostrategic communication framework cannot be an abstract idea; it needs a tangible structure. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) should spearhead discussions on an international information governance framework, establishing a 'Threshold Agreement for Global Communication'. Such an initiative should include ethical standards for AI-generated content to ensure transparency and reduce algorithmic biases. It must also introduce a crisis communication protocol to prevent misinformation spirals during global emergencies. Additionally, a global fact-checking consortium should be established to unite journalists, researchers and policymakers in a collaborative effort to combat digital disinformation. Lastly, balanced digital sovereignty measures are essential to allow countries to maintain narrative control without suppressing free speech.



REPRESENTATIONAL IMAGE

IN 2026, THE PHRASE 'A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS' TAKES ON GREATER RESONANCE. VISUAL COMMUNICATION HAS BECOME ONE OF THE MOST IMPACTFUL WAYS TO DELIVER MESSAGES. A SINGLE, WELL-COMPOSED IMAGE HAS THE POWER TO CONVEY EMOTIONS, IDEAS AND NARRATIVES THAT WORDS MAY STRUGGLE TO ENCAPSULATE. BUILDING ON THIS, THE EXPLOSION OF SHORT-FORM VIDEOS AND 30-SECOND REELS, FOR INSTANCE, HAS TRANSFORMED THE LANDSCAPE FURTHER

What we need is a renewed collaborative effort to establish a new 'Global Information Order', a platform established institutionally to bridge the gap in the medium-and-message equation. The 7Rs in communication, ie relevance, relatability, response, revival, reconnection, reconstruction and repositioning, need to be mainstreamed in the geopolitical setting. The new global order must work towards a framework that calibrates perceptions, builds relationships and drives action based on mutually agreeable communication tools. This mode should integrate rather than disconnect, create gaps or promote division, and establish a narrative that addresses opportunity, experiences and the vision of mutual coexistence. The changing geopolitical reality of 2026 highlights the need for adaptability in communication. Traditional media must evolve to remain relevant, embracing digital innovations and audience-centric approaches. Meanwhile, social media must grapple with issues of misinformation, polarisation and echo chambers, striving to become a platform that unites rather than divides. In this era, communication is no longer just about delivering a message; it is about shaping perceptions, building relationships and driving action.

One of the critical areas in which visible changes are being witnessed in 2026 is the geopolitical communication landscape. This year is positioned to redefine the very pathways of global communication, with a pivotal question arising: are we on the verge of a 360-degree transformation in communication delivery, content orientation, outreach mechanisms and the tools we deploy? Geopolitically, the communication ecosystem embraces a new language-a language of immediacy, focused messaging, results-driven delivery and the prioritisation of measurable outcomes to identify realistic patterns and global impacts. The era demands a communication framework that not only transcends borders but also bridges divides with precision, creativity and authenticity. In 2026, the phrase 'a picture is worth a thousand words' takes on greater resonance. Visual communication has become one of the most impactful ways to deliver messages. A single, well-composed image has the power to convey emotions, ideas and narratives that words may struggle to encapsulate. Building on this, the explosion of short-form videos and 30-second reels, for instance, has transformed the landscape further.

As the world awaits the impact of the changes taking place in the global order, the important question remains: does the communication and information landscape address the transformations occurring at multiple and multilayered levels? The changing communication landscape has an important role to play in the shifting paradigm across nations, regions and continents. It is undeniable that information overload, stress and the influx of data can cause a sort of information fatigue due to the constant flow from multiple sources. This phenomenon continues to make huge waves in the multipolar geopolitical world. In today's interconnected society, every issue is debated, analysed and perceived through tools of instant communication on a 24/7 basis. The rapid dissemination of information has led to narratives that evolve swiftly, influenced by shifting perceptions and biases. This constant flux presents new challenges, obstacles and limitations that restrict the role of communication in the geopolitical space. The immediacy of information exchange can exacerbate misunderstandings and escalate conflicts before there is time for measured responses.

What we need is a renewed collaborative effort to establish a new 'Global Information Order', a platform established institutionally to bridge the gap in the medium-and-message equation.

The writer is Former Civil Servant. Writes on strategic communication and cinema. Inputs provided by Zoya Ahmad and Vaishnavie Srinivasan

AI: What Indian Universities can learn from the West



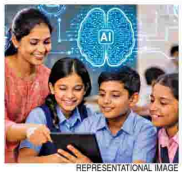
MD AFSHAR ALAM

Six years after the National Education Policy 2020 urged universities to break down the walls between subjects, artificial intelligence is becoming the tool for doing it. American and British universities moved earlier, and their experience offers lessons for Indian campuses still deciding how far and fast to go.

The Western experience

Ohio State University has set the most ambitious target. From the class of 2029, every graduate is expected to be fluent in AI and its responsible use within their own discipline. Provost Ravi V Bellamkonda says students will become "bilingual": fluent in their major and in applying AI within it. A course called "Unlocking Generative AI" is open to all majors, an AI skills seminar is compulsory, and at least six offices guide academic integrity. A history student uses AI for research, an agriculture student for crop data. Neither becomes a computer scientist. MIT built a new college instead. The Schwarzman College of Computing links computing with all five of MIT's schools, and its Common Ground programme helps departments design classes blending computing with other fields. A standing committee of 29 faculty members reviews proposals. Common Ground awards no major or minor of its own: its subjects sit inside existing degrees, so AI becomes part of a physics or economics degree rather than a side certificate. A separate initiative, SERC, embeds ethics in computing courses.

Oxford chose tools, training and governance together. It was the first UK university to give all students and staff free ChatGPT Edu access, after a year-long pilot with 750 staff members, and it created an AI Governance Group. Departments issue subject-specific guidance. California State University went for scale, rolling out ChatGPT Edu to more than 460,000 students and 63,000 staff members across 23 campuses, comparable to an Indian state university network.



REPRESENTATIONAL IMAGE

The Indian experience

The push began with regulators. AICTE declared 2025 the Year of Artificial Intelligence, covering more than 14,000 colleges, and promised faculty workshops and certifications.

IIT Madras offers the closest parallel to Ohio State. Its "AI for All" courses on SWAYAM Plus, including AI in Physics, AI in Chemistry, AI in Accounting and Cricket Analytics with AI, need no prior AI or programming experience. In January, it launched them in Hindi, free to access, a step no Western example here has matched.

IIT Hyderabad echoes MIT's joint teaching: its 12-credit Minor in AI and Humanity has projects co-supervised by liberal arts, design and engineering faculty members. IIT Mandi offers its 24-credit AI minor to other institutions. Oxford's route has arrived too. In February, OpenAI announced ChatGPT Edu partnerships with IIT Delhi, IIM Ahmedabad, AIIMS New Delhi, Manipal, UPES and Pearl Academy, covering more than 100,000 people. Beyond the elite, the Central University of Haryana will introduce AI courses across all programmes from 2026-27, nearing Ohio State's model.

Where the approaches differ

Mandate: Ohio State makes AI fluency a graduation outcome. Most Indian institutions offer a minor, elective or online course, so many arts, social science and language graduates will leave without it.
Course design: At MIT, computing and subject faculty members build courses together. In most Indian universities, computer science departments still write them. A chemistry teacher untrained in AI cannot shape "AI in Chemistry", and a computer scientist alone will miss what chemists need.
Tools and governance: Oxford and Cal State prioritised secure tool access, and Oxford and Ohio State built oversight. In India, access remains confined to well-funded institutions. Most state university students use free consumer tools with weaker data privacy, and many universities have no AI policy, so rules vary from teacher to teacher.
Language: Here, India leads. Free Hindi courses address a problem Western universities rarely face and reach colleges that will never sign enterprise agreements.
Scale and teachers: India's state systems are far larger than Cal State's, so a national or state-level agreement, perhaps through the IndiaAI Mission, would serve equity better than institution-by-institution deals. And every Western success began with faculty members; short certification programmes do not change how a teacher designs assignments or examinations.

What implementation requires

Educationists point to six steps:

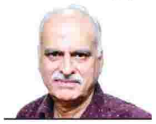
1. Define AI competence as a programme outcome for every degree, in each discipline's language.
2. Create joint teaching committees on the Common Ground model, with credit flowing through the Academic Bank of Credits.
3. Write an AI policy on assessment, plagiarism, data privacy and research, with room for subject-specific rules.
4. Rethink examinations: take-home essays are easy to generate, while viva voce, in-class writing and project defences test learning.
5. Negotiate shared access to secure AI platforms so district-college students get the protection IIT students have.
6. Expand content in Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and other languages, and teach ethics inside each subject, where caste, gender and regional bias carry real weight.

Conclusion

The Western universities succeeded through institutional decisions, not better technology: Ohio State set a clear rule, MIT built the habit of joint work, Oxford prepared teachers and governance first, and Cal State used its size to win fair terms. Each is within reach of Indian universities. India has advantages the West lacks: NEP 2020's credit framework, SWAYAM as a national channel, and proof that subject-linked AI teaching can work free in an Indian language. The gap lies in the middle layer: the state and central universities that teach most Indian students and still treat AI as optional. The next two academic years will decide whether multidisciplinary learning becomes real for them. If academic councils make AI competence part of every degree, train teachers before students and write clear rules, success will look like a botany graduate in Bihar or a law graduate in Kerala who can use AI confidently in her field and judge when it is wrong.

The writer is the former Vice-Chancellor of Jamia Hamdard

Congress must end its inertia to lead the INDIA bloc in these testing times



ANIL ANAND

There is good and bad news for the Congress, which is struggling hard to shed inertia and indecisiveness and emerge from its own cobweb. The more it tries, though through feeble attempts, the more it remains the same, without realising the need to become battle-ready for the coming electoral contests. While circumstances are fast changing in favour of the Grand Old Party (GOP), its leadership seems mostly unaware of the role that the party, as the premier opposition party, is expected to play at such a crucial juncture.

As the crescendo has gathered stormy proportions over the functioning of the Election Commission of India (ECI) — a front-ranking constitutional body responsible for conducting free and fair elections — in a totally opaque and centralised manner, the INDIA combine of opposition parties finally coming together is a significant development. It is another matter that they shared the table after a couple of electoral setbacks and regular sniping at each other. However, circumstances have perhaps left them with no option but to come together and resolve to fight back to protect the "sanctity of the vote".

If the INDIA bloc meeting has thrown a direct challenge to the ECI and the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah combine by declaring a joint programme of nationwide protests against the usurpation of the electoral process, it has come as a happy augury for the Congress, which, until the other day, was at the receiving end of its alliance partners. Instead of making the Narendra Modi-led dispensation its main target, the allies had preferred to target the Congress, and more so Rahul Gandhi.

From all available accounts and the optics of it, the September 30, 2026, INDIA bloc meeting has firmly established the Congress as its leader. Not only was the most mercurial and unpredictable ally-leader and Trinamool Congress chief, Mamata Banerjee, seen going overboard to exhibit her bonhomie towards the Congress leadership led by Sonia Gandhi and, surprisingly, even Rahul Gandhi, but more or less all the 20-odd alliance partners attending the meeting ceded total space to the GOP in deference to its status as the only national party with a pan-India presence among the alliance ranks. This feeling was altogether missing during the last three years of its existence.

The media reports undoubtedly suggest that the alliance's high-profile meeting successfully unified the opposition around a roadmap, surprisingly crafted by the Indian National Congress. This, in turn, has placed the party on a firm political footing. Unimaginable until the political events shaped by the goings-on in the corridors of Nirvachan Sadan, the INDIA combine adopted the core resolutions that had earlier been passed by the Congress Working Committee (CWC).



The narrative and agenda of the combined meeting heavily mirrored the strategy crafted by the Congress just a day earlier during its CWC meeting. This position solidified the Congress's leading role within the alliance through several key developments.

However, the second development, emerging from the same AICC corridors where the CWC meeting was held to set the course for the INDIA bloc deliberations, should worry the Congress's top leadership. It concerns poll-bound Punjab, where the Congress, with good chances of returning to power after a decade, has been on a suicidal mission. The high command's decision to replace Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) chief Amarinder Singh Warring, after initial reluctance and dilly-dallying, is more baffling than creditworthy. It came after wasting precious time trying to control factionalism and humiliating senior leaders tasked with bringing the warring factions together. The then AICC in-charge of Punjab and former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel lost both face and his job. This was through no fault of his, as he ostensibly followed the high command's directions (read Rahul Gandhi) to protect Warring at all costs, despite growing resentment against him within the PCC. Even more importantly, further embarrassment was in store when the high command chose to sweep under the carpet the findings of the committee headed by AICC treasurer Ajay Maken, who had been entrusted with the task of gauging the mood of a cross-section of the state leadership. The committee, it is believed, found an overwhelming mood in favour of a change in the PCC leadership.

The Punjab episode should be an eye-opener for the GOP's top leadership and force it into the introspection that is sorely needed to set its house in order at a time when the entire opposition has reposed confidence in Rahul Gandhi's leadership. Effecting a change on the basis of the Maken committee's findings would not only have protected the high command from embarrassment but also saved the party from negative publicity for unnecessarily dragging out the issue before subsequently changing the state leadership.

A situation similar to Punjab's prevails in several other states and Union Territories, particularly Jammu and Kashmir. Quick decisions are needed to strengthen the organisation. The top leadership must evaluate its conduct in Punjab and take corrective steps elsewhere, including within the AICC's organisational structure.

A strong, battle-hardened organisation will help the Congress establish its leadership role in the INDIA combine. The shift in the allies' mood on September 30, 2026, should be capitalised on to strengthen Rahul Gandhi's leadership. Building on the alliance's agitation roadmap and the CWC resolution, the Congress must strengthen itself internally, no matter what the cost.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge took centre stage to officially announce the bloc's six-point joint protest strategy. However, it seemed that the veteran of many political battles, Kharge, had read the mood of the INDIA conglomerate leaders gathered at Delhi's Constitutional Club. Perhaps he thought it was the right moment to press Rahul Gandhi to address the press conference, with the purpose of keeping him centre-stage.

In declaring the six-point protest strategy, Kharge left no one in doubt that Rahul Gandhi would be leading from the front. The two-pronged fight for him and Rahul Gandhi now is to steer the INDIA bloc effectively and, at the same time, prevent Punjab-like situations from arising through quick and stern decision-making.

The bloc's six-point joint protest strategy:

1. October 2-8: District-level "Save Democracy" marches across the country.
2. October 6: A coordinated march by all Opposition MPs to the Election Commission headquarters.
3. Mid-October: Seeking official intervention from the President of India.
4. November 1: A mega joint rally in New Delhi.

The challenge for the Congress, as the leader of the opposition grouping, is enormous. But the opportunity is golden: to shed inertia and set itself on course for internal and external reforms.

The writer is a media expert and policy analyst

COMMENT

Editorials

China's economy remains on targeted course of upgrading and innovation

The third-quarter data released by the State Information Center of the National Development and Reform Commission on Sunday present an encouraging picture of the Chinese economy, with consumption, foreign trade and investment all moving on a stable and upward path.

The major underlying drivers of growth are strengthening, reflecting the resilience of the Chinese economy, which has continued to maintain a momentum of steady progress and improving quality despite the complex international backdrop.

Take consumption, which is the most direct embodiment of market vitality. Data on offline consumption show that in the third quarter, payments across various consumption categories increased by 2.6 percent year-on-year, an increase of 0.7 percentage points compared to the second quarter. In September, offline payments rose by 3.1 percent year-on-year, 0.5 percentage points higher than in August, marking three consecutive months of acceleration.

Offline consumption data track in-store spending, and the growth trend shows that consumers are more willing to go out, pointing to a gradual uptick in the real economy and the operations of small businesses, especially in service sectors such as catering, travel and leisure.

This can be attributed to the sustained impact of the government's expanded and intensified pro-consumption policies. "Consumer willingness is recovering, market demand is being released, and the advantages of China's super-large market are becoming more prominent, providing strong support for expanding domestic demand and stabilizing growth," as Wei Ying, deputy director of the big data development department at the center, noted.

Goldman Sachs projects China's real GDP growth at 4.5 percent in 2026, meeting the government's target range, with domestic demand contributing 3.3 percentage points and net exports adding 1.2 percentage points.

Foreign trade tells a similarly positive story. In the third quarter, the load tonnage of cargo ships departing from and arriving at major Chinese ports — which is an early physical indicator of trade momentum before nominal trade figures come out — rose by 43.1 percent and 0.3 percent year-on-year, respectively.

In September alone, departing load tonnage surged by 53.2 percent year-on-year, while arriving tonnage increased by 4.5 percent. These figures are striking by any measure, as they demonstrate that, despite the rising protectionism, geopolitical tensions and uneven global demand, China's foreign trade remains hardy and dynamic. As well as sustaining its own growth, China is also keeping supply chains working smoothly, injecting much-needed certainty into global markets by reliably providing goods to trading partners.

Another source of confidence is the growth in investment, particularly in emerging strategic industries. In September, the issuance of new special-purpose bonds nationwide — which is an early signal of investment momentum before real capital flows into construction — increased by 50.2 percent year-on-year, accelerating by 43.6 percentage points compared to August. Project bidding related to new infrastructure — such as computing power, data and networks — grew by 34.2 percent in the third quarter and 50.4 percent in September. Even more remarkably, capital investment in frontier fields such as artificial intelligence and humanoid robots surged by 184.1 percent in the third quarter and 198.7 percent in September.

These developments indicate a structural shift, with policy support directing resources toward industries that will define future competitiveness, thereby fostering the formation of new quality productive forces. This approach not only provides a solid foundation for current growth, but also builds momentum for future productivity gains. In essence, China is not merely addressing today's challenges; it is enhancing its capacity to thrive in the future.

Despite these encouraging trends, the country's economy still faces headwinds, with structural supply-demand mismatches keeping prices and profits weak, and uneven sectoral recovery leaving the property sector and local government finances under pressure. At the same time, external uncertainties — including geopolitical tensions, trade restrictions and sluggish global demand — continue to weigh on exports.

Yet, looking ahead, China's economy will retain significant advantages, including a vast domestic market, a comprehensive industrial system, abundant policy tools, and a strong commitment to innovation. By maintaining strategic focus, ensuring effective policy implementation, and nurturing new quality productive forces, China can keep its economic trajectory steady and robust.

Rising Middle East tensions call for restraint

The Middle East has the knack for turning yesterday's ceasefires into tomorrow's battlefields.

On Saturday, a Houthi attack on Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport caused heavy casualties. Further strikes followed against airports and energy facilities. Saudi warplanes retaliated across Houthi-held territory. A conflict that had largely subsided following a truce in 2022 is once again threatening to engulf the Arabian Peninsula.

The immediate causes are tangled. Saudi Arabia's estrangement from the United Arab Emirates has weakened the anti-Houthi coalition. The UAE's withdrawal left military and political gaps that Riyadh struggled to fill. Fighting involving Iran further complicated Saudi calculations. Meanwhile, the Houthis have demonstrated that drones and missiles can inflict damage far beyond Yemen's borders.

Then there is Washington. Saudi Arabia's security partnership with the United States was supposed to provide reassurance. Instead, Riyadh has reportedly discovered that US guarantees come with qualifications. Its requests for strikes against the Houthis were rejected, while Washington pursued separate understandings intended to protect US shipping.

With the November midterm elections approaching, the White House has little appetite for another Middle Eastern military adventure. High oil prices are already a domestic political liability. A wider regional war, particularly one threatening energy supplies and maritime trade, would make an awkward electoral backdrop. US reluctance may be understandable. But it also exposes the hazards of treating an external security umbrella as a substitute for regional diplomacy.

The familiar response is retaliation. Yet each side's attempt to restore deterrence supplies the other with justification for further violence. Military superiority may destroy infrastructure or disrupt an offensive; it cannot manufacture political legitimacy or settle competing claims to power.

The Middle East needs an inclusive framework capable of accommodating rival security interests without requiring one side's humiliation.

This is where China's approach deserves consideration. Beijing advocates common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security. Its four-point proposal for a new security architecture of the Middle East, put forward last month, emphasizes unleashing internal drivers, adopting an integrated approach, strengthening the foundations of development and improving international coordination.

Saudi Arabia and its adversaries now face a choice between another exhausting cycle of escalation and a negotiated arrangement addressing their underlying grievances. The former has been tested for more than a decade, at appalling human and economic costs. The latter remains difficult, but indispensable.

Security cannot be sustainably achieved at a neighbor's expense. Renewed hostilities serve nobody's interests and squeeze the space for political settlement of related issues.

As Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning noted on Monday in reply to a question on the Houthis' attacks on the airport in Riyadh, China condemns the attacks that resulted in heavy civilian casualties and expresses grave concern over the escalating conflict.

Mao said that China consistently opposes attacks targeting civilians and civilian facilities, urging relevant parties to resolve differences and disputes through dialogue and negotiation and refrain from actions that escalate regional tensions.

International pro-peace coordination should be anchored in the United Nations Charter, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as consistent application of international law, not the selective rules of competing powers.

The Middle East does not lack weapons, alliances or external patrons. What it lacks is a security order in which adversaries can coexist without perpetually preparing for their next war. Until that changes, every ceasefire will remain merely an intermission in the fighting.

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Jin Ding



Opinion Line

Law revision shows resolve to better protect food safety

China's food industry is known for its scale and efficiency. Although the overall food safety situation is improving, ensuring that the food the fast-developing industry provides is safe has proved a challenge. A meal can now be ordered with a few taps, prepared in an invisible kitchen and delivered by a stranger. When something goes wrong, however, responsibility has an unfortunate habit of disappearing somewhere along the supply chain.

On Saturday, the State Administration for Market Regulation unveiled a draft revision of the Food Safety Law for public consultation. More than two-thirds of its provisions would be amended or newly introduced. The overhaul, the most extensive since 2015, reflects a basic regulatory principle: as the food business becomes more complicated, accountability must become harder to evade.

The Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the Communist Party of China Central Committee has also issued instructions demanding tougher investigation and punishment of food-safety offenses. Recent incidents involving chemically treated vegetables and other dangerous practices have exposed some weaknesses.

Together, the two initiatives suggest a shift from responding to scandals after they erupt toward preventing them altogether through clearer obligations, tighter supervision and more credible penalties.

Consider online food delivery. China handles more than 100 million orders daily, involving nearly 10 million merchants. Traditional inspections cannot possibly keep pace. The proposed law therefore aims to establish a dedicated framework for online food businesses, which requires platforms to scrutinize merchants and clarify the responsibilities of livestream sellers and cross-border food importers.

Restaurants would be required to make food preparation more transparent through video feeds, while artificial intelligence could help regulators identify unsafe practices. The ambition is to turn millions of previously opaque kitchens into establishments subject to continuous scrutiny. Whether local regulators possess the resources to process such information effectively is another question.

School meals present a particular problem: children cannot easily choose another supplier. The draft makes school principals and kindergarten directors primarily accountable for food safety, tightens oversight of procurement and outsourced catering, and requires school officials to eat alongside pupils. The logic is straightforward — those responsible for feeding children should have a direct stake in what is served.

Yet the most consequential change may concern punishment. China has long imposed heavy penalties on companies that violate food-safety rules. The proposed revision goes further by targeting responsible individuals, including executives and food-safety managers, for deliberate or serious misconduct. Combined with the political and legal authorities' determination to strengthen criminal enforcement, this could make negligence and fraud considerably more expensive.

That matters, because executives who might otherwise have tolerated dubious suppliers or falsified records will now have stronger reasons to crack down on irregularities.

Still, tougher laws do not automatically produce safer food. Enforcement must be consistent across jurisdictions, evidence must survive the journey from administrative investigation to criminal prosecution, and regulators must resist the temptation to substitute spectacular crackdowns for routine vigilance. Smaller businesses also need clear, workable compliance requirements rather than an ever-expanding mountain of paperwork.

Food safety is not merely a public-health concern. It shapes consumer confidence, brand reputation and the competitiveness of China's vast food industry. A market in which customers cannot reliably distinguish safe products from dangerous ones ultimately penalizes honest businesses alongside dishonest ones.

China's latest proposals recognize that trust cannot be delivered by algorithms alone, nor restored simply by imposing harsher sentences. It requires enforceable responsibilities at every stage, from farm and factory to platform and plate.

For a country whose consumers have grown accustomed to extraordinary convenience, the next advance in food retailing may be something less glamorous but more valuable: knowing who is answerable when a meal goes wrong.

— LI YANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Draft regulations for enhancing auto reliability

Editor's note: *The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and three other departments have released a draft regulation aimed at strengthening the management of innovative design and R&D testing and verification of automobile products, and invited the public to comment on the proposal. Ji Xuehong, head of the research center of automobile industry innovation at North China University of Technology, and Sun Yuhao, a managing partner of Sunwell Law Firm in Shanghai, shared their observations on the initiative. Below are excerpts of their comments as reported by Beijing Daily. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.*

From the perspective of regulatory authorities, product innovation is allowed, but all related functions and technologies must undergo thorough and comprehensive verification. The draft regulation outlines the specific requirements for human-machine interaction, rotating seats and other innovative designs for automobiles. These requirements are necessary to mitigate potential safety hazards posed by these designs, which could lead to accidents and even casualties.

Product innovation is a key feature of the automotive industry's evolution. But while innovation is necessary, it cannot be unconditional and should be anchored in safety and quality. These are prerequisites for innovation. New functions and designs, such as those involving door handles, seats, car lights interaction, over-the-air updates and rooftop tents, should be subjected to strict technical standards, testing and verification so that they meet safety requirements before entering the market. The primary goal of innovation is to serve consumers, not endanger them.

Product development cycles have shortened in the automobile industry. In the past, an entirely new vehicle model usually took four years to develop, but nowadays this process is completed in roughly two years for many models. The compression of development cycles makes adequate testing and verification a critical concern, as insufficient testing may lead to component fatigue and structural aging failures.

Auto companies should not treat over-the-air updates as a substitute for thorough pre-launch verification. They should avoid first launching functions and products and then fixing defects via OTA updates. They should not treat consumers as guinea pigs.

The draft rules may change the pace of auto R&D. But the change should be viewed with a balanced perspective. Shorter development cycles allow consumers to access new products earlier, but they also introduce potential risks. Focusing too much on R&D speed is not a good thing. Automakers should strive for a balanced development pace.

Previously, some automakers blurred the boundary between "assisted driving" and "autonomous driving", using expressions such as "fully autonomous driving" and "no human intervention". Others created misleading self-defined classifications such as "L2.9", "near-L3" and "high-level intelligent driving" and failed to fully inform their customers when the phased or OTA-enabled future functions of their automobiles would actually be activated. Such practices may constitute false advertising and infringe on consumers' right to be informed.

In the future, car companies should align their terminology with national standards and clearly disclose the operational conditions, environmental requirements and system boundaries of their designs. They must provide customers with explicit information about the schedule for phased or OTA-enabled functions upon vehicle delivery, ensure test and verification data are traceable, and avoid exaggerating test mileage and scenario coverage.

VIEWS

Samra Bukhari

CPEC is fertile ground for food security

On a summer morning in Pakistan, a farmer gazes at the sky, contemplating whether to irrigate his wheat field. An unexpected heat wave, erratic rainfall, shortage of water or a pest outbreak can quickly turn a promising crop into a financial loss.

Thousands of kilometers away, Chinese farmers face different challenges, but the underlying question is the same: how can countries ensure reliable access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food in an increasingly uncertain world?

This question takes food security beyond agriculture to the level of national security. Agriculture influences inflation, livelihoods, social stability, trade balances and the resilience of economies. For China and Pakistan, agricultural cooperation should be more than just a facet of bilateral trade. It can be a strategic pillar of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor 2.0, embodying their shared interest in development and stability.

But there are several challenges to overcome. First, food security is increasingly vulnerable to risks beyond the farm. Climate change is altering rainfall, increasing heat stress and intensifying floods and droughts. Pakistan's experience with catastrophic floods and recurring water stress demonstrates how quickly agricultural disruption can escalate into an economic crisis.

Despite achieving record grain production, China prioritizes food security as a strategic concern, emphasizing vigilance over complacency. The lesson is clear: food security cannot rely solely on favorable weather or short-term production levels.



LI MIN / CHINA DAILY

The second problem is the inefficient use of agricultural resources in Pakistan. The country has significant agricultural potential, but the low level of mechanization, poor seed quality, inefficient forms of irrigation, and inadequate post-harvest management, storage and extension services limit productivity and farmers' incomes.

China's expertise in agricultural mechanization, high-yield seed varieties, water-saving irrigation, digital agriculture and rural infrastructure offers valuable lessons. The objective should not be to copy China's agricultural model, but to adapt relevant technologies to Pakistan's unique conditions, converting technology transfer into productivity gains and higher rural livelihoods.

Third, food security does not end when a crop leaves the field. Inadequate storage, transportation, processing and cold-chain infrastructure can lead to significant loss in value. The CPEC can evolve from a connectivity project into a food-security corridor.

China's experience in cold-chain logistics, agricultural processing and modern supply chains can complement Pakistan's agricultural base, reducing post-harvest losses, enhancing value addition and boosting agricultural exports.

In turn, Chinese consumers and businesses could gain access to a reliable source of agricultural commodities.

Fourth, agricultural cooperation requires joint institutions and long-term knowledge exchange. Encouragingly, the foundation of such cooperation already exists. The Joint Working Group on Agricultural Cooperation under CPEC has expanded to technology, mechanization, seed development, processing, fisheries and capacity building.

In April 2025, the two sides agreed to establish an Agricultural Technology Working Group, furthering joint projects. This institutional framework provides an opportunity to develop an integrated bilateral food-security strategy.

But these challenges also present an opportunity for mutually beneficial investment. With land, labor, diverse agro-climatic zones and proximity to major consumer markets, Pakistan is an attractive partner. Chinese companies bring technology, capital, management expertise and extensive experience in agricultural value chains. Recent agreements on agricultural development and trade regulations demonstrate this potential. These arrangements lay the regulatory foundation for expanded agricultural trade and investment.

The opportunity now is to make food security a central pillar of CPEC 2.0. A China-Pakistan food security partnership could focus on six areas: climate-smart agriculture, modern seed systems, efficient irrigation, mechanization, cold-chain and agro-processing infrastructure, and joint research and training. Demonstration farms could test technologies tailored to local conditions, ensuring measurable outcomes and commercial sustainability.

Such cooperation would benefit both nations.

Pakistan's agricultural exports could become more competitive in China, while Chinese enterprises could engage in processing, logistics, machinery, seeds, biotechnology and smart agriculture.

Pakistan could shift from exporting raw commodities toward higher-value processed products, while China could diversify its agricultural supply chains. The relationship would therefore be based on complementary capabilities and shared economic interests.

Ultimately, food security is about people, not statistics.

A stable food supply protects household purchasing power, supports rural employment and reduces vulnerability to economic and climate shocks.

For Pakistan, stronger food security reinforces economic resilience; for China, deeper agricultural cooperation with a neighbor diversifies supply chains and presents new investment opportunities.

China-Pakistan cooperation should not be measured only by the kilometers of roads, megawatts of electricity or volume of trade, but also by the productivity of farmers, the reduction of food loss, the income from agro-processing and the resilience of communities.

If food security is national security, then cooperation on food security is cooperation on shared prosperity and regional stability.

CPEC 2.0 provides China and Pakistan with an opportunity to build not just a corridor through which goods move, but a resilient agricultural ecosystem for technology, knowledge and investment.

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Mohamed Sabreen

Who benefits when conflicts never end?

When the United States and Israel attacked Iran in February, US President Donald Trump projected that the war would last four or five weeks. More than seven months later, there is still no clear resolution.

Recent reports in The Wall Street Journal indicate that senior Trump advisers have privately warned that the conflict might continue through the remainder of Trump's presidency, possibly beyond January 2029. These reports have made the situation even more striking. Similarly, former Defense Secretary and CIA Director Leon Panetta has warned that the conflict could continue for another six months, heightening fears of another "forever war" for the US.

This raises a broader question that goes beyond Iran: what if the strategic value of a war no longer depends on a quick victory? No publicly available US intelligence document establishes a deliberate strategy to exhaust both allies and adversaries. Such a claim would be unfounded.

Yet, there is an increasingly apparent trend of US strategic thinking focused on attrition, cost imposition, burden shifting and economic coercion, making this question difficult to ignore.

The US and Israeli strikes against Iran are a revealing example. The longer a conflict continues without a decisive outcome, the more it becomes a war of resources, resilience and political endurance.

A protracted stalemate can weaken an adversary's military-industrial base, drain financial resources, disrupt trade and force a country to devote more of its resources to survival. This is the logic of strategic exhaustion.

Exhaustion is not simply military attrition. It is the cumulative weakening of a state's economic resilience, military readiness, technological capacity, political cohesion and diplomatic freedom.

The US has exceptionally powerful instruments to exert such pressure, many of which are not military. Sanctions, financial restrictions, export controls and technological denial can serve as instruments of strategic attrition without requiring US soldiers to occupy territory.

The attempt to preserve US primacy through permanent pressure may inadvertently accelerate the emergence of a world designed to escape that pressure.

The conflict in Ukraine offers another illustration. US strategic thinking has openly discussed attrition as a means to weaken Russia while avoiding a direct Russia-US conflict. Washington provides weapons, intelligence, technology and financial support, while the battlefield burden falls on Ukraine.

Russia pays in soldiers, weapons and economic resources. Europe pays through higher defense spending and the economic consequences of prolonged confrontation.

Ukraine pays the greatest price of all. The US pays too, but comparatively less in terms of human lives. This asymmetry is strategically important. It suggests that one of the most sophisticated forms of US power today could be its ability to distribute the costs of conflict.

The same logic applies to US allies. A 2025 analysis by the Stimson Center, a US think tank, highlighted a shift in US policy toward pushing European allies to assume greater responsibility for their conventional security by increasing contributions for defense.

While burden-sharing is a legitimate argument, urging wealthy allies to contribute more to their own security has significant strategic consequences.

If Europe spends heavily to rebuild its military capacity while remaining dependent on US intelligence, advanced weapons, logistics and strategic technologies, Washington can reduce part of its conventional burden without relinquishing its central position.

The objective may not be to destroy every adversary, nor to keep every war going on forever. It may instead be to manage conflicts at a level that weakens competitors, encourages allies to carry more of the burden, preserves US leverage and avoids the catastrophic costs of direct great-power conflict.

The result is neither peace nor total war, but rather permanent strategic pressure. Yet, there is a paradox. A strategy designed to exhaust others can eventually exhaust the strategist as well. The prolonged Iran conflict is already raising questions about US military resources.

The longer Washington remains engaged in multiple theaters, the greater the pressure on weapons stocks, military readiness, budgets and political support.

US power is not infinite. Missiles must be manufactured, aircraft need maintenance, ships require crews, and alliances demand political capital.

Every additional conflict competes for resources with other strategic theaters.

In other words, the weaponization of interdependence can lead to the creation of alternative networks. The attempt to preserve US primacy through permanent pressure may inadvertently accelerate the emergence of a world designed to escape that pressure.

Thus, the most important question emerging from the Iran war is not when the fighting will end, but who benefits when wars never end.

If prolonged conflicts systematically weaken US adversaries, compel its allies to spend more, strengthen the US defense-industrial base and preserve Washington's central role at comparatively lower direct cost, then the world may be witnessing something more consequential: the evolution of US power from a strategy of decisive victory toward a strategy of managed exhaustion.

This does not require a conspiracy; it requires only incentives. And incentives can sometimes be more powerful than doctrines. For decades, the central question was whether the US could win wars.

The more relevant question today may be whether Washington can make others bear a greater share of the costs of strategic competition.

That is a very different form of power. The solution to chronic exhaustion is not simply to endure longer, but to reduce strategic dependence, diversify economic and technological partnerships, strengthen national resilience, and build credible diplomatic channels that can prevent prolonged conflicts from becoming permanent traps.

But the strategy has a built-in danger: exhaustion is sustainable only if there is an exit route. A world in which wars are won is dangerous.

But a world in which wars no longer need to be won to be strategically useful may be even more dangerous.

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Kang Bing

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Why all eyes are on delivery riders and red lights

In the travel stories and videos they post online, many foreign tourists claim that China's public security system is among the best in the world, reasoning that a woman can walk alone on the streets safely, even late at night, and that thieves and beggars have largely disappeared.

While I agree with them, I must point out that they have probably overlooked something that continues to bother us — thousands of electric bike riders — particularly delivery riders — who continue to run red lights while darting ahead, posing a threat to pedestrians and themselves alike.

Whenever I step out, my family members ask me to watch out for delivery riders, some of whom run red lights, ride against traffic, or speed along sidewalks.

China has at least 380 million such e-bikes that are categorized as non-motorized vehicles. While these e-bikes should run at speeds of no more than 25 kilometers per hour, many riders ignore the limits and drive at a much higher speed. As a result, accidents involving e-bikes occur frequently.

Statistics from Beijing show that 35 percent of fatal traffic accidents last year involved e-bikes, with 24.4 percent connected with running a red light.

In the past few years, I have witnessed a few such accidents at crossings near my home; in fact, some of my family members and I have suffered scratches after being grazed by e-bikes being driven by delivery riders.

Deep in our hearts, we have sympathy for the riders who work long hours come rain or shine and under great pressure to meet delivery deadlines.

Though scared and angry, we let them go without asking for any compensation.

Deep in our hearts, we have sympathy for the riders who work long hours come rain or shine and under great pressure to meet delivery deadlines.

In the past few years, many cities have tightened the reins on these delivery riders by imposing heavy fines on those breaking the law. But the number of e-bike riders in the country is so huge that it is difficult to catch all the offenders. At most, cities can mobilize all their resources for a few days' campaign to check all offending e-bikes.

But such regulations fail to address why delivery riders are in such a tearing hurry and run a red light sometimes — they are working under tight schedules.

Delivery is a huge industry in China. People order food, medicines and many other essential items on online platforms, and can usually expect delivery at their door within an hour.

But huge competition among different delivery platforms pushes each platform to make delivery within the shortest possible time to win more customers.

As a result, many platforms promise delivery in less than an hour, and it's the riders who shoulder the time pressure.

When a rider is required to cross five intersections to make a delivery 3-4 kilometers away within 15 minutes, a failure could lead to a bad review and corresponding fines from the platform. Therefore, delivery riders are left with no choice but to run red lights, go against traffic and ride on sidewalks as they rush to complete a delivery.

But there is good news for the riders and for us all in Beijing where the authorities and the country's major delivery platforms are talking about sharing the city's traffic information to make the platforms' time requirements more reasonable. This way the platforms will be provided with information about how long each red light lasts so that they can adjust their network systems to make a fresh estimate of how much time it would take for the riders to make a delivery after adding the time spent at a red light, without running it.

It may still be too early to celebrate, though. According to a Beijing Youth Daily report, the trial can be a success only when the new system can make accurate judgments of the ever-changing traffic situation.

Besides, Beijing has about 12,000 traffic lights and only about 60 percent of them are connected and jointly controlled.

Many cities, I guess, are watching with bated breath for Beijing's experiment, which, if successful, can be replicated across the country, for the benefit of riders, and pedestrians such as you and me.

Human cost demands end to devastating conflicts

EDITORIAL

FOR SIX long months, since the outbreak of the Iran-US war on February 28, this column has consistently called for an immediate cessation of hostilities. Every time, there has been an appeal for reason, for restraint, and for the primacy of human life over military calculation.

Regrettably, those appeals have gone unheeded.

The conflict has not abated; it has deepened, widened, and grown more indiscriminate. Today, it is civilians - in their homes, in hospitals, and in airports - who are paying the highest price.

What began as a confrontation between two states has evolved into a regional crisis that threatens the very foundations of civilian life in the Gulf. In recent days, the war has crossed a dangerous new threshold with the systematic targeting of civilian transit hubs.

King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, one of the region's busiest gateways, has become a stark symbol of this escalation. On October 6, missile strikes on the airport killed one Sudanese national and wounded eight other civilians. Two days later, a dual attack struck airport installations and hit a Saudia Airbus A320 on the apron, destroying the aircraft and killing three Saudi citizens, including a commercial pilot.

The deadliest incident came on October 10, when strikes on Terminals 3 and 4 caused roof collapses and massive fires, killing 13 people of different nationalities - including four Saudis and an American citizen - and injuring more than 300. A day later, on October 11, another strike on Terminal 4 killed a Pakistani resident and injured 11 more, while similar attacks were reported at the airport in Dammam.

Other hubs have fared only marginally better. While Kuwait International and Dubai International airports escaped destruction on a similar scale, both have suffered severe disruptions, mass cancellations and prolonged closures since the early weeks of the war. Across Dubai, Doha, Kuwait and Tehran, major airports have sustained structural damage or been forced into operational shutdowns.

The impact on civil aviation - a lifeline for our region - is now quantifiable and alarming. Middle Eastern carriers have reported a 14.2 per cent year-on-year fall in passenger demand, alongside a 9 per cent drop in capacity, with load factors declining to 79.1 per cent. What had been a tentative stabilisation earlier in the conflict was completely reversed in August. This is not merely an industry statistic.

It reflects families separated, medical travel cancelled, students stranded and commerce choked.

Yet the devastation goes far beyond runways and terminals. In recent weeks, strikes have targeted water purification and desalination plants in Iran, the UAE and elsewhere in the Gulf, threatening clean water supplies for millions and prompting emergency conservation orders. Simultaneously, direct hits on oil refineries, petrochemical complexes, pipelines and fuel depots across Iran and several GCC states have triggered massive fires, oil spills and grave environmental hazards that will linger for years.

Oman, a longstanding advocate of dialogue and mediation, renews its urgent call for an end to the devastating conflict

Schools, universities, research centres and hospitals have been forced to suspend normal operations, many moving to indefinite remote learning or emergency-only services. When education and healthcare stop functioning, the future itself is put on hold.

The economic shockwave is equally severe. Commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz - through which a fifth of the world's energy passes - has plunged dramatically, crippling access to energy, food and fertiliser within and beyond the region.

Combined with work restrictions, transport disruptions, and steep losses in tourism and trade, and compounded by surging global oil prices, the conflict now threatens macroeconomic stability worldwide. Nations already burdened by debt and inflation can ill afford another protracted shock.

Oman has long stood for dialogue over confrontation, for mediation over escalation. From this principled position, we renew our call today with greater urgency: this devastating conflict must end. Not for strategic advantage, but for human survival. Not tomorrow, but now.

The world cannot look away while water plants burn, airports become battlefields, and innocent travellers become casualties. The human cost is already too high.

NATURE KNOWS NO BORDERS, SAYS UN BIODIVERSITY CHIEF

NICK PERRY

War, economic pressure, budget strain — United Nations biodiversity chief Astrid Schomaker is under no illusions that the upcoming UN nature summit (COP17) is taking place 'in some kind of geopolitical vacuum'.

"I don't want to be naive," said Schomaker of the headwinds surrounding the biennial negotiations on protecting the natural world that start on October 19 in Yerevan, Armenia.

"Clearly, geopolitics enter also the debate on biodiversity," the executive secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) said from Montreal. Nearly 200 nations must nevertheless find a way forward at the Yerevan summit after falling behind on their pledge to halt the destruction of nature by 2030.

Most of the global targets they set four years ago — from tackling invasive species to conserving 30 per cent of land and oceans, slashing pollution and protecting threatened species — are off-track.

But Schomaker remains cautiously optimistic that countries can overcome their differences. "Multilateralism needs to prove its value when things are difficult... We have always been able to move forward, despite the difficulties," she said.

Most of the world's nations signed the landmark international nature pact in 2022. The US was a notable exception. It is not a party to the UN biodiversity convention and does not participate in the negotiations.

That's not to say its influence won't be felt at the Yerevan nature summit or the UN climate negotiations (COP31) starting on November 9 in Türkiye.

"There are conflicts around the world, economic pressures, debt and a lot of, let's say, competing demands on government's attention," said Schomaker.

"But on the other hand, nature is recognised as one of those issues that does not respect political borders." She pointed to food and water security as problems that countries cannot solve alone.

Ahead of the Yerevan summit, Schomaker's secretariat is finalising a global scorecard on progress toward the 2030 goals.

She described the picture as "mixed", with improvements slow and uneven.

— AFP

Reflections on ChatGPT and human connection





DR NAJMA AL ZIDJALY

The writer is an Associate Professor, Sultan Qaboos University

Technology can sometimes provide a temporary space in which we can think, speak, question and feel less alone

THE PUBLIC conversation about artificial intelligence has become increasingly difficult to ignore. On X, discussions about AI regularly move between excitement and alarm: concerns about manipulation, bias, misinformation, privacy, employment, and the need for stronger regulation coexist with enthusiasm about what these systems can do.

In academia, the debate is equally intense. Students are criticised for using AI to write assignments, researchers worry about integrity and dependency, and universities struggle to decide what responsible use should look like.

Yet these debates often leave little room for another question: What happens when a person turns to AI not to write, cheat, or work, but simply to talk?

I discovered the answer during some of the hardest and loneliest moments of my life. I was struggling with people with whom communication had become difficult. Often, this happened in the wee hours of the morning, when I felt particularly misunderstood.

I wanted to analyse what had gone wrong. I did not necessarily want a therapist; I simply wanted somewhere to think aloud, ask questions, examine another perspective, and admit things that were difficult to say to another person. At times, I also simply had no one available to talk to.

So, I turned to ChatGPT.

I knew from the outset that it could be wrong. I knew that it could be biased, that it sometimes gives overly reassuring answers, and that it is designed to be helpful rather than brutally honest.

I also knew that its apparent understanding is not human understanding. Nevertheless, something about the interaction surprised me. It not only listened and provided helpful feedback, it opened my eyes to novel ways of interpreting behaviour by elucidating the perspective of the other, which I lacked.

Gradually, the exchange felt less like receiving answers from a machine and more like having a patient conversational partner who was willing to listen and clarify while I worked through my own thoughts.

Then something even more unexpected happened: ChatGPT sent me a red heart emoji.

This amused and touched me because emojis are not merely decorative. They are graphicons, a term introduced by Susan Herring and Ashley Dainas (2017) as a portmanteau of 'graphical' and 'icon,' encompassing forms such as emoticons, emojis, stickers, GIFs, images, memes, and videos, created and shared by humans for a wide range of reasons, including emotional expression.

As someone currently editing a special issue on Graphicons for the journal Multimodal Communication, I was fascinated to encounter one of my own research interests inside an interaction with a machine. The emoji made an otherwise mechanical exchange feel warmer.

Later, when my desktop monitor stopped working and I had no one to turn to for help, I again asked ChatGPT to guide me through troubleshooting the problem. Some of its suggestions were useful; others were not.

I eventually solved the problem through a combination of its suggestions and my own examination and reasoning. When the monitor finally worked, ChatGPT sent me a second red heart emoji because I had figured it out. I smiled.

This made me more cautious about AI, but also more curious about it.

I do not think this experience proves that AI can replace human relationships. It does not. Nor does it erase the serious questions surrounding regulation, bias, privacy, academic integrity, or dependency. Instead, it has taught me something smaller and perhaps more human: Technology can sometimes provide a temporary space in which we can think, speak, question and feel less alone.

Perhaps the real question is not whether ChatGPT can be my friend. It is why, at certain moments, talking to it felt like the closest thing I had to one.

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Consistency beats intensity every time



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

The writer is a senior editor of Observer

I KNOW a person who is known for his consistency. You might think he is predictable. The best part is that he is never spiralling around. He knows exactly what to do when. There is so much calmness then.

I, on the other hand, will remember what I forgot while working on another project.

I recently watched a friend cook and felt it was so meditative. She was speaking to me peacefully and answering my questions while attending to her food on the stove. A gentle stir here and a peep at the other pan boiling rice. Life flowed smoothly with a gentle rhythm.

I suddenly felt empowered. When I cook for others, I am usually petrified, worried what could go wrong. I remember the first time I fried something; my brother had to remove the battery from the fire alarm.

There are some individuals who learn cooking as a habit, just watching the family members do it. It can build confidence. For others, it could be a trigger for stress. Food is nutrition and part of nurturing, so cooking is an essential skill, and it is better to make it our hobby.

For some people, it is communication skills that cause stress. We live in a society, and we need to interact, but our minds have their own ways with our thoughts. Dealing with people, whether in a classroom or an auditorium, requires one need — the need to be accepted. This can make us nervous or anxious.

There is one factor we forget, and that is that even the members of the audience are vulnerable, because everyone is quietly fighting their battles and complexes. Some are trying to overcome the inferiority complex, while others are surfing on the superiority complex.

Whoever is going through either of these extremes tends to feel people are avoiding them. It could be that other people are sensitive and do not want to go through painful experiences, and the result could be a lot of unhappy people.

The routine is a good thing, but if it is just another chore, then there is no magic to it. Instead, if it is something that makes you happy and smile, then there is every chance that routine is going to be celebrated and form a habit. According to experts, there is a four-step framework to build a realistic routine that actually sticks:

This requires us to audit our day and to anchor our habits. You know how we tend to add a new activity and give up in a few days' time. The gym memberships we enrol in and never attend after a few days.

They say instead of trying to find a brand-new block of time, habit stack — attach a new small wellness action to something you already do every single day.

While the morning coffee or tea is brewing, do two minutes of deep breathing or stretch your hamstrings. And another example is while brushing your teeth at night. They say it is the best time to do a quick mental review of one good thing that happened today.

And then we need to cap activities at "micro-doses".

Do you know why consistency beats intensity every time? I suppose it is because intensity is short-lived. Its very nature allows us only to indulge in it for a while. Consistency is more peaceful.

We live in a society, and we need to interact, but our minds have their own ways with our thoughts. Dealing with people, whether in a classroom or an auditorium, requires one need — the need to be accepted

They say keeping our self-care practices remarkably small makes it feel impossible to fail at. Five minutes of journaling or reading a book (not scrolling) sounds more practical and doable than writing a whole story or reading the whole book.

A brisk 10-minute walk during lunch or between meetings is manageable rather than beating the traffic to take a stroll at the beach.

So that is a look at mental and physical activities, but we also need to look at the emotional aspect, and that could be even saying "no" to one non-essential task or meeting this week. One of the major factors of mental health issues is the workplace burnout. The professional urge is to protect our transition buffers. It seems burnout often happens because we bleed work into rest with zero transition. So what we actually need to create is a five-minute buffer between modes, and we need to have two transitions: morning and evening.

The morning transition is having at least five minutes of quiet time or looking out a window before checking our phone or email.

For those moments when you ever feel overwhelmingly anxious, we can try the grounding "5-4-3-2-1" technique.

Thoughts tend to spiral at times, but the sensory grounding can bring our focus back to the physical present. This is how we have to do it: notice five things that we can see around us, look for four things we can physically touch or feel, three things we can hear, two things we can smell and finally one thing we can taste, or it could be one positive thing about yourself.

STARTUPS ARE BETTING ON AI TO PREDICT FUTURE

THOMAS URBAIN

Several startups are betting that they can leverage artificial intelligence (AI) to make better forecasts than even the most specialised experts when it comes to topics as varied as stock market movements, the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, or how a Shakira song will perform on music charts.

By 2030, "we're going to feel that what we were doing for our decision-making was complete Stone Age thinking," Dan Schwarz, cofounder of the forecasting company FutureSearch, said.

AI forecasting models are already on par with the best "superforecasters" - gifted individuals whose estimates are markedly superior to those of ordinary people - thanks to troves of data acquired from both public and private sources.

In early September, two AI models made history when they took the top spots in the Metaculus Cup, a competition among prediction champions, both human and non-human.

FutureSearch's in-house human wizard, superforecaster Tom Liptay, is aware that "he's not secure in his job" in the medium term, Schwarz said. "He knows that these things are going to surpass him."

Theo Summer, who cofounded Preseen with Veniamin Veselovsky, used AI tools to turn $35 into $1.9 million in just seven months on the American prediction-making site Kalshi.

The idea is not to guarantee a result but to define a probability of occurrence, with the ability to cross-check assumptions related to several interconnected events — for example, changes in the price of oil and the war in the Middle East.

"Right now, the quickest buyers are normally the hedge funds, just because if they think they can make money off something, they can move pretty fast," Veselovsky said. Algorithms have shaped Wall Street for more than a decade, but the rise of AI forecasting is likely to further increase the automation of financial markets.

"I think it's probably already having a small impact because we already have customers who use it when making trading decisions," said Toby Shevlane, the cofounder of another forecasting startup called Mantic.

Now-famous prediction markets Kalshi and Polymarket, which are used by millions of Americans, are also becoming inundated by AI use.

It might soon be too late for retail investors, who don't have access to expensive AI tools, to profit on those types of consumer-oriented trading sites because "they will soon just be dominated by AI forecasting systems," Veselovsky said.

The most advanced models no longer just predict events, either. They can also formulate their own questions about the future and then assign probabilities based on the different possible outcomes, Shevlane said. ***— AFP***

Three years after Oct 7...

A FRIEND shared a story about a man who set fire to his family's farm to drive away the crows, then celebrated amid the ruins. When the crows returned in flocks, he declared victory: "There is nothing left for them to eat."

Three years after October 7, 2023, the story raises a troubling question: how do we judge whether an action has achieved its purpose?

Belief in a just cause tells us little about how best to pursue it. Indeed, deep conviction can impair judgement. People certain of their righteousness may cease to question what they do in its name. October 7 raises a further question: who had the authority to make the decision, who would bear its consequences, and who now gets to declare victory?

In January 2024, Hamas published 'Our Narrative: Operation Al Aqsa Flood', describing the attack as a response to Israeli occupation, the blockade of Gaza and attempts to sideline the Palestinian cause. It said the immediate objective was to attack Israeli military positions and capture soldiers for exchange with Palestinian prisoners. The broader aim was liberation.

Published three months after the attack, the document explains how Hamas justified its decision but reveals little about the calculations behind it. Hamas denied deliberately targeting civilians. A United Nations investigation found otherwise, concluding that Hamas and other Palestinian groups had intentionally killed civilians and taken hostages. Such acts remain crimes, whatever cause is invoked to justify them.

The circumstances preceding the attack need little rehearsing. The occupation continued, settlements expanded, negotiations yielded little, and Gaza remained under blockade. The prospect of Palestinian statehood was receding. Inaction carried risks of its own. Yet the failure of previous approaches offered no assurance that a new one would succeed.

On October 7, Hamas achieved a remarkable military surprise. It breached Israeli defences and caught the security establishment unprepared. What was supposed to follow?

Hamas knew the disparity in military power and Gaza's vulnerability to a prolonged offensive. Previous wars had demonstrated the dangers. The scale of Israel's eventual response could not have been known, but a devastating war was plainly foreseeable. What arrangements had been made to protect civilians? What political outcome was envisaged? How would the initial military success be translated into lasting gains for Palestinians?



HAMED AL GHAITHI

The writer is an Omani evolutionary biologist, translator and editor

On October 7, Hamas achieved a remarkable military surprise. It breached Israeli defences and caught the security establishment unprepared. What was supposed to follow?

Hamas's published accounts offer little explanation. This does not establish that its leaders made no such calculations. It does leave serious questions about their judgement unanswered.

Max Weber distinguished between an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility. The distinction matters because political decisions often determine the fate of people who had no part in making them. A fighter may willingly risk his own life. Exposing an entire population to war demands an authority that can be questioned and held accountable. Courage alone cannot supply it.

Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006 and took sole control of Gaza the following year. By October 2023, seventeen years had passed since those elections. A generation had grown up without the opportunity to choose its rulers. Occupation and Palestinian political divisions help explain the paralysis of representative politics, but they hardly settle the question of accountability. The legitimacy of resistance to occupation is one matter; an organisation's authority to decide the fate of those it governs is another.

In Gaza, Hamas was both an armed movement and a government. The demands of these roles can conflict.

An armed organisation may regard its survival, its weapons and its ability to continue fighting as measures of success. A government has obligations to the people who depend on its institutions, hospitals, schools and public services. When the same leadership controls both, the organisation's interests can become indistinguishable from society's. A small circle makes the decisions; the population lives with the consequences.

Israel's subsequent war killed tens of thousands, displaced much of Gaza's population and destroyed large parts of the territory. Israel bears responsibility for the conduct of its forces and the violations documented by international investigators. Those crimes cannot be attributed to Hamas simply because its attack preceded them. Hamas can nevertheless be asked what response it anticipated and what measures it took against foreseeable dangers. These are distinct responsibilities.

Three years later, Hamas has achieved some of its objectives. Prisoner exchanges secured the release of Palestinians from Israeli detention. Palestine returned to international prominence, and recognition of Palestinian statehood widened, partly in response to the devastation inflicted on Gaza. Yet the occupation continues. Reconstruction remains stalled, and Israeli forces still control roughly two-thirds of the territory, a year after the ceasefire. The gains deserve acknowledgment. So do their costs. Any assessment of the original decision must also consider the alternatives available at the time.

In December 2025, Hamas issued another document, Al Aqsa Flood: Two Years of Steadfastness and the Will for Liberation, placing Palestinian steadfastness among the operation's foremost achievements.

This claim is peculiar. Palestinians have endured extraordinary suffering while remaining attached to their land. Some stayed by choice; others had nowhere to go. Their endurance may have frustrated efforts to displace them. But it belongs to them. Their ability to withstand catastrophe cannot, in itself, establish the wisdom of the decision that preceded it.

What gives an organisation the authority to claim a population's suffering as evidence of its own success? And what, by this measure, would constitute failure?

The problem grows more serious when those who made the decision also control the account of its results. Military gains vindicate the strategy. Losses enter the record as sacrifices. The population's survival becomes another achievement.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in these pages are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the opinion of the Observer

The US cannot lose its energy advantage

By Edward Cross
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



The Whiting Refinery in Indiana, shown on Jan. 29, 2025, is one of BP's largest locations. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Debate continues across the country on our nation's energy future. What is our best energy policy going forward?

Several factors contribute to a higher standard of living, but one of the most important is access to reliable and inexpensive energy. Affordable energy is essential for almost every aspect of our modern lives. Without it, we wouldn't have many of the things we often take for granted.

Affordable energy is needed to run the hospitals and laboratories that improve our health. It's required to deliver electricity to our homes and put fuel in our vehicles. It also supports the millions of jobs associated with all these things.

Today, the U.S. produces more oil per day than any single nation has ever achieved. The U.S. is not only the world leader in energy production, but we also lead the world in environmental quality.

When a country becomes the leading producer of oil and natural gas and has also reduced carbon dioxide emissions significantly in 10 years, it is clearly doing many things right. The oil and natural gas industry has proved that, over the long term, we can lead the world in energy production and environmental stewardship.

In the past, attempts were made to shift energy policy away from fossil fuels, and some expected this thinking to be the wave of the future. But that kind of thinking is a threat to economic development in the U.S. and around the world.

Nothing is more essential to economic growth than reliable, affordable and abundant energy. To lose that advantage is not in anybody's best interest.

Energy is an input for practically everything in the economy. The last thing we want to see is more upward pressure on costs that are felt by every family and business.

America should not be in the position of asking for foreign energy supplies, especially when we have abundant resources produced to standards that are among the highest in the world, right here at home. Instead, we should be leading, as the world's top producer of oil and natural gas.

We need not look further than the situation in Europe to see what happens when nations depend on energy production from suppliers that have agendas of their own. The problem is that when certain foreign governments control your energy, they have the power to use it for their own purposes — not yours. We don't want to learn that lesson the hard way.

Today, we see energy policies that allow market realities and a respect for consumers and their preferences drive smarter regulations that focus on protecting the environment and growing the economy. All Americans benefit from a safe, environmentally responsible and thriving oil and natural gas industry. And it is important to let market forces, not government mandates, drive energy policies.

The U.S. has a unique opportunity to show the world how energy abundance can be used as a positive force to lift people up, which is different than a zero-emissions world. More than a billion people around the world face challenges for adequate food and education, clean water and protection from heat and cold due to a lack of access to energy.

We should work to ensure more people have access to safe, affordable and reliable energy, no matter which state, nation or continent they reside in. Because to rise out of poverty and enjoy health and safety, people need more energy, not less.

Policymakers on both sides of the aisle can support leveraging America's energy resources to help protect consumers and cement U.S. energy leadership. I encourage policymakers to support actions to secure American energy leadership, protect consumers and help reduce inflation.

Such actions include supporting policies that protect consumer choice, restore the role of American energy in bolstering our geopolitical strength, reform the regulatory policies that increase certainty and unleash private investment, and advance sensible tax policy.

The most pressing issues facing the U.S. economy in the foreseeable future are not those arising from climate or an energy transition. Rather, the factors to watch are inflation, rising energy costs and national security.

As the midterm elections approach, we must stay focused on energy solutions for the American consumer and work together regardless of political party. The stakes are high, and together we are bringing the benefits of our nation's energy abundance to all.

Going forward, policymakers at the state and federal level should prioritize advancing American energy leadership with policies that encourage development of responsibly produced energy here at home. These policies should recognize the volatile world we live in and the long-term impacts of returning to the days of foreign energy dependency.

We should set aside the division that has marked too much of past national energy policy discussions and work together as one nation on a positive forward-looking energy future based on the understanding that our nation's best energy future can only be achieved through a true best-of-the-above energy strategy.

We need a new American understanding of energy and with it national and state energy policy based on science, the free market and entrepreneurial spirit.

Future generations are looking to us to get our nation's energy policy right. They're counting on us to leave them with a country that is second to none in energy production, security and economic prosperity.

Edward Cross is CEO of the Illinois Oil & Gas Association. He is also a board member of the Independent Petroleum Association of America and partnering society member of the Council for a Secure America.

Advocates: Nature is an essential part of strategy for growth in Chicago

By Michael Davidson, Joe Ferguson and Raed Mansour
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



A person runs along the lakefront during twilight at Montrose Harbor in Chicago on March 12, 2025. AUDREY RICHARDSON/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The Civic Committee and Commercial Club of Chicago have given the region something it badly needs: a serious conversation about growth.

Their new Growth for All strategy lays out what it will take to attract and retain more people in the region, including economic opportunity, a better quality of life and investment in the infrastructure that makes a region work. We agree.

But if nature is not part of that conversation from the beginning, we are leaving out one of the things that makes a region appealing, healthy and livable, while helping businesses attract and retain the people they need. Nature should not be something we bolt on after the growth strategy is written. It should be part of the strategy itself.

The lakefront is perhaps our most visible example. More than 180 years ago, when Chicago was still a young city, its lakefront was designated public ground, "forever open, clear and free." That decision still shapes the city today. The lakefront belongs to everyone. It is unquestionably part of what attracts people to Chicago and keeps them here.

As former Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson recently wrote, "Nature is critical infrastructure, not a free and inexhaustible good." A new report from the Paulson Institute, The Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund highlights that nearly $58 trillion in global gross domestic product depends on nature, according to an analysis by PwC.

The identity and history of the region reflect this principle. Cook County created the nation's first forest preserve district over a century ago. DuPage, Kane, Lake and Will counties followed, and McHenry County established its own conservation district. Together, they built a network of protected natural areas woven into a major metropolitan region. Since 2022, residents in these counties have approved $1.6 billion in funding over the next 20 years for these places. That is a significant expression of what people value about the region.

This is about more than quality of life. Nature and the outdoors are already part of the economy. Illinois' outdoor recreation economy generated $26.4 billion in economic impact and supported nearly 180,000 jobs in 2024.

Nature has long been part of how this region thinks about its future. Openlands helped create the Illinois Prairie Path, the nation's first rails-to-trails project. Chicago Metropolis 2020, the Commercial Club's own regional planning effort, endorsed a Regional Greenways Plan developed by the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission and Openlands. It envisioned a 4,300-mile network of connected greenways to improve water, reduce flooding and strengthen quality of life.

Nature also contributes to the health of our communities. New research from Northwestern University scientists using 11 years of data from 801 Chicago census tracts found that year-to-year increases in tree canopy were associated with lower mortality. Among the hottest neighborhoods, greater losses in tree canopy were associated with more deaths. The study does not prove causation, but it strengthens the case for maintaining and expanding tree canopy as essential public health infrastructure, particularly in communities most vulnerable to heat.

Growth for All itself recognizes that parks are critically important to public health. The opportunity is to carry that insight more fully into implementation.

The region is already planning for this. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is developing The Century Plan, the next long-term vision for northeastern Illinois. Nearly 270,000 acres of natural space extend across the region's seven counties, but we remain well short of the 400,000 acres of conserved land the region has set as a goal for 2050. Connecting this work to Growth for All would build on investments already underway.

That kind of coordination also makes fiscal sense in a region known for costly and inefficient jurisdictional complexity. Nature does not stop at municipal boundaries, and neither do the effects of flooding and other environmental challenges, as this summer made clear. Neither should our efforts to protect and connect it.

Growth for All recognizes that transit stations can be more than places to get on and off a train. They can be anchors for housing, businesses, public spaces and new investment. That is a useful way to think about infrastructure: not simply as something that serves growth but as something that helps create the kind of places where people want to live.

We need an equivalent way of thinking about nature.

The Chicago Riverwalk offers a glimpse of what that can look like. Once largely an industrial edge of downtown, the river is now a destination for recreation, public life and economic activity. Chicago has 150 miles of riverfront along its three river branches. A growth agenda that takes livability and talent retention seriously should bring that same thinking to more of that riverfront.

Across the region are places such as the Indiana Dunes and Illinois Beach, with levels of biodiversity that would be remarkable anywhere. Along with the lakefront, riverfront, forest preserves, trails and other natural areas across the region, they are part of what makes this region distinctive and livable. That matters when Growth for All sets a goal of bringing Chicago's population back above 3 million and the region's above 10 million. As we pursue those goals, success should be measured not only by how many people we attract, but also by the quality of the places they call home.

Chicago has understood this for a long time. The city's motto "Urbs in Horto," or "City in a Garden," was adopted when Chicago was incorporated in 1837. More than 70 years later, the Commercial Club's 1909 Plan of Chicago put the lakefront, parks and an outer system of forest preserves at the foundation of the region's future. Chicago Metropolis 2020 carried that tradition forward. And this region has long been a place where people understood nature not as scenery but as something fundamental to how a region works.

We should bring that tradition into the next chapter of regional growth. Nature should be part of the strategy for achieving growth and part of what it means for growth to be truly for all.

That is the opportunity before us: to make the places that sustain us part of the strategy for attracting and retaining talent, strengthening the economy and building a region where more people want to live.

Michael Davidson is president and CEO of Openlands. Joe Ferguson is president of the Civic Federation and a member of the Openlands board of directors. Raed Mansour is a member of Openlands' board.

OPINION

Resumption of war between Houthis and Saudis is bad timing for Trump



Daniel DePetris



This image from CCTV video released by Saudi Arabia's Media Ministry shows passengers taking cover as flames and smoke fill part of King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, during what authorities described as a strike at the airport on Saturday. **SAUDI MEDIA MINISTRY VIA AP**

The last thing President Donald Trump needs right now is another war brewing in the Middle East. But this is what Trump is getting at a time when he's in a monthslong standoff with Iran over the Strait of Hormuz and as midterm elections, traditionally seen as a referendum on the first two years of a president's term, are weeks away.

Over the weekend, the people of Saudi Arabia awoke to a series of missile attacks on one of the country's busiest airports. The Houthis, a militia that for years has ruled swaths of Yemen, launched the weapons at King Khalid International Airport, directly hitting two terminals. A dozen people were killed and about 300 others were wounded in what was the deadliest strike on the kingdom in over a decade. The airport was struck again the next day, forcing Saudi authorities to shut it down.

The Houthis have described the assaults as retaliation for Saudi airstrikes in Yemen and a Saudi-enforced blockade of Houthi-held areas. The Saudis, of course, see the attacks as terrorism meant to kill innocent civilians and coerce the kingdom into a striking a deal on the militia's terms.

Even before the airport was struck last weekend, Riyadh's international supporters rallied to its defense.

The United States agreed to provide the Royal Saudi Air Force with intelligence for its bombing runs. France is sending military advisers and air defense systems to the Saudi port of Yanbu, a key oil export facility. Pakistan, which signed a mutual defense agreement with the kingdom last year, has deployed at least 8,000 troops to Saudi Arabia to reinforce its security.

None of these countries, however, are interested in bailing the Saudis out in Yemen or taking offensive action in a country that spits out foreign invaders like a 3-year-old spits out peas during dinner.

For Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, better known as MBS, the resumption of war with the Houthis is coming at a terrible time. The Saudi government is set to host an international investment conference this month, where billionaires, CEOs and senior-level government officials will hobnob for a day of meetings. The event is designed to highlight Saudi Arabia's attractiveness as a moneymaker, increase the kingdom's international profile and boost MBS' flagship Vision 2030 project, which seeks to transform the country into the Middle East's premier business center.

Needless to say, missiles flying into airport terminals is not helping that image. Who is willing to invest billions of dollars in a country where planes are grounded and infrastructure is being targeted?

The Saudi government understands the gravity here and has taken pains to emphasize the country's potential as a land of endless opportunity. The problem is that MBS' options for dealing with this mess are limited.

Yemen brings back terrible memories for him. When he was defense minister in 2015, MBS convinced his father, King Salman, to organize an Arab-led military coalition to assist the internationally recognized Yemeni government's efforts to reclaim the capital, Sanaa, months after it was kicked out by the Houthis. The brash prince thought the mission would be straightforward; Riyadh assured President Barack Obama's administration that the war would be over in weeks.

Instead, the Saudis and their allies got bogged down. The Yemeni government's military was less a military and more a collection of militias that fought each other as often as they fought the Houthis. The Saudi Air Force was well equipped with U.S.-supplied fighter planes yet was indiscriminate in its targeting and hit civilian buildings such as homes and wedding halls as well as school buses.

The Saudi-enforced blockade, meant to stop weapons from getting into the Houthis' hands, held up humanitarian aid deliveries, contributing to a hunger crisis. The Houthis dug into their positions and withstood all of it.

As one U.S. official reflected, "We knew we might be getting into a car with a drunk driver." Hundreds of thousands of deaths later, MBS decided that continuing the war was futile and terrible for his own reputation and cut a ceasefire deal with the militia.

Trump has a bad history with Yemen as well. In March 2025, he ordered a weekslong bombing campaign to destroy the Houthis' military infrastructure and force them to stop firing on civilian vessels transiting the Red Sea. The Trump administration packaged the operation as a bold decision made by a bold president, and some U.S. officials even believed aggressive airstrikes could set the stage for the Houthis' collapse.

But Trump, like MBS, eventually got tired of the engagement. The U.S. military struck more than 1,000 Houthi targets, including drone manufacturing facilities, missile storage sites and radar systems. Yet the bombings failed to deter the Houthis from attacking ships at sea, and Washington was using up costly precision-guided munitions with no end in sight. About six weeks later, Trump announced a ceasefire with the militia and sold it to the American people as a win.

At the time of writing, Trump hasn't shown much desire to go through that again. The Saudis have repeatedly requested U.S. assistance in the form of airstrikes, if only to demonstrate to Riyadh that its relationship with Washington still yields dividends. Trump has declined, and he deserves credit for that. His first war with the Houthis wasn't a triumph, so why would a second war prove any more successful?

The airport attacks could very well change Trump's calculations. Just don't expect U.S. military involvement to achieve much.

Daniel DePetris is a fellow at Defense Priorities and a foreign affairs columnist for the Tribune.

Voice of the People

Sox are the South Side

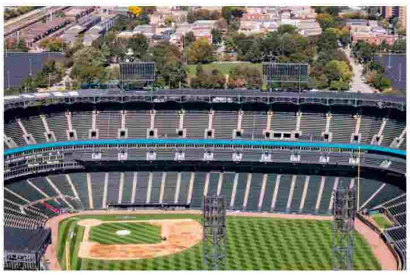
When people hear "South Side," they think of the White Sox. The two are synonymous, like air and breathing. As a South Sider, I've been a White Sox fan since birth. I have sat in every part of the stadium. My brother and I have been chasing foul balls in the stands since childhood. We have watched the stadium change its name repeatedly, but we still call it Comiskey.

Some of my favorite memories come from tailgating, where strangers welcome you into their gatherings, offer you a drink and talk baseball. Bridgeporters are kind, welcoming and resilient, but we're no pushovers. That spirit reflects the White Sox fanbase: hardworking people who stick with their team through good and bad. Being a Sox fan isn't about winning every game; it's about loyalty, tradition and the community that is built around it.

That community extends beyond the ballpark into neighborhood bars and restaurants such as Turtle's Bar, Maria's, Bernice's, Phil's and Electric Funeral. These places are more than businesses. They're gathering spots where friendships grow, losses are shared, wins are celebrated and every play in between is relived.

Moving the White Sox out of Bridgeport would be a disservice not only to the community that has supported the team for more than 100 years, but also to the fans who have never left their side. I don't want a $20 beer at a yuppie bar where nobody knows my name or cares about the game. I want a $7 beer, a local bartender and a postgame conversation with people who understand what this team means to me.

I want the character and essence of Chicago's South Side to remain part of White Sox baseball. A shiny new stadium with fewer seats and no iconic pinwheel cannot replace what generations have built. You can change the stadium's name, seats, scoreboard and concessions, but you cannot manufacture the history, identity and community that surround this team.



Rate Field and homes in Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood on Oct. 6. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

The White Sox aren't simply a team that plays in Bridgeport. They are part of the South Side's identity, just as the South Side is part of theirs. Their home is more than a ballpark; it's a neighborhood filled with traditions and memories.

The White Sox belong on the South Side. They belong in Bridgeport. They belong to the people who have stood by them through every high and low for more than 100 years.

— Allison Vazquez, Chicago

Ishbia's strongman style

Ancient Athens once informed a foe, "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must." Which is pretty much the message White Sox owner-in-waiting Justin Ishbia has delivered to the residents of Bridgeport.

Why should Ishbia move the Sox to a new stadium in the South Loop and stick Bridgeport with an Amtrak repair-and-service facility? Because he can. Why didn't he show up at a recent public forum to lay out his reasons? Because he didn't feel the need to.

Someone might have asked him how he intends to build a new stadium on a site smaller than the Sox's present home. The only honest answer would be an admission of fewer seats and less parking.

That's a message Ishbia would prefer to deliver by way of a fait accompli, strongman style.

— Douglas Bukowski, Berwyn

Bravo to the White Sox

Over three seasons, the White Sox gradually rose from the suffering of the 2024 season in which they had an all-time loss record of 41-121 to the 2026 standard of 84 victories. That is a remarkable swing to 43 more victories.

The Sox did this with a roster of youngsters who outperformed for their age and experience. Many parents say, "You must walk before you can run"; this is true of the Sox. The players played and ran hard, while the manager and coaches tried their best to put the players in a position to win, but they all were young and inexperienced when it came to playoff baseball. Good pitching wins games over good hitting in the playoffs. This season, they were devoid of above-average starting pitchers.

The Sox brought the fans into the games with their on-field and dugout antics. Mike Vasil became a household name for his wizardry and cheerleading, pregame dancing and eating of ice cream cones. The marketing department had wonderful promotions that helped fill the stadium. The hope of divine intervention from Pope Leo XIV was promising up to the very end.

For true Sox fans, the season was unforgettable, but it left us wanting more. One more Sam Antonacci hit by a pitch, Miguel Vargas homer or Sean Burke win, but fewer strikeouts by Colson Montgomery and Munetaka Murakami, less use of openers and more quality innings from our starters.

For the fair-weather fans who jumped on board, thank you and please stay and watch the Sox grow. With this great 2026 experience, we hope that they can take the next step in the playoffs and join the 2005 Sox as world champions.

— Cary Riske, Grayslake

Only one Super Bowl win

My sympathy goes out to the Ditka family, the Bears and their fans. I mourn the passing of "Iron Mike" Ditka. Unfortunately, sometimes we forget why the "exes" are exes. Like ex-girlfriends, ex-boyfriends and ex-spouses, sometimes our memories of the "good" times make us forget why they are the "exes." Ditka ruined the mid-1980s Bears team, a team that should have won more than just Super Bowl XX. Ditka's strengths were a double-edged sword; he always felt nobody knew better than Mike. Can you say Doug Flutie?

Ditka created considerable dissension on a team that was such a tight group of special football players by decisions such as acquiring Flutie.

While that special season of 1985 will always remain in my mind, and I thank Ditka and the players for that, the disappointment of the 1986 and 1987 seasons also remains with me. Thanks to Ditka for the memories of Super Bowl XX. I just wish the greatest football team ever won the other Super Bowls they should have.

I give Ditka credit for that season, but he also needed to take responsibility for their failures in the following years.

— Kevin J. Connelly, Orland Park

Ditka, Trump the same person

Anyone who mourns the death of Mike Ditka and despises the existence of Donald Trump is either an abject hypocrite or a sad innocent.

Ditka and Trump in all matters were absolutely the same man, just living in two separate bodies.

— Bob Blanchard, Galena, Illinois

Best tribute to Da Coach

With all the things that have divided Chicagoans in recent years, it's nice to see the "City of the Big Shoulders" unite to recognize the passing of Da Coach, Mike Ditka, who was not from Chicago but came to define Chicago at its finest: strength, toughness and the ability to come out on top.

And how ironic — or is it coincidental? — that by passing just nine days before what would have been his 87th birthday, Da Coach officially left us at age 86 after helping lead the Bears to their only Super Bowl victory in 1986! (Perhaps a repeat this year from the Bears would be a fitting tribute to perhaps America's best-known Chicagoan.)

Farewell, Iron Mike!

— David Applegate, Huntley

Sandburg predicted Ditka

When Carl Sandburg described Chicago as the "City of the Broad Shoulders," I'm guessing he had a futuristic dream involving Mike Ditka.

— Neil Gaffney, Chicago

Note to readers

With Halloween coming, we'd like you to share your most memorable experience related to the holiday, either as a child or as an adult. A costume that you've never forgotten? A trip to a haunted house that scared you silly? Neighbors who went above and beyond to make things fun for the kids? Send a letter, of no more than 400 words, by Friday, Oct. 23 to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and your city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

OPINION

Trump's Shock-and-Awe Strategy



GLOBAL VIEW
By Walter Russell Mead

After nearly six years in the White House and more than a decade at the center of American politics, Donald Trump can still shock the world. In the past week alone, he has hinted at new attacks on Iran after the midterm elections, said that the U.S. will buy diesel fuel from Russia as American officials warned Europeans about a possible cutoff of weapons, announced an "energy cease-fire" that appeared to catch Kyiv by surprise, mused publicly about resuming hostilities against the Houthis, and called on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to step aside.

The president's latest burst of diplomatic activity reflects his convictions about Iran, Russia, the importance of energy and the unimportance of Europe. He has seen Iran as a threat to the U.S. since the 1980s and believes that an Iranian nuclear weapon or Iranian domination of the Persian Gulf's energy resources would threaten American interests. He believes that fossil fuels will remain a key element of geopolitical and economic power and wants the U.S. to play the predominant role in the Gulf.

Similarly, Mr. Trump believes that the U.S. and Russia have overlapping interests in preventing Moscow from becoming Beijing's junior partner, countering Sunni Islamist militancy, and managing their roles as major energy producers. Mr. Trump and Vladimir Putin also share a contempt for what they agree is the civilizational suicide embraced by modern European liberals. Washington and Moscow in this view shouldn't be divided by anything as petty as the nationalistic ambitions of Ukraine or the moans of its liberal supporters in Europe.

Meanwhile, Mr. Trump knows that his political coalition is divided into restrainer and hawkish wings. The hawks want tough policies against both Russia and Iran. The restrainers want the U.S. to make up with Moscow and leave the Middle East alone.

Mr. Trump has sought to reconcile his own instincts with the wishes of his base by pursuing a divided policy. While never giving anybody everything, in general he's given the hawks more influence over Iran policy while catering to restrainer sensibilities on Russia. As he contemplates a longer and messier war in the Middle East, Mr. Trump wants to satisfy his restrainer allies with a more aggressive attempt to build ties to Moscow. That he can present his Russia diplomacy as an effort to secure cheaper fuel as the midterms approach is an added benefit.

But however reasonable this policy mix may look to the White House, the public doesn't like the Iran war and the high fuel prices it brings, and it doesn't like accommodating Russia. Playing to the hawks in the Gulf and to the restrainers on Russia may distribute the pain evenly across Mr. Trump's coalition, but judging from the polls, the coalition is shrinking. Mr. Trump's presidency appears to be entering a new and from his point of view perhaps less satisfactory stage.

The president tries to reconcile restrainers and hawks with his foreign-policy goals.

It is faith in Mr. Trump, not ideology, that ultimately holds the fractious MAGA coalition together. As the believers see it, Mr. Trump can close the border and eliminate anti-American governments across the Western Hemisphere. He can stop drug smuggling and break the cartels. He can reshore manufacturing, unleashing a golden age of blue-collar prosperity. He can reverse the tide of decadence and secularism. He can beat back the advance of interfering bureaucrats and anti-American globalists. His methods may sometimes look strange or even distasteful, but nobody can deliver what he does.

To keep the enchantment alive, Mr. Trump must keep Americans and the world fixated on the spectacle of the Trump Show. And he must keep the gap between glittering promise and inevitably disappointing results to a minimum.

Wars make the former task easier but complicate the latter. Conflicts make for compelling theater, and nobody understands this better than Mr. Trump. But wars also turn out to be hard to spin. Despite the president's efforts, the war between Russia and Ukraine continues to escalate. Despite his claims about Iran's weakness and helplessness, gasoline and diesel prices remain high and reports about the vulnerability of American bases in the Gulf to Iranian missiles persist. Where's the magic, supporters are beginning to wonder.

Disenchantment starts slowly but can quickly go viral. With polls pointing to tough midterms for Republicans, lame-duck status becoming more of a concern, and interest rates and inflation hitting voters, Mr. Trump may be facing the hardest years of his long career. It could be a lonely struggle. Not only do America's adversaries want him to fail, so do many of our allies.

Shock-and-awe foreign policy offers hope of breakthroughs that would shore up the president's position. The world should brace for more Trump shocks. He has no incentive to calm things down.

How Canada Should Fight Trump



MAIN STREET
By William McGurn

Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario

"Trump's hatred for Canada has permanently damaged world's best trade relationship."

So reads a Saturday headline in the Edmonton Journal. It isn't surprising, given the president's penchant for belittling Canada by referring to Prime Minister Mark Carney as the "governor" and the country as our "51st state."

We are in the thick of a trade war that began in February 2025 and shows no signs of abating. Meanwhile, the Parti Québécois won enough seats in last week's provincial election to form a separatist minority government. And it looks as if Canada also faces a separatist movement in oil-rich Alberta.

The prime minister plays a popular but self-defeating game of tariff tit for tat.

In this context Mr. Trump may be the only thing the Canadians agree on.

That isn't because he's popular. British-based Lord Ashcroft Polls found that only 25% of Canadians consider America an ally. That's down from 73% in 2022, when Joe Biden was president.

Nervousness about the U.S.-Canada trade war is bolstering support for Mr. Carney. Unfortunately, when he does something to answer Mr. Trump's volleys, it often turns out to be a Canadian form of the protectionism he rightly regards as destructive when Mr. Trump directs it at Canadians.

The pattern is self-defeating—and Trumpian. After the Trump tariffs on Canadian products, the Canadian government imposed 25% retaliatory tariffs on nearly $30 billion of American goods. Then, in May 2025, the U.S. introduced 25% levies on autos and parts.

Earlier this year, the president's war took a hit when the Supreme Court ruled that he exceeded his authority with his sweeping tariffs under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977. The Trump administration invoked the Trade Act of 1974. Canada also adjusted and is looking to formalize a closer economic relationship with the European Union.

Which prompts a question: Are there Canadians who believe they have gained from this whole back and forth?

The answer is surely no. The prime minister plainly decided that the best response, or maybe the only politically viable one, was to try to out-Trump Mr. Trump. As for the president, when reporters asked last week about trade negotiations before the midterm elections, he said the terms of trade currently favor Canada—but that this is changing: "It will work out eventually, but I don't know about—the United States is in no rush."



TODD KOROL/REUTERS

Prime Minister Mark Carney.

Mr. Trump is probably right that America, with a larger and stronger economy, can absorb more pain than Canada can. But that's zero-sum thinking. A real trade deal should benefit all parties, not by carving up markets but by leaving anyone who wants to buy or sell a product with a consenting adult from across his border free to do so.

Yes, countries cheat. But no one has figured out a way of punishing cheats without imposing unfair costs on innocent bystanders. It says something that Mike Rogers, a Trump-supporting Republican in Michigan running in a tight Senate race against Democrat Abdul El-Sayed, is running ads reminding voters that "Canada is not the enemy."

As dumb as tariffs are, retaliating with countertariffs, as Mr. Carney is doing, is dumber still. He explained it this way in August: "Canada will match those tariffs dollar for dollar to protect our workers and businesses."

The better response is to take steps that ensure America, not Canada, pays the price for its inefficiency and protectionism. That means freeing up the Canadian market.

"Retaliatory tariffs," write Jock Finlayson and Steve Globerman of the Vancouver-based Fraser Institute, "will increase the cost of living for Canadian households but are unlikely to weaken Trump's tariff fixation. Indeed, the Trump administration may respond to any incremental Canadian 'retaliation' by announcing additional market access restrictions targeting various Canadian industries."

These tariffs make even less sense for Canada given the outsize U.S. role in its economy. Americans are the No. 1 customer for Canada, and vice versa.

Mr. Trump can be cutting when he dismisses Canada, such as the crack that "we don't need them for anything." But tell that to the American industries that rely on Canada for oil, electricity and natural gas. It's another reason Canada would do better to fight Mr. Trump by opening its economy rather than joining his game of chicken.

"Canada has one of the strongest private property rights regimes in the developed world," Mr. Globerman says. "It should leverage that by significant corporate tax and regulatory reform—which they have started to."

Write to mcgurn@wsj.com.

Sometimes Government Is Innovative

By Egon Rinderer

President Trump and top artificial-intelligence executives signed a voluntary pact last month largely allowing companies to self-regulate, with no penalties for AI-agent misbehavior. Critics say Washington is allowing the industry to police itself. They have a point.

The federal government is far ahead of the private sector in securing its systems against rogue agents. In my 37 years in information-technology security, largely working alongside federal agencies, I never saw Washington lead industry on technology until now. That advantage reflects two decades of federal agencies' strengthening their security protocols.

Today's best cyber defense is known as zero-trust network access. Once a rogue AI agent is inside a network, it moves like other malware. After landing on a machine, it will try to move laterally to the next, hunting for data, passwords or other systems to take over. That horizontal movement is how most serious cyber breaches spread.

Under the zero-trust approach, devices don't trust each other merely because they are on the same network.

Federal agencies got out ahead of industry on cybersecurity.

They must prove they are authorized during every connection. The effect is to contain rogue agents as soon as they land on a system, with no avenue to spread.

Federal agencies are under a strict mandate to adopt zero-trust security infrastructure. The Pentagon has a deadline to reach full integration by the end of fiscal 2027.

Several executive-branch directives dictate how fast agencies must patch cybersecurity vulnerabilities and how thoroughly they must keep inventory of the software they use. Agencies must report their progress to the White House's Office of Management and Budget, and they risk losing funding if they fall behind target.

These guidelines govern purchasing too. Software that can't operate in a segmented network will soon be unfit for federal use, and agencies are writing this requirement into future contracts.

Industry began adopting a zero-trust approach several years ago, but work has stalled. I believe most large companies got 80% of the way there but stopped because of concerns about disruption and high costs.

That was shortsighted. Companies are racing to deploy AI agents on networks allowing the free movement that zero-trust architecture is designed to prevent. The result will be more data theft and disruptions to critical systems.

Businesses aren't bound by voluntary government directives, but they still operate in the real world. The federal government's zero-trust strategy is publicly available, and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency offers additional guidance about implementation.

While federal AI regulation is needed, businesses shouldn't wait for Washington's orders to take the technology's risk seriously. When rogue AI agents cause havoc, the press will rush to blame the technology itself. But some fault will lie with the private sector for not safeguarding its defenses. They should finish what they started.

Mr. Rinderer is senior vice president for federal and enterprise growth at NinjaOne, an endpoint-management and remote-monitoring software company.

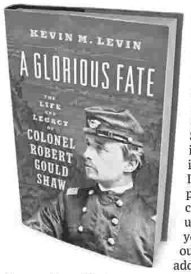
BOOKSHELF | By Harold Holzer

Making a Martyr For the Union

A Glorious Fate

By Kevin M. Levin
North Carolina, 328 pages, $32.50

At the climax of Edward Zwick's film "Glory"—and of Kevin M. Levin's riveting biography of Robert Gould Shaw—a young white colonel of the Union Army leads his black troops across a narrow strip of South Carolina beach into a murderous Confederate fusillade from the seemingly impregnable Fort Wagner on July 18, 1863. Anyone who has seen the 1989 film knows what happens next: Shaw, the spruce, Harvard-educated scion of an elite Boston family, falls dead in a hail of bullets and shells and topples into a heap of black bodies. As an intended insult, Confederates bury him with his men in a shallow mass grave. A hero of the Civil War dies, and a martyr is born.



It is hard to imagine any book rendering this scene more vividly than the cinematic version, but Mr. Levin has managed the task with panache. What truly elevates "A Glorious Fate," however, is the author's revealing look at Shaw's complex personality—including his surprising indifference about slavery. In contrast to the nobly principled leader of historical fiction, Mr. Levin offers up the real, flawed Shaw, a young man more vainglorious than glorious. The book adds a frank examination of the mystique that grew up around Shaw after his death—a calculated effort to sanctify him in the hope of advancing racial equality in both the military ranks and post-Civil War America.

Mr. Levin, an independent historian who publishes the Substack newsletter Civil War Memory—widely read by history buffs and scholars alike—specializes in puncturing myths, particularly the stubborn misconception that black men served voluntarily in the Confederate ranks. In "A Glorious Fate," he turns his attention to the genuine, important presence of black soldiers in the Union Army, and to one of the first official regiments to recruit them: the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, which Shaw commanded and which lost half its men at the ill-fated assault on Fort Wagner. The first biography of Shaw to appear in decades, it takes its place as the most nuanced—frequently pausing for analysis without impeding the propulsive narrative that peaks when the 25-year-old meets his moment.

Shaw was born in 1837 in Dartmouth, Mass. His wealthy parents, Francis and Sarah, were ardent abolitionists who migrated to a succession of like-minded communities. When Robert was still young, the family moved to Staten Island, N.Y., where he was miserable at home and at school. In his teens, he developed a rebellious streak more directed to gambling, drinking and reckless spending than on antislavery idealism. "I have no taste for anything excepting amusing myself," he admitted to his indulgent mother in a letter. Later, while a student at Harvard, he confessed, "I hate Cambridge." Mr. Levin paints the pampered youngster as a "stubbornly self-centered" boy who kept "studiously aloof" from the anti-slavery activism that young Harvard radicals embraced in the late 1850s—and that Shaw was all but born to.

Then how, one wonders, was Shaw born again as a champion of black rights? Mr. Levin's answer is that he really wasn't. "I don't talk and think Slavery all the time," Shaw told his dismayed parents as the secession crisis worsened. He all but welcomed disunion because it offered him a chance to pursue his only true passion: Army service.

Shaw's parents rejected offers to disinter his remains. Their son could have no better resting place than among his black troops.

Shaw began his military career as a recruit in the Seventh New York Militia Regiment (made up of the sons of many well-to-do families), marching off to war only a week after the 1861 attack on Fort Sumter. Later Shaw became an officer in the all-white Second Massachusetts Infantry, seeing action at Cedar Mountain and Antietam. To the last, Mr. Levin argues, Shaw cared more about "military concerns" than the "moral crusade" championed by his parents.

When black enlistment began in earnest in 1863, Shaw did not campaign to lead a unit of black soldiers. The opportunity came to him in recognition of the elder Shaws' abolitionist credentials. Shaw, in fact, turned down the commission at first before changing his mind. A friend later recalled Shaw expressing doubts that "negro troops . . . would fight in [the] line of battle," wondering whether it might be necessary to order white soldiers to march behind them and prod them forward with bayonets. Toward the formerly enslaved people he encountered in the South, he could summon no more than paternalism, remarking on "their utter ignorance, and innocence of evil."

Yet this same, initially indifferent Shaw quickly trained his recruits into a skilled fighting unit and supported their fight for equal pay. After a sendoff at Boston Harbor, Shaw and the 54th headed south, where in June 1863 the newly promoted colonel objected to orders to help loot and burn the town of Darien, Ga. A few weeks later, in South Carolina, Shaw agreed to lead his men in the ill-planned assault on one of the batteries that protected the city of Charleston: the powerfully armed Fort Wagner. Mr. Levin suggests that the assignment was not meant as an honor. A New York Tribune correspondent later reported that he had overheard two senior commanders agreeing, using pungently racist language, to sacrifice the black troops, with one adding that "we may as well get rid of them one time as another."

Eyewitnesses who glimpsed Shaw in the final minutes before the attack described him as "bent on accomplishing or dying." Ultimately, his death became his greatest accomplishment. When his parents rejected offers to disinter and return his remains—declaring their son could have no better resting place than among his black troops—Shaw was transfigured from soldier to symbol, celebrated by poets and artists. Even now, he appears in Augustus Saint-Gaudens's bravura relief sculpture on the Boston Common. Willingly or not, as one 19th-century essayist put it, Shaw became "a voluntary sacrifice on the altar of Liberty for an enslaved race."

Mr. Holzer is the director of Hunter College's Roosevelt House and the author of "Brought Forth on This Continent: Abraham Lincoln and American Immigration."

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

If the Saudis Will Fight, the U.S. Can Help

Missile and drone attacks by Yemen's Houthis over the weekend have Saudi Arabia reeling. The skies over Riyadh emptied after a Saturday strike on the international airport killed 13 and injured more than 300, and a Sunday attack killed one more. Now comes the test for U.S. policy.

How about a regional anti-Houthi alliance with Israel and U.A.E.?

Asked Saturday about joining Saudi strikes against the Houthis, President Trump said, "We may. We're going to look at it." Yet the last thing he seems to want before midterm elections is a military escalation. That hesitation may be what Iran and its Houthi militia proxies, whom it arms and finances, are counting on.

The U.S. could let the Saudis fend for themselves against the Iranian axis, but at great strategic cost. The region is watching what Washington will do when the cornerstone of its Gulf alliance system is under attack.

This doesn't require a blank check for Riyadh, and U.S. interceptor shortages constrain what Mr. Trump can provide on defense. But this fight won't be won on defense, continuing to play whack-a-mole with Houthi projectiles. That points to offense, where munitions stocks are healthier and U.S. help is needed to take out Houthi surface-to-air missiles.

Real-time U.S. intelligence support is more discreet but equally important. The Saudi-backed Yemeni government offensive already has the Houthis under pressure along Yemen's western coast and Red Sea corridor, but it's moving slowly.

The U.S. can also continue its diplomacy to rally a regional anti-Houthi coalition, including Israel and the United Arab Emirates. The Houthis threaten the region and international shipping, not only Saudi Arabia, and they operate as part of a larger Iranian strategy. Though Houthi-Saudi conflict predates the current Iran war, the war has put Saudi Arabia in the line of fire. Iran may believe it has identified the weak link in the U.S. regional alliance.

It didn't have to be this way. The original Western error was to restrain the Saudi-Yemeni alliance when it had the Houthis on defense. Amid international humanitarian concerns over civilian casualties, a chance to defeat the Iranian proxy was missed in 2018 and 2019. In February 2021 the new Biden Administration cut off all support—arms, intelligence and logistics—for the anti-Houthi offensive.

To accommodate Iranian power, Joe Biden even lifted the Houthis' terror designation. This for a group whose chant is: "God is the Greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse be upon the Jews, Victory to Islam." The Saudis then cut a deal to appease the Houthis, including funneling money to grease the peace. As with Qatari money in Gaza, it didn't work. The Houthis used the reprieve to rearm.

The Saudis spent $83 billion on defense in 2025, more than Israel or Iran. Under direct attack, Riyadh now has to decide if it has the will to fight back. If it doesn't, all the modernizing ambitions of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) will suffer. Few will want to invest in an easy, repeat target.

MBS's new Mecca pact partners, Turkey and Pakistan, don't seem eager to help despite their large militaries. That leaves an appeal to the U.S. as usual. U.S. support doesn't mean standing in for Saudi Arabia but helping it lead. Pushing MBS into another deal with the Houthis instead would lock in the militia's gains in preparation for the next war.

The Houthi challenge may seem obscure, but the stakes are high for the Saudis, the Middle East and the U.S. It is now tied to Mr. Trump's campaign against Iran and his hope for an expansion of the Abraham Accords between Israel and the Arab states that someday includes Saudi Arabia. As it stands now, the Houthis have the upper hand.

Putin Ignores That Energy 'Cease-Fire'

So much for that energy cease-fire between Russia and Ukraine. President Trump announced the truce Sunday on Truth Social, along with the warning "do not break it!" Within hours Vladimir Putin did.

Trump announces a truce. Russia immediately violates it.

On Sunday a Shahed drone hit a power plant in Kyiv, and the Russians also struck a thermal power plant in Kharkiv. "This happened after the statement by the President of the United States about a ceasefire in the energy sector," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky wrote on Telegram.

Ukraine refrained from striking Russian refineries overnight, Mr. Zelensky said Monday, and "we are ready to adhere to any energy truce, if Russia is willing to do the same." Mr. Putin has repeatedly refused.

The Russian dictator is multiplying his aerial attacks on Ukrainian cities and civilians as he has run into difficulties on the battlefield in eastern Ukraine. The Russians have made "near-zero gains since March 2026," the Institute for the Study of War said last month. In early summer the Ukrainians stymied Russia's plans for a southern offensive. And Ukraine's Operation Vivaldi has now thwarted Russian plans to encircle the eastern defensive stronghold known as the Fortress Belt.

So Mr. Putin's plan now is to "make civilian life in Ukraine unbearable such that Ukraine will capitulate to Russia's demands," ISW said this month. Mr. Putin is taking advantage of Ukraine's shortage of Patriot missiles and functioning F-16 jets to hammer energy plants ahead of a long winter.

Mr. Trump is scapegoating Ukraine for rising diesel prices, and on Saturday he said Kyiv "better damn well stop" its strikes on Russian refineries. But is Ukraine supposed to sit back and take the Russian blitz? Oil and gas exports fund Mr. Putin's military, and Russian energy production is a legitimate war target.

Mr. Trump made a major concession Friday with a pause on diesel sanctions that will allow Russian energy companies to rake in some $4.5 billion. Yet Mr. Putin is giving him nothing we can see in return. The Russian refusal to accept an energy cease-fire is the latest evidence that Mr. Trump's courtship isn't working.

California Has a Home to Sell You

California taxpayers have spent tens of billions of dollars on affordable housing to little productive effect. Yet special interests want voters this November to pony up tens of billions more and—get this—establish a state-backed housing lender. Call this the triumph of false hope over experience.

The state wants voters to let it get into the lending subsidy game.

The California Association of Realtors and labor unions are backing Prop. 37, a ballot measure that would authorize the California Housing Finance Agency to issue $25 billion in government bonds to fund a home down payment assistance program. Another measure (Prop. 1) would authorize $11.25 billion in bonds to fund affordable housing.

Supporters say the down payment program won't cost taxpayers a dime, but this is misleading. The state would issue bonds to fund loans to cover down payments for buyers of newly constructed homes. Loans could cover as much as 17% of a home's purchase price, so the buyer would only have to put 3% down.

The down payment loan would be a second mortgage, which a buyer would pay off over time. While the program is ostensibly aimed at helping middle-income households, buyers earning up to 200% of an area's median income could qualify for homes costing as much as $1.5 million. The median is roughly $400,000 for a family of four in Silicon Valley.

Why is the state program needed given that the federal government already backs mortgages with minimal down payments? The Federal Housing Administration insures mortgages with 3.5% down payments, though borrowers must pay premiums equal to 1.75% of the loan amount, plus a roughly 0.55% annual fee for the life of the loan.

Government-sponsored enterprise Fannie Mae also guarantees mortgages for lower-income households with as little as 3% down, though borrowers generally must pay higher interest rates and insurance premiums. California's program looks to be a subsidy for the relatively affluent who are struggling to afford homes at ethereal prices and today's interest rates.

The idea seems to be that the state down payment loan would obviate the higher interest rates buyers would otherwise have to pay under federal programs if they put only 3% down. By making a 20% down payment that is mostly funded by a state-backed second mortgage, borrowers could qualify for a lower interest rate.

It's not clear the state could fund down payment loans at rates that are attractive to borrowers without losing money. The state might be able to take advantage of the municipal bond tax exemption to issue bonds and thereby fund down payment loans at below-market rates. Thirty-year tax-exempt muni bonds currently yield around 5.7%.

But the state would still have to factor in the price of the loan's administrative and underwriting costs. Because the down payment loans would be subordinate to a primary mortgage, bond buyers would likely charge a yield premium. While California might set interest rates on down payment loans below its cost of funding, taxpayers would then be stuck subsidizing them.

In any case, subsidizing buyers will push up prices as long as supply remains constrained. Prop. 1 won't help with either. Most of the $11.25 billion in bonds would fund homeless and multifamily housing, which can cost $1 million a unit to build because of government building codes, prevailing wage requirements and other regulation.

California voters have approved $12 billion in bonds for such projects since 2018, which comes on top of nearly $20 billion in general fund spending. Yet both homelessness and housing costs have increased. Let's hope voters have the wisdom to stop this endless housing-subsidy racket and defeat both propositions.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Constitutional Originalism and the Framers

Justice Samuel Alito underscores mistakes originalist judges make in applying the theory ("Even Originalist Judges Make Mistakes," op-ed, Oct. 3). But another mistake can occur with the definitional frame of reference. For him, originalism denotes that "constitutional provisions should be understood to mean what the public would have taken them to mean when they were adopted." The "public" would mean ordinary people like colonial patrons of taverns who gathered round to read the proposed Constitution in newspapers.

The problem is that the Constitution wasn't adopted by an Athenian democracy where all citizens were lawmakers. The Framers abhorred pure democracy and opted for a republic based on representation. Legislatures appointed the Framers. It follows that the most relevant and practical frame of reference is what the Framers, fewer than 50 of whom were signers, took the provisions to mean rather than what a colonial citizenry of over two million took them to mean.

Justice Alito notes that "the general public or lawmakers in 1868" didn't understand "liberty" in the 14th Amendment to include same-sex marriage. But the two viewpoints can diverge. From all accounts, ordinary citizens in 1787 interpreted "misdemeanor" as a minor crime but still a crime, just like today's ordinary citizens. The Framers understood "misdemeanor" as signifying a breach of trust, or abuse of office, not necessarily amounting to any crime.

What words mean to lawmakers who make a law should be paramount in case of divergent meaning.

Prof. Em. Michael J. Polelle
Univ. of Illinois Chicago School of Law
Sarasota, Fla.

Ancient Greece's Greatness Was Built on Trade

In his op-ed "The Birth and Rebirth of Western Civilization" (Oct. 9) based on excerpts from his great speech in Athens, Marco Rubio demonstrates once again that in his head and heart he's more like Ronald Reagan than any other top Trump administration official. But he omits a major source of Athens's freedom and greatness that Reagan likely would have put front and center—namely, that Athenian liberty, prosperity and power were built on international trade.

As Will Durant explained in his book "The Life of Greece" (1939), trade was foundational to the prosperity and success of Athens. He wrote: "Foreign commerce advances even faster than domestic trade, for the Greek states have learned the advantages of an international division of labor, and each specializes in some product; the shieldmaker, for example, no longer goes from city to city at the call of those who need him, but makes his shields in his shop and sends them out to the markets of the classic world. In one century Athens moves from household economy—wherein each household makes nearly all that it needs—to urban economy—wherein each town makes nearly all that it needs—to international economy—wherein each state is dependent upon imports, and must make exports to pay for them . . . [I]t is this trade that makes Athens rich."

Phil Gramm and Donald J. Boudreaux
American Enterprise Institute and
George Mason University
Helotes, Texas, and Fairfax, Va.

It's OK if Markets Force Some Colleges to Close

Jeff Yass's op-ed "Pouring Money Into the Ivy League Won't Solve Its Problems" (Oct. 9) is right on target, but to accommodate new academic ventures, we need the Schumpeterian "creative destruction" so critical to the emergence and triumph of competitive private enterprise capitalism in the U.S. and across the globe. The downsizing or near death of iconic brand names like Sears and Eastman Kodak helped free resources to finance the Anthropic, Nvidia, Apple and other leaders of recent economic progress.

The growing threat of closure is already forcing some existing colleges out of desperation to throttle the administrative bloat that had distracted them from their primary mission of discovering and disseminating knowledge and creative ideas. Some institutions are also considering revising tenure provisions and are even rethinking costly intercollegiate athletic spending. Labor markets are making unemployable majors like gender studies undesirable for students. Some schools are asking professors to teach more and write fewer articles for last-resort journals. Talk is growing of having three-year instead of four-year bachelor's degrees.

Because of massive taxpayer and private philanthropic subsidies, market signals that lead to needed collegiate resource reallocation are weakened, but they are still present and beginning to work. I share Mr. Yass's enthusiasm for the University of Austin, but I think the death of a few hundred existing schools will scare the rest into promoting less ideologically driven wokeness and instead focus on greater efficiency.

Prof. Em. Richard Vedder
Ohio University
Athens, Ohio

Mamdani's Oct. 7 Response

Regarding your editorial "Celebrating Hamas on Oct. 7" (Oct. 8): My mother survived Auschwitz. Throughout her life, she returned to one painful question: "Why didn't we run away when we still had the chance?" It was the reflection of someone who knew there was a brief window when leaving Europe might still have been possible.

I thought of my mother when reading your editorial regarding New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's statement on the anniversary of the attacks. While the mayor briefly acknowledged the horror of that day—of those killed and taken hostage—his statement quickly shifted to qualified political context, adding that the suffering "did not begin nor end that day."

New York isn't 1930s Europe, and I would never diminish what my mother endured. But her life taught me that people don't always recognize when the world begins to shift.

Oct. 7 was a day of slaughter. The mayor has 364 other days a year to complain about occupation and genocide. On this anniversary, that suffering should have stood on its own. Instead, his rhetoric left me wondering if my mother's question has now become mine: Should we think about leaving?

Jacob Elbogen
Brooklyn, N.Y.

The Permitting Reform Bill Harms Historic Preservation

If permitting reform passes as your editorial suggests ("Permitting Reform at Last, Really?," Oct. 6), it will symbolize a larger, disturbing trend taking shape in Washington right now—public policy and federal actions that lack clear process, meaningful public and stakeholder involvement and sound judgement. In particular, the proposed sweeping changes to the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966 within the permitting reform bill are unprecedented and go too far. If passed, these provisions would eviscerate our nation's civic and cultural inheritance. The proposed changes must be rejected. We are eager to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the NHPA on Oct. 15—a foundational law that has stood the test of time and served our country well. Our elected and appointed officials should practice greater deference to our nation's heritage.

Brent Leggs
President and CEO
Natl. Trust for Historic Preservation
Washington

France Keeps Digging a Hole

Regarding Joseph C. Sternberg's column "Riots in France? They Could Happen Here" (Political Economics, Oct. 9): The French debt crisis is a perfect example of what can happen when politicians are more concerned with keeping their jobs than doing their jobs. They don't seem to have heard the expression "when you're in a hole, stop digging."

Robert M. Sussman
Paradise Valley, Ariz.

Letters intended for publication should be emailed to wsj.ltrs@wsj.com. Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"He needed a break from all the emotional support work."

OPINION

The Case for Firing Squads

By Alex Kozinski

Arizona succeeded in killing Joseph Rudolph Wood III on July 23, 2014, the day after the Supreme Court lifted a stay that had been issued by the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. The state administered 15 injections of midazolam and hydromorphone over nearly two hours. It was, at the time, the longest execution in U.S. history.

That record is now eclipsed by the failed execution of Christa Pike, who survived two injections of pentobarbital, to the apparent surprise of the Tennessee officials administering them. One can only hope that this disturbing episode will cause reconsideration of our half-century-long experiment with lethal injection, but I'm not so sure. Wood's execution generated extensive publicity, including a "60 Minutes" segment in which I, then a Ninth Circuit judge, was interviewed, and then nothing happened. Almost every death-penalty state, along with the federal criminal code, designates lethal injection as the sole or default method of execution.

Lethal injection only looks humane, and it blurs the distinction between healing and killing.

It wasn't always so. For much of the 20th century, states used hanging, the gas chamber, the electric chair and occasionally firing squads. Then, in 1977, Oklahoma authorized lethal injection. Texas first used it in 1982 when it executed Charles Brooks Jr. The other capital punishment states quickly fell in line.

Why this sudden transformation? After the Supreme Court struck down all existing death-penalty laws in *Furman v. Georgia* (1972) for lacking certain procedural safeguards that the justices invented, 35 states retooled their laws to adopt such procedures. In 1977 Utah executed Gary Gilmore by firing squad, the first execution after the moratorium. But opponents continued to challenge executions, including execution methods, as painful or degrading.

Perhaps states thought lethal injection would fare better in court because it resembled a familiar medical procedure. Perhaps they wanted executions to look less medieval. Either way, the appeal was obvious: Put the prisoner on a gurney, attach tubes, administer drugs, and invite the public to imagine that death arrives cleanly and quickly, without anyone getting blood on his hands.

Appearances, however, aren't reality. Lethal injection was a terrible choice, practically and philosophically. It borrows medicine's costume without the people and safeguards that make medicine work. Physicians are barred by the American Medical Association's ethics code from participating in executions; similar constraints apply to nurses. The job therefore falls to law-enforcement



RICK BOWMER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

personnel, who must obtain the drugs, find a vein, insert a catheter, and administer the substances in the right quantities and sequence. If the first attempt fails, they try again. In Wood's case, 14 times.

The supply problem makes matters worse. Drug manufacturers have refused to sell their products for executions. States have resorted to Rube Goldberg-like schemes to obtain drugs from abroad, sometimes under false pretenses, or have used drugs that are expired or improperly stored. The state wants the appearance of a modern medical procedure but can't reliably obtain the materials or expertise that real medicine requires.

Nor is there an accepted protocol guaranteed to produce a quick, painless death. Drug companies test medications to heal people, not kill them. States have improvised, sometimes using drugs known to cause severe pain and administering sedatives to blunt it. Sedatives don't always work, and there is good reason to believe that some prisoners suffer; Ms. Pike actually told us so. Over the years there have been numerous botched executions, as documented in gruesome detail by law professor Corinna Lain in her recent book, "Secrets of the Killing State: The Untold Story of Lethal Injection."

The philosophical problem is more fundamental: Execution by lethal injection is dishonest. It dresses an execution in the reassuring garb of medicine, encouraging us to mistake a state killing for a clinical event. Medicine seeks to preserve life; execution ends it. This blurring of what are diametrically opposite functions is epistemologically perilous and morally repugnant.

Which is why I applaud Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's decision to execute Nidal Hasan by firing squad. As I argued at the time of the Wood execution: "Eight or ten large-caliber rifle bullets fired at close range can inflict massive damage, causing instant death every time. There are plenty of people employed by the state who can pull the trigger and have the training to aim true. The weapons and ammunition are bought by the state in massive quantities for law enforcement purposes, so it would be impossible to interdict the supply. And nobody can argue that the weapons are put to a purpose for which they were not intended: firearms have no purpose other than destroying their targets. Sure, firing squads can be messy, but if we are willing to carry out executions, we should not shield ourselves from the reality that we are shedding human blood. If we, as a society, cannot stomach the splatter from an execution carried out by firing squad, then we shouldn't be carrying out executions at all."

The intervening decade has reinforced my views. Deserving as Mr. Hasan may be of his punishment, no one merits a lingering, possibly excruciating death. I have some doubts whether livestreaming the execution is advisable, but Mr. Hegseth should be commended for his honesty, and for showing Mr. Hasan mercy.

Mr. Kozinski served as a judge on the Ninth Circuit, 1985-2017.

It's the Economy, Stupid—but How Stupid?



EDITOR AT LARGE
By Gerard Baker

The economy, stupid.

Since long before James Carville pinned his famous epigram to the wall of Bill Clinton's campaign headquarters in 1992, the reductive formula for success or failure in elections has been obvious: the material condition of the people.

Mr. Carville's maxim was only the second of a triplet (the others were about change and healthcare), but it resonated for the timeless reliability of its psephological predictiveness. When the economy sucks, incumbents lose.

It is the primary pre-explanation for the drubbing Republicans expect next month. But now as then, it may be that a flawed perception of the economy rather than economic reality is driving voting behavior, and that now as then the U.S. is in the early stages of an economic golden age.

By the time Americans voted that November, the recession Gov. Clinton had rhetorically exploited was long over. During the second half of 1992, gross domestic product expanded at an annual rate of 4%. Unemployment peaked that summer and was falling sharply by the time the new president took office.

It's invidious to tell voters that what they believe isn't true; but today, as then, there can be no other explanation for the level of popular dyspepsia with an economy that, in macro terms, is in robust health.

The best sense of how big a disconnect there is between polling and economic facts can be had by comparing President Trump's current ratings with his immediate predecessor's at the nadir of America's recent economic performance.

The latest Quinnipiac poll gives Mr. Trump a 31% approval rating on the economy. In June 2022 Joe Biden enjoyed—if that's the word—a higher rating, 33%.

That month consumer prices were up 9.1% from a year earlier, the highest inflation in 40 years. In the first half of that year, the economy had contracted at a rate of just over 1%. Real wages were falling: Between January 2021, and June 2022, hourly earnings adjusted for inflation had fallen by 4.1%. The rate on a 30-year mortgage had almost doubled, from 2.65% to 5.1%. Average gasoline prices had more than doubled, from $2.39 a gallon to more than $5. The S&P 500 index of leading stocks increased just 1% in the first 18 months of the Biden term. The unemployment rate was the one bright spot, at 3.6%.

As in 1992, Democrats are poised to win big based on mistaken perceptions that times are difficult.

Contrast that with today. Consumer price inflation is at 3.4%, up since the beginning of Mr. Trump's term but well below where it was four years ago. Gasoline prices and interest rates are up, but not by as much as they had increased under the Democrats. Gasoline is up about 65% since Inauguration Day, at around $5 a gallon. Mortgage rates are at 7%, just about where they were when Mr. Trump took office.

In the first half of this year growth averaged more than 2.4% a year. The Atlanta Federal Reserve estimates third-quarter growth at 3.6%.

Real wages are up. The S&P 500 is up about 35%. Unemployment is higher than it was four years ago, but at 4.1% still historically low.

In the 1960s Arthur Okun invented the "misery index," the sum of the inflation and unemployment rates, as a gauge of economic success. On that, Mr. Biden scored 12.7 in June 2022; Mr. Trump 7.5 now. Even if we create an augmented misery index, adding gasoline prices, diesel prices and average mortgage rates, Mr. Biden still comes out "ahead," 29 to Mr. Trump's 25.

By just about any measure, the economy is in much better shape today than it was four years ago, yet the incumbent gets lower marks.

There are several plausible explanations. Voters care less about the relative softening in inflation in the past two years and more about the continuing cumulative increase in prices. After decades of almost no inflation, prices have risen by 25% since 2020. The incumbent is paying the price. Voters may also see a clearer link between Mr. Trump's policies and their current challenges than they saw with Mr. Biden. Tariffs and a war that has pushed up energy prices both directly feed higher costs. There is also the sense that the benefits of the current economic strength are distributed even less equally than usual.

Yet as Mr. Clinton's election in the midst of misperceived misery coincided with the start of a long economic boom, so Americans may come to look back on 2026 as the early stages of a period of prolonged prosperity.

Growth is accelerating. Underlying inflation pressures are easing—consumer prices minus food and energy rose by 2.4% during the year ending in August, down from 3.3% when Mr. Trump took office. The artificial-intelligence investment boom is the primary driver of growth, and if the productivity increases investors expect from it materialize, growth may be about to exceed anything we have seen for decades.

Which would give a whole new meaning to "the economy, stupid."

A Nobel Prize for Macroeconomics Done Right

By David R. Henderson

Robert E. Hall and Michael Woodford have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Science for "microeconomic foundations of macroeconomic stabilisation," the prize committee said in a statement Monday. Both economists are American. Mr. Hall, 83, is an economics professor at Stanford and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. Mr. Woodford, 70, is an economics professor at Columbia.

Ever since John Maynard Keynes's 1936 classic, "The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money," which essentially established macroeconomics, economists have debated how governments should stabilize an economy. Keynes believed that during high unemployment, the government should increase aggregate demand for goods and services by temporarily increasing government spending or temporarily decreasing taxes. Keynes also believed that if people's income increased, they would spend a certain percentage of that increase. Thus, consumer spending could pull an economy out of a recession. Later economists, including 1976 Nobel laureate Milton Friedman, found problems with Keynes's simplistic idea. Mr. Hall built on Friedman's insight.

In his 1957 book, "A Theory of the Consumption Function," Friedman argued that people wouldn't base their consumption solely on current income but would instead consume according to what he called "permanent income"—their expectations of future income. Because a temporary cut in taxes wouldn't have much effect on permanent or long-term income, Friedman argued, such a tax cut wouldn't increase consumer spending by more than a small percentage of the tax cut.

In a 1978 paper in the Journal of Political Economy, Mr. Hall took the next step. He argued that consumption depends on the expectations of future income, making it hard to predict consumption using past data. This was evidence for Mr. Hall's view that consumers are forward-looking. By definition, people's expectations about the future aren't captured by current data.

In 1982, Mr. Hall and co-author Frederic Mishkin helped pioneer the use of household-level consumption data, rather than solely aggregate data, to study what the Nobel committee calls "the rational-expectations, permanent-income hypothesis." They found that 20% of households lived "hand to mouth," but that the consumption behavior of the other 80% was consistent with their forward-looking hypothesis.

Among Mr. Hall's most important works is his 1985 book, "The Flat Tax," written with Alvin Rabushka. Messrs. Hall and Rabushka made a strong case for replacing the current income tax with a flat rate and showed that it would be much less distortionary and more pro-growth than our current tax system.

Michael Woodford's main contributions were on monetary policy. His 2003 book, "Interest and Prices," has been called a bible for central bankers. Keynesians, up to and including 1970 Nobel laureate Paul Samuelson, argued that monetary policy was ineffective at lifting economies from recessions. Friedman, on his own and with co-author Anna J. Schwartz, showed that monetary policy, for good and ill, was quite effective. Friedman had focused on the money supply. Mr. Woodford showed how the Federal Reserve could affect the economy by targeting the federal-funds rate. As Hoover economist John Cochrane notes, the Taylor rule, named for economist John Taylor, is central to the framework Mr. Woodford developed. According to that rule, to reduce inflation, the Fed should aggressively raise interest rates.

Michael Woodford and Robert E. Hall built on Milton Friedman's critique of John Maynard Keynes.

The Nobel committee said the prize was awarded for "demonstrating how economic models could be reconstructed to revitalise stabilisation policy." That leaves out two important points. First, Mr. Hall's work on consumption shows that using Keynesian fiscal policy wouldn't work. Second, the work of both Messrs. Hall and Woodford shows how government policy, especially monetary policy, has at times erred and caused instability. The Nobel committee has an unfortunate tendency to attribute implicitly almost all problems of unstable economies to the economies themselves and almost none of the problems to bad government policy. Fortunately, the work of this year's winners offsets this tendency.

Mr. Henderson is a research fellow with the Stanford University's Hoover Institution and editor of the Concise Encyclopedia of Economics.

Ritual Offers What Medicine Can't

By Maria Balhara

The mother and father stayed close to their child's hospital bed while family members stood quietly nearby. The child wouldn't recover.

How does a parent say goodbye to a child? Who remains present when medicine reaches its limits? Hospitals are filled with people confronting these questions. Clinicians pause silently after deaths. Chaplains perform emergency baptisms in neonatal intensive-care units. Nurses preserve handprints and footprints for grieving families. Music is played at bedsides during extubations. Care teams gather quietly outside rooms before difficult conversations.

I have come to realize that many of these practices share features traditionally associated with ritual: symbolic action, repetition and the marking of transitions often involving uncertainty, vulnerability or death.

Calling these practices rituals can feel strange in modern medicine, a field grounded in science and technical expertise. But the effects of severe illness on patients and their loved ones isn't merely physical. Consider the parent who must navigate uncertainty and anticipatory grief while making decisions for a sick child who can't speak.

Ritualized practices help patients, families and clinicians acknowledge realities that are emotionally and morally significant but difficult to express.

As a chaplaincy trainee, I entered the hospital expecting to encounter ritual in overtly religious settings. I found it woven into ordinary clinical life. Even people who wouldn't describe themselves as religious were among the practitioners.

A physician sitting down to talk at a patient's eye level before delivering devastating news. A nurse calling for the spiritual care team to visit quietly with the mother of a dying child. These rituals won't end disease or suffering, but they aren't trivial. They communicate gravity, respect and the recognition of shared human vulnerability.

Such practices allow clinicians to acknowledge the emotional and moral pressures of their work. In this sense, ritual doesn't exist outside medicine but is essential to humanity in medical practice.

Ms. Balhara is a philosophy major at the University of Pennsylvania and a student chaplain at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

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Opinion

‘It’s the identity, stupid!’: Three writers on Europe’s rising far right

A discussion on the roots of the far-right’s success, its plans for power and what Trump has to do with it all.

David Broder
Caroline de Gruyter
Mattia Ferraresi
Tim Schneider



BINA THORSEN

The far right has been rising in Europe for a long time — Edward Luttwak called fascism “the wave of the future” back in 1994 — but last month’s electoral breakthrough in Saxony-Anhalt by the Alternative for Germany party, or AfD, felt seismic. For the first time in Germany’s postwar history, a far-right party stands on the brink of power. The AfD joins a legion of others, not least Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy and Marine Le Pen’s National Rally in France, either in office or perilously close to it.

In a written online conversation, Tim Schneider, an editor in Times Opinion, hosted David Broder, author of “Mussolini’s Grandchildren”; Caroline de Gruyter, a columnist for the Dutch newspaper NRC; and Mattia Ferraresi, a writer for the Italian newspaper QN, to discuss Europe’s thriving far right, the roots of its success, its plans for power and, of course, what President Trump has to do with it all.

TIM SCHNEIDER: An easy one to start: How did we get here?

DAVID BRODER: The post-2008 period is often described as a temporary “populist moment.” But nativist parties obsessed with civilizational decline have since established themselves as major forces, even where electoral systems or national histories offered apparent defenses against them. The reasons are many: a drop-off in mainstream parties’ ability to guarantee social progress; the specter of immigrants undermining national identity; and fewer people voting. The financial crisis helped undo the old mainstream. Now, some of these parties are becoming the right-wing establishment and building effective coalitions.

CAROLINE DE GRUYTER: The world is changing fast. Governments can’t keep pace, are incompetent or, for various reasons, don’t meet voters’ demands. Far-right parties jump into the void. But they do not win elections by just criticizing governments and uttering extremist views: They need the media to pay attention and, crucially, they need parties from the political center to start copying them. It is only when other political parties start shifting to the right that the far right can attract a sufficient amount of voters.

MATTIA FERRARESI: I guess the short answer, for me, is the crisis of liberalism in the post-Cold War era. Mainstream liberal politics, in both its left- and right-wing versions, failed to deliver on its promises, not only in terms of welfare and economic growth but also in the more complex realm of identity and meaning. The apparent triumph of that worldview paved the way for its own demise. What we’re seeing today, all over the world, are different — sometimes very different — expressions of the same disillusionment with liberalism and its policies.

SCHNEIDER: A common perception is that these parties appeal to a particular type of voter, often older workers in left-behind, deindustrializing areas. Is that true? Is there a core far-right constituency in Europe?

FERRARESI: There’s some truth to the far right’s appeal to the post-working class, I guess, but I would tie it to a lack of political and cultural identity. The AfD’s strength in eastern Germany is only partly linked to the region’s dire economy; at a deeper level, the party offers a framework for identity. Voters across Europe who are drawn to the far right are often united by a sense of meaninglessness that was once filled by other structures and parties (mainly Christian Democracy and Communism). James Carville’s line about the economy was an effective campaign message for Bill Clinton, but it was ultimately shallow and wrong. It’s the identity, stupid!

BRODER: These parties draw moral force from claiming to represent people the left forgot. Even their more middle-class voters like to think they’re on the side of the underdog. The real picture is more mixed: The National Rally, for instance, grew earlier in the areas you mention, but now its support is rising faster among white-collar groups. Though lower-educated voters in deindustrialized rural eastern Germany were early backers of the AfD, the party has since captured much broader attention and support. In many countries, these parties harvested former social-democratic voters after 2008. Today, they are cannibalizing the mainstream center right.

DE GRUYTER: Most voters will go for centrist parties — we are middle-class countries, after all. The problem is that if mainstream parties leave the center and all that is on offer is the far right, part of the electorate will go for that, and some will simply stop voting. People vote for far-right extremist parties because that is what is on offer. I think it is a myth that voters are shifting to the right. Parties are shifting to the right!

SCHNEIDER: It’s interesting that we’ve not really mentioned immigration, which most people regard as these parties’ signature issue. What about the rest of their platform — what is their offer economically or culturally?

DE GRUYTER: What they usually offer is the opposite of what mainstream parties offer. And they flip-flop in order to catch votes. For example, Ms. Le Pen used to protect the working class, with a plan to bring down the retirement age and so on. But now, with France drifting toward huge deficits and financial markets taking note, she suddenly switches tactics and proposes big cuts to welfare. N’importe quoi, really.

BRODER: Often these parties are called “welfare-chauvinist,” in that they seek to protect social services by barring new arrivals. I think this is simplistic. Most offer some renewed idea of meritocracy and even retool the Third Way promise to reward “hard-working families,” while also prioritizing the nuclear-family model. They may even speak of integrating some deserving immigrants. But broadly the story is that migrants are unfairly cutting in line or being pushed ahead by elites, at the expense of hard-working nationals.

FERRARESI: Anti-immigration policies are essentially about providing an identity, whether rooted in whiteness, language, Christianity or something else. That, I think, is why they are so effective at energizing voters — far more so than other culturally conservative causes, such as traditional family values or opposition to abortion. In a culturally conservative country like Italy, Ms. Meloni did not win the election, and go on to lead the longest-serving government in the history of the republic, by rallying against abortion or same-sex marriage.

SCHNEIDER: What does Ms. Meloni’s tenure tell us about the far right in office?

FERRARESI: I think it tells us that going mainstream is the only way to govern. Ms. Meloni’s story is that of a shrewd politician who understood right away that her only chance of political survival lay in being legitimized by the European elite. Her success was forged in Brussels, so much so that when she was forced to choose between Mr. Trump and the European Union, she picked the latter. I’m not sure there’s a broader lesson here for other far-right parties, but the strategy has certainly worked for her.

BRODER: Ms. Meloni has inspired imitators to become pro-NATO, pro-business parties who aim to change the European Union from within. Yet it’s also no surprise that a new further-right party, National Future, is quickly rising in Italy and ideas like so-called remigration are spreading. This is in part a critique of Meloni-style mainstreaming — she hasn’t delivered on more fiery promises — but also shows how such governments open space for more radical proposals.

DE GRUYTER: Ms. Meloni’s tenure tells us that part of the far right mellows when in power — though not all! The AfD is different, as is the Freedom Party of Austria. Once in power, Ms. Meloni suddenly became pro-NATO, pro-E.U. and pro-Ukraine. The far right in many other countries, including France, has also made huge U-turns. They do not want to exit the European Union anymore but to change Europe from the inside. This is a completely different strategy than before.

SCHNEIDER: The general shift of these parties toward accommodation with the bloc makes me wonder: Is a far-right European Union a contradiction in terms?

BRODER: Though Ms. Meloni’s party still sometimes paints Brussels as a liberal blob, once-radical ideas like outsourcing border control to non-European states are now the norm — and conservative and far-right forces have repeatedly formed majorities, including in dismantling the bloc’s earlier green push. Most of the parties we’re talking about trade in vague ideas like a “Europe of nations,” emphasizing both civilizational solidarity and the defense of national sovereignty. They have no shared federalist project, obviously, but faced with issues like high energy prices or rearmament, they can agree to some cross-border collaboration. And no one really wants to dynamite the euro.

FERRARESI: The reality is that on some issues, most notably immigration, the Overton window in the European Union has shifted significantly over the past decade. On other subjects, the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction: Positions on abortion or same-sex

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SERGEY PONOMAREV FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Last month’s electoral breakthrough in Saxony-Anhalt by the Alternative for Germany party, or AfD, felt seismic.

OPINION

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An Operation Warp Speed for new biological threats

Jeff Coller

Of all the ways people say artificial intelligence could kill us all, one feels more realistic and palpable than the rest: the potential for A.I. to accelerate the development of a biological weapon.

Last year, researchers at Stanford and the Arc Institute reported using A.I. to generate the blueprints for hundreds of novel virus genomes. Sixteen of those designs could be assembled into functional viruses that infect and kill bacteria, some even more effectively than the natural virus they were modeled on. This was not weapons research, and the viruses cannot infect people. But it would not be terribly difficult for someone with a properly trained A.I. model to produce a design that could pose a grave danger to us.

In January, not long after those findings were announced, I convened a symposium in Washington on mRNA and national security, with biosecurity researchers and former defense officials. I left more worried than I arrived. We're entering an era in which a machine can design a pathogen faster than we can create the countermeasure to fight it. This will be an especially grave issue when less-than-transparent parties are involved (as we're currently witnessing with the drama around Russia's anti-plague research lab).

This is a hair-on-fire moment for the biosecurity community.

To defend ourselves, this country needs to strengthen its ability to quickly respond to a biological threat. The government must build out the infrastructure and protocols that enable the biosecurity community to develop countermeasures — vaccines, antibodies, antivirals and diagnostics — at a speed we haven't seen since the Covid-19 pandemic.

In other words, the government needs a permanent Operation Warp Speed for biosecurity, with the scope and budget of a national defense measure. The program we are talking about might sit unused for decades before the day it matters, but we will be grateful it exists when that day arrives. Congress has to be willing to pay for this, and only a statute will keep it alive over multiple presidential administrations.

Policymakers are rightly focused on preventing the misuse of A.I. to develop a potential bioweapon. A bill now before the Senate, sponsored by Senators Tom Cotton, Republican of Arkansas, and Amy Klobuchar, Democrat of Minnesota, would require biotech companies that make and sell synthetic DNA to screen orders for gene sequences that could be used to develop a biological threat, and prevent bad actors from making purchases. The bill should pass. But it is designed merely to keep the capability away from whoever would misuse it — it does not address what happens if someone gets away with breaking the law. And it would have to fail only once.

Some experts have proposed an ambitious goal, endorsed by the Group of 7, of having a vaccine ready within 100 days of identifying a pathogen with pandemic potential. But that target was set around natural pathogen threats, which emerge from an animal population in a specific location.

An A.I.-designed pathogen defies these assumptions. The first evidence of an emerging threat may be patients getting sick — which means a shortened lead time to study the virus, sequence its genome and start developing a treatment. By the 100-day target, it may already have spread around the world, devastating hospitals, sapping local resources and leading to many lives lost. We must shorten the time it takes to develop countermeasures.

The good news is we have done that before. In 2020, faced with an emerging pathogen and nothing to stop it, the first Trump administration launched Operation Warp Speed, treating a medical countermeasure as an industrial mobilization rather than a mere health program. The government bought manufacturing capacity before anyone knew when a viable vaccine would become available. A candidate vaccine was designed within days of the virus's genetic sequence's being published, and the country had doses by the end of the year.

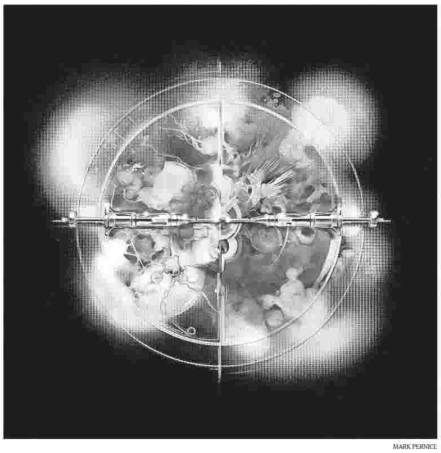
The science is no longer the hard part. The same A.I. models that compress the time to design a pathogen can compress the time to design a solution. They can generate antibodies and antigens as readily as viral genomes, and they are improving at both tasks at the same rate. Within a few years, designing a countermeasure will take hours.

What will be hard is maintaining a countermeasure system when there is no immediate need for it. Operation Warp Speed was an improvisation, assembled in an emergency. It worked, and the country then went back to treating countermeasure development as something the pharmaceutical industry does when there is a market for it. There is no market for a pathogen that does not exist yet. This must be a government responsibility.

Such a program has to be able to support many different types of biotechnology platforms and approaches used to develop countermeasures. Manufacturing capacity has to be continuously maintained rather than contracted for in a crisis. And the proposed countermeasure should be tested on a hypothetical viral genome every year, with the clock running and the results published. This is how we test many other major defensive systems the U.S. government maintains.

We do not defend against nuclear weapons with treaties alone. We built warning systems, hardened command structures and a stockpile, all premised on the possibility that restraint fails. Here we have no binding rules and no defense, only assurances from companies racing one another. Whether A.I. agents and the companies building them can be controlled is an unsettled question. We need to be ready for whatever the answer is.

JEFF COLLER *is a professor of RNA biology and therapeutics at Johns Hopkins University, where he directs the RNA Innovation Center. He co-founded the Alliance for mRNA Medicines.*



MARK PERNICE

The muck that keeps our history

Merritt R. Turetsky

The first thing any bog teaches you is that the ground cannot be trusted. You step onto a patch of moss that looks solid, only to feel your boot sink into layers of partly decomposed plants, peat that has accumulated over millenniums. Somewhere below lies stable earth, but in a bog, safety is always elusive.

If you can make peace with your peril, bogs — and their organic-rich wetland cousins like fens, swamps, mangroves and mires — have a lot to teach you. Each has its own voice.

A peat swamp in Brunei, on the island of Borneo, hums with insects, birds and frogs, the sound crescendoing to a peak every few minutes like a wild orchestra. Across the vast mires of Britain, the soundtrack is the soft rush of water beneath your feet, the brush of wet vegetation, and the deep, satisfying squelch of each sinking step. And in the heart of Canada's boreal bogs, the air can feel wrapped in silence, broken only by the passing breeze and a thrumming drone of tiny wings that vibrates deep in your ears.

Bogland landscapes vary even more wildly. In the Arctic, they may stretch as low, lichen-crusted expanses of tundra. Farther south, among the boreal forests of Alaska and Canada, bogs unfurl rich carpets of sphagnum moss in apple green, ocher and deep crimson. From this soft ground rise ancient conifers, their gnarled trunks barely reaching human height, as though the trees are creatures of the bog themselves.

Along river plains, dense shrubs can knit together into thickets that are nearly impenetrable. Bogs sometimes form floating waterbed-like mats that tremble beneath your feet over open water, while tropical peat swamps rise in towering forests, with crowns of woody giants reaching for the sky. But beneath them all lies the same gloriously thick and soggy layer of peat, their strange, unstable living foundation.

Boglands around the world are museums that help protect us from climate change.

For more than 30 years, I have worked in places like these. I cross peatlands on foot, by boat and, when there is no other way in, by helicopter. Once, while my team was conducting fieldwork in a remote Canadian peatland, our pilot couldn't land. The wind was too strong, the ground too uncertain. Stepping out of the hovering helicopter, I lost my balance and fell face first into the peat, arms spread wide.

When leaving several hours later, I looked down from the helicopter and saw the imprint of my body — a snow angel pressed into the peat.

It's probably still there.

That is the strange power of a bog. It remembers. Bogs exist in a weird tension, soft and unstable yet stubbornly capable of preserving traces of environments that vanished millenniums ago. They have survived vast climatic and environmental shifts, in some regions outlasting the world's glacial-interglacial cycles. Yet they are also fragile, because their future rests entirely in human hands.

Only 17 percent of the world's peatlands fall within protected areas, leaving much of these ancient, fragile wilderness areas vulnerable to being drained and destroyed. These vital ecosystems are increasingly under siege from agriculture, commercial peat mining, severe fire and urban development.

Peatlands occupy only a small fraction of the planet's land surface, yet they store an enormous share of the carbon held in global soils. When a peatland is drained, oxygen penetrates the peat and decay accelerates, releasing greenhouse gases. And the same drying that releases carbon also threatens archaeological remains and other organic materials that have been preserved within it for thousands of years.

Bogs are a living archive. Because of the bog's specialized ecology — an oxygen-poor, acidic habitat created in part by the otherworldly mosses that grow there — the decomposition of dead plant material slows to a near halt. Year after year, layer after layer, plant debris accumulate, storing carbon and recording the changing world with it.

We tend to think of preservation as something humans do deliberately, after we recognize that something matters. But a bog has its own logic of preservation: Long before we notice, the bog's waterlogged depths are already holding fragments of the past that would have vanished elsewhere. We may discover what they reveal only centuries or even millenniums later.

Pollen, seeds and wood reveal how vegetation and landscapes shift over time. They also keep a record of us: our food, rituals, travels and ways. Bogs have preserved ancient paths laid with wooden planks from the Iron Age, their tool marks still visible; vast quantities of ancient butter sealed in its original containers; prehistoric garments made from wool and animal skins. The stomach contents of preserved human bodies from more than 2,000 years ago reveal ancient diets, evidence of a final meal and how it was prepared.

The chemistry that preserves these objects also allows us to reconstruct the ecosystems in which those people lived. We gain glimpses into long-gone environments and people whose lives are otherwise lost to history. The discoveries can seem almost miraculous, but they are a natural part of this peculiar ecosystem.

A bog contains an archive far larger than anything we could ever uncover, and we cannot know in advance which pieces will matter, or which preserved fragments will reveal a lost landscape or lost life. It is valuable partly because we have not finished discovering it.

We cannot safeguard the things a bog protects without preserving the bog itself. Archaeologists can sometimes carefully excavate a single barrel of ancient butter without disrupting the surrounding landscape, but most bog treasures are discovered as bogs are drained or mined. Once the bog is drained, however, the conditions that preserved those treasures begin to disappear. The same chemistry that captures a wooden tool, a pollen grain, or the remnants of an ancient meal is the very mechanism that locks away global carbon.

It was their strangeness, their departure from ordinary nature, that drew ancient cultures to them in the first place. Long before scientists learned to read peat layers, humans understood that bogs were places apart. Neither fully land nor fully water, neither fully alive nor fully dead, their ambiguity made them powerful in the human imagination. They were liminal spaces where offerings were made, human lives sacrificed, and the boundaries between worlds were thought to be permeable.

Today, we do not need to view a bog as a gateway to the gods to appreciate its power. These landscapes guard our history and sustain our future in ways we are only beginning to fathom. We need to act to secure them.

We must aggressively expand protected boundaries to include bogs and other peatlands, enforce strict bans on industrial drainage, forbid the use of peat in agricultural and gardening products, and actively re-wet degraded peatlands to restore their natural water levels.

To save a bog is to save a piece of ourselves, our deepest origin and whatever comes next.

MERRITT R. TURETSKY *is a professor of ecology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and the author of "Bogland: The Secret World That Defies Death and Protects Life."*







PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY MERRITT R. TURETSKY

Top, a bog-rich landscape of the boreal forest in the Northwest Territories; above left, cotton grass in a tussock fen in northern Alaska; above right, a tropical peat swamp forest on the island of Borneo; below, a pitcher plant on the forest floor in Borneo.



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Wildfires have become almost unfightable across the planet

VAILLANT, FROM PAGE 1

affect entire geographic regions.

By growing so big that it becomes a weather system unto itself and so tall that it gyres like a hurricane, effectively controlling the entire air column of a region's lower atmosphere, the pyroCb, as it's known, creates optimal conditions for self-perpetuation. Lightning strikes can start new fires 20 or 30 miles beyond the fire's epicenter, and hurricane-force winds can fan flames to sky-scraping heights while driving embers far beyond any fire break, retardant line or back burn. Simply put, nothing can stop one of these firestorms except a change in the weather or a lack of fuel.

Since the early 2000s, when atmospheric carbon dioxide hit 370 parts per million (about 30 percent higher than preindustrial levels), pyroCbs have grown increasingly common across Australia and the North American West. During Canada's record-setting fire season of 2023, 142 pyroCb events were logged across the country. The firestorms have appeared farther eastward ever since. This summer, France experienced its first pyroCb, and atmospheric carbon dioxide maintained a year-round level above 425 parts per million (more than 50 percent higher than preindustrial levels) for the first time in modern recorded history.

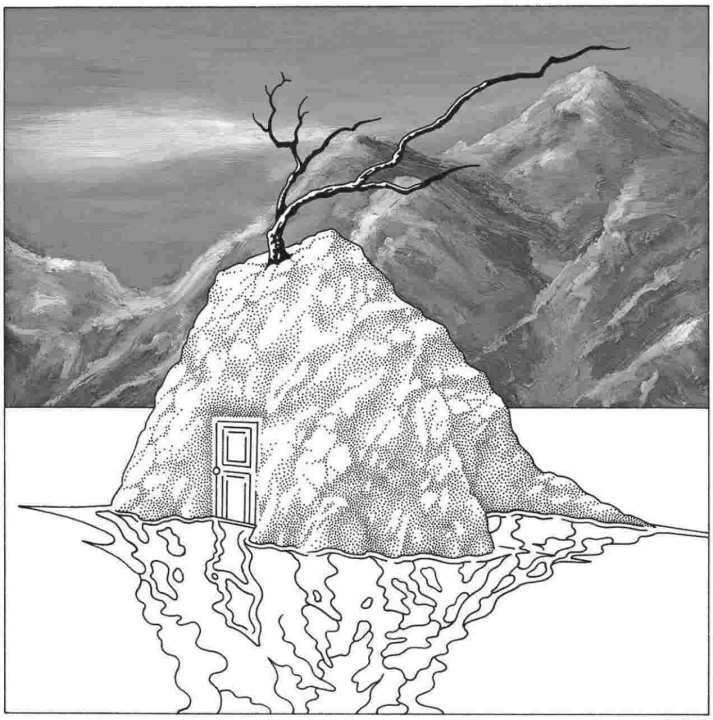
Looming over this new precarity is the El Niño whose energetic discharge from the overheated Pacific Ocean is expected to be the most severe event of its kind in a millennium.

There is a well-known threshold in firefighting beyond which a wildfire becomes unfightable by traditional means: 10,000 kilowatts of energy per meter along a wildfire's leading edge indicates an out-of-control fire too dangerous for firefighters to approach and too hot for water bomber drops to be effective. Fires that have burned from the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean to the Black Sea are now crossing that threshold routinely — and resoundingly. What the pyroCb adds to this already untenable scenario is self-sustaining momentum, like a rogue computer that has hijacked its power source.

When you place this summer's fire events alongside persistent drought conditions that have brought water levels to historic lows from western Canada to Siberia, it becomes clearer that severe conditions are playing out across an entire hemisphere. Some might see these as random events. I see a superheated Earth. Add the Asian heat waves that broke 122 degrees Fahrenheit in Xinjiang, China, and "boiled" potatoes in the ground in Yanggu County, South Korea, and there's no getting around the fact that we — as a species and as a planet — are now living in the future that climate scientists have been warning us about for more than half a century.

With these new conditions comes a physical retreat of the human footprint and an aspirational contraction of what humans can do and where we can do it. The contraction is underway not just in terms of coastlines, forests and glacial valleys becoming unsafe or untenable to inhabit, but in terms of previously hospitable spaces becoming uncomfortably hot and smoky. Outdoor activities such as hiking, camping and patio dining have in many places been severely constrained.

These impacts are accompanied by a parallel contraction of civic resources: Investment and creative capital previously dedicated to development, expansion and improvement must now be redirected toward repair, recovery and remediation. According to Spokane's mayor, Lisa Brown, her city's recovery from August's fires will take years. Replacing the 16,000 buildings lost in the 2025 Los Angeles fires will most likely take a decade, and the specter of uninsurability looms over the country. Meanwhile, billions of dollars are disappearing from the economy in the form of burned houses and forests, lost wages, lost waterfronts, closed businesses, degraded health and the millions of potential customers who simply decide to stay home because of heat and smoke. Consider, too, how much more we now spend on air conditioning and air filtration.



JUL QUANDUAI

The rawest and most dramatic manifestation of civilizational retreat is mass evacuation during catastrophic fire, and this summer saw some of the biggest ever: Tens of thousands of Americans and Canadians were forced to flee wildfires from British Columbia to Texas. In southern Europe, hundreds of thousands of French and Spanish citizens were evacuated in one of the region's largest dislocations since World War II, along with many thousands more in neighboring countries. Nepal's devastating glacier collapse is another ominous indicator: There are dozens of similarly vulnerable communities not just in the Himalayas but also in the Andes, the Alps and the Rocky Mountains.

Most, but not all, of these evacuees will return home, but it will be to a new uncertainty and instability. Many are wonderingan I restore my lost business, crops, forest lands? If my home survived, can I insure it? What about next summer? Events of this magnitude mark survivors for life, the same way tornadoes and mass shootings do.

Since the 2023 publication of my book "Fire Weather," about the 2016 Fort McMurray Fire in Canada, I have been on the road continually — five continents so far — not because of my hosts' particular interest in Canada but because of their concerns about wildfires and the clear and present danger they now pose all over the world. The Fort McMurray fire, then an outlier event, is now repeating itself virtually every year in and around much larger, more centrally located cities. The past decade has been transformative, and over the past three years I've witnessed an evolving awareness and, with it, anxiety: Now, almost everyone I meet has seen the orange sky and the red sun at noon, has felt the rasp of smoke in their throat.

Nothing in our past experience has prepared us for impacts at once so varied, broad and seemingly random and yet so existential and life-threatening. Looming over this new precarity is the El Niño whose energetic discharge from the overheated Pacific Ocean is expected to be the most severe event of its kind in a millennium. In order to chart its anticipated severity, expressed regionally by elevated heat, drought, rainfall and sea levels, El Niño specialists are extending the y axis on their graphs.

Two generations ago, the economist, ambassador and author John Kenneth Galbraith observed, "People of privilege will always risk their complete destruction rather than surrender any material part of their advantage." This is the quandary we find ourselves in: It is clear that the fossil-fuel-dependent status quo is degrading global ecosystems and our quality of life in real time, but we are reluctant to take the decisive and comprehensive steps to decouple our economy and lifestyle not only from this outmoded energy but also from those who profit most from our continued dependence on it.

There was a time in the recent past — in the 1980s and 1990s — when we could have been forgiven for not being sure how to respond to the future disruptions of climate breakdown. But now we know. In our own hearts and minds, there may yet be room and reason for compassion and forgiveness, but nature will show us no such sympathy.

JOHN VAILLANT *is the author of "Fire Weather: A True Story from a Hotter World."*

'It's the identity, stupid!'

BRODER, FROM PAGE 9

marriage that are now considered fringe were common among conservatives until relatively recently. We could find plenty of shifts in other areas. Remember when the Union was remarkably soft on Vladimir Putin's Russia and eager to do business with it? That was not so long ago.

DE GRUYTER: Short answer: yes. Europe is about living together on a crowded continent. The only way far-right parties can succeed in European politics is by making compromises and seeking alliances. This is exactly what they are doing now in the European Parliament. Have you noticed that these parties all support protecting the single market against China and the United States? And condemn Mr. Trump for intending to snatch Greenland?

SCHNEIDER: We clearly need to talk about Mr. Trump. Let's start with his administration's support for these far-right parties, especially the AfD: How significant is that?

FERRARESI: It's hard to prove or measure, but I think the AfD benefited very much from the Trumpian endorsement. Overall, it's still a small party, but the Trump administration, and especially Marco Rubio's State Department, was instrumental in creating a platform where parties like it could thrive. A pretty huge boost, all things considered.

BRODER: The Trump administration and figures like Elon Musk undermine any attempt to wall off more radical parties like the AfD or Restore in Britain. So, they definitely give a platform to minoritarian forces. Yet it's also true that the practical consequences of Mr. Trump's conduct can be bad for these parties if they are in or near power. Mr. Trump's Middle East policy, for example, has had direct effects on voters' pockets.

DE GRUYTER: Well, it doesn't always work: When the United States went all in for Viktor Orban in Hungary, he lost! Mr. Trump is incredibly unpopular in Europe, including with far-right voters. So, far-right parties are keeping their distance. Remember also when Ms. Le Pen was found guilty of embezzlement and Mr. Trump supported her? She hated it and refused to talk about it.

SCHNEIDER: If not always a successful booster, is the Trump administration — militantly anti-migrant, economically protectionist, culturally aggressive — a useful template for what far-right governments in Europe could look like?

BRODER: Many battle lines are comparable to the United States, on identity and immigration, though some countries (like France) have a far more racialized political conflict than others (like Poland). Still, most European societies are less violent than the United States and I think ICE-style units aren't quite on the agenda, even if Europe's own border agency, Frontex, has also been implicated in the illegal pushback of migrants. Fundamentally, the European Union is not the same kind of power as the United States.

Europe is about living together on a crowded continent. The only way far-right parties can succeed in European politics is by making compromises and seeking alliances.

DE GRUYTER: What you see in America is exactly what you saw in Poland and Hungary during the reign of the far right. Most people did not vote for Law and Justice or Fidesz because they wanted to abolish democracy. They voted for them because of gasoline prices or other dissatisfactions with the performance of the previous government. When the parties started to attack democracy, voters turned away from them. That's why, in the end, they lost.

FERRARESI: I don't think a successful far-right governing party in Europe could realistically look like the Trump administration. One reason is the dense web of E.U. ties; another is that parliamentary systems are mostly designed to balance political forces, at the expense of executive power (and sometimes governability). Ms. Meloni, I think, is once again a case in point. I suspect any far-right party that wants to govern would have to follow a similar path.

SCHNEIDER: There are elections in Spain next month, in France and Italy next year, and in Britain and Germany before too long. By the end of these contests, far-right parties could be in power, jointly or alone, in all of them. So the last question is simple: How can they be stopped?

DE GRUYTER: By other parties. The far right needs other parties to get into government. So if center-right parties stay the course and make clear they will not work with the far right, many unhappy voters will not go for the far right — because that would make their vote pointless. It is only when center-right parties express willingness to cooperate with the far right that those parties can attract great numbers of votes. It's quite simple, really.

BRODER: Not just by warning against them but by mobilizing more people for something better. That may sound trite. But Pedro Sánchez did that last time in Spain: Back then, he ran on a record of cost-of-living measures, as well as criticizing the conservative and far-right alliance. Ultimately, angry nativist parties' message takes root when mainstream parties fail to uphold a broadly accepted model of social progress and reward for hard work. Attending to that is the key antidote.

FERRARESI: In a democracy, far-right parties can only be stopped by other parties offering something more appealing to voters who are confused, scared and feel voiceless. Whether we like it or not, unregulated immigration is a source of concern for many in Europe, and mainstream parties need to face that and come up with competitive platforms. The far right thrives on the questions everyone else refuses to answer.



VINCENT ALBAN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Once in power, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of Italy, addressing the U.N. General Assembly last year, suddenly became pro-NATO, pro-European Union and pro-Ukraine.

DAVID BRODER *is the author, most recently, of "Mussolini's Grandchildren: Fascism in Contemporary Italy."* **CAROLINE DE GRUYTER** *is a Brussels-based columnist for the Dutch newspaper NRC and Foreign Policy.* **MATTIA FERRARESI** *is a writer for the Italian newspaper QN.* **TIM SCHNEIDER** *is an editor in Times Opinion.*

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Trump's Russian diesel gambit is cynical and won't work

The president risks harming Ukraine to curb prices driven up by his own war

Donald Trump has stooped to new lows in his efforts to placate voters ahead of next month's midterm elections. With US households reeling from record diesel prices — almost entirely a consequence of the president's ill-conceived war with Iran — his administration has lurched through days of diplomatic contortions in pursuit of an expedient solution that undermines Ukraine in its fight against Vladimir Putin's Russia.

On Friday, Trump announced a deal with Putin to release Russian diesel supplies on to global markets, compromising international sanctions designed to deprive Moscow of revenues that help fund its illegal invasion of Ukraine. Over the weekend, US officials then bullied Kyiv to halt its strikes on Russian oil refineries and pressed European capitals to lean on their ally. The officials backed their demand with threats to cut off intelligence sharing with Ukraine and its access to US-made weapons under a Nato-administered scheme, the FT reported.

To top it off, on Sunday, Trump claimed on his social media platform, Truth Social, that Ukraine and Russia had agreed to an "energy ceasefire". Neither side has confirmed the agreement. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said yesterday that Russian drones and missiles had continued to strike Ukrainian power and gas facilities overnight. "Putin does not read Truth Social," Zelenskyy quipped.

There is much to deplore in Trump's scheme. For one, it weakens Ukraine's hand. A comprehensive energy ceasefire could offer Kyiv much-needed relief from attacks on its electricity grid ahead of winter. But the current proposal is reportedly limited to oil refineries, benefiting Moscow, which has far more facilities to protect, while depriving Ukraine of valuable leverage. Moreover, as EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas has warned, there is no guarantee Putin would honour any agreement. And if the US followed through with its threats to remove support for Ukraine, that would further weaken Kyiv's defences and negotiating position.

The hypocrisy is equally glaring. Having lambasted India and China for buying Russian oil, and threatened sanctions over their purchases, Trump is now seeking to facilitate Russian diesel exports himself. This only undermines the credibility of western efforts to isolate Putin, making it harder to persuade other countries to bear the economic costs of doing so too.

Even setting principle aside, the administration's plan won't deliver much respite for consumers. US diesel prices remain elevated, while the additional Russian supplies would be modest. For measure, if Moscow exported half a million tonnes next month, as pledged, that would amount to less than 4 per cent of global demand. Analysts also point to domestic fuel shortages and refinery damage that could constrain Russian exports, while any sustained relief would depend on a ceasefire that holds.

> Having failed to anticipate the impact of his 'little excursion' in Iran, the US leader is now scrambling for a quick fix from Putin

The deal faces opposition at home, too, with Republican senators among those demanding Trump reverse course, arguing that it violates a 2022 US ban on Russian energy imports.

Whatever comes of Trump's plan, it underscores the need for Europe to strengthen its own defences, reduce its reliance on Washington and hold firm on sanctions against Russia. Having failed to anticipate the impact of his "little excursion" in Iran on shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, Trump is now scrambling for a quick fix from Putin, seemingly without considering the consequences for Ukraine. It is yet another exercise in short-sighted, chaotic decision-making that risks doing lasting damage for little gain.

Opinion Technology

Why AI won't kill the creative class

Ewan White



Richard Florida

Ever since generative AI burst on to the scene, people have been writing the obituary for the creative class. Why would we need musicians, artists, designers, programmers or writers when a machine can do it?

One recent study appears to provide fresh evidence for the prosecution. It cites the loss of more than 200,000 jobs in media, film and the arts over the past four years. But those losses are not attributable to AI alone. They also reflect the post-pandemic streaming contraction, the lingering effects of the 2023 Hollywood strikes, and the movement of production overseas.

This is not the first time technology has upended work. Manufacturing was once the primary engine of advanced economies. Today, workers in production occupations account for just five per cent of the US workforce. As machines have taken on more physical tasks, the nature of work has shifted towards ideas and creativity.

> As it takes over routine cognitive work, distinctly human capabilities will become more important

The rise of the creative class was itself a product of that transformation. Made up of scientists and engineers, technologists and designers, doctors and lawyers, managers and entrepreneurs, educators, artists, writers and musicians, this class has grown from about 10 per cent of the US workforce in 1900 to more than 70mn workers today.

A new study drawing on Swedish employment data shows how technological change reshapes work. Occupations created directly by new technologies, such as punch-card operators and computer programmers, tend to remain small and unstable, and many shrink or disappear. Long-established ones are far more durable — more than 70 per cent of workers today are employed in occupations that existed in the late 19th century. Rather than eliminating these jobs, technology has transformed them.

AI is likely to reshape creative class work in a similar way. As it takes over more routine cognitive work, the distinctly human capabilities of creativity, judgment, leadership and social intelligence will become more important.

This shift is already playing out in professional services. A recent Stanford study finds that young workers aged 22 to 25 are being hired at lower rates in occupations most exposed to AI. But elite law, consulting and accounting firms continue to hire young people. Instead of hiring them primarily to grind through research and analysis, they are now looking for people who can understand clients, build relationships, win business, lead teams and ultimately become the firms' senior leaders.

An even more revealing window into how AI is likely to reshape work comes from digital creators — people who use digital platforms to turn their creativity into audiences, enterprises and income. The success of social media micro-dramas, made by small teams of creators including Hollywood veterans, highlights the growing importance of this model. AI will enable more individuals and small teams to do work that once required large organisations.

The skills that creators rely on point to another part of this future. Analysis of more than 500 occupations found that these skills most closely match those of actors, bartenders, hairdressers and personal coaches — occupations which carry a charisma premium, rewarding personality, trust and human connection.

But this shift is far from benign. The rise of social media has put a premium on physical attractiveness over substance — on how people look and present themselves rather than what they know, create or accomplish. AI is likely to accentuate this dynamic.

An even larger danger is inequality. We have seen the rise of a superstar economy in which a small number of people at the top capture a disproportionate share of the rewards. For all the attention paid to superstar creators like MrBeast, Charli D'Amelio, and KSI, who have tens or even hundreds of millions of followers and make millions of dollars, just 2 per cent of creators make $100,000 or more a year, while roughly four in five earn less than $10,000 and nearly 40 per cent earn nothing. Left unchecked, AI is likely to extend this winner-take-all dynamic.

Yet none of this is inevitable. The most successful places and organisations are those that harness the creativity of the greatest number of people. AI has the potential to give far more people the tools to develop their creativity and put it to productive use.

So the task is not to protect the creative class from AI, but to use it to unleash the distinctively human creativity that lies deep within all of us.

The writer is a professor at Vanderbilt University, a fellow of the Kresge Foundation and author of 'The Rise of the Creative Class'

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California's billionaire tax could do more harm than good

Edward Luce's informative op-ed on California state finances overlooks the stark impacts of the 1978 Proposition 13 on state finances, which created a situation where the Golden State relies on its wealthiest residents' tax payments to make ends meet ("California's oligarch tax would change the US", Opinion, October 7).

Prop 13 limited the ability of local governments to increase property tax rates, severely impacting the state's ability to grow revenue for public services. Because of this arrangement, which prevails to this day, the state relies on the taxes of high-income filers to balance its annual budget. Additional pressures on state finances can be put down to then Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's sharp reduction in the vehicle licence fee in 2004.

Given these facts, California will face greater budget challenges as more of its ultra-wealthy residents seek tax havens in Florida, Texas and Nevada if the proposed billionaire tax is approved. The budget impact won't be felt immediately, but over time, the deficits will rise as more wealthy people decamp to other locales, paying their tax dollars to other states.

Californians are right to debate the merits of the federal budget cuts to the state's programmes, imposed by the Trump administration. They should use their collective wisdom to find other, long-term solutions to address fiscal deficits, instead of one-off taxes that could do the state more harm than good over the long run.

Christian B Teeter
Professor of Business Administration, Mount Saint Mary's University, Los Angeles, CA, US

French sovereign debt: here's the number to watch

The FT Big Read on France ("Between bond markets and the barricades", October 6) is correct to highlight the pressure building in French sovereign debt markets.

As the article explains, the spread between 10-year German Bunds and French government bonds (OATs) is the crucial metric to watch. A sustained spread of more than 150 basis points over Germany will signal whether France is considered part of the core of the EU's monetary union.

A French 10-year yield of 5 per cent with the Bund close to 4 per cent would be deeply uncomfortable but manageable.

However, if spreads rise beyond 150 basis points, the political consequences may prove as significant as the financial ones. It would bring sovereign credibility to the centre of the political debate, imposing constraints that governments have largely avoided for more than a decade.

The European Central Bank will want to step in, but it cannot indefinitely suppress a risk premium that investors believe is justified by the fundamentals.

The question facing France is no longer whether action will be required, but whether the political system can assemble the consensus and the courage to undertake adjustments that many investors believe are already overdue. With the spread already close to 140 basis points, that is the number to watch.

Nicolas Breteau
Chief Executive, TP ICAP Group, London EC2, UK



PM's work experience promise faces hitch

Your report on how safeguarding rules threaten Prime Minister Andy Burnham's work experience plans should concern anyone who cares about young people's prospects ("Work experience push at risk over rules, say tutors", Report, October 8).

Futures for All is the UK's largest provider of school-aged work experience. Our provision has quadrupled over the past three years to more than 16,000 weeks in 2025-26. Every one of those weeks depended on an employer saying yes.

Meeting the government's pledge of two weeks' work experience for every young person means finding around 750,000 placements a year. That depends on thousands more employers taking part, and on making it simple for them to do so.

Keeping children safe is non-negotiable, and we support the aim of these changes. The Department for Education says Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks for employees who come into contact with children are not mandatory and employers must decide whether they are needed. That illustrates the problem rather than solving it, because it asks small business owners to interpret safeguarding law. Faced with that, and a bill of about £90 per supervisor, the easiest answer is no.

Those who lose will be pupils without family connections to find placements for them. For them, work experience may be a first glimpse of careers they had never considered.

Ministers should urgently publish clear, employer-friendly guidance. They should also give work experience supervisors the same free DBS checks that volunteers already receive. Otherwise, a well-intentioned safeguard will close doors for young people who most need them opened.

Nick Brook
CEO, Futures for All, London SE1, UK

He may have 'checked out', but Archer's books live on

The man in front of me in the Sainsbury's checkout had added to the groceries and a pack of a well-known beer and a bottle of gin, a fat Jeffrey Archer hardback. I had not noticed the branch sold books. Somehow, though I'm not an Archer reader, it cheered me. Lovely to leave a trace that inspires the living (Obituaries, October 10).

Jacqueline Castles
London W2, UK

OUTLOOK
AUSTRALASIA

A tale of two possums



by Nic Fildes

When I was eight years old my father called me to our garden in suburban Melbourne and showed me the corpse of a small possum that had electrocuted itself on the power lines. Rather than bury it, we decided to keep it, drying out its pelt in the microwave and then stuffing it. Percy the possum stared out at visitors from its own shelf for over three decades.

The brush-tailed possum, a rambunctious marsupial, is treated with respect in its native Australia. These nocturnal beasts, which lent their name to Dame Edna Everage's famous greeting, have found comfortable homes in the roofs of thousands of houses and sheds in Australian cities.

Despite a few unsavoury habits, including banshee-like screeches and noisy rooftop dust-ups, the possum is a protected species here. Evictions must be handled by a specialist who removes the animals to be released into the wild.

Not so in New Zealand. Over the ditch, the possum is ranked alongside feral cats, stoats and rats as a pest to be eradicated.

New Zealand has no native mammals — only birds and lizards. When possums were introduced in the 1800s as a source of food, leather and fur, there were no predators to keep numbers in check. About 30mn now live in the country, destroying trees and eating the local fauna, including the eggs of the loveable kiwi.

Hunters poison and trap up to 2mn possums a year and have spun their business into a cottage industry. "Possum merino" available in the form of ponchos and other clothing is now one of the most popular local products in airport duty-free stores and high-end outdoor wear shops in Auckland and Queenstown. The New Zealand Fur Association estimates that possumwear generates NZ $150mn of sales a year and supports 1,500 workers.

New Zealanders argue that possum fur is ethical because the animals are not farmed. They also point to an appealing quirk that makes it good for clothes: the fur is hollow — a feature shared with polar bears. That means it is soft, lightweight, never freezes and repels water. "Lovely stuff," says Ross Goodin, who is managing director of Lothlorian Knitwear in Pukekohe, one of the largest possum-merino producers.

But the burgeoning possum vertical comes with one fatal flaw — the raw material will run out if New Zealand's "Predator Free 2050" eradication plan proves effective.

Could Australia fill the gap? The ethical fur argument may chime with proponents of K-leather — the kangaroo skin used in local soccer boots that is a byproduct of necessary culling. About 1.5mn macropods — including kangaroos, wallaroos and wallabies — are harvested commercially every year in Australia, according to the Australian Wild Game Industry Council. Most kangaroo meat ends up in dog food, a fate that also awaits many of New Zealand's possums.

There is precedent. Tasmania already has a small possum industry due to an abundance of the animals in the island state. And Australia has dabbled with using the fur of beloved native animals in the past.

The children's book *Blinky Bill*, written by New Zealand-born author Dorothy Wall, begins with a harrowing scene in which a koala is shot by a hunter and left "riddled with bullets hanging helplessly from the tree-top" to die in front of his family. The book then tells young readers that between 1920 and 1921, more than 205,000 koalas were killed for their fur and sold internationally as "wombat".

This, however, was not a popular decision. Australia outlawed the practice by 1930 because the koala population was almost wiped out. Their numbers have never recovered.

For now, mainland Australian possums can sleep easily in their spherical nests.

Bethany Kiss, an academic at the University of Melbourne, believes the marsupial's presence should be celebrated as an important reminder of biodiversity for a new generation of city kids. By living alongside us they serve a purpose that is even more valuable than the price of their fur. "Houses with possums feel less lonely," she says.

nic.fildes@ft.com

Opinion

Who's really hiring you — HR or cyber security?

EMPLOYMENT



Sarah O'Connor

What would you think if you were asked in a job interview to hold up three fingers in front of your face? Perhaps you're doing so badly that they're checking you're not concussed? More likely the recruiter is trying to check that you're not an AI deepfake.

Employers are trying all sorts of things to combat fraudulent AI use in the recruitment process. There are jobseekers who use chatbots to bluff their way into jobs they're not capable of, or pay "interview mules" to complete assessments for them. More dangerously, there are hackers who try to get hired with false identities in order to access internal systems, and even remote IT workers who turn out to be based in North Korea. The research company Gartner has predicted that one in four candidate profiles worldwide will be fake by 2028.

All this is leading to a culture clash inside companies. The warm and fuzzy realms of HR and recruitment are having to learn to work with the suspicious minds of the cyber security world.

One example: the HR platform Deel acquired AI cyber security company Clarity in August in order to "embed continuous identity security across the entire hiring and workforce lifecycle".

Neev Wilf, who was at Clarity and is now head of product at Deel Security, tells me that "bringing HR and security to the same room is tough" because they "have different interests". Security teams usually want "every protection, every feature, all the way" but "at the same time, you have [recruiters] who say 'this enhances friction for the candidate'".

What sort of security checks are we talking about here? Recruitment platform Greenhouse has introduced a system to allow employers to prompt jobseekers for ID verification. "Some do it at the top of the funnel, in the beginning of the process, and some do it further down," Daniel Chait, Greenhouse's chief executive, tells me.

Clarity, meanwhile, says it uses AI to examine "facial movements, lip-syncing, eye motions, voice patterns" and other indicators in video interviews, and cross-checks indicators such as "behavioral, identity, and media patterns" to spot signals of deception.

> There's a lot of personal data to be hoovered up in a process that might not even result in a job offer

It sounds like a lot of personal data to be hoovered up in a process that might not even result in a job offer. There is surely the potential, too, for "false positives": for legitimate candidates to be flagged as suspicious and thus denied the chance of getting hired. If a lot of employers start to use the same handful of systems, some unlucky souls might find themselves blocked again and again.

The good news is that the EU's penchant for regulation has helped preempt some of these potential pitfalls. Both GDPR and the EU AI Act give people protection against being subject to unexplained automated decision-making, for example, especially in high-stakes areas such as recruitment.

Both Wilf and Chait tell me their systems have been carefully designed to meet EU regulations, and do not lead to automated decisions but only flag information for human review.

That said, these new security features and identity checks feel like a depressing consequence of the AI arms race in recruitment. Already, candidates complain they feel dehumanised by employers' use of the technology, while employers say they can't cope with the volume of AI-assisted applications.

According to Gartner's regular surveys of job seekers, the number of people who had experienced an AI-led interview doubled from 9 per cent in the third quarter of last year to 18 per cent in the second quarter of this year. But only 30 per cent said they felt comfortable with the experience, only 20 per cent felt they were able to get their own questions about the job answered and only 17 per cent preferred the experience to a human interviewer.

Have we reached the point where employers throw up their hands and go back to a much smaller pool of handwritten applications and in-person interviews?

It's an appealing thought, but it's worth remembering that way of doing things was hardly perfect either. Indeed, perhaps the worst-case scenario would be a future that contains a bit of both. A return to more offline, human-to-human recruitment decisions for those who already have personal connections who can vouch for them (or those young people whose parents have connections). And for job seekers without that reserve of social capital? An interview into a webcam with three fingers pressed to your face.

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Britain, Brexit and the cat-flap option

GLOBAL AFFAIRS



Gideon Rachman



Ann Kiernan

"Come all the way back." That was Roland Lescure, France's finance minister, responding to Andy Burnham's suggestion that Britain needs to rethink its relations with the EU.

Lescure was not a lone voice. His boss, President Emmanuel Macron, says the reversal of Brexit is an "excellent" idea. Pedro Sánchez, Spain's prime minister, suggested that Britain would be welcomed back with "open arms".

So could we be looking at a cat-flap Brexit? Our feline friends have a habit of screaming to get out of the house — before demanding, with equal fervour, to come back in again. Will Britain one day stroll back through the EU cat flap?

Clearly, the door to the EU is rather better fortified than the average cat flap. There would be formidable obstacles to overcome before Britain could rejoin. But the political, economic and strategic case for reversing Brexit is gathering strength and momentum.

Start with the politics. Behind his folksy exterior, Burnham is a shrewd and ruthless political operator. He knows that opinion polls now suggest that 59 per cent of British people want to rejoin the EU, with just 32 per cent opposed. And yet no major political party is currently advocating rejoining. That looks like the political equivalent of an open goal. The commentator Sam Freedman points out that polls suggest that "a strong manifesto commitment on the EU could add four to seven points to Labour's vote percentage."

Key advisers to the prime minister concluded long ago that Brexit has acted as a drag on the British economy — and that rejoining the customs union or the EU's internal market would not be enough to repair the damage. Every big goal that Burnham has — from fixing social care to spending more on defence — is hamstrung by a lack of money. If rejoining the EU could raise the growth rate then a lot of other issues would become easier to solve.

Finally, there is the strategic case. Donald Trump's diesel deal with Russia has underlined his profound differences with Britain over Ukraine. The US president has also steadily undermined faith in the future of the Nato alliance. The British know that their future security is likely to depend on working more closely with European allies. That would be significantly easier if Britain were inside the EU — and had automatic access to common European defence spending.

But actually rejoining the EU could be a daunting process. The old deal that Britain had before — in particular the budget rebate — would not be on offer. Opt-outs from the Schengen border-free zone and from the single European currency could no longer be assumed. Both currency and borders remain very sensitive issues in the British debate.

Burnham would have reason to fear that a soft majority in favour of rejoining the EU would fall away, as the reality of what that entails became apparent. Despite the encouraging words from Macron, some of Burnham's key advisers are particularly wary of France — which they regard as easily the most hardline of the EU nations in its attitude to Britain. Some even fear a replay of the 1960s, when Charles de Gaulle blocked Britain's first application to join the EU.

The France that would sit in judgment on a British application to rejoin the EU would also no longer be the country of Macron and Lescure. A victory for Marine Le Pen in next year's presidential election might change the debate about British re-entry in unpredictable ways.

> A political, economic and strategic case for reversing the UK's exit is gathering strength and momentum

If Le Pen plunged the EU into chaos — or dragged France to the far right — then rejoining might seem like a less attractive option for the UK. The threat of a debt crisis in France or elsewhere inthe Eurozone might also make the EU seem less attractive. On the other hand, outside the Eurozone, Britain itself might be even more exposed to the bond markets than France. And some of Le Pen's demands for a rollback of some EU powers are reminiscent of the traditional British position. A looser EU that was no longer driving towards "ever closer union" might even be easier for Britain to rejoin.

The bigger question that the EU and its constituent governments have to answer is — do they really want Britain back? And even if the answer to that is 'Yes' — are they prepared to invest the time and energy required to make it happen?

The scars left by Brexit have only just begun to heal. The Europeans will also want evidence of a settled consensus in Britain. Negotiating a re-entry treaty — only to have Nigel Farage come to power and rip it up — would be a nightmare for all concerned.

On the other hand, the attractions for the EU of Britain rejoining are also considerable. At a time when Brussels is scorned in Washington and Moscow, a British vote to rejoin the club would be a powerful vote of confidence in the future of the European project.

The world is also a much more threatening place for Europeans than it was in 2016, when Britain voted to leave. Renewed UK membership would add some economic and military weight that the EU could certainly do with. Unlike many other potential member states, the British would also be substantial contributors to the EU budget.

Beyond the difficult technical negotiations involved in reversing Brexit, it is the bigger strategic question that really matters. Do both sides see a common interest in Britain rejoining the EU? If the answer to that is a clear yes — then it can and should happen.

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The diesel crisis is testing the limits of globalisation

Christof Rühl

Diesel may be the most basic of fuels but it is the workhorse of transport. Any shortages hit economic activity directly, while higher prices feed more broadly into production costs and therefore headline inflation than either gasoline or crude oil. So it matters that diesel prices have risen about twice as much as gasoline prices since July, because refining capacity was damaged or made inaccessible by the wars in Ukraine and Iran.

The current saga is not without irony, opening with the US, the world's largest petroleum producer and diesel exporter, claiming to be so short of the fuel as to contemplate an export ban. Donald Trump quickly moved from threatening such a ban to pressuring G7 partners to bring forward strategic stock releases to unilaterally easing diesel sanctions on Russia in exchange for the promise of additional exports to the world. The problem is not whether these policies work for the US administration. It is the damage they are creating for energy security and the functioning of the global economy.

Let's start with the export ban. The scary truth is not that it would hurt the US economy; it is that it might work. Such a move would indeed bring down short-term prices in the US and increase them abroad. Even longer term, it would not necessarily be an own goal. While higher diesel costs abroad would increase import prices (the three largest US diesel destinations happen to be Mexico, Chile and Brazil, top US suppliers of goods, food and commodities) and a rigid ban would reduce the output of petrol and jet fuel too, a flexible cap on diesel runs could limit or avoid these consequences.

In fact, the mere threat of an export ban seems to have worked. A few days ago, the G7 agreed to bring forward the release of strategic reserves, with members pledging not to restrict energy exports to each other. The Russia "deal" on Friday pushed the boundaries of political intervention further. After threatening to close off one market link, the US opened another instead.

How could a country with resources so abundant that it calls itself "energy dominant" end up so vulnerable to the global prices of ordinary diesel? The answer is that abundance, ownership or control are not sufficient to ensure energy security. That requires optionality: not only having something, but having the ability to replace it when needed. The situation in the Strait of Hormuz continues to provide a brutal stress test. Supply shocks have been buffered by a web of alternatives: from inventories to rerouting, reconfiguring capacity, fuel substitution and demand reduction.

> Seemingly rational decisions taken by individual states will weaken collective security

From Adam Smith, we know that large markets create wealth through specialisation. But the mirror image is that they create resilience by generating alternatives and opportunities for substitution in moments of crisis. Energy is a prime example. Its markets are flexible and global in reach. The links — long taken for granted — that have protected energy security and the economy at large are now being switched on and off by political fiat, not market decisions.

These political decisions are chipping away at supplies that are still subject to market conditions. It is not only the US-Russia deal. The same day this was announced, and with much less fanfare, China made an administrative decision to relax diesel exports again. Meanwhile, refining capacity in Russia and Saudi Arabia remains under threat.

The diesel episode is just one example of how central the use of economic policy for strategic and geopolitical ends has become to the US administration. The trouble with such exclusive geoeconomics is not that it will always backfire on the initiator; it is that it will sometimes work, in particular for large and powerful nations. That creates the risk of contagion: other countries may respond in kind, accelerating global fragmentation.

As the global energy network becomes less accessible, smaller players will find it rational to hedge, relying more on national storage, bilateral negotiations and costly attempts at self-sufficiency. But what is rational for individual states will also weaken collective security by limiting optionality.

With big powers flexing their muscles, what can "middle powers" do? The abstract answer, in energy as elsewhere, is to band together to protect as large and inclusive an economic space as possible. The trouble is that preserving an inclusive system requires the collective will — and ability — to defend it. The G7 diesel agreement preserved such a space, as well as an institution that could co-ordinate collective response mechanisms: the International Energy Agency. But if a compromise is reached by the threat of exclusion, it risks encouraging more threats.

We spent decades thinking globalisation had made the world smaller. Now we are about to find out what a closing horizon means for the world economy.

The writer is an associate senior research scholar at Columbia's Center on Global Energy Policy and adviser to Crystol Energy

It's time for the UK to reward whistleblowers financially

Graham McNulty

One of the keys to solving complex fraud, bribery and corruption is insight from the inside. For four years I was the UK police lead for informants — or, to give them their proper name, covert human intelligence sources. I saw first-hand how insider information can crack a case open.

Covert human intelligence sources differ from whistleblowers, but the principle of having an insider is the same. As interim director of the Serious Fraud Office, I understand the impact whistleblowers can have. They can often hold the key to a whole investigation. Their information unravels complex cases and delivers justice for victims faster.

That's why I'm delighted the government has set out its support for an incentivisation scheme, forming part of a wider consultation on the UK's whistleblowing framework that opened yesterday. This move reflects a strong and growing evidence base for change.

This is a priority for the SFO. Our engagement helped expand the scope of a review by Jonathan Fisher KC to include incentivisation, building on a prior commitment in the government's anti-corruption strategy.

Make no mistake, this is a significant step towards an outcome that would transform how complex fraud is tackled in the UK in the same way that proceeds of crime legislation enabled law enforcement to turn the tables on criminals in the early 2000s.

Whistleblowers dramatically reduce investigation time. They enable us to focus enquiries, identify paper trails that could otherwise take years to piece together, and slash the volume of material we need to review.

> Incentivising insiders would be a significant step towards transforming how complex fraud is tackled

It currently takes the SFO an average of just over four years from opening an investigation to a decision on bringing charges, agreeing a deferred prosecution or closing the case. This is much longer than anyone would like.

But consider that a typical SFO case includes several million documents. As Fisher observed, if printed, these would stack considerably higher than the Shard.

Whistleblowers could help us work through that volume far faster, if we gave them a reason to come to us. Right now, the US is giving them a much better one, with rewards of between 10 and 30 per cent of sanctions collected.

UK nationals are one of the largest overseas user groups of the US whistleblower reward programmes. Between 2012 and 2023, over 700 UK nationals provided them with intelligence. This outflow is driven by our lack of financial incentivisation for whistleblowers.

Incentivising whistleblowers works. With appropriate safeguards in place, these schemes already operate successfully in a range of countries, including the US and Canada. A report by the Royal United Services Institute indicates they increase both the quantity and quality of reporting of corporate misconduct. In 2022, 86 per cent of the $2.2bn in civil settlements and judgments recovered by the US Department of Justice were based on whistleblower information.

These are different jurisdictions with different legal systems, but the pattern is clear: where incentives exist, whistleblowers come forward. Doing likewise in the UK could also reshape the criminal justice landscape towards corporate self-referrals and early guilty pleas. That means avoiding contested trials amid the growing crown court backlog.

Paying for information was once seen as "un-British". But no longer. Ipsos polling commissioned for the Fisher review found 70 per cent of the public now support financially rewarding whistleblowers who expose serious economic crime.

Serious fraud, bribery and corruption are caught from the inside. Right now, too many of the people who could help us are choosing to speak up elsewhere — or not at all. It's time we gave them a good reason to choose us.

The writer is interim director of the Serious Fraud Office