

# The Editorial Page

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Political and legal institutions play a central role in setting the environment that can nurture prosperity and economic growth. — Angus Deaton

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MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2026

**The Indian EXPRESS**  
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- IN 1932 -

BECAUSE THE TRUTH  
INVOLVES US ALL

## Make it clear: Indian sailors are not collateral damage

**T**HE KILLING of three Indian sailors in a US strike on the oil tanker *MT Setebello* in the Gulf of Oman is a tragic incident that adds a further complication to a bilateral relationship going through an uneasy phase. India has, rightly, voiced its objections strongly, summoning the US Charge d’affaires in New Delhi twice to protest this and other attacks that have endangered the lives of Indian mariners. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said that, in a call with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, he had “reiterated India’s strong protest”. That the US State Department’s account of the call fails to mention the deaths, and claims that “all commercial vessels should immediately comply with orders from US forces”, flies in the face of international conventions and betrays a callous lack of acknowledgement of the incident’s gravity. President Donald Trump’s intervention — blaming Iran for alleged drone strikes against “Indian” ships, which Tehran has denied — is hardly helpful.

This, together with the Trump Administration’s bid to impose higher tariffs on India via US Trade Representative investigations, hunts attempts — such as the reassurances offered by Rubio during his recent visit and the efforts of Ambassador Sergio Goro — to tie the knot back on course. The episode underlines the vulnerability of Indian seafarers — who number around 3,08,143, about 12 per cent of the global pool — in the West Asia conflict. Attacks on neutral merchant shipping in war have been a contentious aspect of international law, and the era of open registries, flags of convenience and a globalised world has only worsened the ambiguities as ship may be flagged in Palau, run by a Dubai-based operator and crewed by Indians, as in the present case. The US has sought to justify its strike on the *Setebello* by alleging that the vessel violated its blockade of Iranian ports and the crew ignored warnings, which can be grounds for attack under the established law. The ship’s operator, IOS Marine FZE, has denied the charge.

With lakhs of its citizens potentially in danger, India has critical stakes in ensuring that such attacks do not recur, that mariners have better protections, and that the blockade is lifted. The US must ensure that civilian seafarers do not continue to become collateral damage. Both Trump and the Iranians have signalled that a peace deal may be in the offing. If it happens, the opening of the Strait of Hormuz will be a relief to the whole world, especially to those risking their lives on the high seas. Meanwhile, New Delhi, even as it rolled out the red carpet for Secretary Rubio last month, should keep reminding him of its red lines as well, especially when it comes to the life — and death — of Indian citizens.

## Urea price crash opens window for reforms

**I**N MID-JUNE, 10 days before the United States-Israeli strikes on Iran, the state-owned Rashtriya Chemicals and Fertilisers contracted about 1.3 million tonnes (mt) of urea imports at a landed price of \$508-512 per tonne. Two months later, that price nearly doubled to \$935-959 per tonne for a 2.5-mt import tender of Indian Potash Ltd. However, National Fertilisers Ltd’s latest tender for import of 1.7 mt, which opened on June 8, saw bids as low as \$444.9-449.3 per tonne. The price crash — to below pre-war levels — comes amid a partial lifting of export restrictions by China and fading fears of prolonged war-induced supply disruptions. Contrast this with the situation till early this month, when the Centre’s fertiliser subsidy bill for 2026-27 was projected to touch Rs 3,40,000 crore, as against the budgeted Rs 1,70,799 crore.

It’s not clear if the above price drop is a one-off affair, triggered by hopes of a US-Iran deal to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly a third of the globally traded fertiliser products passed prior to the conflict. The expectation of global supply chain pressures easing has been combined with El Niño conditions developing in the equatorial Pacific Ocean and the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicting it to become a “very strong” event by October. El Niño, to the extent it moderates fertiliser demand in key agricultural regions of the world, will add to the weakening of price pressures from supply-side relief. That matters for India, not the least because much of its fertiliser requirement — whether in finished form or as raw materials and intermediate chemicals — is imported. In 2025-26, the country imported \$272 billion worth of fertilisers and inputs. The current fiscal could see that surpass the record \$33.4 billion of 2022-23, post Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The exchequer outgo on subsidy is over and above.

The Narendra Modi government should view the cooling of global fertiliser prices as a temporary reprieve. It provides the space for carrying out much-needed reforms in India’s farm subsidy architecture. This newspaper has for long argued in favour of shifting from market-distorting product-specific subsidies — be it for inputs (fertilisers, water and electricity) or crops (through minimum support prices disconnected from demand and supply) — to direct farm income support. Farmers should grow what the market wants. And they must do so efficiently, which means paying the scarcity value of water, energy and imported inputs. The goal of reform is to make them in this direction, unlike ad hoc interventions that only kick the can down the road.

**FREEZE FRAME** BY EP UNNY



# Our parched cities need to make every drop count, recycle water



PARAMESWARAN IYER, ARUNABHA GHOSH AND NITIN BASSI

**W**HAT IS common between Narsinghpur in Madhya Pradesh, Ahmedabad in Gujarat, and Barmer in Rajasthan? These cities have reported maximum daytime temperatures north of 40°C in the first week of May. The high temperatures have led to water scarcity, driven by high evaporation rates and increased demand for domestic water. For many small cities and towns, private tanker water supply has become a norm during summer. Bigger cities such as Delhi are sourcing water from far-off places, often leading to higher costs and dependence on upper riparian regions.

The annual per capita water availability in India is about 1,500 m<sup>3</sup>, which is likely to fall below 1,200 m<sup>3</sup> by 2050, edging closer to the water scarcity threshold of 1,000 m<sup>3</sup>. The reduced water availability, coupled with the water scarcity during scorching summers and increasing heatwaves, calls for more proactive water action. The larger question is what can cities do differently?

One intervention with immense (and thus far unrealised) potential is integrating the reuse of treated used water (domestic sewage), especially for non-potable purposes such as irrigating horticultural crops, land-

scaping, construction, public conveniences, textile manufacturing, lake rejuvenation, and wherever there is no direct contact with humans. As per an analysis by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), this can unlock a market and investment opportunity worth over Rs 3.1 lakh crore and generate 1,00,000 additional jobs by 2047. Also, implementing circular water economy will help ease water stress. For instance, Thane city can bridge its existing water deficit of 53 million litres per day through scaling up the reuse of treated used water. Four interrelated actions can unlock these benefits.

First, the policy on water reuse must be complemented by city-specific reuse plans. About 14 Indian states now have water reuse policies. Uttarakhnad, UP and Odisha are the latest states to realise seasonal water risks and re-evaluate policies. While this is a step in the right direction, city-specific reuse plans are needed, which would have clear targets to address existing water deficits and water quality issues, reuse avenues, reuse water quality requirements, revenue generation options, and implementation mechanisms. Each city has a unique reuse requirement. For instance, in Delhi, Varanasi, and Bengaluru, the priority for water reuse is in agriculture in peri-urban areas, whereas in Chennai, it is for rejuvenating water bodies and lakes, and in Thane, for construction, or for industrial use in Surat.

Second, enable private financing for reuse projects. Urban areas have less than 50 per cent of networked sewage treatment capacity, and less than one-third wastewater treated in 2021. There are many reasons for this, including the absence of infrastructure to

transport sewage to treatment plants, a lack of human resources to operate a plant, an energy deficit for running the plants, and insufficient allocations for maintenance of treatment plants. Reuse is low and accounts for only a small proportion of total treated volumes. Along with public investments, private investments are needed to strengthen used water treatment and reuse infrastructure. Different models of blended finance are possible: The hybrid annuity model, adopted by the National Mission for Clean Ganga, shares financial risk between the government and the private developer.

Third, there is a need to improve the functionality of sewage treatment plants. Many plants in various cities do not meet the effluent discharge quality standards set by the Central Pollution Control Board. Beyond poor plant maintenance, used water is often mixed with industrial effluents from non-conforming units in unauthorised areas, impairing plant operations. Most of the water treatment plants operate on biological processes that rely on microorganisms. The heavy metals and toxins in industrial effluents kill the bacteria or make them dormant. Although India does have a zero-liquid discharge (ZLD) policy for industries, many small-scale units flout norms and release untreated effluent into drains carrying domestic wastewater. As adopted by cities in the Ganga river basin, local governments can leverage innovations in technology and AI to monitor violations and improve compliance of the plants. Further, they can provide incentives to the industries that follow the rules on proper implementation of ZLD.

Cities in Gujarat that offer financial assistance to industries for setting

up ZLD policies are good examples.

Fourth, create a national circular water mission to shift water management from a linear use-and-dispose approach to a restorative model that maximises its reuse. This will require technological, institutional, financial, and behavioural reforms. Technological reforms should target building more decentralised faecal sludge treatment plants in the growing peri-urban areas. Institutional reforms are needed to enable urban local bodies to set up special-purpose instruments to manage reuse projects and convert them into a business opportunity. Financial instruments must be designed to incentivise those reusing treated used water and reclassify freshwater as an asset class. While the introduction of market-based freshwater pricing for all users should drive efficiency, targeted subsidies must be maintained to protect those at the base of the economic pyramid. Lastly, but importantly, are the behavioural nudges to make used water everyone’s business. By shifting public perception, treated used water and its reuse can be made an essential component of life in a city. The recently published study, ‘Water, Nature, Progress’, and the Economic Survey of India 2025-26 have laid down the roadmap for a circular water mission in India.

India’s journey to Viksit Bharat by 2047 will depend on how boldly it builds water resilience. A circular water economy can be the lighthouse — it can reduce freshwater stress, improve water quality, and secure water for all. India has the political leadership, will, and state of concept. What it needs now is action — at scale, at speed, and with urgency.

*Iyer is India’s executive director at the World Bank. Ghosh is founder-CEO CEEW, and Bassi is fellow at CEEW. Views are personal*

**Institutional reforms are needed to enable urban local bodies to set up special-purpose instruments to manage reuse projects and convert them into a business opportunity**

## Focus on knowledge, not on whose system it is



ROHAN MANOJ

**D**O YOU have a nagging suspicion of “Western” medicine? It’s understandable. As many Indians will tell you, such foreign concoctions are drastic measures. For routine ailments, indigenous remedies will suffice. Quite apart from whether this advice works in specific cases, it does something else. It detaches “Western” medicine from its position of privilege — as doctors often emphasise, there’s no such thing as “Western” medicine, only modern medicine — and casts it into a swamp of relativism. It calls into question the primacy of modern science, the foundation on which modern medicine is built. This makes it an epistemic matter — relating to knowledge itself.

As a debate on Indian Knowledge Systems unfolds in these pages, it’s important to emphasise that this is also a bid to build an epistemic paradigm. If it were simply about understanding the intellectual traditions of the past as part of the study of history, it would be called Indian Intellectual History. If it were simply about documenting living oral and folk traditions, that would be an entirely different field. Drawing on traditional practices to create sustainable architecture is a third, separate area. All these are laudable and uncontroversial aims, and the research ought to be strongly supported. The Brahmanical nature of many Sanskrit texts is no reason not to study them; rather, anti-caste scholars should study the *Dharmashastras* precisely because they provided the jurisprudential scaffolding of caste.

However, bringing these and other fields together, under the rubric of “knowledge systems”, makes them part of the fashionable “civilisational” agenda, which seeks to recover an authentic Indian paradigm of knowledge. The question is, to what end? Would exploring, say, pre-modern Indian science or mathematics through anything other than a historical lens serve any purpose? Would this advance the global understanding of science or mathematics?

Such a project implicitly relativises modern science, handing it over to the “West” and forfeiting any Indian claim to

it. This depends on, and props up, the hackneyed notion that there are such things as discrete, insular “civilisations”. In this telling, “Western Civilisations” traces an unbroken arc from Ancient Greece and Rome to present-day Europe and America. It chooses to forget that this is a story Europeans started telling themselves a few centuries ago, replacing the older framework of “Christendom”. It also forgets the multifarious influences that went into the formation of both the “West” and of modern science. For instance, consider *Hortus Malabaricus*, the 17th-century botanical treatise compiled by the governor of Dutch Malabar, drawing to a great extent on the Ayurvedic knowledge of Itty Achudan, a physician from Kerala. In the 18th century, Carl Linnaeus, who laid the foundations of modern plant and animal taxonomy, used *Hortus Malabaricus* as his main reference for South Asian flora, basing his Latin names on the existing Malayalam ones. Is this Western knowledge?

Pre-modern Indian scholars worked within a living tradition, engaging with each other across time and space and expanding the base of knowledge with each generation; often, they sneaked in original contributions under the guise of commentaries. If Patanjali’s *Mahabhasya* was a commentary on Panini and Katyayana, Bhartṛhari’s *Mahabhasya* was a commentary on Patanjali, and so on. That world has vanished. Reconstructing it, or rather, constructing something new, demands an edifice on pre-modern foundations to address modern problems, would be an inauthentic and ultimately quixotic enterprise.

Let’s turn to our neighbour and fellow “civilisational state”. What often comes up in discussions of China is its astonishing progress in all scholarly fields, be it STEM, the social sciences, or the humanities. Is it all thanks to working within its own paradigm of knowledge? Well, one has heard of communism with Chinese characteristics. But one does not hear of chemistry with Chinese characteristics.

*The writer is senior assistant editor, The Indian Express. rohan.manoj@expressindia.com*

## From tariffs to tankers, ties with US face tough tests



VIVEK MISHRA

**T**HE SECOND Donald Trump administration will likely mark a decisive turn for most countries. There are peculiar strands that distinguish India from others in how New Delhi’s relationship with the US has changed. Existing frameworks may be proving insufficient, indeed redundant in some cases, to guardrail the direction and objectives of the relationship.

Beyond the upheavals over tariff, immigration and the import of Russian oil, the past few weeks alone have witnessed several instances that will be consequential for the bilateral relationship. India has become a target of a new line of 12.5 per cent which the US Trade Representative has proposed. This acts as a pressure tool amid ongoing trade negotiations.

The US government has also issued an export-control directive to suspend all access to Table 5 and Mythos 5 by any foreign national, whether inside or outside America. The decision is likely to impact India perhaps more than any other nation, given one of the strongest tech-dependent diasporas and the growing tech-interdependence between the two nations.

But what has drastically added to the strain has been the death of three Indian seafarers in a US strike on a commercial oil tanker. India summoned the US Charge d’Affaires to launch a protest but the incident itself is likely to ring much louder than just a political demerch. The US has framed its action as enforcement of a naval blockade against Iran. On strict legal grounds, a blockade is a recognised method of warfare under customary international law, including the law of naval warfare. However, the attack has raised questions over trust and strategic coordination that the various frameworks between the two nations promise.

In most cases, the crew, flag and other information of transiting ships is publicly available. It is hard to believe that the US would not have an internal assessment of the presence of another strategic partner’s nationals in large numbers on board ships that it was going to attack. Could India have been intimidated timely — a natural expectation under existing strategic frameworks — if the US Navy and the CENTCOM indeed felt that lack of action would have violated the blockade? For sure, a lawful blockade which requires interception, visit, search, and capture or seizure, would have provided the US Navy with ample time to avert a direct strike. Then, there is the question of proportionality in the decision to blockade.

The Trump administration’s actions, tethered to Washington’s interests, may be undermining the promise of strategic frameworks. For India, internally, it raises political questions for justifying its strategic partnership with the US and could roll sentiments. Externally, the Trump administration seems to be doing nothing right to already strained bilateral relationship. If Marco Rubio’s visit to Delhi last month was an exercise in papering over differences, the killing of three Indians could very well wipe the gains.

*The writer is visiting fellow, ORF America, and deputy director, Strategic Studies Programme, ORF*

**Trump administration’s actions, tethered to Washington’s interests, may be undermining the promise of strategic frameworks**

### 40 YEARS AGO June 15, 1986



### 39 Tamil militants killed

THIRTY-NINE Tamil militants and one government official were killed in the past 24 hours in a series of incidents in Sri Lanka’s strife-torn northern peninsula, military sources said. Military sources claimed that 26 of the 39 guerrillas were killed when a military helicopter strafed three vehicles near Mannar. While informed sources claimed that some of the victims were civilians caught in crossfire, military sources maintained that they were all “terrorists” and that they fired at helicopters on reconnaissance flights.

### Launch of clean Ganga mission

THE AMBITIOUS Rs 293 crore action plan to

clean the much-polluted Ganga was formally launched by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in Varanasi. Describing the Ganga as the symbol of India’s unity, civilisation, and prosperity, the Prime Minister called for a people’s movement to clean the Ganga and to take up other such environmental programmes. The Varanasi waterfront, which is one of the most polluted stretches of the river, was chosen as the launching pad for the Ganga action plan.

### Territory settlement stalled

VARIOUS ALTERNATIVES are being discussed at different political levels to break the deadlock created by the resolution of the Punjab Cabinet on the report of the Venkataramiah Commission. Indications are that the Centre

and the Punjab and Haryana governments are keen that the deadline for the transfer of territories is adhered to. Punjab’s Finance Minister Balwant Singh explained to opposition leaders that it would not be possible for the Centre to give 70,000 acres to Haryana, as the areas suggested have a large Punjab-speaking population, and it would be against the spirit of the Punjab accord.

### UNSC warning to South Africa

CALLING FOR “immediate lifting” of the emergency in South Africa, the United Nations Security Council has warned the regime against trying to intimidate anti-apartheid demonstrators on Monday, the 10th anniversary of the Soweto massacre.

# The Ideas Page

MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2026



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● WHAT THE OTHERS SAY  
War tries to destroy culture because culture sustains identity and memory.— *The Guardian*

## Innovation is strategic necessity. Country must incubate technologies world uses



N CHANDRASEKARAN

**T**HE VEDIC hymn "Aanobhadra kravo yanitu vishvatah" (Let noble thoughts come from all directions) has guided India's civilisational openness to innovation. Today, it finds urgent expression in innovation.

Technology has become the currency of national sovereignty. A nation's freedom in trade, security and diplomacy is increasingly determined by its position in critical technology value chains. For India, innovation is a strategic necessity, a bridge between aspiration and execution. It must expand access for citizens, raise competitiveness for enterprises, reduce strategic vulnerability for the nation, and create capabilities the world cannot easily replace. It is central to VISION Bharat.

One of the most significant shifts of the last decade has been Prime Minister Narendra Modi's sustained emphasis on making innovation a national mission. Initiatives such as Startup India, Atal Innovation Mission, ANFR, IDEX, BIRAC, IN-SPiCE, Semicon India, Atal Tinkering Labs and the KDI Fund have built an institutional architecture for innovation, signalling that frontier technology is central to national development. Our higher education institutions, such as the IITs and IISc, supported by the Ministry of Education, are ready playgrounds for deep-tech talent and function as powerful incubators.

India's first innovation decade built the runway. It widened participation through startups, incubators, digital public infrastructure, research missions, student hackathons and new capital pathways. The next decade must build mastery. We are innovation-dense; we must now become innovation-deep. Progress must be measured by capabilities mastered, critical dependencies reduced, global value chains entered with strength, and lives improved at scale.

India has demonstrated exceptional strength in applying and adapting technol-

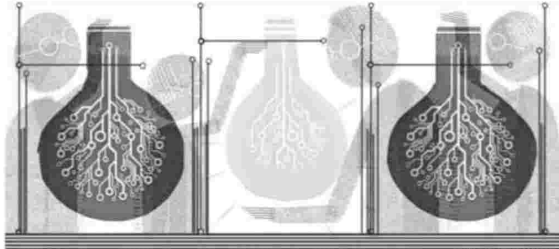


ILLUSTRATION: G. SASHIKUMAR

ogy. The next frontier is origination: Owning critical IP, controlling supply-chain choke points, building component depth, setting standards, and creating platforms that others build upon. India's industrial R&D intensity is low by international standards. We must move from using the world's technology to building technologies the world uses. In every priority sector, we should ask: Do we own the science, the design, the data, the IP, the manufacturing process, the standards and the customer access?

For India's next phase of innovation, the relationship between policy and market forces must be sequenced and calibrated to sector maturity. In nascent frontier sectors, policy must create anchor demand and absorb central developmental risks. IDEX proved this: Structured procurement catalysed a defence innovation ecosystem that would not otherwise have existed. As sectors mature, industry must lead, while policy fills the gaps markets leave through long-horizon research, common standards and shared infrastructure that no single player can fund.

As India focuses on technology innovation for strategic sovereignty, we need to keep in mind that it does not mean technological autarky. Given India's starting point, its national interests are best served through deep partnerships with like-minded nations offering complementary strengths. These are not concessions of ambition. They are a design principle for reaching the frontier faster,

**We must also confront technology's double edge. AI can compress decades of progress in diagnostics and governance. Deployed without careful design, it can also disrupt work, amplify bias and deepen inequality**

squarely in India's enlightened self-interest. Strategic sovereignty means collaborating from confidence, not dependence. The India-France Year of Innovation is a template: Build mastery openly, selectively, based on mutual strength.

India's large enterprises have a significant role to play in driving innovation beyond being first customers of the startup ecosystem. It is much more comprehensive: Investing in R&D, co-innovating with startups, integrating startups and MSMEs structurally into supply chains, making strategic investments in startups, and deploying engineering rigour, quality systems and global market access in service of the broader ecosystem.

At Tata Group, as we deepen our footprint in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, defence, clean energy and digital infrastructure, we are making the startup and MSME ecosystem integral to our growth. In every common domain, the unit of innovation is not a product; it is an ecosystem. A semiconductor strategy needs design, materials, packaging and customer moving in concert. An electric vehicle needs a battery, charging network, software and financing to move together. Large companies that build with this understanding pull an entire ecosystem forward.

India cannot build mastery everywhere. The discipline of this: Apply rigorous criteria. What are the core socio-economic problems that need to be addressed—access to quality healthcare and educa-

tion, sustainability, energy and food security? Which domains have irreducible domestic demand, providing a captive proving ground? Where do India's talent and cost structure create advantages that others cannot replicate? Where does import dependence create genuine strategic exposure, becoming a lever an adversary could use in a crisis? Where is a technology young enough for near-parity competition? India's goal: To identify the domains where the world cannot easily operate without us. For this, we need to concentrate innovation energy.

We must also confront technology's double edge. AI can compress decades of progress in diagnostics and governance. However, deployed without careful design, it can also disrupt work, amplify bias and deepen inequality. India's model must be positive by design, augmenting capability, creating new jobs, and ensuring that the transition does not burden the weakest sections. The transition must be planned and managed with empathy through structured reskilling and redeployment, while ensuring that India does not lag in competitiveness.

Bharat Innovates 2026, organised by the Ministry of Education and France, is a declaration that India's most ambitious innovators are ready for the world's most demanding stage. More importantly, it is a collaboration bridge connecting Indian startups and research institutions with global investors, corporates, universities, research institutions and markets. Its promise is not only that the world will see what India is building, but that global partners will ask: What can we build with India?

To young innovators, researchers and entrepreneurs, the conditions have never been better. India is the world's most concentrated laboratory for consequential innovation, where the hardest problems of human development and technological self-reliance must be solved together at a billion-person scale. The innovator who solves for India's problems solves for much of the world. That is not a burden. It is the most powerful innovation brief on earth.

India's innovation story will be written by a generation that chose mastery over mere participation, depth over dispersion, and purpose over convenience. That generation is ready. The moment is now.

The writer is chairman, Tata Sons

## In Bharathiraja's cinema, the landscape was the story



ARI GAUTIER

**M**Y ATHAI was less than thrilled after watching *16 Vayathinile*. The film brought back memories of her hometown, Muringappakkam, six km south of Pudukcherry. She had come to the cinema for glamour and adventure, not to be returned to the red earth and palm trees she had spent years forgetting.

I didn't know what I was thirsty for until I arrived with Bharathiraja. Understanding what Bharathiraja did for Tamil cinema is to understand what the Impressionists did for painting. Before Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir brought their easels outside, European painting was a studio affair: Controlled light, controlled compositions, subjects deemed worthy by the Academy. The Impressionists shattered that. They painted haystacks, train stations, women hanging laundry, driven by an obsessive need to capture fleeting natural light, insisting that the world outside the studio was not inferior but inexhaustible.

Bharathiraja did the same thing structurally. Tamil cinema in the 1970s had its own Academy: The Kodambakkam studios, the star system, the grammar of mythological and social dramas. He took his camera outside. Into the fields of the Kongu and Nadur belts, under the white Tamil Nadu sun with its long shadows. He cast untrained faces and let the landscape speak for itself. A farmer's daughter at the well, a young man's longing in a village square—*as dramatic and beautiful, he insisted, as any mythological tale.*

And like the Impressionists, he was met with scepticism from those who should have known better. Athai, who had grown up in a village and paid good money to escape it for three hours, was not prepared to see her native red earth elevated to art. It took time. It always does.

This new way of seeing had a name: P.S Nivas. Trained at the Institute of Film Technology in Chennai, Nivas brought a visual vocabulary shaped by the shadow-conscious Malayalam black-and-white tradition. Nivas used backlighting to let figures emerge from light rather than be lit from the front—understanding, as Monet understood, that a slight softness, an unexpected shadow, a face caught between two expressions were not imperfections. They were the film itself.

From 1890 to 1891, Monet submitted himself to gentle madness: Painting the same haystack again and again, at dawn, at noon, under snow, under the copper light of autumn. It was not the hay that held him. It was what light did to it—how it consumed it, lifted it, rendered it almost immaterial at certain hours. The haystack was the place where light came to confess.

Bharathiraja understood the same thing, with the red soil of Tamil Nadu beneath his feet. His sugarcane fields are not backdrops. His whitewashed walls, crossed by that thick afternoon light that only the South knows, are not props. They are the story. He returned to them film after film, season after season, with the patience of someone who knows that the world, looked at with enough care and love, never runs dry.

Jean-Francois Millet knew something the French Academy refused to admit: That three women bent over a harvested field (*The Cleaners*, 1857) contained as much grandeur as any mythological subject. Bharathiraja worked in the same conviction. His women were never ornamented. In *Muthal Mariyathai*, the desire between an ageing landlord and a young married woman is neither condemned nor softened—it exists, whole and present, the way Millet's gleaners exist. In *Araldai Ovaruthirai*, he follows his character through labour, festival, desire, loss, and refuses to force an arc onto material that already has its own breath. Like Pissarro returning season after season to the fields of Pontoise, he believed that if you looked honestly enough, something true would rise to the surface on its own, the way salt rises through the earth after rain.

He was right. I am not sure my *athai* ever fully reconciled with Bharathiraja. For her, cinema was always a way of forgetting—the red soil, the toll, the constrained life she had worked so hard to leave behind. Bharathiraja insisted on remembering. He held that what she had left behind deserved to be looked at until it became luminous. In that insistence lay both his genius and his provocation. The villages he filmed—the faces he restored to dignity, the untidy stories he chose to tell—they will endure. So, too, will Muringappakkam, six km south of Pudukcherry. Bharathiraja would have known exactly how to film it.

Gautier is a writer and poet brought up in Pudukcherry

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Safety non-negotiable

ACCORDING TO Washington, vessels suspected of facilitating Iranian oil exports are warned, intercepted, and, if they fail to comply, disabled through precision strikes intended to minimise casualties. Yet the deaths aboard the *Settebello* expose the limits of that argument. Precision is not the same as safety ('As Modi, Trump head to G7, face off over death of sailors,' *IE*, June 14). Their deaths signal that the world's sea lanes are being transformed into battle spaces where civilian crews are exposed to absorb the risks of strategic rivalry.

S Paul, Nadia

### Beyond punishment

THE EPISODE raises a larger question about how far personal opinions, once aired publicly, should affect one's professional standing. (MBBS student sent on forced leave,' *IE*, June 14) While medical students are rightly held to high standards of sensitivity, the punishment must be proportionate and rehabilitative rather than purely punitive. Institutions would do well to introduce structured sessions on social media conduct and professional ethics early in the course, so that young students learn these boundaries before, not after, such incidents.

A Mylami, Coimbatore

### Lessons not learnt

THE FIRST anniversary of the Air India flight AI 171 tragedy is a somber reminder of institutional opacity ('One year after AI 171 crash, questions persist,' *IE*, June 13). The Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau's failure to stick to the 12-month timeline for its final report undermines public trust. When structural delays compromise accountability, and serious safety anomalies are left unanswered, administrative silence ceases to be perfunctory. It becomes an active public-safety hazard.

Krishan Kumar Chugh, New Delhi



B JAYALAXMI NANDA, NUPUR RAY AND SHAMBHAVI MANI

THREE HUNDRED million enumerators will knock on doors all over the country for the first time in 16 years to conduct the world's largest head count. The sheer amount of change that the Census will document is phenomenal, particularly for socio-economic and demographic indicators. While we wait for this, let's examine the trends that have already been captured by other surveys.

India's maternal mortality ratio (MMR) stood at 93 as per SRFS 2021, a decline of 86 per cent compared to the global reduction of 48 per cent over the past 33 years (PIR, May 10, 2025). It has further come down to 88 (Special Bulletin on MMR in India 2021-23, RGI). Various policy interventions have been credited for this achievement. However, while states like Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have already met the UN-SDG MMR target of less than 70 per 1,00,000 live births, others like Madhya Pradesh, Assam, and Uttar Pradesh are still struggling. Census 2027, cross-referenced with health system data, will enable district-level maternal mortality mapping. This will allow policies to be targeted more precisely.

The demographic transition process reveals that socio-economic development positively impacts mortality, and the statistics for infant and child mortality rate

## After 16 years, Census could tell several new stories

also confirm it—it declined from 39 in 2014 to 27 in 2021. The neonatal mortality rate has declined from 26 in 2014 to 19 in 2021. The under-five mortality rate has declined from 45 in 2014 to 31 in 2021. This highlights improvements in health infrastructure and policy interventions. Although the Census 2027 is likely to confirm continued improvements in aggregate, it is the state-by-state and district-level pictures which will matter.

The 2011 Census recorded child sex ratio: 919 females per 1,000 live births, a decline from 927. This was attributed to intense son preference and misuse of ARTS (New Reproductive Technologies). To curb this, the state had a dual response of the PC-PNDT Act on the supply side, and conditional cash transfer schemes incentivising the birth and survival of girl children on the demand side.

The NFHS 5 data shows a glimmer of hope where the sex ratio at birth for children born in the preceding five years was 929 females per 1,000 males, and the sex ratio of the population was estimated at 1020. Interventions like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao showed measurable improvements in some areas. However, the Census 2027 will provide an authoritative picture.

India has witnessed concerted efforts in achieving higher standards at all levels of education. With policies such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Beti Bachao Beti Pad-

hao, there has been emphasis on girls' education. Yet, Census 2027 is expected to reveal an adult literacy gap, since as per available data, 14.4 per cent overall literacy gap between men and women persists, concentrated in rural pockets. Another issue will be digital literacy. The gender digital divide is emerging as the next frontier of inequality.

Although female labour force participation has seen major improvements, the gender gap remains. Although the Census will not replace the PLFS as the primary source of labour force data, it will provide an updated population denominator with its questions on occupation, offering a comprehensive picture of India's labour market. It is the first time in the independent India that caste-based data will be collected. It is expected to be a detailed catalogue of declared castes, cross-referenced with socio-economic indicators. This will allow for a much more nuanced picture of where disparities are concentrated, enabling targeted policies and reservation frameworks. The Census will indicate the transformative progress in human development indices. For policymakers, researchers, and citizens, it is a mirror that India has been waiting for.

Nanda is professor of Political Science and principal of Miranda House, University of Delhi. Ray and Mani teach political science at Karnal Nehru College and Vivekananda College, University of Delhi, respectively



ANUSREE K C

"HEMA, REKHA, Jaya ar Sushma, *sabki pasand Nirma*". Whether you grew up in India in the 1980s or '90s or even the 2000s, those four names wash over you in a single musical wave—the *Nirma* jingle. The visuals in the cheerful detergent advertisements might have changed over the decades. But the jingle never left. The names were not accidental. They coincided with some of the biggest female Bollywood stars of the '80s—women who were widely adored but at the same time were very different from each other. These were also common names. And so, the jingle wanted you to say no matter which sphere of society you belong to, you would

prefer *Nirma* to "wash your clothes". Suresh Triveni's *Maa Behen*, now streaming on Netflix, borrows those four names—Rekha, Jaya, Sushma (Hema takes her own sweet time to appear)—and asks a gleefully subversive question: What if those women were messy, selfish, sharp-tongued, and absolutely done with being good?

Let's start with the title itself. *Maa Behen*. In large parts of the Subcontinent, these two words are rarely said together as a compliment. As a phrase, it has long existed in the shadows of abuse and moral policing. Women are granted respect only when they fit into a sanctified role. Triveni takes these words that have long been used to threaten or insult men and to remind women of their purpose and turns them on their head. The women here are selfish, reckless, frustrated, and contrarian. They are *maas*.

Pay attention to where the film is set: Adarsh Colony. Adarsh means ideal, model, exemplary—it is the kind of name Indian housing societies love. It carries a promise of respectability, of people living correctly. And who is the family's most vocal critic in this model colony? A man named Charitra Singh. Charitra means character, specifically moral character. In India, when someone says a woman's *charitra* is bad, it is never neutral.

**Self-appointed moral guardians are often fascinated by the very women they condemn. The supposedly wayward woman becomes essential to the performance of virtue**

It is a verdict. Their home itself is named *Kripa Bhavan*—*kripa* meaning grace, something the colony has never once shown these women. The idea of "good" and "bad" women has always been policed by people like Charitra Singh, who appoints himself as a moral guardian of women who never asked for their opinion. These self-appointed men are often fascinated by the very women they condemn. The supposedly wayward woman becomes essential to the performance of virtue, outrage is also curiosity, obsession, and voyeurism disguised as concern.

This is why the casting works so well. As one of Hindi cinema's most beloved stars, when Madhuri Dixit plays a character who is free-spirited, it is almost liberating. Jaya, on the other hand, shows us the cost of "goodness" that women have to pay. Despite having lived her life abiding by the laws of so-

ciety, she ends up failing to be "the perfect daughter-in-law and wife" in a marriage she never wanted. The TV anchor from the crime show *Khalibali* narrates Rekha's imagined life with beautiful scandel. We recognise his voice immediately. We have heard it on news channels, in WhatsApp groups, at family dinners, on evening walks in the colony park. The voice that holds women against an impossible standard and then enjoys telling them they have failed.

*Maa Behen* is not a perfect film. But its essential life with beautiful scandel. Triveni borrows names from the *Nirma* jingle and asks us, very politely, to let go. Hema, Rekha, Jaya, Sushma are back. Not now, instead of washing things clean, they embrace the mess.

The writer is correspondent, *The Indian Express*. anusree.kc@expressindia.com

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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

• GLOBAL

## Why Trump is bringing UFC event to White House lawns

Kartika Bhattacharya  
New Delhi, June 14

THE WHITE House is set to host its first-ever professional sporting event as part of celebrations marking America's 250th year of independence.

The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), the world's largest mixed martial arts (MMA) organisation, is holding the 'UFC Freedom 250' on June 14 (Monday morning India time), which is not only the US Flag Day but also President Donald Trump's 80th birthday.

The White House's South Lawn, which usually hosts diplomatic gatherings, has been transformed into a 4,000-seater makeshift arena with a caged ring at its centre. Another 80,000 people are expected to view the blend of striking and grappling from an adjoining ground called the Ellipse. Critics have questioned whether the event fits the occasion.

### Trump's long association

The major driver is Trump's long-standing relationship with the UFC and its president, Dana White.

In 2001, back when MMA was viewed by many as a violent bloodsport and struggled to secure venues, Trump stepped in to host UFC events at the Trump Taj Mahal casino in Atlantic City. An avid fan of combat sports, Trump also launched a short-lived MMA promotion.

White would later become one of Trump's strongest allies. Their relationship deepened during the Covid-19 pandemic, when Republican-controlled Florida allowed the UFC to resume hosting events.

Following the attack on the US Capitol by Trump supporters in January 2021, UFC events increasingly became one of the few major public spaces where Trump continued to receive enthusiastic receptions. White also encouraged Trump's outreach to younger audiences through podcasts and internet personalities.

Trump's appearances at UFC events have since become regular spectacles. The White House event comes as Trump faces mounting scrutiny over his ties with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and his war against Iran, which has set off an economic crisis. It also coincides with a steep slide in Trump's approval ratings ahead of the mid-term elections in November.

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### Draped in patriotism

UFC is promoting Freedom 250 as the biggest event it has ever staged. But more than its star-studded line-up, the fight card has attracted attention for its overtly patriotic imagery. Six of the seven bouts feature at least one American fighter. One of the fighters on the card, featherweight Steve Garcia, was a close friend of the assassinated far-right figure Charlie Kirk.

Much of the audience is expected to comprise members of the US military, as tickets have not been put up for public sale. The event follows multiple UFC training sessions conducted for FBI agents this year. On June 11, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and White signed an MoU to use the UFC as a tool of American diplomacy, with fighters and senior executives to serve as cultural ambassadors overseas.

### Criticism from fighters

The political nature of Freedom 250 has drawn criticism from within and outside the MMA world. Current UFC middleweight champion Sean Strickland said he would have been willing to fight if fans were allowed to attend, adding that he did not want to participate merely to "go hang out with the Epstein list." Former UFC lightweight title challenger, Gray Maynard, also criticised it.

White, however, has rejected accusations that the event is political, insisting that anyone who loves America would appreciate it. But the flagship event scheduled for June 14 may be exactly the kind of political pageantry the US President needs to secure a major public relations win.

• ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

## 'Site of aspiration and exploitation', what India needs to guard in AI growth path



### EXPERT EXPLAINS

PETRA MOLNAR  
LAWYER AND ANTHROPOLOGIST WHO STUDIES AI AND SURVEILLANCE

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is increasingly being framed as a route to economic growth, strategic autonomy, and national power. But what happens when the costs of that ambition are borne by workers, communities and public resources that remain largely invisible?

The "AI Resist List" seeks to answer that question. The project documents global efforts to challenge and reshape the growing influence of AI across areas ranging from

labour and data extraction to surveillance and social infrastructure. Petra Molnar, who is part of the project, told Anagha Jayakumar why narratives of AI-driven growth can obscure questions of accountability.

Many countries, including India, are embracing AI as a pathway to growth, competitiveness and national power. How did AI adoption become such a widely shared political goal?

The story of AI as a national imperative is, at its core, a story about the seductiveness of technological shortcuts. For governments navigating post-colonial legacies, widening inequality, and the anxieties of geopolitical irrelevance, AI offers a way to skip the messy, slow work of structural transformation and arrive at a future that looks like growth through algorithmic efficiency. The US and China modelled this playbook aggressively, and the pressure to follow has been enormous in the so-called AI Arms Race, with countries jostling for AI supremacy.

What the AI Resist List reveals is that this "AI as development" framing is itself a form of narrative power. It is one of the four pillars we document: Resist, Refuse, Reclaim, and Reimagine. The narrative infrastructure of AI — the stories told about what AI is for, who it serves, and what progress looks like — is as material as the data centres and chip supply chains. Countries like India have absorbed not just the technology but the idea that power in the 21st century requires AI dominance, and that resistance stands in the way of progress.

This framing obscures what drives these decisions: defence procurement interests, surveillance state consolidation, investor capture of public infrastructure, and the very concrete political utility of appearing modern and an "AI Leader".

The list breaks AI power up for indianexpress.com



A weekly column decoding AI's new frontiers, how they shape the world and our place in it

interconnected pillars: labour, surveillance, data, and narrative. India appears in all of them. What does India's position say?

India's appearance across all the pillars is no coincidence. AI power is assembled through extraction at multiple levels, and no country is simply a victim or a beneficiary. India occupies a revealing position: it is simultaneously a site of exploitation and a site of aspiration. On labour, India supplies much of the invisible workforce that makes AI systems legible. On infrastructure, data centres are being pitched as development anchors while drawing on scarce water and electricity. On surveillance and data, facial recognition systems, networked CCTV, and the vast reserves generated through Digital India raise significant questions about oversight and consent.

con Valley and then shipped outward. It is assembled through relationships that are extractive and unequal. AI's global supply chains depend on hierarchies that have structured capital for generations.

AI companies often present data centres and computer infrastructure as engines of development. What questions should communities and policymakers ask?

In my mind, the single most important question is: who bears the costs, and who receives the benefits? For example, data centres consume vast quantities of water for cooling and electricity that, in water-stressed and power-insecure regions, comes directly at the expense of households, farmers, and small businesses. The promised benefits of jobs, tax revenue and a stronger position in the digital economy are unevenly distributed.

Policymakers should ask whether commitments are binding, whether communities can refuse or renegotiate projects,

whether environmental and social impacts have been independently assessed, and whether data governance and technology transfer arrangements benefit locals.

India wants strategic autonomy in AI while remaining dependent on American chips, cloud providers and frontier models. Are genuinely sovereign AI ecosystems possible for countries outside the US and China?

The infrastructure that underpins AI, from frontier models to semiconductor supply chains, is so concentrated that formal sovereignty coexists with profound dependence. A country can localise data and build its own large language model while still relying on foreign cloud infrastructure and Nvidia chips subject to US export controls.

This is not a reason to abandon sovereignty as a goal, but it is a reason to be precise about what sovereignty would actually mean. The most achievable forms of AI sovereignty are about the capacity to regulate, audit, and refuse.

• ECONOMY

## India's push beyond E20 fuel: Reasons, and pitfalls



ANIL SASI

THE CENTRE last week exempted higher ethanol-petrol blends (22%-30% ethanol) from central excise duty, putting their tax treatment on a par with the 20% ethanol blend (E20) that's the standard at pumps.

The government has also proposed amendments to recognise 85% ethanol-blended fuel and 100% ethanol fuel under the Central Motor Vehicles Rules.

Both measures signal the government's intent to prepare the country's vehicular and fuel ecosystems for the next stage of ethanol adoption. But they have differing implications.

The first measure — the transition from E20 fuel to higher blends — is aimed at most petrol cars.

The second move — the draft amendment to recognise E85 and higher fuel — targets an entirely new category called flex fuel vehicles. Such vehicles are designed to operate on varying blends of petrol and ethanol but are still some way away from being widely introduced to the Indian market.

For now, it is the first proposal that has caused concern among carmakers and motorists — unless their counterparts in Brazil — a country that has successfully and structurally integrated ethanol with its automobile ecosystem. Brazilian law, unlike India, also provides for a discount for higher ethanol blends.

**IGNITION ISSUE.** Regular ICE cars running on higher ethanol blends are hard to start on winter mornings because ethanol burns at a higher temperature than petrol.

**EXPONENTIALLY WORSE PERFORMANCE.** While a fuel with 10% ethanol (E10) makes little difference to a car's performance, anything above is said to cause problems in engines not specifically built for it. And that performance worsens exponentially as the blending levels increase. The Petroleum Ministry has said that these concerns around higher ethanol blends are not backed by "scientific evidence".

A senior technical expert at a major automaker acknowledged that there are no conclusive studies on the long-term impact of blended fuel on non-compliant vehicles. But the expert also said it could definitely have an impact on the engine's life, its various rubber parts, valves and piston heads, among others.

**ENGINE DAMAGE.** Ethanol has a higher content of water, which is corrosive. So, E20 or higher ethanol blends could damage the parts of the internal combustion engine (ICE). This is especially true for older engines and the ones used on two-wheelers, where high-grade aluminum or steel casters are not used for the engine block.

**MILEAGE.** Many customers had flagged a drop in mileage after the E10 to E20 shift. The drop could be between 5-12%, depending on when the car was manufactured. The

### • HOW A FLEX FUEL CAR IS POWERED

**THE ECM:** Controls the fuel mixture, ignition timing, and emissions system; detects and troubleshoots problems.

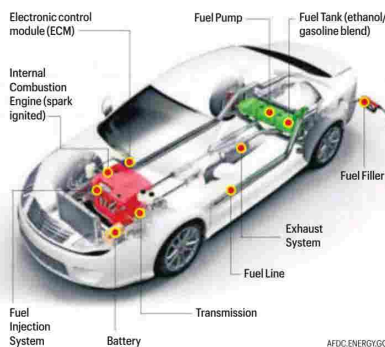
**FUEL FILLER:** A nozzle from a fuel dispenser attaches to the receptacle on the vehicle to fill the tank.

**FUEL INJECTION SYSTEM:** Introduces fuel into the engine's combustion chambers for ignition.

**FUEL LINE:** A metal tube or flexible hose (or a combination of these) transfers fuel from the tank to the engine's fuel injection system.

**FUEL PUMP:** A pump that transfers fuel from the tank to the engine's fuel injection system via the fuel line.

**FUEL TANK (ETHANOL/GASOLINE BLEND):** Stores fuel on board the vehicle to power the engine.



India is looking to transition from E20 fuel to higher blends to reduce its dependence on oil imports. But the plan has raised concerns

involved in the process indicated that OMCs have made it clear that they can only offer two ethanol blends at any given point.

### Behind the measure

The government is looking to progressively increase ethanol blending in petrol from the current E20 level to E25, before transitioning towards flex-fuel vehicles and E85-E100 fuels.

This is an integral part of India's strategy to reduce its dependence on imported fossil fuels — especially after the experience with the West Asia conflict that drove up prices.

India currently imports nearly 88.5% of its crude oil requirement, making the economy and energy security vulnerable to geopolitical disruptions.

There's a political angle too: the agricultural lobby, especially from Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, is pushing hard for ethanol blends to be hiked since farmers, such as those growing sugarcane, are sitting on significant overcapacity.

The government maintains that the rollout of higher ethanol-petrol blends will only be done after proper testing and consultations. The Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), on May 19, also notified fuel standards for these higher ethanol blends.

According to a source in the government, the move towards blends higher than E20 is "not being pushed through in a hurry and there will be enough time given for vehicles and oil companies to gear up for this transition". "Too much should not be read into (Wednesday's) notification" on the excise duty exemption, said this source.

### The transition process

In the medium term, consumers may have two categories of fuel available at petrol pumps. One would be the standard fuel — E20 today, and potentially E25 if the government pushes ahead with its plans. The other would be high-ethanol fuels such as E85 or E100.

The higher blend would likely be priced lower than a consumer with a flex fuel vehicle can also consider the pricing before deciding which one to use.

For new vehicles, manufacturers would have to recalibrate engines and undergo fresh emissions certification and homologation, since current models have been tested and approved using E20 fuel. Homologation, the process of certifying a vehicle's roadworthiness, would need to be repeated for E25, just as it was done when E20 was introduced.

Ultimately, however, they will likely make a shift to flex fuel vehicles — a project delayed on multiple counts.

### Brazil's way

Brazil's ethanol programme, which kicked off in the 1970s, was in response to the uncertainties of the oil market.

At nearly every petrol pump in Brazil now, people have the option to either choose between blended petrol, which typically includes 27-32% ethanol, and E100, which is pure hydrous ethanol. Brazil also got carmakers to usher in flex fuel cars.

consumer will likely end up bearing the brunt of any drop in fuel efficiency. For older vehicles, there is the added question over vehicle damage due to the high ethanol mix. That too is left to the consumer, a representative of an auto manufacturing association said.

### ...and for automakers

The E25 transition will require additional engineering and validation work around engine calibration, fuel-system durability, corrosion resistance and material compatibility. All this, just months after the E20 transition.

Vehicle costs will increase and likely fall on the consumer.

Carmakers have called for greater policy clarity and alignment before higher ethanol blends can be rolled out at scale.

Beyond that, in private, they're willing to talk about some anomalies in this E20 to E25 transition.

"Some of the concerns have been conveyed, especially through (auto) industry representatives. Indications are that the transition towards a base fuel having a higher blend of ethanol (above E20) is likely to happen, alongside the progressive rollout of the E85-E100 fuels," a senior auto industry executive told *The Indian Express*.

Oil marketing companies (OMCs) such as Indian Oil and Bharat Petroleum, too, will face challenges. A government source

• DEFENCE

## AN-32: Soviet-origin transport aircraft, the IAF's workhorse

Amrita Nayak Dutta  
New Delhi, June 14

FIVE PERSONNEL of the Indian Air Force (IAF) were killed Saturday when a military transport aircraft, the Antonov AN-32, crashed during landing at Jorhat in Assam. One other person on board the aircraft has been rescued and is undergoing treatment.

This is the third major crash of an AN-32 over the past decade. The two other crashes have killed 42 IAF personnel.

### What is the AN-32?

Bought in 1984 from the erstwhile Soviet Union, the AN-32s have served as the IAF's critical workhorse. The IAF has employed it as a tactical transport aircraft since its induction into the force.

The AN-32 is a twin-engine turboprop aircraft and can carry a maximum weight of 27 tonnes at a maximum speed of 530 km per hour. It can carry up to 67 tonnes of cargo or 50 passengers, making it the pre-

ferred choice for transport of men and cargo across different terrain.

The aircraft can cover small to medium ranges and can operate from far-flung airfields with minimum ground infrastructure, enabling it to play critical roles during a conflict, especially in the mobilisation of men and material and with its limited bombing role.

It has also been used for para-trooping operations. During the Kargil War with Pakistan in 1999 and subsequently in Operation Parakram in 2001-02, it played a critical role in transporting personnel and cargo to border areas through multiple sorties.

### Modernisation programme

After an AN-32 crashed in 2009, India signed a \$400-million contract with Ukrainian manufacturer Antonov to upgrade most of the IAF's 105 AN-32s through overhaul of airframes and turboprop engines. The programme also involved fitting the platforms with advanced navigation



The Antonov AN-32

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

and communication equipment.

The programme, however, stalled after Russia formally annexed the Crimea region in 2014. Subsequently, India and Ukraine agreed to resume the upgrades, with Kyiv having developed some alternatives to the Russian-made systems on the aircraft. The upgrade was under way at the IAF's base repair depot (BRD) in Kanpur, with equipment transferred from Ukraine. About half

of the planes had been modernised in Ukraine, and 38 have been at the BRD.

### Safety record

The AN-32 is considered among the most reliable transport aircraft in the IAF's inventory. But the crash in Jorhat is the third major one since 2016.

On July 22, 2016, an AN-32 went missing while en route over the Bay of Bengal, from Tambaram Air Force Station, Chennai, to Port Blair, killing 29 people on board. The wreck was traced years later.

Then on June 3, 2019, an AN-32 was crashed in the hilly terrain when it was heading to Mechuka in West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, near the border with China, killing 13 people on board. The wreck was found over a week after the aircraft went missing.

There was another major crash on June 10, 2009, when an IAF AN-32 crashed at around the same place in Arunachal Pradesh, killing all 13 people on board.

# Idea Exchange

14

MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2026

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

## WHY KIRAN RIJJU

Kiran Rijju, Union Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Minority Affairs, is seen as one of the most vocal leaders in the BJP-led NDA government which has just completed two years of its third term. He plays a crucial role as the government is keen on passing the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026, also known as the Delimitation Bill, 2026, which failed to get the two-third majority in the Lok Sabha in April. The ruling dispensation is trying to muster support for its key reform legislation in the new political landscape that is going through a realignment process after the recent Assembly polls

**Liz Mathew: As the NDA marks 12 years in governance, recently the Constitution Amendment Bill was defeated in Parliament. Were you prepared for this?**

We were very upset that the Women's Reservation Bill was defeated.

**Liz Mathew: The Women's Reservation Bill was not defeated.**

Its implementation was. You can name it the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill but basically it was the implementation of women's reservation in the Lok Sabha and the Assemblies. We were upset because the actions of the Opposition parties were unexpected on two accounts. Number one, the same bill, the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam in 2023, supported by all the Opposition parties, was passed unanimously.

And it was mentioned that the Bill will be implemented on the basis of the population census conducted after 2026. Since the caste-based census is going to take a long time, we have to refer to the 2011 census, so that requires amendment. Without that, we can't incorporate the necessary things to be included in the implementation of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam Bill. Secondly, it is not that we brought the Bill suddenly, we had consultations with all the stakeholders, especially the bigger political parties. Except for the Congress, Trinamool and AAP, the other parties have joined, they have agreed.

**Liz Mathew: The main contention of the Opposition parties was that you had not called an all-party meeting. Then you brought the Bill two days ahead of the session and that you did not mention about what you had promised to other parties which is the 50 per cent increase, you only mentioned the number of seats in the Lok Sabha. The Congress had said that they were ready if you delinked it from the women's reservation. What do you have to say?**

While the first part of the Parliament session was on, we had started the consultation process. The demand for all party meetings was much later. Mallikarjun Kharge wrote three letters to me. The first demanding the all-party meeting be kept for later, when I already completed the consultation with most of the political parties, with DMK, Samajwadi Party, Shiv Sena, with all other parties. What is the point of calling for all-party meeting when we have finished the consultation process? We met 70 per cent of the Opposition parties. The Congress then out of blue asked for an all-party meeting, that was basically a ploy.

**Liz Mathew: What is the way forward?**

I can't commit anything right now because unless it's placed in the Cabinet and a decision is taken.

**Liz Mathew: With the CBSE evaluation and the NEET paper leak, many students have been affected. Has the government failed in this?**

You cannot say that the government has failed. But we should concentrate on how to get the students justice. There are so many steps taken from re-evaluation to re-assessment. Now, portals have been created. Many students have registered and have sent in their queries. Despite cyber attacks, the government has taken necessary steps to fix them. The primary objective is to make the system transparent so that in future such frauds are prevented. If we all sit together and ensure that reforms take place, the careers of students will be better.

**Liz Mathew: Don't you think that somebody from the government has to be held accountable for this?**

First of all, at any level, if a person has made a deliberate attempt to hijack the system, action should be taken. To build the confidence of the students, the CBSE chairman and the secretary have been shifted. New proposals to change the system are in place. The education minister has already said that he takes moral responsibility. He is not running away from the error, whoever has committed it, he has rather taken it up as a challenge to fix the problem. The demand for the resignation of the education minister is an effort to drive political mileage out of the problems faced by the students.

**Manoj CG: Had the BJP been in the Opposition, would you not have demanded the resignation of the education minister?**

There is a difference. If the fraud is committed by the minister or minister's staff, then the minister is responsible. But if a problem happens within an autonomous body, then they are answerable. The CBSE is an autonomous body. Then there is NTA, these are not directly monitored by the minister daily.

When we were in Opposition, every month there were scams against ministers. In the last 12 years, there is no direct charge against any minister for taking bribes or commission or manipulation of the system... So, bifurcate the difference between what Congress did and what we have done.

**Shyamal Yadav: Manmohan Singh had launched a 15-point programme in the interest of minorities and in 2014-15 there were 8.71 per cent**



### ON THE DELIMITATION BILL

*When the first part of the Parliament session was on, we had started the consultation process... We met 70 per cent of the Opposition parties. The Congress then out of blue asked for an all-party meeting, that was a ploy*



### ON ATTACKS ON MINORITIES

*If there are incidents against churches, there are incidents against Hindus, in Kashmir, Assam, Bengal, Karnataka... it can happen anywhere. One incident doesn't make it a national one*

## 'Anybody can create a political party but don't undermine and ridicule Indian democracy'

Kiran Rijju, Union Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Minority Affairs, on the need for the Constitution Amendment Bill, attacks on minorities, why most Bills do not get passed in Parliament and the major crisis facing the government. The session was moderated by Liz Mathew, Deputy Editor



Kiran Rijju, Union Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Minority Affairs (right), in conversation with Liz Mathew, Deputy Editor, *The Indian Express* RENUKA PURI

**minorities appointed in all Central government jobs. What percentage of minorities has been appointed in the Central government after 2014-15 until now?**

I will not look at appointments in a few organisations. See it in totality. Minorities are better in India. 12 years after Modi ji has become the prime minister. It's the Congress and the Left ecosystem that keep hammering these slogans of minorities not being safe. *Sabka saath, sabka vikas* means every scheme is for everybody. Can anyone name a person who has left India because of religious persecution? You are maligning the character of the nation by saying that Muslims are not safe in India. Hindus and Sikhs from Afghanistan have come to India, from Pakistan, too.

When problems started in 1959 in Tibet, why did they (Tibetans) come to India? It shows that India is inclusive. It's not only because of BJP. The character of the Indian society is such. But we have made it very clear that we will not accept illegal migrants. We will not accept anybody who is creating trouble in our country.

As for appointments, deserving people wherever they are, will be appointed. We don't believe in appeasement of anybody. Our philosophy is simple, justice to all, appeasement to none. There is no deliberate attempt to bar anybody from getting appointment in any of the bodies.

**Aaron Pereira: In February, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) wrote to the prime minister about attacks on Christians, especially during mass but nothing happened. Also, what is your response to Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) given that over 20,000 institutes have lost their licences, so far.**

**Bengal, Suvendu Adhikari, who became chief minister, said: 'Muslims did not vote for me, I will work for Hindus'. What do you make of such political statements?**

First of all, I have a responsibility towards looking after the welfare of the minority communities, but law and order is not the subject of the minority affairs minister. To give an example, though, just before the 2015 Delhi elections, there was news that churches were attacked in Delhi. I called the Delhi Police Commissioner who gave me the statistics; there were four incidents. I asked for incidents across three months. There were more than 300 incidents related to temples, around 150 related to *gurdwaras* and some 100 incidents related to mosques. But the news was only about churches being attacked. And then right after the Delhi election was over, there was no news. Can you

afford to run this kind of campaign in a secular country? If there are incidents against churches, there are incidents against Hindus, also, like in Kashmir, in Assam, in Bengal and in Karnataka... it can happen anywhere. One incident doesn't make the incident a national one. As for FCRA, someone said it cost the BJP more than five per cent votes in Kerala. We are not doing anything for the sake of votes. A major amendment of the FCRA was done in 2010 by the UPA government. It was already in existence.

**Liz Mathew: But, you are doing it seven days ahead of the election.**

No. Implementation has continued. More than 20,000 FCRA cases were cancelled in the last 12 years... There were many cancellations but platforms are being provided. If the cancellation seems arbitrary or they have not been given enough

time to be heard, then that will violate the necessary course of justice. That will be looked into. But it is not targeted at anybody. This is not a law which is meant for any religious group. It is a law for everybody. The only thing is if a complaint is coming from the Christian community we will definitely address it, but the thing being said that the campaign is made only to target missionaries is wrong.

**Srirupa Goswami: Manipur is still burning. Why is it so difficult for the government to tackle this violence that has been going on for almost three years now?**

Unfortunately, Manipur has witnessed violent incidents numerous times in the past as well. The conflict between Nagas and Kukis has taken thousands of lives in the past. Any violence is unfortunate. In Manipur, they are used to being in a bunk hole for months. When BJP came to power, peace prevailed for six-seven years and the valley and hills were well connected. There was a dialogue, there was normal development taking place. Then unfortunately, violence erupted due to various reasons, largely because of mistrust between Meitei, Kukis and Nagas. As a country, we have to collectively come together, give up violence and come and sit and negotiate and learn to live with each other.

**Harikishan Sharma: The government proposed to increase seats of Lok Sabha from 543 to 816, roughly an increase of 272 seats. Can you give us an idea of the financial burden it will have on the government and the people? Secondly, if the government genuinely feels that women should be given reservation, what is stopping you from giving them reservation with the present number of seats?**

In almost 80 per cent of the states and union territories, MLAs have higher salary

than MPs. The burden will come to the state exchequer on the payment and other facilities for the elected members. India, as a growing country, will not have difficulties in carrying out this responsibility. Of course, smaller states will have a larger burden but for bigger states it would not be much of a matter because it will cost a few crores in terms of salaries. An MP draws only one lakh as salary. I don't get a salary as a minister so there's not much of a burden.

As for the total representation and why it is necessary, in places like Uttar Pradesh, an MLA represents nearly four lakh people which is equivalent to 20 MPs in Europe. If the elected representative is unable to cover the entire area or meet people, it is a deficiency which must be taken care of.

In fact, if you are concerned about democracy then you should be questioning why only 850.

**Tista Roy Chowdhury: What are your thoughts on the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) and the protests they have been organising?**

Anybody can create a political party. But don't undermine and ridicule Indian democracy. The CJP only poses a challenge to the Congress party. They need to worry.

**Vandita Mishra: The Congress has three state governments in the country and the Left has none. So why does it pose such a formidable challenge for the BJP in the 12th year of its power?**

The Congress and Left should understand that the people of India do not buy their argument or their leadership. Despite that they say that Modi is a failure and the BJP is a failure. They should stop running this campaign that the government has failed. People have accepted the government... They are powerful in paper and on social media but we are countering them.

**Liz Mathew: But does Opposition have a space in democracy?**

If they are rejected by the people, how are you to be blamed for that?

**Damini Nath: In the last many years, we've seen that though productivity is high during Parliament, the number of bills that go to committees and that are passed in a short duration is increasing. Is this a cause of concern and how would you address this?**

You are right in certain aspects. The numbers of bills passed in the last few years, of course, the numbers are not less but the amount of time given for discussion is less because from the beginning (of the session) the Congress party jumps into the Well of the House and starts shouting 'Your prime minister is a thief', they keep shouting slogans.

The bills are, therefore, becoming the victims of this. How are the bills to be referred to if discussions are not allowed? First of all, you have to allow debates and discussions. During that time, if necessary, you send or refer the bills to the Parliamentary standing committee or JPC. That has to be decided by the House. But the moment the House resumes it is adjourned again because MPs come with placards.

**Shalini Langer: You've said that they hold placards in front of the prime minister but the PM is rarely there in the House.**

For any important debate or discussion, the Prime Minister is always there. But he cannot sit in the House throughout. He has to run the affairs of the government. Even ministers have got a roster. I decide which minister should be present on which date in which House and at what time. These are all decided by the parliamentary affairs minister.

**Liz Mathew: The NDA government is entering its 13th year. When it comes to governance, what are your real concerns?**

Right now, it's the West Asia crisis. It is a reality that 40 per cent of our oil and gas comes through the Strait of Hormuz. The prime minister has already stated in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha that we have diversified our energy sources. We are taking all possible steps towards a transition to green and clean energy.

Because of the West Asia crisis, the government has had to bear a significant burden. The reduction of Rs 10 in excise duty has cost us more than Rs 1 lakh crore. India is among the few countries where the increase has been only around five per cent. Despite that, Opposition parties continue to raise an outcry. In a crisis like this, everyone should support the government. It has always been the tradition that when there is an external or internal crisis, people stand with the government.

**Liz Mathew: What about youth aspirations? We are seeing increasing disenchantment among young people. Doesn't that concern you?**

Youth aspirations have certainly gone up. Young people in India are more aware of their needs and rights. But alongside that, they also should be aware of their obligations and duties towards the country. Young people are the country's greatest asset and their participation is essential for India's growth.



### ON THE WEST ASIA CRISIS

*The government has had to bear a significant burden because of the crisis. The reduction of Rs 10 in excise duty has cost us more than one lakh crore. India is among the few countries where the increase has been around five per cent*

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## Fuller expression

### A rapid decline in inflation appears unlikely even if the war ends

India's May retail inflation at 3.93%, the highest in the current CPI series and roughly a 15-month high if compared with the previous series, has begun to reflect the pass-through effects of surging food and fuel costs more clearly than in previous months. However, last month's wholesale inflation numbers, the first under the new WPI series and due later this month alongside India's first Producer Price Index (PPI), should reveal how much of the price shock producers and wholesalers continue to absorb. May's food inflation rose at a faster clip to 4.78% from 4.20% in April. While transport inflation rose by 1.75% after a marginal contraction in April, a subdivision within the sector — transport services for goods — surged by 7.63%, signalling growing price pass-through. This was largely driven by the four tranches of petrol and diesel price increases beginning in mid-May. Significantly, the sharp rise in commercial LPG prices — by about ₹1,300 per 19-kg cylinder, representing an increase of over 75% since February — appears to be reflected in the restaurants and accommodation services category, which stood at 5.75%, the second-highest division after personal care and miscellaneous goods and services. Inflation in the latter category reached 18.46%, reflecting soaring precious metals prices. Domestic LPG's second price revision by ₹29 earlier this month will likely find a fuller expression in June's consumer food price inflation.

Although May's inflation remains below the RBI's 4% target and within its 2%-6% tolerance band, the RBI retained its neutral stance at its latest monetary policy review, signalling concern over the possibility of further price pressures. Its intervention in the foreign exchange market through dollar sales has meanwhile helped shore up the rupee, Asia's worst-performing currency since the U.S.-Israeli conflict with Iran escalated. The currency, which briefly approached ₹97 to the dollar in May, is now trading closer to ₹95-₹96. The Centre may nevertheless draw some comfort from the fact that core inflation, which excludes food and fuel, remained relatively contained at around 3.8%-3.9% in May, largely unchanged from recent months. This coincides with signs of a U.S.-Iran rapprochement and uninterrupted shipping through the Hormuz. Yet, uncertainty persists over whether Iran may impose fees or restrictions on transit through the waterway, which could keep fuel prices elevated for energy-importing nations such as India. Even if crude prices soften, oil marketing companies are unlikely to immediately reverse retail price increases as they seek to recover losses. LPG prices, too, may remain sticky. Thus, while the prospects for a durable peace may have improved, a rapid decline in inflation appears unlikely.

## Series of gaps

### Distrust of police has led to underreporting of child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse in India remains persistently under-reported and the state response to it has shown up treatment systemic inefficiencies in over 90% of cases, including the recent Sular case in Coimbatore in which a charge sheet was filed last week, the threat to a child is from within the family's trusted circles. Public imagination often fixates on predatory strangers, which is not conducive to helping families and communities identify a risk in time. Migrant and working-class communities are especially at risk as they are less integrated in local protective social networks. Second, abandoned industrial sites and poorly maintained common land tend to become crime scenes. But despite the 'Safe City' project and the recognition of child-friendly urban development paradigms, urban redevelopment still focuses on core areas of major metros. The social safety dimensions of urban wetland restoration, like that of the Noyal river, are often overlooked as well. Next, while POCSO trials are required to conclude within a year of the special court taking cognisance, POCSO courts face an 89% pendency rate and conviction rates have historically ranged between 3% and 30%, undermining confidence in the police and judiciary. The Sular case prompted promises of swift action, but this is only one case; systemic reforms to protect vulnerable children remain elusive. In 2024, the NCRB reported 69,191 POCSO cases involving more than 70,000 child victims.

Public distrust discourages residents from reporting suspicions and encourages families fearing police apathy to search for missing children themselves, potentially allowing the perpetrators to hide evidence or flee. Ultimately, when the state fails to deliver due punishment, the people perceive the police to be a bureaucratic hurdle, leaving children more vulnerable. Repeatedly strengthening penalties merely suppresses reporting in most cases where the offender is familiar. Even the 2018 and 2019 amendments to the POCSO Act reacted to public outrage rather than considered evidence and focused on harsher punishments. Both comprehensive longitudinal data on recidivism and analyses of whether harsher legal penalties are effective deterrents remain scarce. While data collection has improved, the Ministry of Women and Child Development has noted that qualitative analyses of acquittals rarely inform policy changes. Finally, survivors and families face secondary victimisation from insensitive administrative responses and media reports. Together with the lack of policing informed by trauma response and stigma, true safety continues to evade thousands of children leaving them vulnerable to a cycle of unreported and unpunished violence.

Today, June 15, marks the 84th anniversary of a historic meeting we have allowed ourselves to forget, which led to the birth of the Indian National Army (INA). I learned about it on a visit to the Thai-Bharat Cultural Lodge (TBCL) in Bangkok, discovering a remarkable, overlooked chapter of history that reveals Thailand's vital role as a neutral, strategic beacon for Indian revolutionaries seeking refuge from British colonial rule. From its humble beginnings as a hub for cultural and intellectual exchange, the organisation evolved into a cornerstone of the Indian independence movement, providing the essential infrastructure for the formation of the INA.

### From culture to cause

The roots of this alliance were sown in 1927 during a historic visit to Siam, now Thailand, by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, who met with King Prajadhipok (Rama VII). Their dialogue centred on the deep, enduring connections between India and Thailand — ancient ties rooted in religion, philosophy, and shared cultural narratives such as the Ramayana and the Thai Ramakien. Inspired by his vision, Prafulla Kumar Sen, a Bengali scholar who became known as Swami Satyananda Puri, arrived in Bangkok in 1932.

A brilliant intellectual who had taught at the University of Calcutta and Visva-Bharati University, the Swami immersed himself in the Thai language and culture, mastering it in six months and becoming an esteemed professor at Chulalongkorn University. In 1939, he established the Dharam Ashram, a sanctuary for spiritual and cultural exchange, which served as a focal point for the growing Indian diaspora in Bangkok.

In December 1940, this ashram was transformed into the TBCL. A defining moment in the organisation's history occurred shortly after, when the Indian Tricolour was hoisted at the Lodge — a bold, defiant gesture that signalled the arrival of the Indian independence movement in Thailand and drew strong protests from the British Ambassador. As the Second World War descended upon Southeast Asia, the TBCL shifted from a cultural institution to an active political base. By late 1941, as Japanese forces advanced, the Lodge became a nexus for Indian nationalists and independence activists.

One of the most instrumental figures in this era was Sardar Gani Pritam Singh, a Sikh missionary and Ghadar Party veteran who had been preaching revolutionary ideals among the Indian diaspora in Bangkok. Operating from garudaras and working closely with the TBCL, Pritam Singh established vital covert links with Major Iwachi Fujiwara, the chief of the Japanese intelligence



Shashi Tharoor

Fourth-term Member of Parliament, Congress party (Lok Sabha) for Thiruvananthapuram, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author of 29 books, including, most recently, 'The Sage Who Reimagined Hinduism: The Life, Lessons and Legacy of Sree Narayana Guru'

An enduring Thailand-India bond that played a pivotal role in India's independence movement

unit, F-Kikan. In December 1941, the Indian National Council (INC) was founded at the Silpakorn Theatre in Bangkok by a group of nationalists associated with the TBCL, with Swami Satyananda Puri as its president and Deb Nath Das as its secretary. This organisation played a crucial role in coordinating the efforts of the Indian independence movement, bridging the gap between civilian aspirations and the military mobilisation led by the Indian Independence League (IIL).

### Toward organised resistance

The cooperation between these groups culminated in the historic Bangkok Conference, which took place between June 15 and June 23, 1942, at the Silpakorn Theatre. This gathering represented a turning point in the struggle, bringing together more than a hundred representatives of Indian communities and freedom fighters from across Southeast Asia, including Burma, Malaya, and Singapore.

The conference served three primary functions. It brought together diverse nationalist factions under a coherent political and military framework, effectively establishing the IIL as the central body for Indians residing outside of India. It adopted a comprehensive 34-point resolution, which provided the official blueprint for the INA, stipulating that it would be composed of volunteers and former prisoners of war and supervised by the IIL rather than the Japanese military. The delegates urged Japan to formally recognise India as an independent nation and acknowledge the IIL as its sole legitimate representative, reflecting a strategic effort to ensure that the independence movement maintained its own agency despite its reliance on Japanese support.

The struggle began with a tragedy that shook the movement to its core. In March 1942, a plane carrying the Swami and the Sardar, who were en route to a high-level meeting in Tokyo to secure further commitments for the movement, crashed, resulting in their deaths. Their loss was a devastating blow, yet their sacrifice served to deepen the resolve of those who remained and who conferred in June with the Japanese to set up the INA. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's arrival in 1943 provided the centralised, charismatic, and revolutionary military leadership needed. He took command of the IIL and the INA, shifting the focus from decentralised regional council discussions toward a unified, disciplined military and political front designed to launch an armed struggle for Indian independence.

While the TBCL's roots were in intellectual and cultural exchange, Netaji's arrival accelerated the transition to a mass-mobilisation effort, drawing in thousands of civilian volunteers and former

prisoners of war who were inspired by his call for "Total Mobilization". Under Bose, the collaboration with the Japanese military was elevated to a high-stakes diplomatic partnership aimed at securing full recognition for the Provisional Government of Free India.

Despite the shift toward a more militarised and centralised command under Netaji, the TBCL continued to serve as a vital institutional bridge. It provided the necessary civilian and cultural cover for many activities that supported the broader independence movement. As the war progressed, the TBCL remained a steadfast centre for the Indian diaspora, even as the focus of the struggle moved to the front lines of the INA's march toward the Indian border. The Lodge maintained its role as a sanctuary for those committed to the ideals of independence, preserving the vision that had been articulated during the early days of Swami Satyananda Puri's tenure — that India's freedom was inextricably linked to the broader cause of Asian liberation from colonial rule.

### Keeping history alive

Following the conclusion of the war in 1945, the TBCL was banned by Allied forces and its leaders imprisoned. Even after the conclusion of the war and the dissolution of the INA, the legacy of this era persisted. Thanks to the tireless efforts of figures such as Pandit Raghunath Sharma, the Lodge was successfully re-established in 1946. The Lodge's survival serves as a testament to the fact that the political and military efforts of the Bose era were supported by the deep-rooted cultural and social networks fostered in the years prior. These networks allowed the movement to survive the vacuum of leadership following the war and continue to inform the historic relationship between India and Thailand.

Today, the TBCL remains the only surviving institution from this era, functioning as a living archive, housing a precious collection of rare texts, historical photographs, and documents that provide an intimate window into the lives of the Indian families who contributed to the fight for freedom.

During my visit I was treated to a passionate tour of the premises by Pandeyji, a descendant of Indian rajuroids who had migrated to Thailand three centuries ago. As he evoked the stories behind each grainy photograph and historic document, it became clear that the TBCL stands not just as a library or a museum, but as a monument to the enduring friendship between the people of Thailand and the Indian diaspora — a symbol of the shared courage and determination that defined one of the most critical, yet often forgotten, chapters of the global anti-colonial movement.

# The 'seven-point IQ opportunity' for Indian children

What if we could increase the IQ of India's future generations by seven points with a pivot in the understanding of early childhood development under the Anganwadi system?

For decades, India's early childhood agenda has focused on ensuring that children survive early childhood, reducing under-five mortality from 43 in 2012 to 32 in 2020 (UNICEF and World Bank data) with sufficient inputs invested toward their health, nutrition, immunisation and sanitation conditions. The Anganwadi system reflects these priorities at scale: approximately eight crore children (ages 0-6 years) receive supplementary nutrition, growth monitoring and health services, alongside counselling and home visits for their parents. However, body and brain development in the early years do not proceed on separate tracks.

Early childhood development is an ecological process in which nutrition, health, and early learning interact dynamically with each other through the body, brain, and environment. The developing brain is highly energy-intensive, consuming nearly one-fifth of the body's energy at rest. In the first year alone, grey matter volume increases by 149% and the cerebellum by 240% as millions of synapses form in regions associated with movement, language, and planning.

### Middle-income evidence is clear

Paediatric research in Jamaica in the 1980s provided hard academic evidence to an idea that many cultures already understood. Researchers working with stunted children found that nutritional supplementation improved physical health alone, but adding regular psychosocial stimulation (love-talk-play and responsive interaction) resulted in stronger cognitive gains.

Similar findings emerged in India from a birth cohort study in Vellore (250 children followed from birth to age 9) where children stunted early in life performed worst on later cognitive assessments, but those who recovered physically also showed better cognitive outcomes.



Beena Koshy

Senior Professor, Developmental Paediatrics, Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore, Tamil Nadu



Riday Chokshi

Senior Associate — National Initiatives and Policy, Rocket Learning

Anganwadis can help boost cognitive development through holistic early intervention

International research on enteric dysfunction and poor sanitation has shown that nutritional inputs are mediated by the child's environment. A child's body may receive food, but infection, inflammation, toxic exposure and deprivation of stimulation can adversely influence this very nutrition. In studies in Vellore, children with iron deficiency or high lead exposure in early life, score lower on developmental and cognitive assessments, even when their height and weight appear normal. It is not simply what children eat that matters, but whether their bodies can absorb and use it. Yet, numbers on a growth chart never tell the full story. The quality of the home environment — how much they are talked to, read to, played with and emotionally supported, keeps emerging as a stronger predictor of cognitive outcomes than diet alone.

Most encouragingly, exposure to structured preschool and early stimulation has the potential to transform a generation. Children in the Vellore cohort who attend preschool regularly for 18 to 24 months, including in Anganwadi centres, are scoring seven IQ units higher on cognitive tests than those not attending preschool, even after accounting for poverty, maternal education and early stunting. In a similar Brazilian birth cohort, children who received structured preschool had higher cognition scores by eight units at age five. This is powerful evidence that stimulation and nutrition have strong, independent effects and amplify each other when both are fulfilled.

### A role for Anganwadis

Indian policymakers are responding to new evidence quickly. The Anganwadi system has started to incorporate this broader understanding of holistic early childhood development into its core design. This shift is most visible in the rollout of national frameworks such as Aadharsila and Navchetana and programmes such as Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi. They are critical inputs in redefining neighbourhood Anganwadis as vibrant early childhood education centres that nourish both mind and body. Aadharsila

strengthens play-based preschool education within centres, while Navchetana extends early stimulation into the home, equipping caregivers with simple, science-based ways to support development through everyday interactions.

In clinical practice, we offer these frameworks to parents everyday, helping to turn routine moments into opportunities for learning. We encourage the integration of Navchetana's "loving, talking and playing" into daily life while feeding, cooking or playing with children. The home lays the foundation of early language, cognition and socio-emotional skills in the first three years, and Anganwadis deepen it through structured play-based activities, storytelling and peer learning from ages three to six.

Systemic community mobilisation initiatives, such as Poshan Pakhwada conducted in April 2026 by the Ministry of Women and Child Development focus on promoting early stimulation for brain development, play-based education in the early years, and the role of parents and communities in reducing screen exposure and strengthening engagement with Anganwadis. The campaign signals that early childhood development is not confined to centres or programmes, but depends on what happens within households and neighbourhoods.

### Building futures

An "ecological" approach uplifts families as much as it strengthens children. Reliable childcare gives mothers the time, the confidence and the opportunity to work, study or contribute economically. In Vellore, we have seen women trained as childcare workers gain both dignity and livelihood, creating a virtuous circle of care. When the kitchen, classroom and crèche align, children flourish, women work and communities thrive.

For a Viksit Bharat, progress cannot rest on calories alone. The physical and interactive learning and playing environments in homes, Anganwadis and communities must be as enriching as the meals they receive.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Safeguarding shipping

While the protection of maritime routes and the enforcement of sanctions are matters of international policy, the use of lethal force against merchant ships — especially those with documented connections to neutral nations — is a dangerous escalation. It is imperative that all parties prioritise

diplomatic channels over confrontation to ensure that the lives of merchant sailors are protected and that international maritime commerce is not treated as collateral damage in geopolitical disputes. **Ram Kumar Viswanathan**, Bengaluru

**Surface appearances**  
The 'Open Page' article,

"The demands of beauty" (June 14), made for realistic and engaging reading. Today, gyms and spas have become ubiquitous. Sadly, even fruits and vegetables are not spared in the pursuit of appearance. They may look attractive on the outside, but are often tasteless within, their natural fragrance diminished by the excessive

use of chemicals and pesticides, both harmful to health. In a world obsessed with appearances, physical beauty is frequently

prioritised over inner well-being. The finest cosmetics and make-up offer only temporary enhancement. Our ancestors lived in an era

when gyms, spas and beauty products were largely unknown. Yet, they were often healthier and, arguably, looked better than we do today. Nothing can truly replace the original. **Balasubramaniam Pavani**, Secunderabad

Letters emailed to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) must carry the postal address.

### Corrections & Clarifications

In the Data Point, "A World Cup like no other" (Opinion page, June 9, 2026), the photograph of Cristiano Ronaldo was used instead of Ronaldo Nazario.

The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28576347/28576300; E-mail: [readerseditor@thehindu.co.in](mailto:readerseditor@thehindu.co.in)

# Towards a fair, efficient insolvency regime

The outline of India's Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) has long been demarcated by the intransigent stiffness between the inevitability to preserve distraught companies and the necessity to safeguard the interests of creditors. This contradiction is often cited as the "Chakravarty Challenge"—a structural paradox by which the economy eases a company's entry into the system but forms formidable formal fences when it wishes to exit.

From the Sick Industrial Companies Act, which demonstrated a debtor-in-possession model and had been plagued by promoter misuse, to the creditor-in-control model of the IBC, the historical flight of such laws reflects an incessant effort to improve the balance. Though the IBC aimed at providing time-bound resolutions, it has fallen short due to protracted litigation and procedural lapses. In light of this, the 2026 Amendment to the IBC presents the Creditor-Initiated Insolvency Resolution Process (CIIRP), a hybrid apparatus attempting to espouse debtor-in-possession topographies with the creditor-in-control model. Nevertheless, the amendment's restrictive framework bounds initiation rights to only a fine class of financial creditors belonging to "notified financial institutions", thereby inviting constitutional contests and economic ineptitude.

**Swift yet stringent alternative**  
The CIIRP is a clever attempt to address financial crisis without the value-destroying disruption of typical liquidation proceedings by allowing the current management to maintain control over activities under the supervision of a resolution specialist. In order to reduce judicial intervention and procedural delays, the IBC established the CIIRP procedure by adding Sections 54C to 54P. Significantly, the change is a legislative response to the ruling in



**Vinay Juneja**  
Course Director, PG MBA and Assistant Professor (Law) at Maharashtra National Law University Mumbai



**Shweta Bhuyana**  
Research Assistant (Law) and PhD Scholar, Maharashtra National Law University Mumbai

**Vidarbha Industries.** The National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) was formerly given discretionary authority via the interpretation of "may" in Section 75(A), which permitted it to postpone or reject admission even in cases where debt and default were proven. This has now been replaced by the required "shall" via the 2026 amendment, thereby compelling the NCLT to accept cases based on information utility records. As a less disruptive restructuring instrument, the CIIRP is an appealing, if exclusive, resort for creditors because corporate debtors experiencing transitory liquidity crises suddenly lack the breathing room to fight initiation.

However, by limiting the ability to start the CIIRP only for "notified financial institutions," the Act creates an arbitrary hierarchy within the class of financial creditors. Although the distinction between financial and operational creditors was previously maintained in Swiss Ribbons via the "intelligible differentia" standard of Article 14, this sub-classification is essentially different. The government's argument that "notified" institutions have special knowledge is out of date; sophisticated investors with the ability to perform in-depth restructuring analysis can be found in today's financial markets. The Act runs the danger of being overturned as arbitrary since it does not explain why these excluded parties are less able to promote resolutions that maximise value.

Operational and smaller financial creditors are significantly disenfranchised under the current arrangement as they are already at the bottom of the repayment priority list. Smaller creditors may be forced to the sidelines of restructuring talks as a result of the CIIRP's propensity to concentrate bargaining power in the hands of notified institutions. It compels non-notified creditors to undertake the more aggressive and disruptive Corporate

Insolvency Resolution Process (CIRP) just to protect their financial interests. This compromises the equity of the entire insolvency ecosystem.

**The way ahead**  
The Indian method is mysteriously constrictive. The U.S.' Chapter 11 and the U.K.'s Part 26A restructuring plans base their access on objective financial conditions rather than the regulatory identity of the creditor. A wide range of stakeholders can participate in the restructuring process in both the U.S. and the U.K. as long as they meet certain requirements. India's choice to restrict initiation rights to a particular group of creditors is an anomaly that deters foreign investors from participating because they believe that the Indian market is intrinsically skewed against their asset classes. The law gives notified institutions procedural dominance, which makes Inter-Creditor Agreements less clear and informal negotiations less fair. If a lender who hasn't been notified is put on hold, they have to file for formal CIRP to protect their capital.

There must be a "universal CIIRP" with a "default-neutral initiation rule". This proposal does away with regulatory status and replaces it with a threshold based on financial exposure. Any financial creditor could start the process as long as they get the support of creditors holding at least 51% of the total financial debt. This takes care of constitutional issues while keeping a strong protection against one-sided, malicious filings.

By adding debtor-in-possession features, the 2026 amendment shows that the pure creditor-in-control model doesn't keep business value. But the "notified institution" criteria could hurt these gains. India can make an efficient insolvency system that benefits everyone by using a universal CIIRP model based on financial interest instead of institutional identity.

# Pawar struggles: parties in flux

Internal dissent, diminishing power, and leadership crises mar the two NCPs

## STATE OF PLAY

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit

Maharashtra

In Maharashtra, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) is at a crossroads. The party, which was formed by Sharad Pawar in 1999, has been a strong regional force, being in power for 20 of the 27 years of its existence, in alliance with parties across the ideological spectrum. Its split in 2023 led to a majority of the leaders and cadre turning to Ajit Pawar, who had joined hands with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He claimed ownership of the original party, which the top court eventually ratified. Sharad Pawar was thus left with only a fraction of the party's strength, and had to float a new party named the NCP-SP (Nationalist Congress Party-Sharadchandra Pawar). He now looks to his daughter Supriya Sule to lead the party, as a young and comparatively inexperienced grand-nephew, Rohit Pawar, tries to flex his muscles in Baramati and beyond. Away from power, the cadre and its leaders are in a state of disarray.

After the split in 2023, Ajit Pawar proved his mettle in the State in the 2024 elections, while Sharad Pawar's party dominated in the Lok Sabha polls. But the sudden demise of Ajit Pawar earlier this year dealt a heavy blow to both parties as their leaders admitted that talks of a merger were underway when Ajit Pawar was alive. Today, Ajit Pawar's NCP has been inherited by his politically inexperienced wife, Sunetra Pawar, who continues to be a part of the Mahayuti government led by the BJP. She is Maharashtra's first woman Deputy Chief Minister. A massive sympathy wave got her elected by a national re-

cord during her first Assembly election (by-polls) in April this year from Baramati; none of the major parties fielded any candidate against her. The Baramati constituency is considered to be a bastion of the Pawars, with Ajit Pawar being elected as its legislator for eight consecutive terms.

The possibility of a merger between the two NCPs has now faded, largely due to the interpersonal relations within the Pawar family. During his address on the foundation day last week, Sharad Pawar started his speech by taking a dig at his former party over their full-page advertisements in all the major newspapers.

## A new dynamic

In the NCP, the murmurs in the power corridors about Sunetra Pawar being highly influenced by her son, Parth Pawar, who is a political novice, cannot be ignored. Several complaints of his high-handed behaviour, rude nature, and efforts to sideline experienced leaders are being heard within the party. Party leaders also point to the undue influence of its alliance partner — the BJP. If the party continues to be handled this way, disruptions are likely to be seen by the 2029 elections, leaders opine. Meanwhile, Sunetra Pawar warned against "undue interference" in the party during her foundation day address.

The cadre is also unhappy with opportunities being doled out to "outsiders". Re-

cently, Parth Pawar's friend Vikram Kakade was given the Legislative Council seat from Pune, much to the opposition of the local leadership.

However, in the NCP-SP, there is no doubt as to who is in charge — Sharad Pawar. He is a beacon of hope for the disgruntled elements in the NCP. At the party's foundation day celebration in South Mumbai's YB Chavan auditorium, the octogenarian's large cut-outs were prominently displayed. Supriya Sule stayed away from the stage, and did not deliver an address. She did however wait for photo opportunities with the party workers after the event. Rohit Pawar, even though seated on the stage, spoke briefly and left immediately after the event to launch a protest. He appealed to party workers to struggle as an effective opposition, adding that the fruits of power enjoyed by the NCP were transient in nature. He glorified the value of struggle in Maharashtra's history, lauding those who had stayed with Sharad Pawar after the split.

Thereafter, Sharad Pawar went on to praise Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi in his speech, slamming Prime Minister Narendra Modi for comparing himself with Jawaharlal Nehru. This was significant given the consistent speculations about the likelihood of his party merging with the Congress.

Today, the family, which has chartered Maharashtra's electoral landscape for more than four decades, lacks robust leadership, and is also dealing with the raw political ambition of the younger generation which lacks political experience. This, even as their leaders accuse each other of further splits and mergers.

vinaya.deshpande@thehindu.co.in

# Making sense of the biggest IPO in history

SpaceX's grand entry has raised concerns over the relaxation of rules enabling wealth concentration in the hands of a few

## DATA POINT

Pon Vasanth B.A., Sambavi Parthasarathy, Nitika Francis

Technopreneur Elon Musk, who was already the planet's richest person, became the world's first trillionaire with his company SpaceX's stock market debut on June 12, 2026. The company saw the biggest-ever initial public offering (IPO) in history.

However, SpaceX's entry has also raised concerns over the company's valuation; the relaxation of rules that enables the company to enter indices like the Nasdaq-100; and the increasing concentration of wealth among a few. New York City's mayor Zohran Mamdani, in a cryptic reaction on X said, "Reason #1,000,000,000,000 why we should tax the rich".

SpaceX's market capitalisation, now estimated over \$2 trillion is less than the Gross Domestic Product of only 11 countries in the world, an indication of the unequal distribution of wealth (Chart 1). Additionally, Mr. Musk had merged his companies Starlink and xAI (which includes X) with SpaceX before he planned the IPO. As of Friday, SpaceX was the sixth largest company in terms of market capitalisation (Table 1). However, as the table shows, it is the only loss-making company in the list.

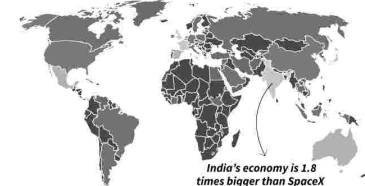
Among the three companies that are part of SpaceX, Starlink is the only company that has reported profits last year, leading many to express concerns that Mr. Musk has managed to sell the potential of his company, which includes building data centres, instead of its actual track record (Table 2).

If one were to place SpaceX's IPO in Indian terms, the initial offering of all the top 100 IPOs in India would not match the \$75 billion raised by the U.S. giant on Friday.

## Soaring disparity

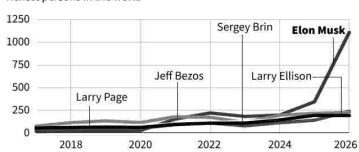
The data for the charts were sourced from Space Exploration Technologies Corp's Securities and Exchange Commission filings, Nasdaq, Renaissance Capital, World Bank, India Budget and Forbes

**CHART 1:** SpaceX's market capitalisation is greater than the GDP of 157 of the 168 countries analysed based on available World Bank data

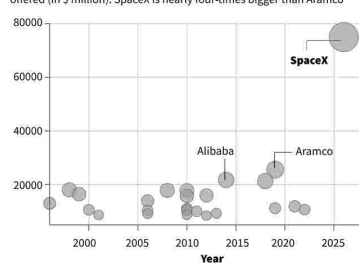


India's economy is 1.8 times bigger than SpaceX

**CHART 2:** The chart shows the net worth (in \$ million) of five of the most richest persons in the world



**CHART 3:** The 25 biggest-ever IPOs in history in terms of values of shares offered (in \$ million). SpaceX is nearly four-times bigger than Aramco



**CHART 4:** The 10 biggest IPOs from India in terms of the total value of shares offered (in ₹ crore). They do not add to even a tenth of the \$75 billion raised by SpaceX

Hyundai Motor India Limited	27,858.8
Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC)	20,557.2
One97 Communications	18,300
Vodafone Idea Ltd	18,000
Tata Capital Ltd	15,511.9
Coal India Ltd	15,199.4
Yes Bank Ltd	15,000
HDB Financial Services Limited	12,500
LG Electronics Ind...	11,607
Swiggy Limited	11,327.4

**TABLE 1:** The five biggest companies in terms of market capitalisation, their revenues, and income

Rank	Company	Market capitalisation (in \$ trillion)	Revenue in 2025 (in \$ billion)	Net income in 2025 (in \$ billion)
1	NVIDIA	4.96	215.93	120.06
2	Alphabet	4.35	402.83	132.17
3	Apple	4.27	416.16	112.01
4	Microsoft	2.90	281.72	101.83
5	Amazon	2.56	716.90	77.60
6	SpaceX	2.10	18.67	-4.94

**TABLE 2:** Starlink is the only company to have reported profits in the last year

Companies part of SpaceX	Revenue (in \$ billion)	Operating income (in \$ billion)
SpaceX	4.086	-0.657
Starlink	11.387	4.423
xAI	3.201	-6.355

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 15, 1976

## U.S. planning arms aid to Kenya, Zaire

Washington, June 14: The United States is on the verge of beginning a military aid programme for Kenya and Zaire under which those two nations would become the first African countries below the Sahara (besides Angola) to receive weapons and military training from the U.S.

Reports reaching here from Brussels said the U.S. Defence Secretary, Mr. Donald Rumsfeld, who was attending meetings at the NATO headquarters was now en route to Nairobi and Kinshasa, to discuss with African leaders there, their military equipment needs.

The Rumsfeld trip to Africa, which comes not long after the Secretary of State, Dr. Kissinger's own visit to that continent, apparently has more or less the same purpose — prevent African nations from going the Angola way into the Soviet orbit of influence.

But while Dr. Kissinger sought to do this by diplomatic means and by promising moral and economic support to the Africans' struggle against white oppression in such places as Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa, Mr. Rumsfeld apparently is trying to achieve the same thing by promising American military aid to selected African countries which perceive a need for them as security against neighbours who have Soviet connections.

There is a Soviet presence in Somalia which is Kenya's north-eastern neighbour. Zaire borders Angola, whose leaders have not forgotten that Zaire backed the pro-Western rebels during the recent civil war. While Zaire is said to be seeking American anti-tank weapons for ground defence, Kenya is said to be interested in U.S. fighter aircraft.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 15, 1926

## A new lightship

Rangoon, June 14: A new lightship known as "China Bakir" lightship is to be stationed at the mouth of the Rangoon river is being erected by the Port Commissioners. The vessel which has a candle power of 50,000 is reported to be unique of its kind in the East in respect of up to date arrangements and labour saving devices. Special care has been taken to make the ship's light visible under the most favourable circumstances. The vessel is expected to be completed within the next three months.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

**NEWS IN NUMBERS**

**South Lebanon villages issued evacuation order**

**29** The Israeli military on Sunday issued evacuation warnings for residents of 29 villages in southern Lebanon ahead of planned strikes. The military's Arabic-language spokesman, Colonel Avichay Adraee, issued two successive warnings — first for 13 villages, then for 16 more, with the second targeting communities north of the Zaharani river. AP

**Number of years since last Maharashtra Road Safety Council meet**

**3** Maharashtra has not convened its statutory State Road Safety Council meeting in over three years, despite reporting over one lakh accidents and more than 50,000 deaths during the period, as per officials. The last meeting was held on April 4, 2023. Since then, over 38 months have passed without a single meeting, even though the rules mandate that it meet at least once in six months. PTI

**Wells mobilised to aid local residents in Maharashtra**

**151** The Latur district administration has deployed three tankers and acquired 151 wells to supply water to residents facing scarcity during the peak summer here in Maharashtra, officials said on Sunday. A private and two government-operated tankers have been making six trips daily to supply water to the affected areas. PTI

**Worth of Baghdad airport project cancelled by Iraq**

**764** in \$ million. Iraqi PM Ali al-Zaidi has decided to cancel the Baghdad International Airport development project after corruption suspicions were raised, Iraqi state media reported. The project involves a \$764 million contract awarded to a consortium of Luxembourg-based Corporation America Airports and Iraqi real estate firm Amwaj International. REUTERS

**Offenders arrested in law enforcement actions in T.N.**

**1,238** Addressing reporters after inspecting the preparatory work for the government exhibition here, Tamil Nadu Minister for School Education and Tamil Development Rajmohan on Sunday revealed that recent law enforcement actions have led to the arrest of 1,238 offenders in the State. PTI

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## Can India protect its seafarers in Gulf?

How many Indian seafarers are working in the Gulf region? What happened to the three vessels attacked by the U.S. Navy? What sanctions were imposed on some ships? Does the foreign-flag status of the vessels limit India's options? Do international maritime laws protect civilian crews?

**EXPLAINER**

M. Kalyanaraman

**The story so far:**

**I**n June 12, after India summoned a U.S. Embassy representative Jason Meeeks and lodged its "strong protest" against U.S. missile attacks on merchant vessels carrying Indian crew members, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio told External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar that violations of the American blockade and "illicit transport of Iranian oil" would not be tolerated. Recalling his discussion with Mr. Rubio, Mr. Jaishankar posted on X: "I reiterated India's strong protest at the attacks by the U.S. Navy in the Gulf that killed three Indian mariners. Such lethal actions against commercial shipping are not justified."

**How many Indians are working on merchant vessels globally?**

There are an estimated 3.5 lakh Indian seafarers manning ships across the world. The Indian government estimates that more than half of them are in active service, mostly in foreign-flagged ships.

This means one in every six seafarers serving on large merchant ships worldwide is Indian. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) estimates that some 20,000 seafarers of all nationalities are stranded on ships in the Persian Gulf region. The DG Shipping of India estimated at the start of the crisis that some 23,000 Indian seafarers are serving in the broader Gulf region in various capacities and facilities, with the UAE accounting for more than half.

**What happened to the three vessels targeted by the U.S.?**

On June 8, 10, and 11, the U.S. Navy fired precision munitions — Hellfire missiles — on merchant vessels *Marivex*, *Settebello*, and *Jalveer*. The three were tankers carrying Indian crew. While no one was hurt in the case of *Marivex* and *Jalveer*, three Indian seafarers — one chief engineer, one engine fitter, and one deck cadet — died onboard *Settebello*. While *Marivex* was attacked off the coast of Duqm, some 400 nautical miles from the Strait of Hormuz, the others were attacked off the coast of Shinas in Oman, which is closer to the Strait.

Videos put out by the United States Central Command (Centcom) show the engine rooms of the ships being hit as well as the steering compartments. These attacks damaged the vessels above the waterline, so water didn't rush in to sink them. But their ability to move and manoeuvre on their own was lost.

In its press releases, the U.S. Centcom has said the crew of *Settebello* and *Marivex* refused to comply with instructions and all of them violated the blockade by attempting to transport Iranian oil. *Marivex* attempted to sail to an Iranian port, it claimed.

While the *Marivex* crew is reported to have informed seafarers' unions that their ship was at anchor while attacked, *Settebello's* manager, IOS Marine FZE, a firm registered in Ajman, has flatly contradicted the U.S. The company has said *Settebello* was stationary for nearly 10 days in the region. It said the ship had no communication from the U.S. Navy and had no connection with Iranian oil or ports.

**What sanctions were imposed on these ships?**  
*Marivex* was sanctioned by the U.S. in



The Palau-flagged tanker *MT Settebello*, carrying 24 Indian seafarers, was attacked by U.S. forces off the coast of Oman near the Strait of Hormuz. Three Indian crew members were killed in the strike. ANI



Kamalwati Devi, mother of one of three Indian seafarers killed aboard the tanker *MT Settebello*, mourns at her home in Deoria, Uttar Pradesh, on June 12. REUTERS

December 2025 for Iranian connections. *Settebello* had been flagged by a U.S. non-profit advocacy organisation, United Against Nuclear Iran, for alleged Iranian links. U.S. sanctions are not binding on any other country besides the U.S., although the U.S. Treasury Department's sanctions make it difficult for the companies associated with the concerned ship to access the financial system and other business transactions. Quite often, sanctioned ships lose insurance cover, without which ports will not accept calls by the ships, and charterers will refuse to handle cargo through them.

There have been reports of non-compliance of these ships with some maritime regulations. Typically, such violations, not uncommon in merchant shipping, relate to safety aspects. And ships are typically given time to remedy them before the consequences of losing insurance cover can kick in.

**Does the foreign-flag status of the vessels limit India's options?**  
They all carried foreign flags of convenience (FOCs) but had deep Indian links, including in ownership and management. In merchant shipping, ships are often registered in little-known nations with no infrastructure to rigorously supervise and monitor ships. Popular FOCs include Panama, Marshall

Islands, Liberia, and Guinea-Bissau. Such FOCs are also popular among ships transporting Russian and Iranian oil.

Yes, technically, an Indian flagged ship will provide legal sanction for possible action. The U.S., during the Iran-Iraq war, ordered many ships to change their flag to the U.S. so it could legally escort the ships in and out of the Strait of Hormuz. But the Indian Navy has acted against Houthis and Somali pirates to help Indian seafarers onboard foreign-flagged ships.

Further, *Marivex* and *Jalveer* were often serving Indian ports, facilitating India's enormous oil needs. Soon after the ceasefire was announced in early April, *Marivex* headed out of the Strait of Hormuz to call on Mangalore. *Jalveer* is a bitumen carrier — a special type of ship that carries tar-bitumen, popular in laying Indian roads.

**Were other options available for the U.S.?**

In the last week of April, the U.S. Navy boarded *Tijani*, a sanctioned very large crude carrier in the Indian Ocean past Sri Lanka. The ship had an Indian crew.

This week, U.K. forces boarded *Smyrto* on the English Channel for its alleged links to drug cartels, Russian oil, and so on.

Merchant ships are defenceless. Typically, merchant ships have wireless

channels open for communication with nearby vessels and any instructions from governments and Navies and Coast Guard vessels are immediately complied with. Seafarers are trained to protect crew, cargo and the ship.

Somalian pirates coming in small craft and carrying firearms could easily board and seize massive oil tankers. The only evasive action ships have against attackers is a high-pressure water jet they can direct at them.

**What can India do to protect Indian seafarers in the region?**

India did launch Operation Sankalp to protect merchant ships against Houthi attacks. Indian Navy and Coast Guard intervened to protect four merchant ships in 2024. India did take action against Somali pirates. But the belligerents in the Persian Gulf are the U.S. and Iran. Therefore, India's options are rather limited.

**Does international maritime law adequately protect civilian crews?**

The nodal agency for regulating global shipping is the IMO, a United Nations agency. Though the IMO has the means to regulate the technical, commercial, environmental and safety aspects of global shipping through consensus and rulemaking, it has often fallen short in protecting ships and seafarers. Quite often, national governments take unilateral action, and typical of an UN agency, the IMO has been unable to act to prevent or take remedial action.

The law governing the oceans is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Its acts and mandates are extensive and are an outcome of decades of negotiations and consensus-building. UNCLOS is thorough and considers various situations, including transits across straits such as the Hormuz. But many nations have not signed on to it. The U.S. refused to sign it on the grounds that UNCLOS considers the deep seabed as the commons. Iran has signed the convention but has not ratified it. There really is no overarching body for enforcement. Things are often left to the good sense of governments.

**THE GIST**

India has protested U.S. missile attacks on three merchant vessels carrying Indian crew in the Gulf, in which three Indian seafarers aboard *Settebello* were killed.

The U.S. says the vessels violated its blockade and were involved in transporting Iranian oil, but ship operators have disputed these claims and said some of the vessels were stationary when attacked.

With about 23,000 Indian seafarers in the Gulf region, India has limited options because the vessels were foreign-flagged, while international maritime bodies and laws have limited enforcement powers in such situations.

CACHE



The success of Amazon, the largest e-commerce retailer in the world, can be credited at least in part to drop shipping practices. REUTERS

# What is drop shipping, and what are the risks for online shoppers?

Drop shipping allows online individuals or agents who do not hold any products to take customer orders and pass them on to other makers or sellers, inserting themselves into the transaction as middlemen; while legal in most jurisdictions, the practice can expose customers to several risks

Sahana Venugopal

While scrolling through Instagram Reels, you naturally pause when an attractive product catches your eye: a sleek laptop bag for travel, a cheap set of popular novels, an ultra-fast wireless charger on sale, beautifully embroidered linen shirts, or leather-bound notebooks with custom gold foil inscriptions. Before you know it, you are entering your credit card number or UPI PIN.

Caught up in your shopping spree, you may not have checked the true origin of the product or other customers' reviews of the seller. What's more, you may not even realise that the "company" you paid is just a decorated webpage created with AI and owned by a person who does not hold a single product.

This is the economy of drop shipping: the business practice that allows almost anyone with an internet connection to sell products that come from others.

Here is what you should know as a customer.

### What is drop shipping?

This is a business practice where an online individual or agent — who does not hold any product — takes orders from customers and passes them on to another maker/seller who actually holds the product. The product is then delivered to the customers, either by the original maker/seller or a third-party delivery service. To put it simply, the drop shipper inserts itself into the transaction as a middleman. One or even multiple drop shippers might stand between buyers and the original makers of the product they want.

The success of Amazon, the largest e-commerce retailer in the world, can be credited at least in part to drop shipping practices. In its earliest days, Amazon did not commandeer giant international warehouses packed with products; rather,

the company was a web-based middleman that fulfilled many customers' orders by sourcing the books they wanted.

Though Amazon's product delivery model has drastically evolved, the company allows drop shipping to take place via its platform. Other channels, such as Shopify, also enable drop shipping and help users manage the logistics. Alternatively, drop shipping might take place through channels such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and lesser-known websites.

In essence, if you have ever bought any product online, there's a chance that you placed your order through a drop shipper rather than the original seller.

### How does drop shipping work?

Drop shippers can work with both domestic and international manufacturers and customers. Some try to fill an existing gap in their local market (such as affordable school textbooks), some capitalise on market trends (such as the popularity of iPhone cases), and others build hype around rarer products (such as foreign luxury fashion). Most importantly, the drop shipper does not need to buy or store any of the products they are selling.

Drop shipping has become a popular source of income for both public-facing Instagram creators monetising their virality as well as private marketers looking for discreet revenue streams. What's more, with AI automating many customer services and harvesting business insights, drop shipping feels like something that almost anyone with an internet connection can try out.

In addition to promoting products and setting up online storefronts, drop shippers may also buy/sell courses that reveal current market trends, customer interests, trusted wholesalers, and useful AI tools, in order to generate further profits.

Drop shipping might look illogical at

first, but it is in vogue for a number of reasons.

Buyers trying to independently source foreign products from a wholesaler might be forced to order more than they need, or contend with complicated customs regulations and fees. They also may not know if the original seller is legitimate, or as might be unable to communicate with them due to a language barrier.

However, placing orders through a vetted drop shipper with a user-friendly web page eases some of these worries. What's more, legitimate drop shippers regularly carry out quality assurance tests of their own, and should ideally become a customer support layer of sorts in order to resolve any complaints.

### Is drop shipping legal?

Drop shipping is legal in most jurisdictions, as long as the participants involved ensure transparency and comply with their region's tax laws.

Instagram's commerce eligibility requirements state that the users' Facebook Pages or Instagram professional accounts must contain product listings that are available for direct purchase from the user's website. In case buyers are being directed to another website, the user must provide the domain through which they sell, and their channels must represent the shop associated with the domain.

But now that it is possible to create entire storefronts and e-commerce websites in minutes with just some cheap domains and a few AI coding prompts, Instagram drop shippers can easily present themselves as original sellers and offload customer orders to other sellers. Videos of workers sorting through wrapped packages, or Reels of founders happily holding up stacks of paper that they claim are customer orders, can mislead social media shoppers into thinking they are dealing directly with a trusted seller.

Ultimately, the line separating

influencers, marketers, and sellers can blur quickly on social media. Some drop shippers also ask customers to contact them via WhatsApp, to take their communication off the app. Buyers may not know where their products are actually coming from or how their data privacy rights are being eroded. And as supply chain transparency is lost, drop shipping operations can quickly slide into a legal grey area or end up in criminal violations.

Some risks include scams targeting customers, as well as scams targeting drop shippers. Original sellers and drop shippers may both inflate product prices.

Drop shippers might also work with wholesalers sending out defective/rejected products. Furthermore, drop shippers may unknowingly promote pirated/counterfeit products. Hyper-realistic AI product images can mislead both customers and casual drop shippers.

Meanwhile, delivery timelines can be long — if the product even arrives at all. The drop shipper may not be required to take responsibility for any safety or hygiene standards that have to be maintained while shipping the products.

Adding to this, multiple drop shipping layers in different countries can inadvertently lead to sanctions violations. In case of complaints, cancellations, or refund requests, customers may have no choice except to cut their losses and move on.

Other dangers include pyramid schemes to recruit more drop shippers, or even cyber-crimes via phishing and hacks, as the customers' payment information is shared with multiple parties without their informed consent.

So, the next time you spot a book influencer on Instagram promoting a handy new reading light, or stumble across an excited founder surrounded by sacks of customer orders, take a few minutes to do your research and find out who is really selling you the product.



### KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

## The company is trying not to go under

Some people think he has nothing between the ears

S. Upendran

"What are you doing here? I thought you were taking two weeks off, and going to..."  
"Got a call from my sister a couple of days ago. Her company isn't doing too well, and..."

"According to most newspaper reports, the company your sister works for is going under."

"Does it mean it's sinking?"

"Exactly! The company is being compared to a sinking ship."

"I read somewhere that when the Titanic hit the iceberg, the ship went under very quickly."

"When you use 'went under' with a company, it means that it's going bankrupt. It's like a sinking ship."

"In other words, it's a company that's failing."

"Yes! Here's an example. During the epidemic, several businesses went under."

"When one company goes under, there's usually a chain reaction."

"That's true. If the bank doesn't give us a loan, the project is likely to go under."

"That's the good news! The company that my sister works for is likely to get a substantial loan from the bank."

"That should keep the company afloat for a while. Is your sister worried about the downsizing that is likely to happen?"

"What are you talking about? Are you talking about people getting fired?"

"Companies don't use the term 'fire' anymore. They 'lay off' people or they talk about 'downsizing' the company. In other words, they reduce the number of people working."

"In other words, you downsize by firing some of your workers."

"That's right! People lose their jobs. But downsizing sounds better, that's all! It's the politically correct term. The CEO told the Managers that they should find ways to downsize the workforce by 20%."

"I don't think there'll be any downsizing in my sister's company."

"It's bound to happen. In everyday contexts, downsize is used to mean to move into a smaller accommodation. After retirement, my aunt and uncle downsized and moved into a small flat."

"That's what my mother wants to do. But my father doesn't believe in downsizing."

"It's probably because they aren't involved in the running of the house."

"I know what you mean. The good news is the company that my sister is working for is replacing the CEO."

"Any idea who the replacement is?"

"It's your friend Ramesh's cousin - Jagdeep. Know him?"

"No. I hope he's nothing like Ramesh."

"Why not? Ramesh is a nice guy."

"I agree. The problem is, he has nothing between his ears."

"What are you talking about?"

"The expression is mostly used in informal contexts to talk about one's intelligence."

"I see. So, when you say that someone has nothing between the ears, what you mean is that he's not bright."

"No real common sense. Why would you go to someone like Jyothi for advice?"

"The girl has nothing between the ears."

"I find it difficult to have a conversation with my neighbour. The guy has nothing between the ears."

"But he has a lot of money. That's good enough."

upendrankye@gmail.com

## THE DAILY QUIZ

Marking the birth anniversary of Mona Lisa, this quiz explores art, history, symbolism, and enduring mysteries surrounding Leonardo da Vinci's most famous portrait

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

Prathmesh Kher

**QUESTION 1**  
Who is widely believed to be the woman depicted in the Mona Lisa?

**QUESTION 2**  
Around what year is Leonardo da Vinci believed to have begun painting the Mona Lisa?

**QUESTION 3**  
What is the approximate size of the Mona Lisa?

**QUESTION 4**  
Which artistic

technique, heavily employed in the Mona Lisa, creates the painting's characteristic soft transitions between light and shadow?

**QUESTION 5**  
Which French king acquired the Mona Lisa for the royal collection?

**QUESTION 6**  
What major event in 1911 dramatically increased the painting's worldwide fame?



**Visual Question:** Which Italian Renaissance master executed this sketch of a young woman before a landscape, believed to have been directly influenced by Leonardo's Mona Lisa?

PUBLIC DOMAIN

**Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:** 1. Which Goalkeeper holds the record for most consecutive clean sheets, as well as most consecutive minutes without conceding a goal in World Cup history? **Ans: Walter Zenga, Italy. 5 matches / 517 minutes during the 1990 edition** 2. Which Manager holds the record of having won the most tournaments in World Cup history? **Ans: Vittorio Pozzo, Italy - 1934 & 1938** 3. Who is the only player to have won 4 medals in the World Cup history? **Ans: Miroslav Klose, Germany - 4 (Silver in 2002, Bronze in 2006 & 2010 & Gold in**

**2014)** 4. Which player has the distinction of having scored at least one goal in all five tournaments that he played? **Ans: Cristiano Ronaldo, Portugal** 5. Which was the first World Cup to be held outside Europe and the Americas, and who hosted it? **Ans: 1970 with Mexico as host** Visual: Identify the player and what is the unique record that he possesses in World Cup history? **Ans: Gabriel Batistuta, Argentina, the only player to have scored a hat-trick in two consecutive World Cups - 1994 & 1998 both on June 21 of that year.**

No one got all the answers correct

## Word of the day

**Humdinger:**  
Someone or something remarkable

**Synonyms:** wonder, marvel, phenomenon

**Usage:** The film's ending was a humdinger.

**Pronunciation:** newsth.live/humdinger

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /hʌmdɪŋɡə/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) with the subject 'Text & Context'

## Hanging in balance

Capital flows may just edge up to offset higher CAD

**I**ndia's current account surplus of \$7.1 billion in Q4 of FY26 comes as a pleasant surprise — given the spike in crude oil prices. While the current account balance has been favourable in Q4 over the last four years, it is notable that the Q4 surplus was recorded in difficult times. Both US tariffs and the Iran war (which began in February) were factors. The surplus came about, thanks to an increase in services exports — led by computer and other business services — and, rather surprisingly, strong overseas remittances.



However, FY26 as a whole recorded a marginally higher current account deficit (CAD) of \$25.2 billion, or 0.6 per cent of GDP (\$23.3 billion in FY25). This increase was largely on account of the expansion in goods trade deficit by \$51 billion. While US tariffs and their effects contributed to a higher goods trade deficit in FY26, rising oil prices have made matters worse this fiscal. Analysts have estimated the CAD for FY27 to be above 2 per cent of GDP. This looks plausible for various reasons. First, higher energy prices will lead to a spike in the oil import bill, unless the war ends in West Asia soon. Second, the CAD also depends on the extent to which remittances can offset a higher goods trade deficit. Finally, it is to be hoped that the newly minted FTAs, such as those with the EU and UK, do not result in higher net imports. Ordinarily, a CAD of above 2 per cent of GDP is not threatening. India has financed higher CADs with capital flows. However, the problem is that FPI equity outflows, at above ₹2.5 lakh crore so far in 2026, have overshoot ₹1.6 lakh crore for all of 2025.

Debt flows, too, have been negative. Net NRI deposit inflows in FY26 were down 11 per cent at \$14.4 billion. Similarly, external commercial borrowings had also ebbed 23 per cent to \$14.2 billion. The recent monetary policy announced a US dollar-rupee swap facility to banks on fresh FCNR(B) deposits of three-to-five year maturity. The central bank has also agreed to take on the hedging costs on these deposits. With most banks hiking the rates offered on FCNR(B) deposits by 200 to 400 basis points, the hope is that inflows from this route could improve. A similar swap facility is also being offered to public sector undertakings to raise ECBs from overseas. With borrowing rates likely to be lower due to the swap arrangements, PSUs could raise more ECBs until December. Equity outflows are driven by global factors. The RBI and Centre have, therefore, rightly targeted FPIs investing in debt. FPI inflows into Indian debt through the fully accessible route has been positive in 2025 and 2026, indicating demand from global bond funds. The removal of capital gains tax on G-Secs as well as exemption of income tax on interest earnings on these bonds will help. Passive inflows through global emerging market funds can improve going ahead. FY27 may yet turn out to be a reasonably normal year on the external account front.

### OTHER VOICES.

## The Guardian

Words do not stop when the bombing begins

Last week, thousands of readers gathered for a literary festival in Kyiv, risking air raids to hear from writers. Four brutal years of war have not destroyed the appetite for writing, but fuelled it. Russia's extensive and systematic attempts to destroy Ukrainian culture, and therefore identity, have rightly received widespread attention. Over 700 libraries were damaged or destroyed outright within the first three years of the full-scale invasion. But that campaign has also spurred efforts to move away from Russian literature and the Russian-language titles that previously dominated the market. Ukrainian literature and publishing has flourished far beyond the powerful documentary accounts of war often awarded attention outside the country, with growing room for experimentation. (LONDON, JUNE 12)



Japanese businesses should speak out to the Takaichi gov't

The Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in China (JCCIC) has released the White Paper on the Chinese Economy and Japanese Enterprises. The paper acknowledges that China provides "significant market opportunities" for foreign companies while also recognizing various concerns regarding trends in China-Japan relations. It outlines three hopes: political and diplomatic issues between the two countries will not be allowed to spill over into corporate activities or cultural activities; high-level dialogue and exchanges between the governments of both countries will be held regularly and reliably, regardless of international and political circumstances; the Chinese government and relevant authorities maintain and strengthen dialogue with Japanese companies under all circumstances. (BEIJING, JUNE 13)

LINE & LENGTH.  
TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

**E**veryone thinks there is only one gorilla in the room, namely, AI. Actually there are two. The second is the absence of policy instruments to tackle the massive unemployment that awaits societies because of AI. But while everyone is hyperventilating over AI, there is pin drop silence over the absence of options before governments.

Meanwhile, the companies that stand to benefit from a widespread use of AI are peddling all sorts of justifications. The most intellectually grounded of these is the Jevons Paradox.

William Stanley Jevons was a 19th century British economist who said that the invention of the steam engine, which used coal more efficiently, would result in higher coal production and consumption, not less. That is, less coal per steam engine would lead to more engines being bought.

Microsoft's Satya Nadella might not have heard of Jevons until recently but he used the paradox to say that AI would have a similar impact and that unemployment would not increase. Instead, it would increase. Others are recalling Joseph Schumpeter who said this sort of thing was inherent to capitalism and that it was good.

This may well happen, eventually, even though the IT boom of the 2000s didn't lead to any great and permanent increases in productivity that later led to greater employment. There are several studies that show this.

Not always, even though the past need not be an infallible guide to the future, we do need to ask: even if AI increases the efficiency of capital-use and that gives better returns to shareholders, what will it do to, and for, labour, especially in the medium term? If 10 programmers are replaced by one AI application, the cost saving will increase the dividends to shareholders by some amount but what of the 10 people who are now wondering how to pay their bills?

### BYE BYE, MAYNARD

John Maynard Keynes, the most influential macroeconomist to have lived after Kautliya, said governments must spend money even if they didn't have it to create demand that would, in

# Will employment rise in age of AI?

The IT boom of the 2000s didn't lead to any great and permanent increases in productivity that later led to greater employment



turn, create employment. But country after country gradually has forgotten that Keynes had a very specific situation in mind, namely, that of reviving deficient aggregate demand to utilise installed capacity.

As a result of this amnesia, led by the Left which has co-opted the religious right, the Keynesian solution for reviving demand has gradually turned into massive welfare spending. This is not something that Keynes ever intended, although he is believed to have said that money should be put in people's pockets even if it was just for digging holes in the ground.

To cut a long story short, because of

**If 10 programmers are replaced by one AI application, the cost saving will increase the dividends to shareholders but what of the 10 people who are now wondering how to pay their bills?**

this self-serving use of Keynes by politicians, we now have unsustainable levels of government debt in far too many countries. Debt now looms menacingly over the world.

Before 1968, government debt and unemployment were not linked. Now they are. For a while higher government debt did bring down unemployment. But not anymore. The goose that laid the golden egg for politicians has died.

The IMF has therefore been getting horror nightmares. It is muddling away that there is no paddle to row out of this creek. But as I said above, no government is paying a blind bit of attention to its grumbling.

Finance ministers may occasionally warn the heads of their governments that their goose will be cooked but it's not having much effect. Deficit financing to win some political advantage over rivals remains very much the go-to solution.

### NO MONEY LEFT

The most devastating example of this came after the Atlantic financial crises of 2008 (as Rakesh Mohan, former deputy governor of the RBI, rightly calls it).

Globally, governments have spent a few trillion dollars that they didn't have in the name of social security and welfare.

Now even that option has vanished because it's not going to help. It has become like firing blanks in the air: there's a lot of noise and smoke but the problem doesn't go away.

The world has over eight billion people now. Around half of them are of working age. But barely over a quarter of those four billion are employed on a full-time basis. The rest are self-employed earning basically subsistence wages.

Even without AI we are talking of at least two billion people who need income and other forms of support. This is Karl Marx's "reserve army of the unemployed". They constitute not only an economic challenge but a social and political one as well. In India, this situation will worsen quickly as we have already fallen below the population replacement rate. That is, India will almost certainly grow old before it gets rich.

To meet these challenges a lot of money is needed. Money that's no longer available to governments.

# India's ethanol push requires a relook

Higher ethanol blending targets will intensify water stress, without achieving energy security or a reduction in imports

Ritesh Kumar Singh

**T**he logic behind India's ethanol push appears compelling: blending more ethanol with petrol will help cut crude oil imports, ease pressure on the current account by conserving foreign exchange, support the rupee and raise farm incomes.

At a time when India imports the bulk of its crude oil requirements and external balances remain sensitive to oil prices, the argument has found wide acceptance. But the economics increasingly suggest otherwise.

The ethanol push now appears to have more to do with absorbing excess production capacity than reducing India's import dependence. The challenge has shifted from building supply to finding demand.

India requires 10-11 billion litres of ethanol to meet E20 blending norms. Yet production capacity had already approached 20 billion litres (<https://tinyurl.com/2s3c6uza>) by November 2025 and may expand by a further 15 per cent in FY 2026-27 as new distillation projects come on stream. Put differently, the current blending target absorbs barely half of installed capacity. The issue therefore is no longer about producing more ethanol; it is about finding demand for capacity already built.

The rapid expansion of ethanol capacity was not accidental but actively supported through government-backed soft loans and interest subvention running into thousands of crores. The ethanol programme may have catalysed

investments exceeding ₹40,000 crore. Once investments of that scale are committed, utilisation becomes central to financial viability. Idle capacity compresses returns, raises fixed costs and increases the risk of stranded investments.

To address recurring sugar surpluses, cane-based distilleries were encouraged. As sugar availability tightened, policy support gradually shifted towards grain-based distilleries, including incentives through relatively higher prices for ethanol produced from maize. Ethanol created an additional revenue stream protected through administered pricing, unlike sugar, where prices are largely influenced by supply conditions.

In many ways, the current excess capacity reflects the cumulative effect of these policy shifts and incentives. Higher blending targets are no longer only an energy-security tool but are needed to absorb surplus capacity.

Substituting petrol with domestically produced ethanol does lower oil demand. But the import story becomes more complicated when the full production chain is considered.

Producing ethanol at scale requires larger volumes of sugarcane, maize and rice. Expanding these crops raises demand for fertilizers such as urea, DAP and potash which require imported inputs such as natural gas.

Greater policy support for ethanol feedstocks may also reshape cropping patterns, drawing acreage towards sugarcane, maize and rice and away from cereals or pulses — segments where India already relies heavily on imports. In that sense, ethanol may reduce



WATER USAGE. A major issue

crude oil imports without proportionately reducing external dependence. The dependence simply shifts. Lower oil imports could partly be offset by higher requirements for fertilizers, natural gas and edible oil imports, while consumers also experience lower mileage because of ethanol's lower energy density.

### ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS

The environmental arithmetic is equally complex. A government study estimates that producing a litre of ethanol from sugarcane requires roughly 2,860 litres of water across the production cycle. Water intensity rises further for grain-based pathways, with maize-based ethanol requiring around 4,093 litres and rice-based ethanol as much as 10,790 litres per litre of output.

India now has close to 500 ethanol distilleries (<https://tinyurl.com/eps3c4z4>), with grain-based capacity accounting for a growing share of incremental supply. The shift towards grain-based ethanol

therefore raises the water intensity of ethanol production.

The imbalance is already visible. In Maharashtra, sugarcane occupies less than 10 per cent of cropped area but perhaps consumes over half per cent of irrigation water. Expanding ethanol-linked feedstocks in such regions risks intensifying pressure on already stressed water systems.

The environmental costs extend beyond water. Higher production requires more fertilizer, irrigation and electricity, much of it generated from coal. Emissions therefore do not disappear entirely; part of the environmental burden moves upstream.

India's ethanol programme has undoubtedly created additional revenue streams for mills, helped manage cyclical sugar surpluses and contributed to food diversification. But the economics of the programme have entered a different phase.

After rapid capacity expansion and large private investments in ethanol, capacity utilisation became the economic imperative. Reducing crude imports is not necessarily the same as reducing external dependence, nor is expanding production the same as improving efficiency.

As India evaluates the next stage of ethanol policy, the focus may need to move beyond blending targets and towards a broader assessment of water use, cropping incentives, import substitution and long-term resource allocation.

The writer is a business economist and CEO, Indonomics Consulting Private Ltd

### BELOW THE LINE



Jugaad!

To make computerisation more palatable to bank employees, trade unions and associations, the exercise was called "mechanisation" in the late 80s, according to SBI Chairman CS Setty. Narrating an interesting anecdote at the recent Cit Investors' Conference, he noted that Indian banking then was dominated by public sector banks and the

governance of India, through RBI, wanted to implement computerisation. "They (the government) didn't call it computerisation. They called it mechanisation. They wanted to bring machines in the banking industry. Every employee, union, and association pushed back. They didn't want machines," Setty said. So, to get buy-in from all stakeholders, the government came up with a very typical Indian "Jugaad" — anybody who uses a computer will get an increment.

### Match Fixing?

The Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) recently called for applications to fill the post of

Director, Basmati Export Development Foundation. It asked interested applicants to visit its website for more details. Details on the site said applicants from the private sector should not be over 55 years of age, while retired bureaucrats should not be over 62. A little bird says this rules out a former bureaucrat who was among those short-listed initially and another person who had been thought of as a favourite to fill the post.

### Trust factor

I don't know you. I am talking to you for the first time. How can I trust you? How do I know that you are what you claim you are over telephone? These questions came

from the chairman of a PSU when contacted for a routine media query. Even after this reporter introduced himself, explained the story and pointed to credentials available in the public domain, the executive remained unconvinced. "Is this telephone number listed in those credentials?" he asked. "If I had met you, I would speak to you. We cannot trust anyone in this fake age." The two-minute exchange captures a growing reality of modern reporting: before journalists can verify facts, they increasingly find themselves having to verify their own identities. In a world of spoofed calls, fake social media profiles and AI-generated impersonations, even a straightforward request for

comment can begin with a trust deficit.

### Checkmate

Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam leader C Joseph Vijay may have outmanoeuvred political rivals in the recent Assembly elections, but he met his match on the chessboard on Monday. Fresh from winning the Norway Chess Championship, Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa visited the Secretariat and engaged Vijay in a friendly game. The TVK leader made a few impressive moves, but the young chess champion quickly seized the initiative and secured victory. Vijay presented the Tamil Nadu grandmaster with a cash award of ₹50 lakh for winning the title at Norway. **Our Bureau**



# Opinion

MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2026

## Access denied

Washington has served notice that frontier AI is a strategic asset; India needs to take that seriously

**T**HE DECISION BY US authorities to restrict foreign access to Anthropic's latest AI models, Mythos 5, and Fable 5 may appear at first glance to concern a single company and a limited set of users. In reality, it signals a more significant shift in how governments are beginning to view advanced artificial intelligence (AI). Until now, policy attention has largely focused on restricting access to the sophisticated semiconductors needed to train and run frontier models. The latest move suggests the focus is expanding from hardware to the models themselves. As AI capabilities improve and concerns grow over their potential use in cyber operations and other sensitive applications, governments are increasingly treating frontier AI not merely as a commercial product but as a strategic asset. The debate is thus moving from who can build the most capable models to who can access them.

This evolution should not come as a surprise. Technologies that confer economic, military, or intelligence advantages have historically attracted state intervention. Nuclear technology, satellite systems, and advanced semiconductors have all been subject to varying degrees of oversight and control. AI is entering the same category. Whether the specific concerns cited in the Anthropic case are fully justified is almost beside the point. What matters is that governments are increasingly willing to intervene in the distribution of advanced AI systems when national security considerations arise. If access to frontier models becomes subject to export controls, licensing requirements, or geopolitical calculations, the global AI landscape could become far more fragmented. Access to cutting-edge AI may increasingly depend not only on commercial arrangements but also on strategic alignments and national priorities.

For India, the episode is a reminder that access to frontier technology cannot be taken for granted. Startups, enterprises and researchers have benefited enormously from powerful AI models developed abroad. Yet that dependence creates an obvious vulnerability. If access to advanced systems can be shaped by policy decisions taken elsewhere, Indian users have little influence over outcomes that could materially affect their competitiveness. Unsurprisingly, the development has revived calls for a stronger sovereign AI strategy. Industry leaders such as Sridhar Vembu have argued that India must invest more aggressively in domestic capabilities and open-source ecosystems rather than assume that foreign frontier models will always remain available. The issue is not one of technological nationalism. It is one of ensuring that critical digital infrastructure is not wholly dependent on decisions made outside the country's control.

India need not pursue complete technological self-sufficiency, nor can it realistically replicate every frontier model being developed globally. But the scale of ambition must match the scale of the challenge. The India AI Mission has laid a foundation, yet recent developments raise legitimate questions about whether current investments are adequate in a world where AI is increasingly viewed as strategic infrastructure. Calls by industry leaders such as Mohandas Pai for a substantially larger national AI effort, including a dedicated annual fund and deeper public-private collaboration involving technology leaders like Nandan Nilekani, deserve serious consideration. Expanding computing capacity, supporting domestic model development, strengthening research institutions, and fostering open-source innovation should become long-term priorities. The lesson from the Anthropic episode is not that India has been denied access to a particular model. It is that access itself is becoming a strategic resource. Countries that wish to shape their digital future will increasingly need the capability to build, adapt and sustain critical technologies at home.

## THE HUMAN FACTOR

### On Musk's Mars, Indians will make sure it feels like home

**ELON MUSK SAYS** Mars is the future. Fair enough, particularly now that he has become the Earth's first trillionaire. But if he ever succeeds in building a city there, the most interesting question is not whether humanity can live on Mars. It is what Musk will do once he gets there. History suggests that once people become unimaginably wealthy, they stop buying things and start buying ideas. Some build art museums while others build homes with so many floors that guests require a brief orientation before being left unsupervised. A trillionaire on Mars may have to think bigger.

For starters, he could become the first person to launch a Martian version of urban planning. After centuries of humanity complaining about potholes on Earth, Mars could become the first place where roads are built before traffic appears — though Indian visitors will immediately suspect something is wrong. A road cap with no diversions, no dug-up patches, no mysterious barricades, and no signboard saying "Work in progress since 2000" is unlikely to inspire confidence. Several will walk around it, just to be safe.

Musk could also launch Mars Metro. The project would be announced with a completion deadline of six months. It would eventually open in five months. This would create such a shock among Earthlings that management schools would devote entire courses to understanding how infrastructure can finish ahead of schedule. Indians would assume the opening date was simply announced late.

Real estate would, of course, follow. Martian property advertisements would promise oxygen-facing apartments, catriviets, and walking distance from the nearest life-support station. Prices would initially be affordable until someone starts a WhatsApp group called Mars Investors Forum. Within a week, a cousin nobody remembers will be offering pre-launch rates on a two-BHK in Sector 4, Olympus Mons.

Then comes governance. Musk may appoint an AI-powered administration where every citizen gets instant approvals. No forms, no queues, no paperwork. Within weeks, however, a small group of settlers from Earth will recreate bureaucracy from first principles. A permit will suddenly require another permit, which will require a certificate confirming that the original permit exists. Humanity has survived ice ages, world wars, and recessions. It will not abandon paperwork. Someone will also want an office with a nameplate.

There is also the question of culture. The first Martian cricket league is inevitable. Nobody knows whether reverse swing works in a thin atmosphere, but that will not stop arguments. A television panel on Earth will spend three hours debating whether a batter born on Mars is eligible to play for India. Two former cricketers will disagree loudly. A third will talk about the 1983 World Cup for reasons that remain unclear.

Food may present a bigger challenge. Scientists will devote years to growing vegetables in Martian soil. The first successful harvest will immediately be followed by a demand for *paneer*, *dosa*, and butter chicken. If human civilisation can transport millions of tonnes of equipment across 140 million miles of space, somebody will figure out how to send green chutney. A dabba service from Pune will probably crack it first.

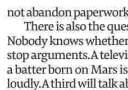
And then there is politics. Musk may dream of a hyper-efficient technocratic settlement. But eventually someone will demand elections, someone else will demand reservations in crater allocations, and a third group will insist that the capital deserves special status and its own high court. A fourth group will forward a WhatsApp message claiming the whole Mars mission is against Indian culture. At that point, Mars will finally begin to feel like home.

Perhaps that is the real lesson. We imagine Mars as an escape from Earth. But the first thing humans do on a new planet will probably be to recreate the old one — complete with traffic complaints, property speculation, sporting rivalries, unsolicited matrimonial enquiries, and family WhatsApp groups that nobody can leave.

The rockets may be revolutionary. The humans arriving on them almost certainly won't be.



**SHYAMAL MAJUMDAR**  
shyamal.majumdar@expressindia.com



**PRAMOD RAO RACHANA BAID**  
Respectively former Executive Director, Sebi, and Dean (Academics), National Institute of Securities Markets



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Respectively former Executive Director, Sebi, and Dean (Academics), National Institute of Securities Markets

## DATA CENTRE CONCERNS

Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw

Many innovations are also coming up. Innovations in terms of power requirement, water, and using certain water cooling methods, which reduce water requirement by about 70%

## AI INFRA GROWTH

INDIA MUST BE CAREFUL IN MANAGING THE ECONOMIC DOWNSIDES

# The burden of AI adoption

## AMITENDU PALIT

Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Trade and Economics), Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore



AI IS KICKING up more controversy at every step of the way. Pope Leo's call to prevent AI from being deployed for malicious uses, including replacing human relationships, depicts AI as a general-purpose technology capable of causing significant harm. The burden of AI adoption can have significant social, political, and economic repercussions for India and the Global South.

India has been emphasising safe, trusted, and ethical use of AI. Preventing AI from becoming an instrument of domination will require the world to make rules for serving the purpose. Such rules, though, are currently elusive. India and the Global South must be ready to address challenges arising from building larger AI capacities.

Globally, AI infrastructure growth is causing major strains on natural resources. Demand for electricity is increasing at exponential rates. Along with electricity, there is high demand for water. Both demands are compounded with rising appetite for vast tracts of land. All three will manifest in India as it builds more AI data centres.

AI data centres require huge computing power. Generative AI like ChatGPT and Claude need to continuously process data for staying advanced and updated. Computing capacities of data centres, especially the hyperscale ones that host thousands of servers and run accelerated graphics processing units (GPUs), require high uninterrupted supply of electricity, and water for cooling the overworked systems. The big data centres with large computing capacities also need sizeable pieces of land to grow.

The International Energy Agency estimates servers to account for more than 60% of energy demand coming from data centres. The share rises to almost 80% for servers in hyperscale data centres. The latter also require billions of litres of water annually, for cooling the chips used for computing. Water is needed for energy generation as well.

Looked at in the context of India becoming an important destination for building AI infrastructure and large data centres, the above conditions highlight some concerns.

First, electricity demand by AI data centres pre-stresses electricity grids. The state grids will need to ramp up overall output since supplies to households, agriculture, and other industries can't be compromised. Electricity producers will need to expand capacities for generating more power, bringing to head a critical problem: can more electricity be generated without resorting to greater use of fossil fuels? The ostensible answer is no. Without using more coal and natural gas the electricity output can't be increased making for carbon footprints an unavoidable outcome.

The data centres in India involving the US big tech — Google and Meta — that are coming up in Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh and Jamnagar in Gujarat are to run on captive renewable energy. They might also go off-grid for fetching power directly from renewable producers. While

this can limit additional emissions by containing use of fossil fuels, it can also create different incentives for renewables: independent, especially smaller producers of the latter, might be more incentivised to sell off grid to data centres instead of national or state grids. Furthermore, not all large data centres will have the capacity to internally finance captive renewable capacities. They will have to rely on the common grids, thereby making use of more fossil fuels for generating electricity an almost unavoidable option.

Second, where will the water for cooling servers come from? The proposed Meta AI facility in Jamnagar is expected to use desalinated sea water for cooling. This can ensure preservation of water supplies for local use. Other data centres coming up close to coasts might be able to do the same, unless they take to more expensive techniques like liquid cooling of AI chips. This, however, brings up another important issue in the development trajectory of data centres. Coastal states of the country are likely to attract more data centres due to the advantage of using sea water. As it is, coastal states like Andhra and Gujarat are closer to underwater subsea cables that make them digitally more

**Globally, discontent against AI data centres is rising because of the pressures they are generating on energy, water, and land. India is walking a delicate path**

attractive for US big-tech promoted data centres. Might this generate a hinterland-coast divide in concentration of AI centre investments?

Third, where will the land for data centres come from? The electricity capacities of data centres in the form of power generators and substations, and water-cooling systems, require large spaces. The US experience of building these data centres shows that the hyperscale ones can require up to as much as 1,000 acres or more. Such tracts of barren land are not easily available in coastal Indian states. Might it mean that farmlands, and ecologically fragile land, especially for local communities, need to be taken up for the data centres?

Globally, discontent against AI data centres is rising because of the pressures they are generating on energy, water, and land. India is walking a delicate path in this regard. It is yet to be hit as badly on jobs by AI as several other countries of the world, including the Global North. The hit, though, might just be around the corner with many white-collar tech jobs awaiting the chop. Indeed, several businesses are citing AI for justifying layoffs. Coupled with the stress put on scarce and sustainable natural resources, the employment squeeze can make AI politically unacceptable.

It is not just Pope Leo who's called for disarming AI. Conservative ideologues are describing AI as new immigration with serious cultural, social, and economic consequences and urging action to stop its progress. Tech experts spelling out virtues of AI are being protested in global university campuses. The politics of AI is assuming highly sensitive proportions.

India needs to be careful in managing the economic downsides of AI infrastructure growth. The consequences might aggravate the political backlash on AI.

Views are personal

# Calibration matters more than perimeter

Bringing a new category within financial regulatory ambit is the first step; the more consequential phase is calibrating it once participant behaviour is known



## PRAMOD RAO RACHANA BAID

Respectively former Executive Director, Sebi, and Dean (Academics), National Institute of Securities Markets

**IN FY2025, ₹5.13 lakh crore** moved through India's online bond platforms in a regulated category that did not exist four years ago. The figure stands out on its own, and also stands on account that the ecosystem of online bond platform providers (OBPPs) operated outside formal regulation until late 2022, when Sebi brought fintech-led bond marketplaces within its perimeter.

That decision has proved right. Some 25-30 registered OBPPs now serve 5.6 lakh investors, up from roughly 3.5 lakh a year earlier. Average ticket sizes of ₹1.2 lakh tell you the profile: doctors, salaried professionals, small business owners, and the like. They are buying corporate bonds in a manner that resembles equity-market participation far more than the dealer-driven market that preceded it.

The OBPP experience points to a broader development. The harder phase of financial regulation begins after the perimeter expansion, when the regulator must determine how the regulator itself should be calibrated in light of evidence of how participants behave.

The International Organization of Securities Commissions, in Principle 7 of its Objectives and Principles, requires regulators to review the regulatory perimeter on an ongoing basis. The principle was codified after the Global Financial Crisis because innovation tends to outpace rules, and investors are drawn towards products outside the perimeter. Expanding the perimeter is one half of the discipline. Calibrating the glide path, disciplining in requirements, observing behaviour, and adjusting on the basis of evidence is the other more difficult half.

Indian regulators have generally per-

formed the first half well. Across account aggregators, payment systems, online bond platforms, and small and medium real estate investment trusts (REITs), the RBI and Sebi have shown both speed and willingness to engage with new business models. The harder test lies in the second half: returning to a framework after 18 or 36 months, reviewing data the new perimeter has produced, and asking if the original regulatory intent has been met.

A glide path is not unidirectional. It may tighten where innovation has produced risks the original framework didn't anticipate, loosen where feared harms haven't materialised, or remain unchanged. What it cannot afford to do is freeze, which is what happens when a framework, once notified, is treated as a settled matter.

Sebi's May 2026 consultation paper on OBPPs is a calibration in practice. The paper proposes a few changes: permitting OBPPs to offer products regulated by the International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA); expressly including Section 54EC tax-saving bonds within the permissible product list; and harmonising the compliance officer requirement with the standards applicable to stockbrokers generally.

Each change is modest and incremental in nature. They do not require new regulation drafted from first principles, as each can build on a framework already in force and a dataset already accumulated.

The underlying issues could not have been identified ex ante. Each surfaced

because the framework was operating in practice: an inter-regulator question in one instance, a listing anchored ambiguity in another, and an incidental drafting choice in the third. The 2022 framework was a first step taken with the best information available; the May 2026 paper is the second step, made possible by what the first revealed.

Three points warrant attention as the consultation proceeds. IFSCA-regulated products carry currency exposure and jurisdictional differences in resolution that domestic listed debt does not; a plain-English risk disclosure at the point of transaction is the calibration the paper proposes; and the five-year lock-in attached to 54EC bonds needs to be made apparent at the instrument level, not at checkout. And the compliance officer revision sets a useful precedent for the wider rulebook:

requirements should reflect the function performed, not the historical drafting of a circular. It may also be necessary to review if compliance officer qualifications are profession-agnostic and fit for purpose in terms of knowledge, ability, and sufficient availability across the board in all market intermediaries, not just OBPPs.

Three-four questions deserve consideration. The six-month lock-in proposed in Sebi's original 2022 consultation, intended to prevent "deemed public issue" arbitrage, was dropped after industry representations; three and a half years of market data now permit a precise assessment of whether some calibrated require-

ment is warranted. The product perimeter itself may also need revisiting — initial or subsequent capital raising by issuing units of listed infrastructure investment trust and REIT units, and small and medium REITs, remain outside the OBPP universe despite their proximity to debt instruments in cash-flow character. Qualitatively, how have the bonds and fixed income instruments including securitised debt instruments that have been offered by the OBPPs performed, including in timeliness of payments and repayments, delays or defaults, rating being maintained or upgraded/downgraded. Finally, besides fintech-led OBPPs, why have larger financial conglomerates or large financial intermediaries not yet undertaken or commenced activities as an OBPP. Reviewing these can also serve to inform the glide path.

The OBPP example shows the glide path operating as intended: a framework notified in 2022, observed for three and a half years, and refined through a consultation paper informed by what the market has shown. The temptation in financial regulation is to treat the expansion of the perimeter as the conclusion of the regulator's work. Sebi clearly resists this temptation.

Human ingenuity and inventiveness know no bounds. Innovation frequently outpaces laws and regulations, leaving regulators in a constant game of catch-up. When innovations carry the promise of profit, investors are naturally drawn towards unregulated products, services and platforms. The only sustainable response is the steady, evidence-based discipline of the glide path: read the data, ask whether the original intent has been met, adjust, and start again.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Government-industry co-ordination needed

Apropos of "From ambition to execution" (FE, June 13), Nikhil Kamath's framing of India's shift from a digital-services economy to a deep-tech one is timely, but the gaps he identifies — including for early-stage research, IP-driven service layers, skilling, and university research — are not new. What has been missing is sustained follow-through. Programmes like the RDI

Fund and Bharat DeepTech are welcome, but their success depends on whether universities, industry, and government coordinate rather than work in silos, as has often happened with earlier initiatives. India isn't short of talented researchers or ambitious founders. What it needs is patient capital willing to wait longer than the typical startup timeline, and institutions that can absorb and apply research output rather than let it sit in journals. —Swathi Senthilkumar, Coimbatore

### Damage after crash

Apropos of "Answers, not assumptions" (FE, June 13), a year after the Ahmedabad crash, the families of 260 victims still await a final report, and that delay is hard to justify. International norms call for completion within 12 months, yet India's investigators have offered only a preliminary report that, by the editorial's own admission, raised more questions than it settled. Speculation has filled the vacuum left

by official silence, and that speculation has done real damage to pilot reputations and public confidence. The Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau must recognise that a rushed or incomplete report serves no one, but neither does indefinite delay. What is needed now is a public timeline for the final report, along with periodic updates to the families. —A Mylamsi, Coimbatore

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# The Statesman

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## Deterrence Revisited

For more than two decades, India's nuclear doctrine has been treated as a settled matter. Built around the principles of No First Use and assured retaliation, it has projected restraint while signalling resolve. It reflected a strategic culture that sought credibility without courting recklessness. But doctrines, like technologies, cannot remain frozen in time. The uncomfortable question India must now confront is whether assumptions forged in the early years of this century can still withstand the realities of the next.

The world that shaped India's nuclear thinking was one in which concealment was possible and uncertainty worked in favour of stability. Mobile launchers could disappear into vast terrain. Hardened facilities promised a degree of protection. The belief that enough weapons would survive an enemy's first strike to permit devastating retaliation underpinned the logic of deterrence. Today, that logic faces unprecedented strain.

Persistent satellite constellations, artificial intelligence-enabled data analysis, advanced sensors, long-range precision missiles and hypersonic delivery systems have transformed the strategic landscape. The battlefield is increasingly transparent. Targets that once relied on mobility and secrecy may now be monitored, tracked and revisited with startling speed. The time available for political leaders to assess information and make decisions during a crisis is shrinking.

This evolution carries dangers beyond technological competition. The fear that nuclear forces could become vulnerable creates incentives for haste and miscalculation. States may feel pressure to act before losing their capabilities. Conventional attacks on strategic assets could be interpreted as preparations for nuclear disarmament. The distinction between conventional and nuclear conflict, once relatively clear, risks becoming dangerously blurred. For India, the answer is not to abandon the restraint that has long distinguished its nuclear posture. Calls for a dramatic departure from No First Use or for an unconstrained expansion of the arsenal deserve careful scrutiny rather than emotional endorsement. Strategic credibility rests not merely on possessing weapons but on maintaining political control, clarity of purpose and the confidence of adversaries that retaliation remains inevitable.

Yet prudence should not become complacency. A doctrine drafted for one technological era cannot be exempt from periodic review. India has repeatedly adapted its military institutions to changing threats, whether in the aftermath of the Kargil conflict or through reforms to higher defence management. Its nuclear posture should be no exception.

A serious reassessment of survivability, command-and-control resilience and the balance among land, air and sea-based deterrent capabilities is overdue. The expansion of sea-based assets, investment in secure communications and rigorous examination of emerging technologies should form part of that exercise. Such a review need not signal weakness or alarmism. On the contrary, it would demonstrate strategic maturity. The credibility of deterrence has always depended less on inherited doctrines than on their continued relevance. In an age of rapid technological disruption, national security cannot rely on assumptions that no longer command certainty. The purpose of revisiting doctrine is not to make war more likely. It is to ensure that the prospect of war remains unthinkable.

## Counting Care

For generations, Indian society has perfected a contradiction. It has revered mothers as selfless nurturers, praised them as the anchors of the household and celebrated sacrifice as an essential feminine virtue. Yet when it came to economics and the law, the labour that sustained families was often dismissed as "non-earning" and therefore unworthy of serious recognition. That contradiction is finally being confronted.

The significance of the evolving judicial approach towards homemakers lies not in sentiment but in economics. It acknowledges an unpaid care work is work. It creates value, supports productivity and forms the invisible foundation upon which the formal economy rests.

Every working day begins with labour that rarely appears in statistics. Meals are prepared before office-goers leave for work. Children are prepared for school. Elderly relatives are cared for. Household crises are managed. Emotional support is provided during moments of stress and uncertainty. These activities do not generate salaries, invoices or tax returns. Yet they make it possible for millions of people to participate in paid employment and contribute to economic growth.

Conventional measures such as Gross Domestic Product have failed to account for this reality. Feminist economists across the world have argued that by excluding unpaid domestic and caregiving labour, societies underestimate both women's contribution and the true cost of sustaining life. The economy recognises the wage paid to a domestic worker but not identical work performed within one's own home. The distinction may suit accounting systems, but it does not reflect reality. Recognising the economic value of domestic labour is therefore not an exercise in generosity. It is an attempt to correct an institutional blind spot. It challenges the notion that worth can only be measured through market participation. More importantly, it strengthens the idea that dignity should not depend solely on the possession of a paislip.

However, recognition alone will not transform the lives of homemakers. Courts can influence social attitudes, but they cannot substitute for public policy. Questions relating to social security, pension benefits, inheritance rights and financial protection for those who spend decades performing unpaid care work require legislative attention. Equally important is ensuring that caregiving itself does not remain an obligation imposed on women. A more equal society values care while also sharing its burdens.

Ideas shape institutions, and institutions shape culture. The immediate trigger for this debate is a recent Supreme Court ruling arising out of a motor accident compensation case. In recognising the economic contribution of a deceased homemaker, the court moved beyond treating homemakers as "non-earning" dependents and sought to assign a realistic value to unpaid domestic labour.

In doing so, it sent a powerful message about what societies choose to value—and what they choose to ignore. India's homes have always generated wealth of a different kind: raising children, caring for the vulnerable and sustaining those who drive the economy. Recognising that truth is not an act of charity. It is an overdue act of honesty.

# The Fifth Stream ~ II

Democracy is not merely a system for winning elections; it is also a culture of coexistence with opposing ideas. If every ideological rival is branded anti-national, fascist, or communal, the foundations of democratic society will weaken. A diverse society like India survives not through permanent consensus, but through maintaining balance amid disagreement. That is why the different streams of Indian politics must understand that permanent polarization ultimately harms all sides.



The question remains even today: on what legal basis can the Jana Sangh or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh conclusively be called fascist? They were accused of being anti-democratic and anti-constitutional, but these accusations were never decisively established in legal terms.

Between 1977 and 1989, the rise of coalition politics transformed the direction of Indian politics. There came a time when V.P. Singh was supported on one side by Atal Bihari Vajpayee and on the other by Jyoti Basu. It became increasingly clear that after the Congress, the BJP was the most organized political force. Even in the election where the BJP won only four seats, its vote share remained significant. Later, both its seats and influence continued to grow.

There is little doubt that the BJP gained its greatest national advantage from the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Whatever one's interpretation of this movement, labeling it simply as fascist politics would be an oversimplification.

It may be viewed as an example of religion-based politics, but fascism is a far more complex question. If every cultural assertion is called fascist, then the same question would arise regarding the nature of the Emergency of 1975-77.

The BJP steadily increased its strength through democratic processes. In 1999, a government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee was formed and successfully completed five years in office. After its defeat, the BJP also accepted the role of the opposition. Vajpayee's government is generally not described as fascist.

Throughout this period, the issue of the Gujarat riots remained central. Serious allegations were made regarding Narendra Modi's role. It was said that the state government had failed to uphold 'raj dharm' (the duty of government). It was also claimed that Vajpayee wanted to remove Modi, but Lal Krishna Advani protected him.

Nevertheless, it is also true that after prolonged judicial and constitutional scrutiny, Modi was cleared of direct criminal responsibility. Between 2007 and 2014, Indian politics underwent a qualitative transformation. Through the "Gujarat model," the BJP attempted to combine development, administrative efficiency, and Hindu identity. The party expanded its organizational reach into villages, small towns, and semi-urban areas. Through the Ram Temple movement, cultural symbols and social organizations, it strengthened its ideological base.

The story of Godhra and Gujarat appeared before the public in two contrasting forms. One side portrayed Modi and Shah as criminals; the other presented them as protectors of Hindu interests. For the first time, large numbers of people felt that Hindu identity too could become part of legitimate political discourse.

The strength of the "Indian ideology" rested upon historical and intellectual memory, but in the age of liberalization and the internet, people's experiences began to change. Public opinion was no longer shaped only by newspapers and universities. People were now understanding politics through their own experiences, media exposure, and the digital world. Hindu nationalists intervened in this new space in an organized manner.

The capitalist class too has always followed the direction of political winds. During British rule, when Congress influence grew, industrialists moved closer to Congress. When Nehru's influence expanded, they aligned with him.

For a long time, it was said that their hearts lay with Hindu nationalists while their minds remained with the "Indian ideology." Gradually, however, a time came when both began moving in the same direction. The growing influence of Hindu nationalist organizations among the youth accelerated this change.

The sharpest criticism of the ideological rigidity of the "Indian ideology" came not from a right-wing thinker, but from leftist intellectual Perry Anderson in 2012. Yet that criticism did not receive serious attention.

Gradually, it became clear that the balance of political power could change. Yet despite this, a large section of "Indian ideology" continued to rely mainly on Gandhi's assassination, the alleged fascist character of the RSS, and accusations regarding the Gujarat riots as their principal political weapons.

A large section of the public no longer found these accusations sufficient. People could see that courts had cleared Modi and that the BJP was raising issues many citizens felt in their own lived experiences. The BJP also attempted to reshape caste equations in its favor. It projected Hindu identity as a broad political framework. As a result, in 2014 it established decisive control over the central government, and thereafter the central balance of Indian politics changed.

All this happened within the democratic process. Elections were held, the people voted, and power changed hands. In a democracy, political forces continue to change. One side wins, another loses, and circumstances evolve. But to describe every disagreement as fascism or even opponent as anti-national only makes democratic politics more extreme.

The RSS and BJP do not formally reject the Indian Constitution or electoral democracy. They may include many ideological and policy-related problems.

The tendency to move from opposition to Muslim appeasement toward outright hostility to Muslims, attempts to increase

influence over institutions, and narrowness on questions of cultural diversity—criticism of all these is both a democratic right and duty. But simply declaring a party or its supporters fascist because it has enjoyed long-term public support weakens political analysis.

Presenting history in such a way that one side appears entirely black and the other entirely white is no longer effective. The experience of Indian politics is far more complex. Leaders such as Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Chandrababu Naidu, and P.V. Narasimha Rao engaged in ideological struggles, yet maintained dialogue on national questions. Vajpayee could be sent to international forums to present India's position on Kashmir because political disagreement had not yet been transformed into national hostility.

The greatest need in politics today is to preserve this culture of dialogue. Democracy is not merely a system for winning elections; it is also a culture of coexistence with opposing ideas. If every ideological rival is branded anti-national, fascist, or communal, the foundations of democratic society will weaken. A diverse society like India survives not through permanent consensus, but through maintaining balance amid disagreement. That is why the different streams of Indian politics must understand that permanent polarization ultimately harms all sides.

The strength of Indian democracy has always lain in its ability to absorb even ideological extremes within itself. Differences of opinion are permanent here, yet the political process has largely prevented them from turning into violent conflict.

Therefore, the need of the hour is not to transform political opposition into moral enmity. In a democracy, the people's verdict is the ultimate basis of legitimacy, and dismissing any political current that has enjoyed long-term public support merely through slogans ultimately weakens democratic wisdom itself.

(Concluded)

## The Korea Herald

## Messages for today's young people

Recently, I came across a children's book that impressed me greatly. Published in Korea, it was entitled, "When Everybody Says It's Right, Is It Really Right?" The subtitle was "How to Say 'No'." Written by Lee Ki-yeon and illustrated by Bang Sang-ho, the book explores the problems of the "tyranny of the majority" and illuminates the ways in which we can say "No" and reach agreements reasonably.

The book begins with a fundamental question that touches upon one of the inherent problems of democracy: "Is the principle of majority rule absolutely right?" The author argues that the principle of majority rule is neither ideal nor perfect. Rather, it is the last resort when discussions fail to reach a conclusion. Without realizing it, we customarily decide everything according to the principle of majority rule, assuming that it is the best solution. But what if the minority is right and the majority wrong? The author then stresses the

importance of saying no when the majority wrongfully shouts "Yes!" Of course, it is not easy to say no when everyone else yells yes.

Yet we should say no whenever the majority is wrong. We should also say no when our social conventions or customs are improper or unreasonable. In the book, the author explains that there are many ways of saying no, such as signing petitions, joining boycott movements, or becoming a whistleblower.

Such actions may risk our jobs, families or reputations, and yet we should still say no when something is not right.

The author refers to Susan B. Anthony, Rosa Parks, and August Landmesser as exemplary people who said no when others said yes. In 1872, Susan B. Anthony boldly said no to the social convention that prohibited women's suffrage in America.

In 1955, Rosa Parks courageously said no to racial discrimination on buses in the American South. In 1936, August Landmesser valiantly refused to join the crowd in giving the Nazi salute to Adolf Hitler.

According to the author, saying no is not always good, because sometimes people say it for selfish reasons. "Not in My Back Yard," for example, is a typical case of egoistic resistance.

Indeed, people often object to facilities being built in their neighborhoods if they believe such developments will lower real estate values.

In addition, there are those who stubbornly say no to everything. Such people turn a deaf ear to other voices or opinions. They are self-righteous and thus believe that they are always right, while others are wrong. We should be different from them.

Like Zeus, we should have the courage to say no like thunder when others howl yes. Joining others who shout yes is easy,

but saying no amid roaring approval is not. Nevertheless, we should say no whenever necessary.

In that sense, Lee's book significantly broadens the horizons of children's minds. Another book I have recently encountered is "Reminiscing upon Those Days." It is a collection of poems written by Cha Yun, a former high-ranking Korean Navy officer and diplomat.

Cha wrote these poems during and immediately after the Korean War, when he was a young Naval Academy cadet and later a junior Navy officer on the battlefield.

As a war veteran, Cha decided to publish his poems to help young people open their eyes to the harsh reality of a country still divided by ideological conflict.

Through his poems, Cha reminisces about his youth entangled in war, the agonies of adolescence, and his visions and ambitions as a seaman aboard a battleship.

## Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

### Shift in stance

Sir, This refers to the front page report "3 Indian seafarers confirmed killed in US strike on tanker," published today. It is high time for India to make shift from being the soft power to a hard power.

The Indian government has not taken any stand against Iran or the US, apart from strong diplomatic protests whenever Indian vessels or civilians were attacked.

Trump's second inning in the White House has been the much-needed reality check for us as a country. We have been vilified, abused and called a hellhole. The



same was not done to China, because Beijing has a monopoly on things the US needs. India doesn't have anything on which US or any major nation is critically dependent. We need to develop critical technologies.

Yours, etc., Yashi Bairagi, Ujjain, 12 June.

### Credibility

Sir, Your editorial "Opposition's Test" has rightly said that the Bharatiya Janata Party's greatest advantage today is its ability to maintain continuous engagement with voters between elections while the Opposition parties appear active only during campaigns or moments of crisis.

The Opposition alliance also fails to deliver against most common but serious issues like price rise and unemployment.

One of its crucial constituents, the Trinamool Congress is fragmenting on a daily basis cornering Mamata Banerjee and Abhishek Banerjee. Under the evolving

situation, the Indian National Congress and other partners are likely to lose their credibility as a dependable Opposition if they continue to team up with the TMC and the Banerjees.

The editorial has said the central challenge before the Opposition parties is not arithmetic, it is the question of credibility which requires consultation, accommodation and mutual respect among themselves.

Citizens who are unhappy with the government should be convinced by the Opposition alliance.

Yours, etc., Sukhendu Bhattacharjee, Sheoraphuli, 11 June.





### Editor's TAKE

## G7 Summit: Yet another bid to reset world order

As global fault lines deepen, the G7 returns to where it was born — France with an agenda to revamp world order and reaffirm its relevance

There is a certain poetry in the setting. The Group of Seven, born out of oil shocks in 1975, reconvenes in Evian-les-Bains, France, from June 15 to 17, in a year marked by geopolitical fragmentation, and renewed questions about the role of the forum itself. The anxieties may be the same as fifty years ago, but the stage has become far more complex.

France has carefully constructed its summit priorities around addressing macroeconomic imbalances, strengthening economic security and critical mineral supply chains, and reforming international development partnerships. President Macron has been unusually ambitious in his G7 presidency, seeking to push the grouping beyond its traditional comfort zones. He has invited Chinese representatives to a video call to address global imbalances — a bold move that signals Paris's desire for genuine multilateralism rather than performative solidarity. Artificial intelligence is high on the G7 agenda, and Macron's decision to invite OpenAI's Sam Altman to summit discussions underlines his intent to position France as Europe's AI powerhouse. Trade tensions, energy insecurity, sovereign debt crises, and the fallout from the Iran war are all expected to be on the table. The attendance of President Donald Trump, however, adds its own layer of uncertainty to the summit's outcome. Trump's transactional instincts and scepticism of multilateral frameworks have a way of rewriting summit scripts. France also wants to put dialogue, crisis-response, and renewed multilateralism at the heart of its G7 presidency, themes that sound aspirational given today's fractured world order.

The Iran crisis, West Asia, and the security of commercial shipping lanes will inevitably dominate back-corridor conversations. Among the most anticipated moments of the summit is what will transpire on its sidelines between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Trump. The talks will be the first in-person meeting between Modi and Trump. The backdrop is complicated. India-US ties have faced occasional friction over trade policies, India's purchases of Russian oil despite the personal bonhomie between the two leaders. New Delhi has bristled at the last claim in particular, viewing it as an overreach. Trump, meanwhile, congratulated Modi on becoming India's longest-serving elected Prime Minister, reflecting his personal rapport with him. The two leaders are expected to discuss the stalled India-US trade framework, with New Delhi eager to reduce the tariff burden on Indian exports. Yet the ghost of last year's Canada G7 looms — when Modi arrived ready to negotiate, only for Trump to leave the summit early. Modi's visit is expected to reinforce New Delhi's efforts to position itself as a leading voice of the Global South and an influential stakeholder in shaping future rules around artificial intelligence, economic cooperation, and sustainable development. That is a long-term diplomatic investment worth far more than any single meeting. Evian may not resolve the world's crises. But how the leaders navigate their disagreements — and what Modi and Trump signal to each other behind closed doors — will be crucial for Indian subcontinent.

## Modi@12: Laying the foundations of a Viksit Bharat

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi completes twelve years in office, becoming India's longest-serving Prime Minister in independent India's history, assessments of his legacy continue to evoke both admiration and criticism

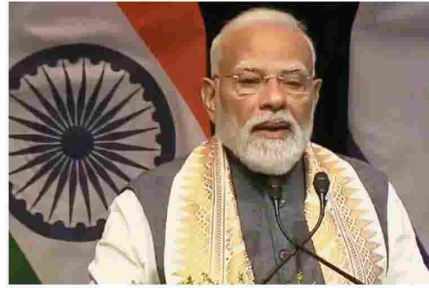


JAGMOHAN SINGH RAJU

With completion of twelve years in office, Shri Narendra Modi has become the longest serving Prime Minister of independent India. He has proved to be a transformational leader who has restored national confidence, accelerated development and elevated India's standing in the world. Critics question aspects of his governance, institutional approach and political style. Yet beyond the partisan debate lies a larger and more enduring question: what has India become after twelve years of the Modi era?

The answer is not that India has already become Viksit Bharat, a developed nation. No country has India's size and complexity can complete such a journey in little more than a decade. Rather, the more persuasive argument is that the foundations of a Viksit Bharat have been laid in these twelve years. The significance of the Modi era lies in the creation of economic, infrastructural, digital, social and strategic foundations upon which a developed India can be built over the coming decades. The scale of this transformation can perhaps be captured through a few numbers. India has risen from the world's tenth-largest economy to become the fourth largest. More than 58 crore citizens have been brought into the formal banking system through Jan Dhan accounts. Over 15 crore rural households have received tap-water connections, more than 10 crore poor women have received LPG connections, nearly 12 crore toilets have been constructed, and an estimated 25 crore Indians have moved out of multidimensional poverty. Taken individually, these figures represent efficient governance. Taken together, they tell a larger story: the laying of foundations for a more prosperous, inclusive and capable India. Beneath these achievements lies a deeper transformation. The central theme of the Modi era has been the strengthening of India's state capacity—the ability of government to identify beneficiaries, deliver services, build infrastructure, respond to crises and pursue national objectives. In many ways, the journey of the past twelve years can be described as a movement from entitlement to empowerment, from leakage to delivery, from policy paralysis to execution, and from a hesitant India to a more confident India.

The first of these foundations is economic strength. In 2014, India was frequently described as a country of immense promise struggling to realise its potential. Twelve years later, India stands among the fastest-growing major economies in the world, recording average annual growth of around 7 per cent. Economic growth alone does not create a developed nation, but no nation has become developed



WHETHER THROUGH INFRASTRUCTURE, DIGITAL INNOVATION, WELFARE DELIVERY, SPACE EXPLORATION OR DIPLOMACY, INDIA IS INCREASINGLY BEHAVING LIKE A NATION THAT EXPECTS TO SUCCEED

without sustained economic expansion. The second foundation is infrastructure. The past twelve years have witnessed a sustained effort to close India's infrastructure gap. National highways have expanded by nearly 60 per cent, port capacity has doubled, 88 airports have been operationalised in smaller cities and over 7.8 lakh kilometres of rural roads have been completed. Dedicated freight corridors have become operational and railway modernisation has accelerated. These are not merely construction statistics. They reflect the enhanced capacity of the Indian state to conceive, finance and execute projects at scale. Another important foundation has been the renewed emphasis on manufacturing. Through initiatives such as Make in India and Production Linked Incentive schemes, India has sought to strengthen domestic production capabilities and reduce strategic dependence in critical sectors. From electronics and mobile phones to defence production and semiconductors, the objective has been to create the productive capacity necessary for a developed economy. The third foundation is digital transformation. The JAM Trinity—Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and Mobile—has fundamentally changed the relationship between citizen and state. India's digital public infrastructure is now studied across the world, while UPI has made digital payments routine even among small traders and rural households. More importantly, technology has enabled the state to deliver services and monitor outcomes with a degree of precision that was previously impossible. The fourth foundation is social welfare and inclusion. For decades, India aspired to be a welfare state but often struggled to ensure that benefits reached intended recipients. The opening of 58 crore Jan Dhan accounts represents far more than a banking initiative; it signifies the inclusion of millions who previously stood outside the formal economy. The real significance lies not merely in the opening of

accounts but in the state's ability to reach previously invisible citizens and deliver benefits directly to them. Similarly, LPG connections, toilets, housing assistance, tap-water connections and healthcare coverage have sought to improve the quality of life of those at the bottom of the social pyramid.

The fifth foundation is state capacity itself. The true test of governance is not the announcement of schemes but the ability to implement them. The government was able to transfer assistance directly into bank accounts, distribute food grains at enormous scale and administer one of the largest vaccination programmes in human history. Such outcomes were possible because the institutional architecture for delivery had already been established.

The sixth foundation is national security. Development requires stability, and stability requires security. India today appears more confident in protecting its interests than it did a decade ago. Major terrorist incidents have declined significantly, border infrastructure has improved. Left Wing Extremism has receded dramatically and is now confined to a much smaller geographical footprint, defence modernisation has accelerated and internal security challenges have become more manageable. India is today safer, more resilient and better prepared than it was twelve years ago.

The seventh foundation is India's global standing. The India of 2026 enjoys greater international stature than the India of 2014. Its voice carries greater weight in global forums, its G20 Presidency demonstrated diplomatic confidence and organisational capability, and its growing strategic partnerships have strengthened its position in an increasingly multipolar world. The world no longer sees India merely as a country with potential; it increasingly sees India as a country shaping outcomes.

Perhaps the most important foundation, however, is confidence. Nations rise not only through economic indicators but through belief in their own capabilities. Whether through infrastructure, digital innovation, welfare delivery, space exploration or diplomacy, India increasingly behaves like a nation that expects to succeed. Confidence alone does not create prosperity, but prosperity rarely emerges in its absence. Yet it is important to distinguish between laying foundations and completing construction. Twelve years is not enough to transform a civilisation-sized nation into a fully developed country. It is, however, sufficient time to establish the pillars upon which future progress can rest. History will ultimately deliver the verdict. But when historians look back at this period, they may conclude that the Modi era will be remembered less for any individual scheme and more for the foundations it laid—foundations of economic strength, digital capability, social inclusion, national security and, above all, national confidence—for the emergence of a Viksit Bharat.



The writer is former IFS officer and Chairman of Centre for Resource Management and Environment

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A woman walks past a banner of International footballers Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, Neymar Jr, in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

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### STRENGTHENING INDIA'S DEFENSIVE SHIELD

The successful trial of India's multilayered Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system marks a major milestone in strengthening the nation's security architecture. By demonstrating its ability to intercept hostile missiles at various stages of flight, the system significantly enhances India's preparedness against evolving security challenges. This achievement reflects the remarkable capabilities of India's defence scientists and research institutions. The development of such sophisticated indigenous technology underlines the country's commitment to self-reliance in critical strategic sectors and reduces dependence on imported defence systems. In an increasingly uncertain geopolitical environment, an

effective missile defence shield is essential for safeguarding national interests. Beyond protecting key installations and densely populated areas, it strengthens India's deterrence capability and contributes to regional strategic stability. The successful BMD test is a matter of national pride, showcasing India's growing technological prowess and scientific excellence.

While maintaining a robust defensive posture, India must continue to uphold its longstanding commitment to peace, dialogue and regional cooperation. A strong defence capability, coupled with responsible diplomacy, remains key to ensuring the nation's sovereignty and ensuring long-term security.

RUKMA SHARMA, JALANDHAR

Please send your letter to the info@dailyopinioner.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

## Deserve God as a doer in life



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

### 2ND OPINION

In this article, I will try to explain about who is the actual doer though we feel that we are. It will surprise almost all that we, souls, don't accomplish anything by ourselves; we only desire and decide, being very minute and subtle souls. For doing any act, gross senses are required except in case of God, who does everything with his 'ichha shakti' (Divine Will Power).

We can understand this phenomenon with an example of a rich man. He desires to build a large manufacturing plant. What does he do? He thinks about it and has a subtle plan for it. But for this plan to take physical shape, he needs lots of men, machinery, etc. Yes, his own body will also be used, but let us remember that his body is part of the material nature, given temporarily for one lifetime; it is not permanently his. A soul always remains small



and subtle. There are three entities involved in doing any physical act, if we consider our bodies as separate though they are parts of the material nature. The second is the material nature, created by God to keep the earth habitable with energy, air, water, fertile land, etc. The third and the most important entity is God — the Creator. These three do all acts in various percentages. For non-devotees, there are only two entities, that is the body and the material nature. Human body consists of gross senses, subtle mind, intelligence, ego, consciousness and, most importantly, personal nature. Shocking as it may seem, personal nature is also part of the material nature and is fixed at any given time. All our acts are driven by it. So

who is the actual doer? The answer has to be the material nature in this case.

Now let us see what happens in case of devotees of God, those who have taken shelter of God. God takes charge and microngrams lives of his devotees. It means that there are now three entities involved in doing anything with God as the Karta (doer). This gives enormous advantages, which are beyond what we can imagine. Because God is Omnipotent, Omniscient, Controller, Owner, Everything. Whatever God is involved in will be successful. God, ultimately, liberates these fortunate souls.

What happens to non-devotees? Under control of the material nature, they are forever living in illusion. They run after material things which only God can ensure. The worst thing it does is to give a false impression to the eternally small soul of having become big. In this mind-set, a soul makes big mistakes and helplessly suffers repeated cycle of birth and death.

What is the conclusion? We should all take shelter of God and try to remain there. Not only does God liberate but the present life also runs smoothly, which only God can ensure. Otherwise, be ready to suffer during this life and continue to suffer in future lives also. We must qualify to get God as Karta in our lives to avoid such misfortune.



The writer is a spiritual teacher

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Hope for diplomacy in the Iran Crisis

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's assertion that a peace agreement between the United States and Iran could be finalised soon has raised hopes of a diplomatic breakthrough after months of tensions and negotiations. According to Sharif, both sides are closer to an agreement than ever before, with discussions progressing towards the final stages. He expressed appreciation for the continued engagement of Washington and Tehran and voiced optimism that the proposed accord would promote long-term regional stability. Reports suggest that negotiations have focused on crucial issues such as Iran's nuclear programme, sanctions relief, management of enriched uranium stockpiles and ensuring the security of the Strait of Hormuz. Pakistan has emerged as an important intermediary since the conflict began in February, hosting talks aimed at facilitating dialogue between the two sides. While Iranian officials have indicated progress, they have also cautioned that the proposed framework remains under review until formally finalised. Given the wider implications for regional peace, global markets and maritime security, a successful agreement would be welcomed by the international community. Sustained diplomacy remains the best path to prevent further escalation.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

### A Waiting for peace over conflict

The US President Donald Trump's repeated threats of military action against Iran resemble the experience of waiting endlessly for a train whose arrival is repeatedly announced but continually delayed. Each announcement raises expectations, only to be followed by another postponement. Eventually, passengers may even learn that the train has been cancelled altogether. While such uncertainty can be frustrating, the cancellation of military action would undoubtedly be preferable to the devastating consequences of war. If a strike against Iran is ultimately avoided, countless lives could be spared despite criticism over the prolonged suspense and shifting rhetoric. This situation recalls Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot, where anticipation itself becomes the central experience. The prolonged expectation, uncertainty and speculation surrounding possible military action have shaped international discourse in much the same way. For the leader of the world's most powerful nation, exercising restraint may ultimately prove wiser than pursuing irreversible conflict. Diplomatic engagement, however imperfect, offers a more constructive path than military escalation. In matters of war and peace, patience and prudence often serve humanity better than hasty decisions with far-reaching consequences.

R.S. NARULA | PATIALA

### Jaspal Rana's enduring sporting legacy

The sudden demise of Jaspal Rana has deeply saddened the nation. India has lost one of its most accomplished shooters, an exceptional coach and a dedicated mentor who inspired generations of aspiring sportspersons through his commitment to excellence. A renowned pistol shooter specialising in the 25-metre discipline, Rana brought immense glory to the country through his achievements on the international stage. Recognising his extraordinary talent, he received the Arjuna Award in 1994 at the age of 18 and was later honoured with the prestigious Dronacharya Award for his outstanding contribution to coaching. Equally remarkable was his role as a mentor. Through his guidance and dedication, he nurtured several young talents, including Manu Bhaker, who went on to win two bronze medals at the Paris Olympics. His transition from champion shooter to successful coach reflected his deep commitment to Indian sport. Jaspal Rana's passing is an irreparable loss to the sporting fraternity. Though he is no longer with us, his achievements and contributions will continue to inspire future generations. The nation will remain forever indebted to this remarkable sports icon. May his family find strength during this difficult time. May his soul rest in peace.

RAMESH G. JETHAWA | BENGALURU



## Europe's drift into Trump's detention logic

What is emerging in Europe is not a clean policy shift but a gradual reorganisation of how state power is distributed across space. The centre keeps legal language and institutional identity. The periphery carries operational burden



**NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA**

What is the most striking fact in policy implementation in most developed countries, which are developed largely by extracting resources from countries whose collapse was often externally shaped, and then channelled through backchannels into networks that can include armed actors, is that their real operating structure rarely matches the language they use in public.

Front-facing governance is built on carefully polished claims about rights, legality, and humanitarian duty. Back-end governance runs on pressure, leverage, of rejected asylum seekers to "return hubs" outside its borders. This is not the first time such logic has appeared in Western governance. It is only the latest form of a longer pattern. Earlier phases used different tools. In security policy it was extraordinary rendition. In financial systems it was offshore architecture. In military interventions it was proxy enforcement. The pattern is always the same: move sensitive functions away from the centre, keep central language clean, and distribute enforcement into spaces where oversight is weaker and accountability is diluted. The European migration proposals sit inside that tradition, even if expressed through legal and administrative language rather than secrecy.

The idea of sending rejected asylum seekers into facilities outside EU territory is not described as punishment or exile in official terms. It is framed as "return management". That phrase does a lot of work. It removes emotional weight. It removes the violence embedded in forced removal. It turns a human outcome into a logistical process. Once language is reduced to procedure, moral friction becomes easier to manage. That reduction is not neutral. It enables policy movement that would otherwise face stronger resistance.

There is a deeper issue underneath the debate about return hubs. It is the question of where legal responsibility sits when a state transfers individuals into systems it does not fully control. European legal orders have spent decades building the principle that rights follow jurisdiction and jurisdiction follows effective control. That principle becomes unstable when control is outsourced. If a person is held outside EU territory under an arrangement initiated, funded, or coordinated by EU states, then the legal system enters a grey zone it has never fully resolved. The system does not break. It bends.

This bending is not new. The United Kingdom's attempt to build an offshore asylum system in Rwanda exposed India's same tension in a more direct way. The UK scheme reportedly cost well over £200 million in public spending before producing almost no operational transfers, collapsing under sustained legal challenge and judicial rejection. It became a case where large financial commitment created political signalling, but not real deportation capacity. In practice, the system functioned more as deterrence narrative than working infrastructure.

That failure matters because it shows a recurring pattern: outsourcing migration enforcement does not remove legal constraint, it relocates it. Courts do not disappear when policy is externalised. They reappear at the point of transfer, questioning safety, fairness, and legality of removal. The result is often delay, blockage, or full suspension, even after major political and financial investment. The European proposals now emerging operate in the shadow of that experience, yet they continue to assume that a more coordinated supranational framework will avoid similar outcomes. That assumption may not hold. Legal constraints are not national quirks. They are embedded in the European Convention on Human Rights and in the broader constitutional structure that binds member states. Externalisation does not remove those constraints. It shifts where they become active.



There is also a political dimension that cannot be ignored. Migration has become a central pressure point in domestic politics across Europe.

Public frustration is not only about numbers but about system failure. When deportation orders are issued but not carried out at scale, the authority of the system weakens in the eyes of voters. Governments respond by trying to close the gap between decision and outcome. External hubs are presented as one method of doing this. The goal is not only border control but credibility restoration. The problem is that credibility in legal systems is not restored through enforcement alone. It depends on legitimacy of process. If enforcement is seen as bypassing safeguards, credibility can decline even as action increases. The system becomes more active but less trusted. That tension is already visible in debates around detention expansion and wider enforcement powers. Each new tool increases administrative reach but also increases legal and ethical resistance.

When states negotiate arrangements with third countries to host return facilities, they are not only moving people. They are moving legal exposure.

The host country becomes the site of detention, complaints, and conditions, while the initiating country keeps political responsibility without full legal visibility. This creates a structure where accountability is deliberately split. It is not absence of responsibility. It is fragmentation of it. This logic is not without precedent in the darker parts of recent Western security practice, where distance was used as a tool of legal and moral insulation. In accounts of CIA extraordinary rendition and black site operations, as detailed in *Ghost Plane: The True Story of the CIA Rendition and Torture Program* by Stephen Grey and further analysed in *The Black Banners* by Ali H. Soufan, the same structural impulse appears. The point was not only control of individuals but control of visibility itself. The more fragmented the system becomes, the harder it is to identify where harm is assessed and addressed. If a person experiences rights violations in an external facility, which court has authority, which inspectorate has access, which political body carries responsibility.

There is also a quiet shift in how enforcement is understood. It is no longer a simple choice between admission and exclusion. It is becoming a chain of administrative stages spread across multiple jurisdictions. Entry control, asylum processing, appeal limits, removal decisions, external transfer, detention pending return. Each stage is separated and justified on its own terms. But the combined effect is a system that is harder to challenge as a whole because no single step appears decisive enough to contest.

What is emerging in Europe is not a clean policy shift but a gradual reorganisation of how state power is distributed across space. The centre keeps legal language and institutional identity. The periphery carries operational burden. Between them is a growing zone of uncertainty where governance increasingly operates, not only in migration policy but across areas where states try to balance internal legitimacy with external pressure.

The most important feature of this moment is not the design of return hubs or detention rules. It is the acceptance that governance can function through separation of authority and execution. Once that idea stabilises, the structure expands on its own. Each operational problem creates another external arrangement. Each legal constraint creates another procedural workaround. The system does not collapse under contradiction. It adjusts to it. Is the EU, once the most attractive supranational project in modern history, now quietly dismantling its own moral architecture while borrowing the very Trump-style detention logic it once dismissed?

## Modi's 12-year transformation of India's development paradigm



**NIKHIL ANAND**

As Narendra Modi completes twelve years as Prime Minister, assessments of his tenure naturally crowd the public discourse. Most analysts examine economic reforms, infrastructure growth, foreign policy and national security. Yet one of the most consequential transformations of this period remains underexamined: a fundamental reimagining of what social justice means in India.

For most of independent India's history, social justice was understood through a relatively narrow lens - reservations, representation and political participation. These were legitimate priorities in a society shaped by centuries of caste-based discrimination and exclusion. Over time, however, the discourse calcified into electoral arithmetic and identity mobilisation, often losing sight of the deeper question: were our citizens 7? The answer lies in the challenge of confinement. Its central proposition is that social justice cannot be measured by institutional representation alone. It must also be measured by access to housing, healthcare, education, economic opportunity and human dignity.

This philosophy is captured in the governing motto Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikaas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas - development for all, with all, trusted by all and driven by all. Under this framework, development itself becomes a vehicle for social transformation. Modi's own rise carries symbolic weight within this story. He became the first Prime Minister from an Other Backward Class background to win repeated national mandates on the strength of governance rather than dynasty or elite patronage. His ascent signalled a democratisation of political power in a country where leadership had historically concentrated within narrow social circles. But symbolism alone does not define a legacy - policy does.

On representation, successive Union Councils of Ministers under Modi have included significant participation from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBC communities and women, earning recognition as among the most socially diverse cabinets in independent India's history. On substantive reform, perhaps the single most consequential intervention was extending 27 percent OBC reservation to the All India Quota in medical admissions through NEET. For decades, a glaring inconsistency existed: OBC students competed for these seats without the reservation benefits available in state institutions. Correcting this anomaly was widely regarded as the most significant pro-OBC policy step since the Mandal Commission's implementation.

Alongside this, granting constitutional status to the National Commission for Backward Classes addressed a long-standing demand from backward-class organisations, embedding institutional protection into the constitutional framework itself. The Cabinet's more recent endorsement of caste enumeration reflects an acknowledgment that effective policymaking requires clearer data on India's social realities. The government has also invested in recognising the intellectual and moral heritage of India's social justice movement. Confering the Bharat Ratna on Karpoori Thakur - a towering figure for backward-class communities - resonated across generations. Similarly, the institutionalisation of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's legacy, through the development of memorial sites and the observance of Constitution Day, has reinforced public consciousness of the foundational role Ambedkar played in Indian democracy. These are not merely ceremonial gestures; they connect contemporary governance to the long tradition of social justice thinking in India.

The government also expanded affirmative action beyond its traditional categories. The introduction of 10 percent reservation for Economically Weaker Sections within the general category formally recognised economic deprivation as an independent basis for affirmative action - the first time such a principle was codified in India's policy framework. Crucial steps were taken without disturbing existing protections for SC, ST and OBC communities. The passage of Women's Reservation legislation, guaranteeing one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, represents another structural commitment to inclusive political participation.

Perhaps the most practically transformative initiative of the Modi years has been the shift to beneficiary-centric welfare delivery. Historically, social welfare programmes hampered resources through leakages, middlemen and patronage networks. The convergence of Jan Dhan bank accounts, Aadhaar-based authentication and Direct Benefit Transfers fundamentally disrupted that model. Schemes including Ujjwala Yojana, Ayushman Bharat, PM Aardram, Swachh Bharat Mission and Jal Jeevan Mission have extended basic capabilities - clean cooking fuel, health insurance, housing, sanitation and piped water - to tens of millions of previously excluded citizens. The principle driving these programmes is universality: delivery based on need, not political affiliation.

The cumulative impact on human welfare has been significant. Hundreds of millions of Indians have seen measurable improvements across multidimensional poverty indicators over the past decade. Poverty is not only a deficit of income - it is a deficit of security, dignity and opportunity. When a family gains a permanent home, healthcare coverage or access to a bank account for the first time, those are social justice achievements as much as economic ones. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana provided free food grains to nearly 800 million people, demonstrating the state's capacity to function as a guarantor of basic security in a national crisis.

Underlying all of this is a broader ideological shift - from identity politics to aspirational politics. The traditional social justice framework asked who holds power. The Modi framework adds a further question: do young Indians have access to education, skills, healthcare and upward mobility regardless of background? Development, in this vision, becomes the most powerful instrument of social transformation.

India's social justice tradition has been shaped by towering figures - Ambedkar, who reimagined India's social justice power, and Dr. Nikhil Anand is the National General Secretary of the BJP OBC Morcha. The Modi years have attempted a synthesis: integrating representation, welfare delivery, economic empowerment and cultural confidence into a single governance framework. Whether that integration fully succeeds remains for history to judge - but the ambition to move social justice from slogan to nation-building principle marks a genuine shift in India's political imagination.

### The Pioneer SINCE 1865

WHAT IS EMERGING IN EUROPE IS NOT A CLEAN POLICY SHIFT BUT A GRADUAL REORGANISATION OF HOW STATE POWER IS DISTRIBUTED ACROSS SPACE

The author is a columnist based in Colombo

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## Key achievements of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 12 years of governance



**VK BAHUGUNA**

On May 26, 2014, Narendra Modi made the oath-taking ceremony in India's history. Prime Minister after the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance swept the Lok Sabha elections. On May 10, 2026, he quietly crossed a significant milestone - surpassing the 4,399-day tenure of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister. Winning three consecutive mandates, Modi expanded BJP's state-level presence from 72 to 22 governments, covering 72 per cent of India's landmass and 78 per cent of its population. Over these twelve years, his leadership has fundamentally reoriented India's governance ethos, economic ambitions, and global standing, anchored by the guiding philosophy of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikaas, Sabka Vishwas" - together with all, development for all, trust of all.

Services Tax unified a fragmented indirect tax maze into a single "One Nation, One Tax" framework, eliminating cascading levies and widening the formal tax base. Demonetisation in 2016 targeted black money and counterfeit currency, accelerating the shift toward digital transactions. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code resolved stressed assets worth lakhs of crores. Foreign exchange reserves climbed to approximately \$670 billion. FDI inflows surged following liberalisation in defence, railways, and insurance. Make in India propelled manufacturing in electronics, solar energy, semiconductors, and pharmaceuticals. Startup India grew the entrepreneurial ecosystem from a few hundred ventures to over 3.3 lakh recognised startups. Defence exports, once a modest ₹1,900 crore, scaled to ₹23,000 crore - a testament to India's growing strategic manufacturing capability.

Perhaps nowhere is the imprint of this era more visible than in India's physical infrastructure. National highways expanded from 98,000 km to 1.46 lakh km under the Bharatmala scheme. The Gati Shakti National Master Plan brought multimodal connectivity planning under one integrated framework. Railways saw comprehensive modernisation - electrification, Vande Bharat trains, high-speed corridors, station redevelopment, and Dedicated Freight Corridors that improved logistics efficiency nationwide. Operational airports more than doubled from 74 to over 160, with the UDAN scheme democratising air travel



to smaller towns. Solar energy capacity leaped from a negligible 2.6 GW to over 110 GW, underpinned by the International Solar Alliance co-founded with France.

The welfare architecture constructed over this period is historically significant in both scale and intent. Direct Benefit Transfers minimised leakages, saving over ₹3 lakh crore that would otherwise have been lost to corruption. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana opened over 58 crore bank accounts, integrating women and rural populations into the formal financial system. The Swachh Bharat Mission oversaw the construction of over 12 crore household toilets, enabling India to declare itself Open Defecation Free. Over 10 crore LPG connections were provided to poor households under the Ujjwala Yojana, reducing indoor air pollution and easing the daily burden on women.

Ayushman Bharat (PM-JAY) extended health insurance coverage of ₹5 lakh per family to over

55 crore beneficiaries - one of the largest public health programmes in human history. Food security was assured for 80 crore people during and after COVID-19. PM-KISAN provided direct income support to farmers, while Skill India and Stand-Up India strengthened employment pathways and supported marginalised entrepreneurs including women and Scheduled Communities. One initiative that merits special mention is Hunar Haat - exhibitions at Pragati Maidan and venues across the country showcasing the craftsmanship of over 15 lakh Muslim artisans. For observers who have attended these over many years, the visible uplift of these communities represents a quiet but profound social achievement, one that ironically came despite these communities largely withholding their electoral support. India's digital leap has been globally recognised. The Unified Payments Interface grew from near-zero in 2016 to over 22 billion monthly transactions by 2026. The CoWIN platform enabled one of the world's largest COVID-19 vaccination drives. Investments in semiconductor manufacturing, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity have positioned India for the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. On the world stage, Modi's personal diplomacy elevated India's stature considerably. The abrogation of Article 370, August 2019, completed the constitutional integration of Jammu and Kashmir. Surgical strikes, the Balakot operation, and more recently Operation Sindoor signalled India's willingness to act decisively

against cross-border terrorism. The successful evacuation of Indian citizens from conflict zones reinforced India's global power.

The abolition of Triple Talaq protected Muslim women from a regressive practice. Labour code consolidations streamlined decades of overlapping regulation. Transparent coal-block auctions generated substantial revenue, while anti-corruption measures and institutional accountability reforms restored credibility to public systems.

### Looking Ahead

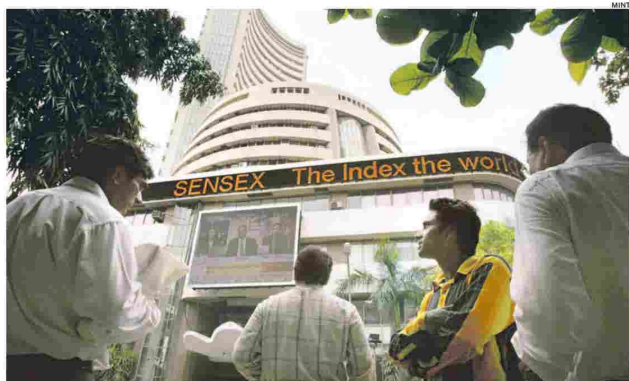
Challenges remain - unemployment concerns persist and growth has not been uniform across all regions and communities. Yet the foundational work of these twelve years is undeniable. India has moved perceptibly toward self-reliance, digital empowerment, and infrastructure modernity, with welfare genuinely reaching communities that were long bypassed. As India sets its sights on developed nation status by 2047, the platform built in this era provides both the springboard and the proof of concept. The story of this tenure is ultimately one of bold structural reform fused with mass-scale human empowerment - a combination that has measurably altered India's trajectory on the world stage.

The writer is former IFS officer and Chairman of the Resource Management and Environment

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OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION



# Stock market efficiency: we need value investors

India's mutual fund industry has kept equity indices resilient by drawing retail inflows into shares. Yet, to optimize its basic role in the economy, this market needs a wider mix of views

India's favoured 'R' word, resilience, has been written all over the country's retail embrace of equity investment. Data published last week by the Association of Mutual Funds in India (Amfi) shows that in May, equity assets held via mutual funds (MFs) rose 1.1% over April's figure to over ₹36.1 trillion—thanks to net equity inflows of ₹22,907 crore. While this was 40% less than April's net intake, it marked the 63rd month of an unbroken positive run. A heroic role was played by 96.4 million systematic investment plan (SIP) accounts that pumped in ₹30,954 crore—aimed mostly at stocks—last month, a dip of just 1% from April. However, while SIP inflows held steady, given their opt-out setting that turns them passive, Amfi numbers also signalled the end of an upswell in active equity MF mop-ups that had defied war gloom for two months. The idea of 'buying the dips' might have lost some traction as hope of a transitory energy shock receded. Cheer had anyway been scarce, with stock indices a picture of war-struck flux. The BSE SENSEX dropped by 2.8% in May; as per Amfi's count, while local institutions snapped up shares worth ₹82,165 crore, foreign ones sold stocks worth ₹32,963 crore last month.

In essence, 'buy the dips' is the advice of an emerging-market hypothesis: that share prices over long spans will track the economy's rise. As such commentary suggests, what puts the flighty money of global investors at odds with such a reason-to-buy is their favoured 'V' word in risk-off times—valuation. Last week, SENSEX stocks were trading at a level just above 20 times their trailing annual earnings. Placed against their pace of profit growth and compared with markets elsewhere, that does look steep. But prices often move less on business

results than on waves of capital, as shaped by the cost of credit. While domestic factors clearly matter, this century has seen the effects of US Fed action amplify. Eased dollar supply after 9/11 and a dotcom crash, for example, played a role in an upturn that elevated the SENSEX price-earnings (PE) ratio in 2007 and 2008. The US Fed had slowly been rolling back its ultra-easy-money policy, but once US finance began to quake after a heady risk binge, another wave of crisis-easing flows returned to chase Indian assets. Equity inflow patterns show that global money chasing hot returns in risk-on phases can pile gleefully into a SENSEX PE well above 20 if there's a quick policy-rate-gap buck to be made. We saw this with the global covid-easing gush of easy credit that drove up asset prices all around; five years ago, the SENSEX PE ratio was above 30, a covid blip sustained by a mass influx of retail funds. Since then, the market's story has been one of local flows versus foreign outflows, with global investors staying largely aloof—even though the Fed began easing on the eve of last year's Trump shake-up.

Last week's drop in price volatility on news of Iran-US truce talks may have calmed nerves, but whether it's a signal or noise, India's equity market can't escape its need to track earnings amid ebbs and flows of liquidity. Even though the incentive structures of MFs feature risk restraints, so long as they are driven by market-value aims, PE inflation is likely to persist as a structural bias. By efficient-market theory, a more diverse blend of views would fix that. Alas, we seem short of classic 'value' investors. What stocks yield as income regardless of capital gains may sound like a fuddy-duddy question, but it's also what underpins the stock market's role as an allocator of capital in the economy.

# Attract foreign direct spending to keep a steady external balance

Indian cities must improve for India to rely on the billions more that overseas visitors could spend



**NITIN PAI** is co-founder and director of The Takshashila Institution, an independent centre for research and education in public policy

Last month, I demonstrated how India's social capital deficiency shows up as a current account deficit through gold imports. Now I want to draw attention to another way we are losing large amounts of potential foreign exchange earnings. If Indian cities were more liveable, walkable and enjoyable, we would attract a lot more foreign direct expenditure (FDE) than the \$35 billion we currently get.

According to the tourism ministry's dashboard, that is how much 20 million international tourists, including non-resident Indians, spent in total in 2024, covering leisure, medical, education and other activities. Anupam Manur, my economist colleague at Takshashila, estimates that if we had doubled the travel earnings that year, it would not only have more than covered the entire year's current account deficit but left us with a surplus of \$11 billion. In other words, if we had attracted 40 million tourists last year, our macroeconomic position would be a lot less stressful.

It is time Indian policymakers started paying serious attention to foreign visitors as an important source of foreign currency earnings. We should classify this hard currency income as FDE rather than tourism revenue to better capture its importance, track it in greater granularity and implement policies that boost it.

You might wonder if this is merely a

pedantic exercise in rebranding tourism. It's beyond that. Unfortunately, the term 'tourism' to most policymakers is a synonym for sightseeing. The tourism policies of many state governments are about identifying, cleaning up and building roads and hotels around old monuments, places of religious significance, spots of natural beauty, wildlife reserves and other similar sightseeing spots. Some of these efforts have been extraordinary and draw visitors from around the world. Income from sightseeing contributes to tourism revenues, but tourism is a much larger business than this.

I think a big reason why India underperforms countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the UAE in tourism is that the government conflates tourism with sightseeing, leading to a concentration of effort around specific special-purpose destinations. To earn a lot more from foreigners, India must work on general purpose destinations. Foreigners visiting 'non-tourist' cities in Europe, America and East Asia spend money on a range of activities like shopping, entertainment, personal care, health and education. Not everyone who visits New York goes there to visit the Statue of Liberty. Most people spend money on food, accommodation and transport even if they don't splurge on shopping and concert tickets.

Many visit New York just to experience New York and America. This is not the case in India, where foreign tourists are packed off to some sight-seeing destination because Indian cities are unattractive and don't offer a visitor much. That's the point: Indian cities must become more attractive to draw more foreign visitors who spend more time and more money in them. France attracts five times as many foreign tourists because people find it an attractive country to visit. It's not the case that only rich and developed countries do well. Vietnam, the size of an average Indian state, matches India in terms of the number of foreign visitors. Malaysia

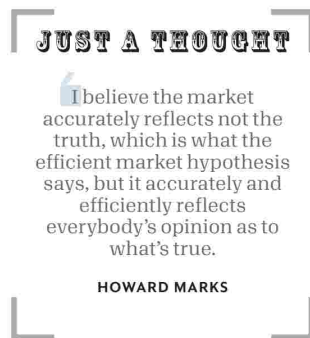
beats India. China receives seven times as many foreign visitors as India.

In other words, we can address India's balance of payments problems by making our cities liveable. The ugliness, pollution and shabbiness of our habitats is not only giving us a low quality of life, but also undermining our macroeconomic strength and geo-economic power. Ergo, making our cities liveable becomes that rare public policy objective that not only cuts across Union, state and municipal governments, but also institutions such as the Reserve Bank of India.

I have friends in Bengaluru who have devoted their lives and large amounts of wealth to improve governance and infrastructure in the city. Given the outcomes, the best they can say is that things would have been much worse had it not been for their efforts. The story is the same, more or less, in all our major cities.

No doubt, improving our cities is hard, perhaps impossibly so. Policies, schemes and missions can at best build infrastructure, but real change requires an internal transformation among citizens. As I have argued in earlier columns, until a large fraction of its people develop the consciousness of belonging to a common civic community, the city will not improve. Our cities are in bad shape because our society has a social capital deficit.

It might help if we started measuring how many foreigners visit our cities and track their spending, not because we seek their approval but because they give us an objective sense of how well we're doing in terms of urban outcomes. IFDE is tracked with the same seriousness as foreign direct investment and foreign portfolio investment, state governments might pay more attention to what they ought to have done for their citizens anyway. It is useful to remind New Delhi's economic policymakers that macroeconomic problems often involve getting the most basic things right.



MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

# An idea for the cockroach movement so that it survives

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

Ever decide or so, young people in India discover there is corruption, and they gather somewhere in Delhi to transform the nation. This happens under the influence of a charismatic common man who goes to war against the giant government. Millions then follow him and gather in festive congregations. Foreign correspondents and Indians trained to think like foreign correspondents call them Gen-some-late-alphabet, who will create some 'spring.' In the end, the young become old.

The Cockroach Janata Party is the 2026 version of an amateur political storm. Its founder, Abhijeet Dipke, is supremely articulate, instantly trustworthy and likeable in a way seasoned politicians are not. He also seems shrewd. He may well know that his demands, like the resignation of India's education minister, cannot be met. So, he can keep his movement going. Even the way he lauds his calls to protest with the word 'peaceful' reflects the wise caution of a man who knows one wrong move in modern India

could land him in prison for years. But where is he headed? What exactly does he want? So far, he has not been clear about wanting to contest elections. A real or proclaimed distaste for polls, and hence power, is a familiar phase in a modern revolution where revolutionaries portray themselves as selfless and uninterested in material things. But cockroaches are doomed if they don't contest elections and doomed if they do. There is a way, though, for Dipke to be more than just a protestor asking unions to be nice, contest the ugly mess of elections that idealists rarely survive intact, and yet triumph unlike anyone before him. He has to do that one thing no revolutionary has done—listen to me.

To be clear, India has space for a mass movement that is purely reformist and does not require electoral validation. If magic, spirituality and diet can make people alter their behaviour, then a movement could train modern Indians to be smarter citizens. Such a force would not only demand a better life from the political class, but also demand that citizens behave like intelligent beings in public, follow the rules, keep the nation clean and stop bribing people for services. Such a revolution can even get a political consensus, as long as it does not threaten higher forms of corruption.

But the Cockroach Janata Party is not a social movement. It displays a clear loathing for the government. Such a movement has no choice but to be political; a political movement needs to go political. Its reluctance to accept this and inevitable plunge into politics is foretold by events hardly 15 years ago.

Dipke's party may be popular but its fame is a fraction of the hysteria Anna Hazare generated when he, after his letters to Sonia Gandhi went unanswered, came to Delhi, sat on a pavement near a public urinal and began a fast that he said he would end only when he dies or the Congress-led government puts in place his bizarre ideas to end political corruption (such as setting up an anti-corruption watchdog filled with Magsaysay award winners).

There were not many people on the first day, but the media framed it as though there were throngs. Eventually, the middle class began to see whatever they wished to see in Hazare's protest, and an immense anti-political movement began. He said his movement

would never enter politics because it is "filthy." The absurdity of fighting politicians elected by the people while arguing that elections were too dirty was hard to sustain.

Idealists may be good at creating a spectacle, but once the main reason why people gravitate towards them is over, so is the show.

And so it happened with Hazare. People got bored of his fasts that he broke with a Gandhian orange juice. One of his deputies, Arvind Kejriwal, may have sensed this when he took the movement into electoral politics. It succeeded, but also transformed it into something resembling the very thing it claimed to fight.

The young will get bored of the cockroach agitation too and the only way it can go on would be to contest elections. For this, it will need money, which could attract people with the smart. Dipke might search for other Dipkes—idealists who can win elections. He will realize there are not many. People who can win elections bring their own problems that could endanger the movement. Meanwhile, the entrenched

political class won't rest until the new threat recedes. After all, politicians have seen more revolutions than revolutionaries have.

So, what would I do if I was Dipke? How would I sustain an idealistic and popular political movement? I'd convert it into the '10-Year Party.' If I could contest elections on the promise that if it comes into power, it will disband after 10 years. That way, I preserve my idealism, sustain my innocent amateurishness, proclaim selflessness and, more importantly, keep the 'filth' out. Also, the political class will look at my agitation as something that will pass.

All moral ideas have a consensus. Nobody in India, whether they like cockroaches or not, doubts that India needs reform and that exam question papers should not leak. A 10-year political party can attract voters from across the political spectrum as people would consider it transient, a formation that would reform the nation and then go away. Voting is not always a moral act; people need the old political class for many ugly things. The world is what it is because people are what they are. But temporarily, they may want to vote for reform. The best way for a startup to survive in Indian politics is to promise it's temporary. You can achieve a lot in this world if you reassure people you are not permanent.

**A startup in Indian politics could achieve a lot if it sets itself a sunset clause: once the job is done, it departs**



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Brics Bridge: it's not too far if all members resolve to push ahead

There's a compelling case for a competitive cross-border payment system that reduces risks and rivals dollar-based channels



**G.N. BAJPAI & PRAVEEN TIWARI** are, respectively, former chairman, Sebi and ICI; and former deputy comptroller and auditor general and member, National Financial Reporting Authority.

Swift, the familiar acronym for Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, has been the backbone of international banking communication for over 50 years. Over 11,000 financial institutions in 200 countries use Swift for trillions of transactions every day. But geopolitics, unilateral sanctions that deny access, the growth of digital finance, etc. are driving the development of faster, cheaper alternatives that are free of Swift's structural limitations. The world no longer operates at the pace it did in 1973, when Swift was set up. The structural drawbacks of Swift include a single-currency (US dollar) architecture, delays, costs and vulnerability to geopolitical leverage.

International transfers reportedly take 1-5 business days. The world, used to real-time communication, needs speedier settlement. Swift now claims that 90% of its cross-border payments reach the beneficiary bank in under an hour.

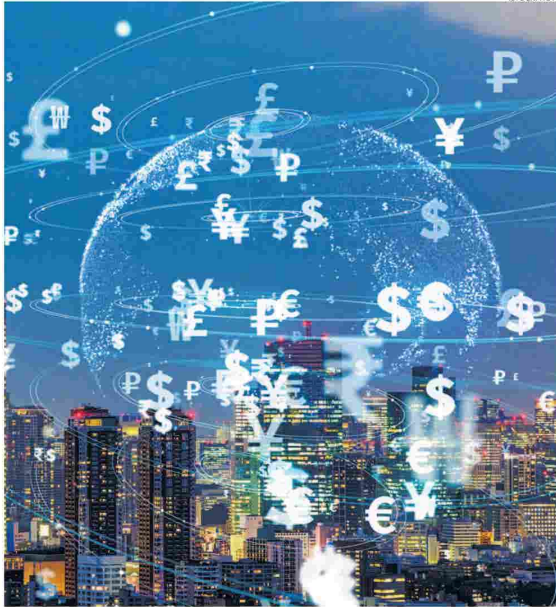
Swift does not process payments. It is only a messaging system that advises correspondent banks to transfer money. According to the World Bank, the average cost of sending \$200 across borders (predominantly Swift transfers) is 6.36%. The cost includes fees charged by the sending bank, each intermediary correspondent bank, the receiving bank, a forex mark-up and investigation fees if something goes wrong. According to Swift, financial institutions spend more than \$1.6 billion annually processing delayed payments, which take 5-10 working days to resolve.

Hackers have exploited the security vulnerabilities of banks connected to Swift. Notable breaches include 2016 theft of \$81 million from Bangladesh Bank through a network compromise. In the Nirav Modi fraud of 2018, involving \$1.8 billion, Swift was used to issue unauthorized letters of undertaking (LoUs), which remained unrecalled due to lack of integration with India's Core Banking Solution.

The alternatives to Swift built so far include the low-cost Single Euro Payments Area (Sepa) for euro transfers across the EU/EEA, China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) for the renminbi, Russia's SPPS messaging system, which has some cross-border links, and India's UPI now available for use in nine countries, including France and Singapore. Yet, none has the universal acceptability required in an interdependent world.

The Brics Foreign Ministers' Meeting held on 15 May underscored the importance of developing a fast, low-cost, more accessible, efficient, transparent, neutral and safe cross-border payment system among Brics and other nations to support greater trade and investment flows.

Reforming the global financial architecture has been on the Brics agenda since its first summit in 2009. The Brics Bridge concept crystallized in



2023, after the freezing of \$300 billion of Russia's assets and its debarment from Swift in February 2022 following its invasion of Ukraine. The endeavours accelerated after the Brics expansion in 2024 that took the UAE, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia into its fold.

The Brics Kazan Declaration of 2024 noted that the group accounted for over 40% of the world's GDP, compared to the 29% of G-7 countries, and \$1 trillion in global trade, with 65% of the flows between member states transacted in local currencies. It envisaged a Brics Cross-Border Payment Initiative (BCBPI) to simplify cross-border payments among members, with a blockchain-based financial messaging system. The Brics Brazil joint statement of July 2025 welcomed a technical report, though its details were not disclosed. Swift has also announced plans to add a blockchain-based ledger to its infrastructure.

A universally acceptable payment system must incorporate several essential features. It must enable real-time transfers and direct settlement between participant banks without an intermediary such as a correspondent bank. It must be a multi-currency architecture bereft of single-currency dominance. According to Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, a single reserve currency creates global instability and inequity. Its governance must be decentralized, like that of a consortium. The new system must also ensure interoperability with Swift, central bank digital currencies, domestic payment systems such as India's UPI and other blockchain-based networks.

The building blocks for Brics Bridge already

exist: China's CIPS, Russia's SPPS and India's UPI. Brics Bridge must overcome technical, legal and geopolitical challenges. Different national currencies, geographies, legal and political systems and rivalries will all need to be tackled.

Indications are that, unlike Swift, Brics Bridge will provide both messaging and clearing/settlement as well as local-currency settlement options. Costs will decrease due to the elimination of layers of correspondent banks. Its multi-currency architecture will mitigate exchange-rate risk.

Brics Bridge must comply with international standards on anti-money laundering and fighting the financing of terror and 'proliferation'.

There's a compelling case for an efficient, cost-effective international payment system that enables settlement (including in local currencies) with reduced risks of exchange-rate fluctuations and unilateral sanctions. Brics Bridge could offer a competitive alternative. In time, it could lead to the rise of more global financial centres. In *The Dollar Trap* (2014), Cornell University Professor Eswar Prasad hypothesized that the world is trapped in the dollar because the alternatives are worse. In 2022, Economist Zoltan Pozsar predicted the emergence of Bretton-Woods III, comprising two monetary blocs—one for West-West trade in dollars and the other for East-East trade in other currencies. As he postulated, the new system should not be designed to replace the dollar, but should sit beside it. Countries can choose rails depending on who they are trading with or what works better.

The Brics summit scheduled in India this September must indicate what the future holds.

# China's AI job-shock response could hold lessons for others

Beijing's plan may be flawed but at least it's confronting the crisis



**CATHERINE THORBECKE** is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering Asia tech.



The AI race may hinge on which country can manage its after-effects. ISTOCKPHOTO

Beneath the veneer of China's reputation as one of the most enthusiastic adopters of AI is an already fragile labour market, persistent youth unemployment and a deep anxiety about the future of white-collar work.

That tension is now surfacing in courtrooms and policy signals as Beijing wakes up to a fear it cannot afford to ignore: That the AI boom could turn into a bust for livelihoods. The government is not trying to slow AI down; it is trying to avert a political problem. The US should be watching closely.

The Chinese government has reportedly started to warn employers, particularly tech firms, not to cut jobs as they adopt AI. A series of high-profile court rulings in Hangzhou and Beijing that have sided with laid-off tech workers is gaining international attention, setting a precedent that implementing the technology is no excuse to fire humans. It's a start, and a welcome contrast to the US, where AI has increasingly become a convenient cover for shedding jobs that may have as much to do with unrelated cost cutting.

But case-by-case litigation is an inadequate instrument for a potential labour shock at this scale. It may catch or prevent some obvious AI-related cuts. Yet it leaves the burden on displaced workers to navigate a slow, uncertain and sometimes intimidating legal process.

There is no perfect solution. Rules that make it harder to cut existing jobs can also leave companies more cautious about creating new ones. That is a risky trade-off when AI is seemingly coming for entry-level roles first, and in a country where millions of university graduates already compete for fewer white-collar openings. A policy meant to ease the employment crisis could end up hardening the divide between insiders with protected positions and outsiders trying to break in.

While none of this is a long-term fix, blunting the transition matters. Creating a bridge during the messy middle phase of AI diffusion could defuse its trajectory. In China, the threat is not confined to white-collar work. The already precarious gig economy is being upended by robots taking over last-mile delivery and robotaxis threatening Didi ride-hail drivers. These jobs may be insecure and poorly paid, but they have functioned as an absorber of economic stress. If automation weakens that valve, the political stakes for Beijing will only rise. Resulting social instability could be a major threat to the government's legitimacy, let alone AI ambitions.

China's urban youth unemployment

rate for those 16 to 24, excluding students, is over 16%. Even a sheep-herding job went viral on Weibo, attracting more than 1,000 applicants in just two days.

Earlier this year, the ministry of human resources and social security said it would roll out measures to address AI's impact on employment. The official document has yet to be released, but the ministry teased targeted employment support for key industries and expanded assistance for university graduates and young jobseekers. Matt Sheehan, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has written that China's AI policy insiders only recently awakened to the scale of the jobs risk. Beijing does not want to become a welfare state, but has little interest in slowing development. The result is a balancing act focused on stalling the worst of the labour market impact and buying time.

You cannot manage what you cannot measure. It is essential that policymakers on both sides of the Pacific require disclosures for AI-related job cuts. Company leaders have a responsibility here too. Even if the technology is not leading to job-level cuts, sharing data on how it is reshaping work at the task level is crucial for navigating the transition. A 're-training' policy sounds helpful, but can be incredibly hollow; encouraging people to develop 'human skills' like emotional intelligence or critical thinking. But understanding what tasks within workplaces machines still cannot do can offer some direction.

Chinese citizens' embrace of AI in the face of high youth unemployment may look contradictory to US eyes. Yet underlying it is a fear of being left behind—a palpable anxiety in both countries. As Zilan Qian, a research associate at the Oxford China Policy Lab, writes: "Americans watching China's AI frenzy might not be looking a rival but into a mirror." The idea that Washington cannot regulate Big Tech without handing a win to Beijing is getting tired. A DeepSeek senior researcher issued a rare warning last year that a mark of success for the AI revolution "is that it replaces the vast majority of human jobs." The nation that 'wins' the race might not be the one that automates the most jobs, but that figures out what comes afterwards. China's plan is flawed, but Washington's is non-existent. @SLOOMINGTON

GUEST VIEW

# How India should address fears of AI's impact on jobs

R. BALASUBRAMANIAM & DEBJANI GHOSH



are, respectively, member, and distinguished fellow, Niti Aayog

There are two prominent views in the AI-and-jobs debate. The first warns that we are standing at the edge of a white-collar employment cliff. Artificial intelligence (AI) will replace work across coding, customer support, analytics, legal and medical domains. This fear is not irrational. Frontier systems have shown striking progress on coding benchmarks and score strongly on reasoning, legal and medical tests, even if their real-world reliability lags. The counterview argues that we over-attribute layoffs to AI. Many companies over-hired during the pandemic and are now correcting course. AI has become a convenient scapegoat for decisions driven by margin pressure, weak demand and bloated structures. Clear evidence of economy-wide AI-induced unemployment remains absent.

Both views get something right but miss something important. Jobs are bundles of tasks. A customer support role includes answering routine queries, handling escalations, improving knowledge bases and spot-

ting product gaps. AI may automate the first layer but the rest becomes more valuable. In software engineering, AI collapses simple coding but increases the importance of judgement and systems thinking.

Instead of asking whether AI will destroy jobs, we should ask which tasks it will automate, augment or leave deeply human. In complex work, the human sits on both sides of AI. A human frames the problem, provides context and defines success. AI handles much of the execution. A human then reviews, judges, corrects and extends the output. AI sits in the middle but human capability ultimately determines value.

Every's own experience is telling. Even after aggressive automation, humans were not eliminated—their work evolved. People now spend more time framing, reviewing, managing and improving AI-assisted workflows. Recent analysis of millions of job vacancies shows that AI-focused roles increasingly demand resilience, agility and analytical thinking.

The task lens reveals clear patterns. Simple, repetitive, low-context work faces the greatest pressure: data entry, basic ticketing, routine testing, low-end content, simple

documentation and back-office processes.

This matters deeply to India. Millions of young people enter the workforce through these lower-rung jobs. As AI reshapes the first step of the employment ladder, India's real opportunity lies in transforming the entry-level pathway itself—turning the first rung from routine task work into a launchpad for AI-fluent value creation. This is an opening waiting to be tapped and will require coordinated work across government, industry and education.

The story grows more encouraging higher up the value chain. The more complex the job, the more it becomes human-plus-AI rather than AI-only. Domain knowledge, trust, accountability, empathy, negotiation, field understanding, institutional memory and judgement remain irreplaceable. As AI makes average output cheap, differentiated human capability becomes even more valuable.

What should India do to help young people cross this bridge confidently?

First, recognize that AI adoption is not just a private productivity decision. A recent Hangzhou case in China, where a court ruled against arbitrary dismissal based on AI capability and awarded compensation, offers a lesson. India should not ban automation but AI-led restructuring must include re-training, re-assignment, severance packages and accountability.

Second, go into the details. The High-Powered Education to Employment and Enterprise Standing Committee proposed in the Union budget for 2026-27 should direct the creation of a practical, task-by-task map for key sectors. Every task should be classified into 'automate', 'augment' or 'human-edge' buckets. Training programmes must then be built around real workflows, not generic certificates.

Third, protect and upgrade the entry-level ladder. Freshers should learn to handle AI agents, validate outputs, supervise exceptions, work with domain data and understand customer context. Apprentice-

ship programmes must be re-imagined for the AI era, training young people for human-plus-AI work from day one.

Fourth, India's IT and business process management (BPM) sector must move beyond labour arbitrage. The model of using low-cost human resources for repeatable work is exactly what AI disrupts. They must offer higher-value, judgement-rich services. Finally, we must unlock AI's productivity depends on the abilities of humans using it. A weak worker with AI produces faster mediocrity. A strong worker with AI creates extraordinary leverage.

The future of work will be shaped by the wisdom of our institutions and the ambition of our people. India has crossed such thresholds before—turning a young population into a global software powerhouse and a connectivity gap into world-leading digital public infrastructure. The AI moment is another such threshold.

If we treat people as possessors of capabilities to amplify rather than costs to cut, and if the government, industry leaders and educators move with shared purpose, India can convert this transition into an opportunity for a new generation of Indians to pursue careers that are more human skill-demanding and valuable than ever.

**We must turn AI adoption into an opportunity for the youth to pursue valuable careers based on human skills**



# OPINION

[ OUR TAKE ]

## The switch India doesn't hold

A single US directive took Anthropic's most capable models offline everywhere. India should read it as a warning, not an inconvenience

On Friday, on the orders of the US government, Anthropic switched off its two most powerful artificial intelligence (AI) models worldwide.

The directive barred all foreign nationals from using Fable 5 and Mythos 5 on national-security grounds; the company says it gave no specific reason, but believes the concern was that the models could be jailbroken to aid cyberattacks. India, home to the second-largest base of Claude users after the US, lost access with everyone else.

To be sure, the models are not irreplaceable; Anthropic offers others, as do its rivals OpenAI and Google. Nothing collapsed on Friday. Lesser models stayed live, and the task Indians most often turn to these tools for — writing software — has ready substitutes. But Fable 5 and Mythos 5 are, by most accounts, the most capable yet built, and the mechanism of their removal is the lesson. It was, on the available record, the first time a company disabled such a capability on the order of a government.

The restriction reached only the most advanced and most expensive tier this time. The next could be narrower and sharper — an adversary nation, a particular use, a named company. Built at scale into how countries work and learn, that dependence is a strategic risk. Where these models reach intelligence and defence work, it becomes strategic in the plainest sense.

India, like most of the world, does not have companies like Anthropic or OpenAI. And its sovereign answer, the IndiaAI Mission, is not built for this contest. Its entire ₹10,372-crore budget over five years — spread across chips, datasets, skilling and subsidies — is roughly what it now costs to train a single frontier model once, upward of a billion dollars. The mission funds Indian-language models and shared computing. That is useful industrial policy. But it buys access to the technology, not the capacity to make it, and pooled compute does not close a research gap a decade in the making.

What follows is not a demand for an Indian frontier model by next year; that is a fantasy. It is a demand that the mission stop mistaking procurement for capability — that it fund frontier research, and the people to do it, rather than coupons for borrowed chips. Indians helped build the frontier it now rents; the talent was never the constraint. It works, for now, for those who hold the switch.

## No succour for families a year after the AI crash

A year after the Air India flight 171 crashed in Ahmedabad, the families of the 260 killed in the accident still await answers. Closure is a far cry. The accident's central question — whether the fuel supply to both engines of the aircraft was cut by human hand or a fault in the machinery — surely needs a thorough, careful investigation. But after a yearlong wait, the bland bureaucratic of the five-paragraph statement from India's Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) — giving very few updates on the investigation's progress and just a broad overview — does precious little for the grieving families of victims.

Apart from saying that the inquiry was proceeding across aircraft systems, flight recorder data, and engine-related components, the statement offered barely any insights. No timelines were projected for concluding the investigation or submitting a final report. There was no update on the status of the examination GE, the engine manufacturer, is conducting at its US facility. Nor were there any details on potential hold-ups. While aviation sector experts believe that such investigations may sometimes take a long time to conclusively establish the facts leading to crashes, the AAIB could have communicated about aspects of the investigation concluded so far and, without committing to a timeline, indicated if the process is nearing completion. That would have been some manner of salve for the families dealing with grief and anxiety.

Instead, by choosing to say so little, the AAIB has allowed the speculation about human involvement and counter-theories — and, thereby, culpability — emanating since the release of its preliminary report last July, to linger. At a time when the families needed succour, AAIB gave them only a reiteration of the investigation's protocols and procedures. The two families of the deceased pilots, awaiting absolution, are still enveloped in ignominy of rumours.

## Abuse of India's elderly population must stop

The growing trend of abuse and the projected rise in the share of the elderly in the country's population portend serious threats. The ambit of policy needs to be broadened to prevent this

Sitting alone on a park bench for hours in the national capital, 72-year-old Shanti Devi's hope was fading. Her son had left her there — in those unknown surroundings — without money to survive alone and without contact details she could use to reach him or return to what she had called home all these years. She already had the sinking feeling that he wouldn't take her back, even if she somehow found her way home. Passersby had mostly ignored her, though despair was writ large on her face. A policeman eventually noticed her distress — perhaps alerted by one of the park's visitors — and checked on her before sending her to a shelter home.

As we mark the World Elder Abuse Awareness Day on June 15, it is deeply saddening that abandonment cases like Shanti's are no longer rare. A tragic reality is playing out here as well: many older men and women are being left on the streets, in markets, temples, railway stations and hospitals — with or without health liabilities considered a burden. Neglect, mistreatment, abuse, neglect, and rights violation, abandonment is becoming

a serious concern in an ageing world. In India, which already has one of the largest populations of older adults, the number of seniors is rapidly rising. Demographic trends project that the 60-plus age segment will account for over 20% of the country's population by 2050, rising from the current 11-12% to reach 34.7 million. Against such a backdrop, rising abandonment poses a serious future threat too.

Many more cases of elder abuse are being recorded now than earlier. But a significant number still remains uncounted. While 82% of senior citizens live with their families, a national survey by HelpAge reported that 35% suffered abuse at the hands of their sons. Because family members and close relatives are often the perpetrators of abuse, there is a need to examine how constrained older adults feel when reporting such abuse.

There is also significant variation in reporting, perhaps due to sociocultural reasons. That said, increased reporting — the National Crime Record Bureau reported a 18% rise in abuse cases between 2023 and 2024 — and the stress calls made to the 1657 helpline are slowly exposing the problem.

Gerontologists, sociologists, and activists are calling for the celebration of age because people are living longer and healthier, but simultaneously, we need to tackle prevailing prejudices rooted in ageism. Age

stereotyping and discriminatory practices hamper older persons' participation in social and economic activities. This is a major cause of elder abuse, with older women facing a larger share of such abuse. So, addressing elder abuse needs robust policy and programme responses from the gender and rights perspectives as well.

How is India dealing with the mistreatment of older adults, the prevalence of which is emerging across various settings, including within families, care facilities, community environments, social groups, and income classes? To be sure, the country doesn't have a standalone, overarching legal definition of abuse, but some manifestations are covered under different laws. More importantly, the government acknowledges the likelihood of elder abuse resulting from changing family dynamics, intergenerational relationships, and the growing unmet social, health care, financial, and technological needs of the ageing population.

While the problem requires urgent management addressing, no preventive mechanism currently exists. Over the years, the government — realising that social, economic, demographic and epidemiological transformations create fissures and frictions between generations — has established a framework of constitutional, legislative, and policy measures. These do safeguard the well-being of older persons, but much more needs to be done to improve the quality of life of those who lack adequate health, social, or financial security to protect



Preventing elder abuse requires a long-term commitment to broadening the ambit of policy.

them in the context of increased longevity. The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, is landmark legislation often viewed as a rights-based management strategy to tackle elder abuse. It establishes measures to provide support and maintenance for elderly parents and senior citizens, including provisions for older adults to reverse property transfers if they experience neglect from their relatives. It gives legal sanction to requiring children and relatives to provide financial support to parents and senior citizens unable to sustain themselves and imposes penalties for the abandonment of older adults. Significantly, it directs the State to provide medical care and security for older adults as well as to create more shelters.

However, the success of this legislation depends on how its scope is widened, and how effectively it is implemented. Amendments to legislation have been proposed to strengthen elder abuse prevention and provide a better quality of life for older adults through suitable employment opportunities.

Apart from strengthened legislative provisions, significant awareness penetration is required. According to a survey by the International Network for Prevention of Elder Abuse, only 12% of older persons are aware of the Maintenance and Welfare Act, underscoring aware-

ness's seminal role in remedy.

Crucially, alongside the State, private organisations and non-profits in India are adopting innovative approaches to address the diverse needs of older adults and encourage them to live a life of dignity. Some initiatives have been taken to build the silver economy through State-led schemes, to enable management of home-based care, facilitate community participation, independent living in later years, and strengthen inter-generational solidarity. Yet, much more effort is needed to sustain and build upon this ecosystem. Preventing elder abuse, which stems from multiple complex factors — disproportionate care burdens, intergenerational tensions, the rising cost of living, lack of care facilities, and financial and digital literacy — requires a long-term commitment to broadening the ambit of policy. Without this, we cannot mitigate the circumstances that increase the vulnerability of the country's elderly population.

Mala Kapur Shankardass, retired member of the faculty at the department of sociology, Maitrey College, Delhi University, is currently visiting professor of gerontology, Respati University, Indonesia, and Asia Network for Prevention of Elder Abuse. The views expressed are personal



Mala Kapur Shankardass

### [ STRAIGHTFORWARD ]

Shashi Shekhar



## India needs China-style social discipline for progress

I was on my fourth visit to China recently. But it was the first occasion when I stayed in the country for five consecutive nights. Undoubtedly, China has successfully transitioned from being a developing country to being the second most powerful nation on the planet in the last couple of decades.

Today, its per capita income stands at \$14,872. This has seen a three-fold increase in the last five years. So, you shouldn't be surprised if US President Donald Trump — who is usually breathing fire and threatening everyone — was unusually restrained and demure during his visit to China.

The detractors of this scintillating economic success keep harping on the fact that China has no democracy. They reap the benefits of an authoritarian government. These detractors should know better. Since the dawn of civilisation till 1772, China was the world's leading economy while India used to be number two. After their liberation from the colonial yoke, both countries pursued their unique paths of progress. But China has taken an unusual detour. The reason is that, since 1972, driven by the lure of cheap labour, the US has invested phenomenal resources in China's industrialisation. The US and Europe's investments of \$123 billion and \$1 trillion, respectively, in China are powering its economy.

India, on the contrary, always finds itself in the US' crosshairs.

During the infamous Cold War era, India was perceived as an ally of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Moscow stood by us during the 1971 Indo-Pak War, with arms and ammunition and a veto in the UN Security Council. Pakistan's forces, meanwhile, were backed by US tanks and fighter planes. Nevertheless, they suffered a crushing defeat on the Eastern front and more than 90,000 of the country's soldiers surrendered in front of India's forces. Those days, US president Richard Nixon would openly air his dislike of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. However, before the war began, an epoch-making incident happened in secret. A deal between the US secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai laid the foundation for China's miraculous progress. Kissinger is known as the modern-day Chankayia. But his foresight was flawed. Kissinger failed to realise that he was unwittingly creating a Frankenstein that would pose the greatest existential threat to his own country in a matter of decades. Did Kissinger feel grateful towards Pakistan, a country that facilitated the US-China détente? (It was the Pakistan dictator Yahya Khan that brought the US closer to China and provided its own bases and resources for the mission.)

However, after the 1971 Indo-Pak war, had the US moved away from Pakistan during

those tumultuous times and helped India instead, today's geopolitics would have looked very different.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the entire global supply chain came to a grinding halt. At the time, people started discussing that though China was factory to the world, the globe needed a China+1 policy. India was the obvious choice for the global manufacturing giants. But the idea fizzled out the moment the pandemic ended.

Those who cite China's success to criticise India should pause and take a moment to look around. Things aren't as bad as they are made out to be. The Dragon opened its doors for the world after Kissinger's visit in 1972. In this regard, India lagged behind by two decades. PV Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh initiated India's economic reforms (liberalisation and reconstruction) in 1991. The results have been encouraging.

During the last 25 years, India's economy has grown at a rate of 6.5-7% on an average. The 2008 financial and economic meltdown, the pandemic, and now, the hazards of Hormuz have failed to deter it. During the same time, only China surged ahead of us with a growth rate of 8-9%. Many experts believe that the day we attain a growth rate of 7%, we would be able to tide over every difficulty we face.

As I mentioned earlier, people credit the dictatorial Chinese government for its success. It's partially true. Chinese cities are saturated with cameras every few metres. You can find monitoring stations at regular intervals, minutely observing people on the streets in real time. These control rooms are connected to the mobile cellular network's big data centre in Beijing. The belief is: Let alone a person indulging in drugs using their local app for a bit, a missed will be met by police personnel within minutes.

Another important fact is that even today Chinese citizens' access to information is severely regulated and they receive only the information that their government deems kosher. During my most recent stay, I asked many Chinese youngsters about what they knew about India. Their answers were always the same: We don't know much about the outside world. We know what our government wants us to know.

I would like to mention apps such as Deepseek here. They don't just turn the users into scrollers but also empower them. I found vehicle drivers using their local app for routes because they were more accurate than Google Maps.

But, let me make a distinction. Lack of global exposure isn't making their youth intellectually poor. Actually, they're some merit in the control. Years of discipline and increasing prosperity have made their focus progress-oriented. There's a lesson for India. Our roads, railway stations, airports, and other public places look chaotic as compared to China. We have made progress but we need to develop social conduct and requisite discipline to move ahead quickly.


This is the reason that every time China attacks, it also appears to challenge us.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal

### [ DAVID SACKS ] CO-CHAIR, PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL OF ADVISORS ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, THE US

It's difficult to fathom how they (Anthropic) could claim a jailbreak allowing operability of a cyber weapon could be defined as "not serious"

In response to Anthropic's statement on the withdrawal of its Fable 5 and Mythos 5 AI models



## Noida Airport's promises and portents at take-off

Connectivity is the make-or-buy factor in this age of multimodal transport. This certainly holds true for Noida International Airport (NIA); the first phase of the airport, a ₹1,000-crore project, was inaugurated by the Prime Minister last month. With commercial operations set to start by June 15, the airport hopes to combine "Indian warmth with Swiss efficiency" — Zurich International Airports had won the tight contest for the airport project in November 2019.

The commencement of operations offers a much-needed distraction from the dire straits the aviation sector finds itself in at the moment, thanks to the war in West Asia. NIA promises to change the face of air travel in the national capital region (NCR).

Till a few years ago, Jewar, where the airport has come up, was a sleepy little hamlet not far from Noida, Uttar Pradesh. But things changed after chief minister Yogi Adityanath and his team of ministers and bureaucrats assumed office in 2017. The state government acquired the land and got it vacated in record time for Zurich Airports to start building.

For passengers, NIA can be a blessing provided it is made easily accessible and cost-effective. The new airport is 700 metres from the Yamuna Expressway, which has already shrunk travel time in this region. To ensure smooth access, the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) has built a clover-leaf interchange from the airport to the expressway.

The Delhi Metro is expected to provide connectivity from Noida and Greater Noida to a station that opens right outside NIA's entry — quite like many European airports that can be accessed through their respective metro-rail networks. A more ambitious high-speed rail connection between Delhi and Varanasi with a stop at the NIA passenger terminal has also been discussed, but is still on paper.

NIA has bagged a few access-enabling agreements, including air-conditioned bus services from the airport to four key destinations in Uttarakhnad and nine in Haryana, including Gurugram. It is also partnering Mahindra Logistics Mobility to offer a premium, 24x7 all-electric taxi service.

The good news for NCR passengers is that Delhi Airport has pulled up its socks to

retain traffic, investing ₹9,800 crore to expand and upgrade its present facilities. Airlines operate in a hyper-competitive environment themselves, and are excited that two airports will be competing, ending the "take it or leave it" treatment often meted out by airport operators — apart from its own catchment spanning Noida to Mathura. NIA could also grab some of the central and east Delhi traffic if it offers significant cost and time savings.

The biggest question before NIA is financial viability. Move over the view that Zurich Airports and NIAL (the joint-venture between the airport and the UP government) will burn cash for at least the initial six to eight years before it starts generating returns.

Experts argue that the airport is likely to be far more expensive to operate from since it is being built so long after Delhi Airport, and construction costs will be in keeping with today's prices. Although the plan is to make sure there is no "gold plating", the pressure from the economies of scale that Delhi Airport has already achieved can't

be wished away — it can afford to offer competitive rates to airlines. If it so chooses, this is where ease and costs of connectivity come into play. Catchment area notwithstanding, NIA is 25-26 kilometres from the heart of Noida. Time and cost of reaching will determine the choice of airport. Access, once you reach the Yamuna Expressway, may be quick, but reaching the expressway means navigating many stretches of clogged Delhi traffic.

The official thinking is that even if NIA is a bit early in terms of traffic requirements of the NCR region and the UP government or the concessionaire lose money for a while, it is better to be early than sorry, as has been the case with Mumbai. In a country of India's diversity and complexity, greenfield airports such as the Navi Mumbai one or even Goa's MOPA have taken almost 20 years to build since they were first conceived. Inordinate delays in getting Navi Mumbai Airport off the ground have already taken a heavy toll on Mumbai's aviation growth. The NCR shouldn't see a repeat. Ambitious India no longer has 20 years to wait.

Anjali Bhargava writes on governance, infrastructure, and the social sector. The views expressed are personal



Anjali Bhargava

# Thanks, Trump-ji for The Push We Needed

### India needs to keep its AI sourcing options open

The Trump regime's attempt at controlling the export of Anthropic's most advanced AI models, GPT-5 and Myths-5, may not play to script. The San Francisco-headquartered AI company threatened to disable the models if it is asked to keep access confined to US nationals. The company has a history of challenging the government. It has refused to allow the US military to use its AI models for autonomous warfare. It has also delayed the public release of Myths, which can detect security flaws, until companies building critical software run conclusive tests with the AI model. This infrastructure is international, and denying access to non-Americans runs counter to Anthropic's original intent.

However the developments turn, expansion of US export controls from hardware to software will force countries to seriously rethink AI sourcing. India is particularly affected because of its strong linkages to the US software industry through manpower and data. Indian engineers help build AI models, which then train on Indian data. Denial of access to frontier technologies will provoke diversification as well as localisation. India anyway needs sovereign AI because of its cultural diversity and need to protect data. It also has a talent pool that can drive indigenisation. But it will have to depend on advanced US semiconductors to build its foundation AI models.

Domestic AI resilience is within the reach of many countries, including India. Locally-owned AI infrastructure, data and models can scale up surprisingly fast. Strategic and economic benefits of sovereign AI are already shaping market behaviour, with a little help from the government. This has a bearing on policy responses of AI leaders as the race becomes crowded. The hyperscale US model requires a global market for its AI innovations. The state-led Chinese model also depends on overseas customers. India needs to keep its sourcing options open as it builds domestic AI capability. It pays to have friends all over in this game.

# Mind Your Language Education Policy

The problem with CBSE's latest push for a 3-language formula is not 'too much multilingualism' but the way it has imposed. Students entering Classes 6 and 10 are already dealing with mounting academic load. To suddenly have them pick up an extra language can be reckless. Schools are struggling to find qualified teachers, and language learning requires time, continuity and age-appropriate methods. Supreme Court admitting a PIL against the move — the hearing's next month — only confirms that these concerns are neither frivolous nor isolated.

The second issue is political. Although CBSE has clarified that Hindi is not mandatory, the move has revived anxieties in non-Hindi-speaking states. Given India's history of language politics, Gol should have engaged more extensively with stakeholders before making it mandatory to have at least 2 of the 3 languages non-English Indian ones. Education is on the concurrent list, and while CBSE schools have to comply with central guidelines, states evolve their own approaches. That is precisely why consultation was essential.

India aspires to become a knowledge economy. That requires policy stability and predictability. If policymakers believed the 3-language formula was necessary, it should have been introduced gradually from lower classes. Learning another language, especially one that professionally opens doors later, is an asset. That is what makes this episode particularly unfortunate: a skill that should expand horizons for individuals now risks being perceived as yet another artificially-induced 'nation-building' exercise. Coming as it does on the heels of controversies surrounding exams and educational administration, this decision represents poor optics and poorer policy design.



JUST IN JEST If you're a Hitler and Marvel Comics fan, do keep them separate

# 'Reich' Reddy, Take A Hydration Break

Recently, Telangana CM Revanth 'Reich' Reddy announced how he was inspired by Hitler's 'favourite word' and 'assassination squad' Hydra, to name his state's anti-encroachment agency, HYDRAX — Hyderabad Disaster Response and Asset Protection Agency. Well, we can do nothing about Reddy being a Hitler fanboy. After all, which politician these days isn't an admirer of national socialism? But we do have a problem with him mixing up the fictional Nazi-adjacent organisation in the Marvel universe with a non-existent Hitlerian Hydra. Mixing them up is far worse than confusing Gandhi with Gandalf, or MK with Joseph in the Stalin franchise. No, Herr Reddy, neither was Adolf Garm a Marvel character, nor was Hydra a club for Nazi ultras. (Although 'Operation Hydra' was, indeed, the codename for the August 1943 British Royal Air Force bombing raid on Germany's V-2 rocket research facility in Peenemünde — which is not a luxury highrise at Banjara Hills but a town in Baltic Germany.) Perhaps it's safer if Reddy sticks to Marvel Comics, considering his party could do with some superheroic (non-fascistic) help to regain some relevance nationally. The Telangana CM could brush up on his history — both of the comic book and history book variety. And, while at it, refrain from saying he's satisfied by his administration's work so far by conjuring up his other hero, Mogambo.

### Aspiring AI powers will now have to treat US tech access not as gift but as variable to hedge

# SAPOKHPAN ME

## Tech Denial's Come Home



Subimal Bhattacharjee

Last Friday, Anthropic switched off its two most capable models, GPT-5 and Myths-5, for most customers. It did so not by choice but after being arm-twisted by a US government export control directive, citing national security issues, that bars access by any foreign national, whether inside or outside the US, including Anthropic's own foreign-national employees. Because Anthropic couldn't cleanly separate US citizens from non-citizens, compliance meant disabling the models altogether. So, a frontier AI tool that launches every other week went dark within hours of a letter from the US commerce department. This also disrupts the Anthropic-led expanded Project Glasswing — uniting major tech firms like Amazon, Google, Microsoft and Apple — to combat AI-driven cyber threats that India would have benefited from.

If one strips away specifics, the episode is a signal flare. For a decade, technology denial has crept from the periphery of sanctions on adversaries (like Huawei) to the centre, 2025 AI Diffusion Rule sent the word to others and, for the first time, treated model weights as controllable munitions. Friday's directive is the next turn of that screw.

The frontier of control is no longer geographic but the individual. What is alarming is the precedent it sets. If a security concern can vapourise a publicly launched model overnight, every other deployment now carries that contingent risk. That should unsettle every government betting its AI future on the US stack. India included. India has waged heavily on tech diplomacy with the US — TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Using Strategic Technology) initiative launched by Trump and Modi in February 2025, the Pax Silica supply-chain in compact, and India-US AI Opportunity Partnership signed this February. The framing is seductive with India as 'trusted partner' anchoring AI infrastructure outside East Asia's chokepoints. The latest GPT-5 episode, however, exposes the fine print — conditional trust that's revocable overnight.

If Washington can turn off the lights on a model of its own engineers, an Indian developer's access is a privilege, not a right. China will read the same event and harden its conviction that sovereignty must be built at home, because any spigot the US controls in India's second-tier chips for Chinese buyers last December, Beijing

has kept pouring capital into an indigenous stack. Middle powers are improvising, too. France, hosting this week's G7, is co-funding a \$45 bn SoFiBank build-out and branding itself as Europe's AI hub. The EU is chasing sovereign compute. Japan and South Korea are nursing domestic foundries, while the Gulf trades investment for chip allocations. None yet rival the US stack. But the GPT-5 shock is exactly the kind of thing that accelerates the hunt for alternatives, the very fringes US strategists fear.

The timing is also theatrical. The 3-day G7 summit convenes in Evian-les-Bains from today, where Macron hopes to nudge AI cooperation forward, even as governance language is diluted and Washington presses its 'American AI technology shield' against Chinese rivals. India isat-tending as a guest, with lot of tech diplomacy work happening at the back. 120 Indian deep-tech startups are in Nice since Sunday for the 3-day Bharat Innovates 2026, spanning semiconductors, quantum and space. Narendra Modi will be a speaker at the annual VivaTech conference in Paris later this week, where India is AI Country Partner. Israel, is expected to unveil its MANAV (Moral, Accountable, National Sovereignty, Accessible, and Vital) governance framework.

Founders in Nice are courting global investors at the exact moment the US has shown conditional tech control without warning. So, is 'trusted partner' now a probationary perch? Does anchoring to the US stack threaten India into a dependency, a future directive could throttle in an evening? The answer is not to walk away. Compute, capital and frontier models still flow predominantly from the US. What India should do is refuse exclusivity. India's strongest play is as that it's embedded deep enough into the US stack to extract real infrastructure. It's sovereign enough in talent and standards to bargain, and open enough to France, Japan and its own stack to avoid single-point capture. The ecosystem is ramping up but Gol has to foster this further. Because technology denial has come home.

The writer is a commentator on digital policy issues

## Big Yard, Iron Fences

Jay Vinayak Ojha

When the US imposed strict controls on the export of advanced GPUs, the computing backbone of AI, to China in 2022, then-NSA Jake Sullivan declared that the intention was to build a 'small yard with a high fence'. The state would guard a few critical technologies jealously. But beyond that narrow enclave, the free commerce of the world would continue undisturbed.

Access Denied You don't have permission to access http://www.America.gov on this browser. Reference #18.6a29e41.1515438275.19a16160

US commerce secretary Howard Lutnick's order last week directing Anthropic to deny its latest GPT-5 model (and Myths-5) to all non-citizens — including engineers who built it — marks a dramatic enlargement of that yard. Should the directive hold, all its severity the fences will become iron walls. The decision lays bare three developments that will survive any potential reversal.

State, the supreme actor Various assigning ideologies, including those evangelising 'long-termism' and 'effective altruism', seem to believe that the milk-manned, soft-spoken, bespectacled lord in Silicon Valley — not the gruff, general or clueless politician — should be entrusted with the fate of the world. Over the course of this year, this notion has been nudged by reality. When in February Anthropic defied Pentagon's demands to strip safety safeguards from its Claude AI model to be used for any 'lawful use' by the government, it cited red lines on domestic surveillance and autonomous weapons. Accordingly, the company was struck from the list of approved government contractors, and branded a supply-chain risk. While this regime can rarely be accused of acting with proper purpose, it can hardly be blamed for being peeved at the company. Last week, Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei warned that AI will become the 'dominant source of military and economic power'. But a firm can't declare its tech to be the decisive instrument of national survival, deny it to its own nation's defence services, and then be surprised at

the state's hostility towards it. This tension between universalist aspirations of technologists and realities of a hard-power world dominated by states will have to be confronted honestly by all countries, including India. In every previous generation of technological change, big tech has adjusted to believe this time will be different.

Resurrection of US hard power The organising myth of the post-Cold War era was that US ideas and ideals would simply spread open and peacefully around the world through the internet. What this ignores is how the Cold War itself was waged, and won. The US successfully banded together in a coordinating committee (CoCom) with its allies in Western Europe, Britain and Japan to successfully deny the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries access to the technologies that would dominate the computing revolution: microelectronics and telecommunications. This preserved the West's qualitative 'lead time' in the arms race. The US and its allies following immediate profits in pursuit of a grander strategic pursuit.

It appears that the Trump regime today is willing to do the same. India will have to adapt to a world where money will no longer be enough but will have critical technologies. Weaponised interdependence The idea of weaponised interdependence developed by political scientists Henry Farrell and Alvin H. Hansen posits that the power seated at the central node of a network — finance, information, and now computation — can choke off its dependent upon it. The latest GPT-5 episode is that choke point made manifest. To raise an economy and arm'd forces upon AI models that temperamental foreign officials may switch off at will is extremely imprudent.

India has shown before that it can punch above its weight in the contest for strategic technology through coordinated national effort. Cut off from all assistance in the wake of the first Pokhran test in 1974, India's atomic scientists managed to build an entirely domestic nuclear ecosystem. Israel and UAE also stand as testaments to what can be achieved through coordinated effort.

This latest development in the US simply drives home the fact that it's past time to lead India's mission into high gear, with an empowered government structure and frontier-AI sovereignty as the explicitly stated goal.

The writer is senior reporter, follow, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy



### THE SPEAKING TREE

## Determined For Success

BRAHMA KUMARI CHAKRABHARI

Determination is a power of the mind. It's present in each of us to some extent or another, and it can be increased at will. The drive to succeed in any sphere of life or to turn negative situations into positive ones is the basic impetus for determination. Other thrusts for determination include making relationships more peaceful and harmonious, building a good career, or shaping a professional role in a positive way.

Without determination, we can't reach our desired destination in any work or walk of life. Because the moment we begin our journey, there can be obstacles to overcome, and we need the inner powers of peace, patience, hope and determination in our minds and actions. It's determination that becomes the key driving force in opening the door to opportunities for success.

But, at times, we pay less attention to the importance of will power and determination, and to their application in overcoming different types of obstacles. It's said that faith can move mountains. At times, the powerful thought or feeling of determination, ready to make us free from negative, wasteful or weak thoughts. Determination also means that a stable internal state of mind is more powerful than external situations. As we remain strong, the situation gradually weakens and wanes. Our innate power of determination needs to be used not to fight the situation in different ways but to shape different scenarios to desired ends.

With focused force of mental resolve, we can change weaknesses into strengths, negatives into positives, challenges into opportunities, and problems into solutions.



### MELODY FOR MONDAY

## Angel

Jim Hendrix

Jim Hendrix's 'Angel', released posthumously on the album 'The Cry of Love' in 1971, is arguably one of the most tender compositions ever. This is a song where firebrand virtuosity yields to fragile beauty. The music glides with gorgeous, almost lullaby-like grace, its contours shaped by Hendrix's voice — hushed, intimate and achingly tender. Unlike the pyrotechnics of 'Purple Haze' or 'Voodoo Child', 'Angel' is a prayer whispered, rather than sung out loud.

The guitars weave an intricate, web-like tapestry; arpeggios shimmer like strands of light, while subtle bends and slides create a sense of suspension. Hendrix's mastery here lies in restraint — every note feels carefully placed, as though cotton spun. The interplay of rhythm and lead lines produces a delicate sonic net that holds the listener in its palms.

Lyrically, it's a meditation on loss and transcendence. Hendrix sings of a celestial figure who comes to carry him away, while 'Fly on my sweet angel' becomes both invocation and farewell. In 'Angel', the great guitarist proves that his genius was not only in explosive improvisation but in crafting songs of exquisite delicacy.

## ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was a man named Trump, Whose war talk fell flat with a thump. He swore 'frank's done' — But folks said, 'Nice one. Take his promises in a bag for the dump.' ...

## EV POWERING UP

Public EV charging infrastructure is a foundational requirement for the large-scale adoption of EVs, particularly for the passenger car segment. Despite strong policy momentum and rapid capacity expansion, public charging has so far been a financially challenging business in several markets.



Source: Market Analysis of Electric Vehicle Public Charging Infrastructure in Cities - Brazil, Colombia, Mexico & India. An assessment by C&G Cities and IFCI

## MEME'S THE WORD

WHEN SOMEONE TELLS YOU THAT ITALY DIDN'T QUALIFY FOR THIS WORLD CUP



# For FTAs are Jolly Good Fellows



Rajesh Agrawal

As of 2026, WTO records 394 notified FTAs in force. They form the institutional blueprint for India to secure crucial market access while protecting its businesses from unpredictable winds of geopolitical storms. FTAs open vital windows of opportunity not just for large businesses, but also for startups, MSMEs, farmers, fishing enterprises and talent looking to monetise their skills on the world stage. Binding commitments cover tariffs, services market access and transparent trade rules, delivering the certainty businesses require to invest for the long term. India's trade negotiation strategy focuses on complementary economies that serve as primary export markets for goods and services. A key objective of recent FTAs is securing a level playing field for exporters in vital markets like the EU, Britain and Australia. This parity is especially urgent for labour-intensive sectors

like textiles, apparel and footwear, where Indian products have historically faced steep tariffs while competitors enjoyed duty-free access. Gol is also negotiating trade agreements with Canada, Israel, and blocs like the EU and Mercosur. Services are central to India's export and FTA strategy. By locking in commitments on cross-border digital delivery, recent FTAs help drive investor confidence across the rapidly expanding GCC ecosystem, tech startups and digital innovators.

FTAs have allowed India to integrate at the negotiating table, securing binding commitments that enhance mobility for talent. Key achievements include mobility provisions and side-letters for students and professionals, frameworks like India-Britain Double Contributions Convention (DCC) to prevent dual social security taxation on temporary assignments, and mobility rights in niche areas such as yoga. A hallmark of India's next-gen FTAs is recognition of the intrinsic link between trade and investment. Recent agreements explicitly link market access to investment outcomes. A prime example is India-EFTA agreement, which conditions market access for FTAs on India's \$100 bn FDI commitment and 1 mn jobs in India. India-New Zealand FTA features comparable provisions. Modern trade is no longer confined to tariffs. It requires navigating 21<sup>st</sup>-c dimensions with an equal focus on rules, including technical barriers to trade (TBT), sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures, and trade facilitation (TF) Protocol, standards and other regulatory requirements frequently pose hurdles to market access than tariffs. Provisions for regulatory harmonisation and cooperation within India's FTAs offer structured, institutional mechanisms to mitigate these barriers for Indian exporters. Not engaging with environmental and labour standards is no longer an option. New FTAs build cooperative

arrangements to address these concerns, in a manner not inimical to Indian interests. India's FTA policy is not piecemeal, but targets complementary economic progress, with sunset clauses of global GDP and 75% of global import demand. Negotiation of these FTAs relies on continuous stakeholder engagement and whole-of-government support. This ensures trade policy is aligned with India's broader imperatives related to industrial development, innovation and socioeconomic progress, with sunset clauses structured so that vulnerable sectors and populations are protected.

FTAs include robust provisions to ensure that opening the market does not cause disruptive shocks to domestic stakeholders. Liberalisation in vulnerable and technical barriers to trade (TBT), sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures, and trade facilitation (TF) Protocol, standards and other regulatory requirements frequently pose hurdles to market access than tariffs. Provisions for regulatory harmonisation and cooperation within India's FTAs offer structured, institutional mechanisms to mitigate these barriers for Indian exporters. Not engaging with environmental and labour standards is no longer an option. New FTAs build cooperative

The writer is commerce secretary, Gol

## Chat Room

### Trillion Dollars: SpaceX's Limit

Appropos the Edit, After Musk, Aur Kaun Banega Trillionaire? (Jun 13), Elon Musk's emergence as the world's first trillionaire epitomises the extraordinary ascendancy of technology-driven capitalism. His colossal fortunes, forged through transformative ventures in electric mobility, aerospace innovation and AI, underscore the unparalleled capacity of modern enterprises to generate wealth at an unprecedented scale. While this milestone celebrates entrepreneurial audacity and visionary leadership, it simultaneously accentuates concerns surrounding wealth concentration, market hegemony and socioeconomic inequities. Musk's achievement symbolises both the boundless possibilities and inherent contradictions of the contemporary global economic order. *Nandini Reddy Bengaluru*

CONTRAPUNTO

If you think tech can solve your security problems, you don't understand the problems and you don't understand the tech

BRUCE SCHNEIER

Give Data, Take AI

India needs cutting-edge AI. It should use data as bargaining chip for unrestricted access to US models

Trump admin's order to block top-tier AI access to non-Americans is not surprising, but it is problematic on two fronts. One, it hurts global collaboration. Two, for middle powers like India, and many smaller countries, it exposes dangers of dependence.

For now, the US restriction applies to Anthropic's Mythos 5 and Fable 5 models. Fable 5 was released just last week. It's the public version of the highly capable Mythos, with stronger safeguards built in.

carry out cyberattacks. US fears its own systems, including defence systems, could come under attack. Hence, the abrupt ban. But this sets a precedent. From now on US, and also China, may reserve their best AI models for their own use, on national security grounds.

There are three ways. One, join hands to develop AI together. Since AI development is costly, resources - chips, data centres, energy, research - can be pooled. But wide cooperation of this nature is easier preached than practised.

The third way is the most pragmatic. Remain in the US camp, use its AI, but with some leverage. What does India have that US AI giants want desperately? User data.

Ask The Baby Makers

That fertility rates are low is a choice women and men are making, and will remain so

The trillionaire, some billionaires, religious heads and many govt want more people of "their kind" on the planet. Make babies, they say, with or without sex - via IVF, surrogacy, what have you. Problem is, no one is listening, especially women.

Yet, fertility rates are nosing down, global janta is ignoring all missives to get onto the baby-making pasta machine. Govts asked, why? Childcare's expensive, said potential baby-makers, too many expenses.

(South Korea), set up support systems for early childhood care (France, Hungary), mandated paid parental leave, etc etc. Yet, nada. Why? Demographers concluded financial incentives, or care programmes, "rarely reverse long-term demographic decline on their own".

Funnily, gender equality is where fertility rate saw a slight uptick - when men take responsibility for the child, especially the early years. OECD data then showed that men who took on caregiving quickly discovered what women know: parenthood costs time, money, ambition. Upshot: couples are getting more beyond, and outside of, parenthood.

Blow hot, blow cold

Climate change is not only out there, it's also within us

Jug Suraiya



Coming into Heathrow, the pilot cheerfully announced: "It's a lovely day, with the temperature at 30°."

A lovely day, with the temperature at 30°C? With the calendar yet having to catch up to June and still loitering about in the last week of May, which is supposed to be spring, not high blazing summer? Had spring got sprung? And if so, where had it got sprung to? Sub-Saharan Africa?

We got out of the airport and realised that the pilot had been wrong. It wasn't 30°C. It was 23°C. How more goaconda could it get? We found out the next day. It became 34°C. At 34°C, London was 10°C cooler than Gurgaon, where Bunny and I live. But 34°C in London feels much more than 44°C in Gurgaon.

We're told repeatedly there are simple reasons for this. In India, buildings are by and large designed to keep the heat out and the coolth in. In UK, every thing's done to keep the heat in and the cold out.

So, when it does get hot in Britain - as it's doing more and more often thanks to climate change - the heat feels worse than what the thermometer shows. This is because of a different kind of climate change: not outside climate change, but the inside climate change of our minds.

When we're in Gurgaon, we expect it to be hot, so we don't get all het up about the heat. At 34°C, it would indeed be a lovely day in Gurgaon in May.

But not in London, or anywhere in Britain which, despite growing evidence to the contrary, keeps telling itself and the world at large that it is not just a temperate country, but a cold country. So, when Britain does get hot, the heat hits with a double whammy, both physical and psychological.

Einstein explored the phenomenon of space-time relativity. We need a psychological Einstein to explore the phenomenon of space-time climate relativity: How relative is the climate to where and when we are?

London in May at 34°C? An oven. Gurgaon in May at 34°C? How cool. Our internal weather depends on our whetabouts, whether we are here, or there.

Dead Homemaker Gets Paid

Supreme Court has called homemakers "nation-builders", but their labour still remains economically invisible in official statistics. Compensating a husband after a wife's death doesn't empower any woman

Faizan Mustafa



It is high time that the invisible is made visible, observed Justice Sanjay Karol in a Supreme Court judgment on Thursday. The case concerns the work of a homemaker in a road accident in 2001. In enhancing the compensation from ₹8.40 to nearly ₹63L, the court described homemakers as nothing less than "nation-builders".

Basically, the legal system acknowledges the economic value of a wife's labour only because she's no longer alive to perform it. The compensation will benefit surviving family members, including the husband. But what about recognising and compensating women for their domestic labour while they are alive?

These questions are hardly new. More than a century ago, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the first woman ordained as a Protestant minister in US, wrote that a wife "owes service and labour to her husband as much as absolutely she does to his master". Married women's labour continues to be treated as an extension of their husband's rights.

Legal scholar Robin West has found that intimate labour occupies a peculiar position in modern economies. Whenever care, affection and domestic responsibility are involved, compensation mysteriously disappears. The result is economic impoverishment for those who perform that labour, overwhelmingly women.

In India, in the 2011 Census, those who perform household duties were categorised as non-workers, and clubbed together with beggars, prostitutes, and prisoners. In the 2011 Census, 169.9m women, and only a meagre 5.8m men referred to household work as their main occupation. NSO's 2019 Time Use in India report found an average Indian woman spends 269 minutes per day on unpaid household services, and an average man only 97 minutes.

A 2009 study estimated the value of Indian women's unpaid work at more than ₹900bn annually. The situation remains nearly the same since a century earlier, when,

as noted by Justice Karol, British economist Arthur Cecil Pigou had lamented how household labour performed by wives is absent in national income calculations. Today, inclusion of women's household work can easily improve India's GDP.

The result of this invisibility lies deep in legal history. Under English common law, a married woman's economic identity was effectively absorbed into that of her husband. Remarkably, until the mid-nineteenth century, no country had fully recognised a wife's right to her own earnings. If she worked for wages, those wages legally belonged to her husband.

It took hard-fought reforms to recognise women's ownership of income generated through their own labour. Yet, even as women acquired legal rights to wages earned outside the home, labour performed inside the home remains economically invisible. To this day,

A woman who cooks in a restaurant is a worker; a woman who prepares three meals daily for a family is not. A nanny earns wages, a mother providing identical care does not. The activity is economically recognised only when someone pays for it.

In 2010, an attempt to register a National Housewives Association as a trade union was rejected, because domestic work was deemed neither trade nor industry. UPA gov't's 2012 proposal that husbands pay a monthly "salary" to wives, generated criticism for creating an employer-employee framework within marriage.

These failures shouldn't obscure the underlying issue. The problem is not merely that wives receive a monthly

payment. It is whether the economic value created through domestic labour is fairly acknowledged and shared, during the subsistence of marriage itself.

Indian courts have made important contributions, but only within limited contexts. In Arun Kumar Agrawal (2010) and subsequent cases, including Rajendra Singh (2020), the Supreme Court has acknowledged that a homemaker's contribution is invaluable, but impossible to compute in money terms.

At the same time, compensation awards are provided by assigning notional economic value to domestic work. These cases arise under the Motor Vehicles Act. They answer a narrow question: how should damages be calculated when a homemaker dies? They don't address the broader issue of wives' unpaid economic claim, arising from their own paid labour during marriage.

That gap becomes particularly striking when contrasted with persistent judicial attitudes. For example, in 2022, Bombay HC's division bench, hearing a domestic violence matter, remarked that a woman unwilling to perform household duties should have disclosed this before marriage. This indicates what kind of gender notions remain deeply embedded in social and legal institutions.

Justice Karol's judgment recognises the invisible labour of a homemaker. This is good, but not good enough. Recognition after death, to pay compensation to her heirs or husband, is of no use for her. If labour is the foundation of wealth, then domestic labour is a fundamental form of wealth creation. It reproduces the formal economy. Yet, the person performing it often has no automatic claim to the income generated by the household she helps sustain.

The real challenge lies beyond compensation awards. It is whether Indian law can recognise domestic labour productively, matrimonial property regimes can be strengthened, and household work treated as a shared responsibility. Whether economic rights can arise during marriage, rather than only at its dissolution.

Until then, the homemaker will continue to occupy a peculiar place in law. She may be celebrated as a nation-builder, but her economic contributions are recognised only when she is no longer there to hear it.

The writer is Vice-Chancellor, Chanakya National Law University, Patna. Views are personal



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/ANDREW HARRIS

Americano, But It's Still Espresso At Heart

World Cup has been Americanised, and not just with rules. Excessive commercialisation & Trump's politics stand between fans and field. But matches have begun, and so has magic, as we saw in Brazil vs Morocco

Marcela Mora y Araujo



In 1998, I went to a World Cup match on a US corporate hospitality package. We met for drinks in a fancy Paris hotel, where a Spanish businessman put a stop to those drinks. He had a different approach to soccer. We were used to urine-smelling stadia, foul-mouthed chest-banging and chanting, and a subtle appreciation of the nuances of a game that can have as many interpretations as people watching it.

Headed back to USA '94, and was delighted. Valderrama wigs, Mexican waves and Chelsea Clinton provided enduring images. The challenge, however, was how to make the biggest and most affluent market - US - love our beautiful and most noble of games as much as us. The answer seemed to be "more goals".

Almost 40 years ago, Argentinian cartoonist Roberto Fontanarrosa, in his short story Football and Science, described a future in which committees of men in towers adjacent to the stadium would dissect every move and detail on the field of play through strategically positioned cameras.

Now we have VAR, a system of justice which notably increases the number of goals through set pieces. Instead of one referee and two linesmen, we have five officials on the pitch, and three on the VAR cameras; we have new measurements and stats, new rules about the number of minutes players can take for an injury, new concepts of "mistaken identity", which can render a foul given to one side to be later adjudged to the other.

I would argue this is the Americanisation of the game, not necessarily because it's American in nature, but because its spirit is borrowed from other sports which are more popular in the States. So Soccer seems a better name for this game, which barely resembles my beloved Futbol.

Unlike previous editions, where the political content was dragged out as a sub-plot, this one's almost in-your-face, with headlines about issues of the day - immigration policies, war (actual war between host nation and a participant is truly a first), language imperialism (no Spanish translators



GAME ON: Bouaddi (left) tackles Mathews Cunha during Brazil vs Morocco at New York New Jersey Stadium on June 13

at the pressers), and US's particular field of expertise: money. Ticket, transport and food prices, merchandising overkill; all leading themes in the land where happiness is achieved through consumption.

But it's going to be a Great Party. As the ball's started rolling, narratives will no longer be solely dictated by

of-the-pitch geopolitics and showbiz agendas. Brazilian fans descending en masse in Toronto, a small village in Kansas falling in love with Algeria, South Koreans sharing tequila with all and sundry in the Mexican

Federal District, and Scottish men in kilts tobogganing into history are already viral versions of the game. Recognition after death, to pay compensation to her heirs or husband, is of no use for her.

It took a handful of matches for football to steal the limelight. The first half of Brazil vs Morocco was the thing itself. The pure excitement and passion brought by the contrast of the King Nation, the most decorated and emblematic of our squad we've known, given a run for their money by the most recent arrival in the Pantheon of Greats: Morocco, with almost half the squad born outside the country, semi-finalists in Qatar 2022, winner of the Under-20 World Cup in 2025, and an average player age of 21.21.

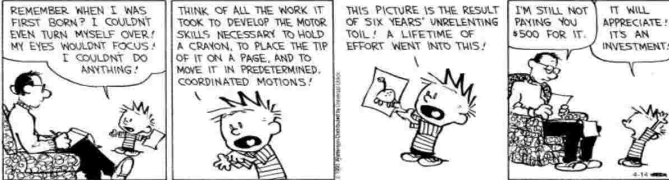
The revelation of the night might well have been 18-year-old Ayyoub Bouaddi, a long-haired, gazelle-like Moroccan, who stepped on the pitch for his World Cup debut, calm, cool, and collected, as if he faced Brazil week in, week out.

Until recently he was actually captain of France's youth squads, and switched to wearing the Moroccan strip thanks to a new FIFA rule that allows more flexibility for youth players to choose the nation they represent, even if they have played some games for another. This contrast between places of birth and nationality, and the various implications of the distinction, will undoubtedly become one of the dominant conversations of the tournament, once again proving that football mirrors society, given how central the same is currently in many countries around the world.

Football is organic, ever-changing, and however reluctant we are about accepting the new (my father could never get over the penalty shoot-out as a way to resolve a draw), we will learn to adapt and adopt the new waves. Generations to come will fall in love with a version of the game that I will forever consider soccer, but I fall in love with it.

The writer is a football expert

Calvin & Hobbes



Satish K Kapoor

The Chhandogya Upanishad likens pran to a horse that drives the body's carriage. Yet pran is not just breath but the force behind the process of breathing. It animates both man and the universe.

Pran moves through five vital airs in the body - pran, apaan, udan, vyan and saman; and five sub-vital airs: nag, karm, krikar, devdutt and dhananjay. When breath moves upwards, it is called pran; when it goes downwards, it is apaan; when it vitalises different organs, it is vyan; when it maintains an equilibrium, it is saman, and when it abandons the body, it is udan.

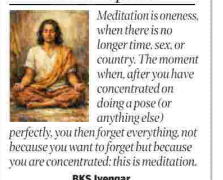
Human breath is the first form of cosmic pran, which functions in all the three states of being - wakefulness, dream and deep sleep. Through pranayam, one can regulate the breathing process, control inner and outer nature, and create a positive-energy field around the body.

Pranayam is a sequence of three processes - purak, inhalation, kumbhak, retention, and rechak, exhalation. These are undertaken conjointly, employing right, left, alternate or both nostrils, and even the mouth for different purposes.

lungs, clearing toxins in the process. Left nostril, has a cooling effect, and through the Pingala, right nostril, has a heating effect. When the breath changes from left to right, or vice versa, it flows through the Sushumna, middle channel, balancing positive and negative currents in the body.

While retaining breath, three yogic bandhas, locks, are performed - mulabandh, contraction of the pelvic-floor; udhyan bandh, contraction and drawing inward of the upward of the abdomen towards the back and jalandhar bandh, contraction of the throat, with the mind. Yog texts say that when pran apaan vyan enters the sushumna conduit and opens up brahma granthi in the abdomen, vishnu granthi in the navel, and rudra granthi in the throat, invigorating pranayam kosh, the vital body

Sacredspace



Meditation is oneness, when there is no longer time, sex, or country. The moment when, after you have concentrated on doing a pose (or anything else) perfectly, you then forget everything, not because you want to forget but because you are concentrated; this is meditation.

BKS Iyengar

Anatomy Of Pran And Pranayam



THE SPEAKING TREE



DECCAN HERALD

ESTABLISHED 1948

## Nomination rejected, democracy undermined

The rejection of Congress leader Meenakshi Natarajan's nomination papers for the Rajya Sabha election from Madhya Pradesh, and the Supreme Court's refusal to grant her relief, raise serious questions about the fairness of the electoral process and the judiciary's ability to ensure due procedure is followed in elections. The returning officer rejected her nomination on the unconvincing ground that she had failed to disclose in her affidavit a pending criminal case against her in Hyderabad. The case itself stemmed from a complaint of inappropriate behaviour against a Congress leader, in which a corporator alleged that Meenakshi had failed to act. At the time of the incident, however, she was not the AICC in-charge of Telangana; she assumed that role much later. The court issued her a notice, to which she responded, but it has not even taken cognisance of the alleged offence. Yet her candidature was rejected. The action, as it stands, has no immediate remedy.

The returning officer's decision was arbitrary and wrong, as Section 33A (1) of the Representation of the People Act mandates disclosure only of cases carrying a punishment of two years or more, and in which charges have been framed by a court. The law is clear, yet the returning officer misinterpreted it to reject Meenakshi's candidature and declare the three BJP candidates elected, though the party had the legislative strength to elect only two. On the same day, a BJP-backed candidate in Jharkhand was given 24 hours to rectify a flaw in his affidavit. Clearly, the decision in Madhya Pradesh was politically motivated, with the Election Commission complicit in awarding the seat to the BJP. The commission's duty is to hold free and fair elections, which are basic to democracy, but it has repeatedly failed, and its actions have served to undermine democracy.

The Supreme Court failed to ensure democratic justice in a case where it was blatantly subverted. A bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and A S Chandanur rejected Meenakshi's petition on the ground that it could not intervene in the election process once the process was set in motion. It is true that election results could be challenged only through an election petition, as per Article 329. However, the court has the authority to intervene in cases of gross violation of natural justice, as is the case here. The Madhya Pradesh election force reveals yet another method of subverting elections has been discovered with the knowledge and complicity of the election commission.

## Strong policing needs stronger safeguards

The Karnataka government's decision to establish permanent anti-rowsy squads across the state deserves unequivocal support. Organised crime has evolved beyond isolated street violence; it is now deeply intertwined with land grabbing, extortion, contract intimidation, and high-value real estate disputes. Conventional policing, often reactive after crimes are committed, is ill-equipped to tackle such networks. A dedicated intelligence-driven mechanism that continuously monitors habitual offenders is, therefore, a timely and necessary intervention. In recent years, the growing nexus between organised crime and the booming property market has made preventive policing as important as investigation and prosecution. The challenge is no longer confined to Bengaluru. Many notorious criminals first hone their skills in district towns before graduating to the lucrative world of urban crime. The explosive growth of Bengaluru's real estate sector has created enormous opportunities for musclemen recruited from across Karnataka. A statewide network of specialised squads can help disrupt this pipeline by sharing intelligence across jurisdictions, thereby nipping criminal networks in the bud before they entrench themselves.

Home Minister Priyank Kharge deserves credit for backing an institutional framework instead of relying on occasional crackdowns. Karnataka has witnessed successful anti-rowsy campaigns in the past, particularly during the era of Ramakrishna Hegde, when organised gangs were dealt a severe blow through strong political will and empowered policing. The current initiative seeks to institutionalise that resolve by embedding specialised anti-rowsy units at the police station and circle levels, backed by periodic reviews and accountability mechanisms.

However, enthusiasm must be tempered with caution. The history of rowsy sheets and preventive detention laws is also a history of misuse. Once an individual's name enters a rowsy sheet, the stigma can follow them for years, affecting employment prospects, travel documents, financial transactions, and social standing. Such branding should never become a tool for settling local scores or harassing petty criminals. The decision to classify someone as a habitual offender must be based on credible evidence and subjected to rigorous scrutiny, with adequate safeguards against arbitrary action. Equally important is a change in policing philosophy. The belief that "once a rowsy, always a rowsy" serves neither justice nor society. Law enforcement must incapacitate hardened criminals, but it should also recognise genuine reform. Individuals who have demonstrably abandoned crime should not remain trapped indefinitely in police records for their past. The success of the new anti-rowsy squads will depend on maintaining this delicate balance: being uncompromising against organised crime while remaining scrupulously fair to individual rights. Strong policing and constitutional safeguards must advance together, not at the expense of each other.

Yet another method of subverting the polls has been discovered with the knowledge and complicity of the Election Commission

The history of rowsy sheets and preventive detention laws is also a history of misuse

CONCEPTUAL DISILLUSIONMENT

# Law's identity crisis on trafficking

By drawing a distinction between trafficking and voluntary sex work, the Prajwala verdict revealed deeper problems with anti-trafficking framework

SHANTANU BRAJ CHOUBEY AND SUMIT KUMAR SINGH

*Prajwala v. Union of India* (2026 NSC 509) has rightly been acclaimed as a landmark decision in favour of the victims of trafficking. Much of the commentary surrounding the judgment has been on the recognition of rehabilitation, dignity, and victim-centred protection. But such readings are at risk of missing the most important aspect of the decision: beneath its directions on rehabilitation lies a deeper doctrinal critique of India's anti-trafficking framework.

The judgment reveals a situation where there are two competing notions of trafficking that have never been successfully reconciled. At one level, the law continues to approach trafficking through the lens of prostitution regulation. At another, it increasingly understands trafficking as a broader offence of exploitation. These two frameworks have different assumptions and goals, and can often result in conflicting outcomes. *Prajwala* is not just about the rights it affirms, but the uneasy tensions it poses on the consistency of anti-trafficking law.

This is an apparent contradiction that can be attributed to the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA), 1956. The statute is the result of an abolitionist attitude towards prostitution as outlined in the 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, which India honoured as part of the convention. The tenet was that prostitution, especially when third parties benefit from it, is exploitative.

Thus, brothel-keeping, procuring, detaining persons in brothel premises for the purpose of prostitution, and living off the proceeds of prostitution are all criminalised. Parliament inserted Sections 370 and 370A in the Indian Penal Code, 1860, through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, which is now reproduced under Sections 143 and 144 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023. The provision, based on the Palermo Protocol, shifted the focus from trafficking as a crime of morality to trafficking as a crime of exploitation. It involves an act, a prohibited means, and a purpose of exploitation. Recruitment, transport-

ation, harbouring or receipt of persons only becomes a crime if it is based on coercion, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or abuse of vulnerability.

In the original 2004 *Prajwala* petition, the petitioners pointed out that the rescued persons were often treated as criminals and not victims. It recorded poor rescue techniques, poor post-rescue protection, and a lack of meaningful rehabilitation processes. In particular, it stated that without a strong system of victim protection, rescue would often be counter-productive, as victims were returning to the same circumstances of exploitation from which they were rescued.



In two decades, it was accepted by nearly all the stakeholders that there is a need for reform. The Union government repeatedly told the Supreme Court that it would enact the necessary legislation. Inter-ministerial committees were formed, draft trafficking Bills were prepared and revised in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2021. There was, however, no legislation enacted as a consequence by Parliament to combat trafficking. At the same time, plans for an Organised Crime Investigation Agency with a focus on tackling trafficking networks were shelved. What was left behind were a series of statutes, schemes and institutions that worked in isolation and not unified under a single set of legislation.

The court's disdain of this situation is apparent throughout the judgment. It notes that there has been repeated call over successive governments for a comprehensive legislation, which has never come to fruition. Through the BNS and the enlargement of the jurisdiction of National Investigation Agency (NIA), there are still loopholes regarding protection, rehabilitation, rescue plan, and institutional coordination.

These gaps are apparent when it comes to sex trafficking. The ITPA's implementation frequently fails to differentiate between trafficking victims and voluntary adult sex workers, and

persons associated with the sex trade whose actions may not meet ITPA's threshold requirements of Section 143 BNS. Investigations usually target raids at brothels but recruiters, transporters, financiers and organised criminal networks remain unchecked.

It stated that human trafficking is an organised crime that is supported by complicated financial arrangements, money laundering, and multi-state networks. However, enforcement efforts are overwhelmingly focused on instances of exploitation, rather than on the systems that perpetuate the exploitation.

This critique reveals the doctrinal tension that lies at the core of the Indian anti-trafficking law. Trafficking remains an organised crime and investigation needs to be directed towards coercive networks, money flows, and criminal enterprises. In the context of prostitution, raids and rescue operations are obviously the predominant enforcement measures.

It is in this context that the court's emphasis on informed consent, individual assessment, and victim autonomy assumes greater significance. These directions are often discussed as matters of rehabilitation policy. In reality, they reflect a deeper shift in legal reasoning. The court repeatedly stresses that victims cannot be treated as passive objects of State intervention. Adult persons cannot automatically be institutionalised merely because they have been found in situations associated with commercial sexual exploitation. Meaningful inquiries must precede decisions regarding rehabilitation and restoration.

The consequences go beyond sexual exploitation for commercial gain. Today, trafficking in persons is defined as forced labour, domestic servitude, child trafficking, forced begging, cyber trafficking, and other organised trafficking. This contradiction is not addressed by *Prajwala*. Nor can it. Parliament must take up that task.

The judgment does achieve an equally important task as it reveals the conceptual disillusionment that has long lurked under the anti-trafficking legislation in India. The court's Victim Protection Plan serves as temporary scaffolding, but cannot replace legislative clarity. Strengthening enforcement efforts or the establishment of more shelter homes or better rehabilitation schemes are not the only things that will safeguard the future of anti-trafficking law in India. *Prajwala* must, therefore, not only be recalled as a rehabilitation verdict, but as a warning.

(Choubey is Faculty Convener, Centre for Labour Law and Research (CLLR), National University of Studies and Research in Law, Ranchi; Sumit is student co-convener, CLLR)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

## About names, Juliet was wrong

Inspired by the Bard and abridged by bureaucracy, there's a lot in my name

SURYAKUMARI DENNISON

What's in a name? demands Shakespeare's Juliet. I disagree. She does not have to endure the continuing consequences of being christened Sylvia Rebecca Suryakumari.

Sylvia came about this way. When I was born, my mother Olivia, who was as imaginative as her namesake in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, turned to the Bard for inspiration. After a spirited, rather than scholarly, search, she and my father decided on Ophelia (apparently, it matched Olivia) from Hamlet. Presumably someone (to whom I am forever indebted) apprised my parents of that hapless woman's tragic end, for

Ophelia gave way to Sylvia. "Also Shakespeare," my mother would tell me triumphantly, ignoring the lack of a 'y' in Sylvia of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. After all, as Juliet might say, what's in a spelling? My passport has me down, inaccurately, and insultingly, as Sylvia.

At least some version of the original Sylvia appears on that document. Rebecca has long since faded into oblivion. When I was filling in the requisite personal information before taking my ISC examination, the form could not accommodate my full name. I was firmly told that if I wished to finish school, it must be changed through chopping.

Thus, Rebecca was removed, and has not resurfaced these past 55 years. Neither its biblical nor literary associations (my parents admired Daphne du Maurier) could save it from ultimately extinction.

Suryakumari has survived. Unfortunately, I had hardly called that by anyone who knows me well. My father did, in

my childhood, but that was when he was angry. A summons to "Sury" indicated that there was nothing to fear, while a stentorian "Suryakumari" meant that I was in trouble. To most people I am Surya, which invites the inevitable, "But that's a man's name" from those hearing it for the first time. A friend of mine has solved the problem to her satisfaction by addressing me (more appropriately, she feels) as Chandra, which is one letter short of my husband's name.

Now what, I wonder, would Juliet have made of that? She might readily have traded surnames with Romeo (not caring if she was a Capulet or Montague), but an exchange of first names? Consider the absurdity of her exclaiming, "O Juliet, Juliet, wherefore art thou, Juliet?" and the young man declaring, "It is the east, and Romeo is the sun."

"What's in a name?" asked Juliet. "Lots in a name," I would reply!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Enforcement must match legislation for dowry to die

I refer to 'Education, empowerment fail to weaken dowry grip' (Jun 14). Despite India's literacy rate and the stringent Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, the dowry system festers as a normalised transaction. Education has raised literacy, but dowry persists in its sanctified rooms negotiate life with gold, cars, and cash masked as 'gifts'. The NCRB data shows over 6,500 dowry deaths annually, but conviction rates languish below 35%. The law threatens jail, but society rewards compliance.

Police often reframe complaints as 'domestic disputes', while families fear stigma more than dowry. A prestige economy underlies the rot: grooms possess market value, weddings signify status, and daughters are viewed as liabilities to be 'settled'. Literacy taught us to read, it didn't unlearn entitlement. Until we shame takers as much as we pity givers, and until enforcement matches legislation, statutes alone won't cure this cultural greed. N Sathasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

### India should be assertive

The upcoming Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) meeting is a critical test for India's maritime leadership. With the recent US attacks targeting four vessels carrying Indian seafarers, New Delhi must boldly bypass bureaucratic red tape to address this crisis. Over 70% of global trade passes through the Indian Ocean, yet

our sailors have become collateral damage in foreign blockades and regional power plays. While IORA's charter technically discourages political disputes, ensuring basic maritime security and human life is the ultimate form of regional cooperation. India must aggressively utilise its chairmanship to demand strict accountability, penalise unlawful blockades and establish an

unyielding, unified regional security framework. We cannot allow our trade routes to become lawless war zones. Vijaykumar H K, Raichur

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

SPeak OUT

Most MPs and MLAs want the party to continue. It is their initiative. They want Mamata Banerjee to be the chief advisor and continue in a role similar to that of a leader. Their appeal touched me. Therefore, I decided that I can stay with them.

Sudip Bandyopadhyay, TMC MP



Politics, noun. A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage. Ambrose Bierce

TO BE PRECISE

A week after youth protest of Jantar Mantar



IN PERSPECTIVE

## The city's missing public voice

The Greater Bengaluru Authority must take the planning process to its citizens

ANJALI KAROL MOHAN

The Karnataka government has announced its intention to prepare an economic master plan for the Bengaluru Metropolitan Region (BMR), spanning 8,000 sq km across three districts. Earlier this year, the government made a similar announcement on master plans for the newly carved Greater Bengaluru Local Planning Area (886.82 sq km) and the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) Area (540.66 sq km). The Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) should leverage the principle of subsidiarity as a practical tool. Again, the RIP requires the master plan to indicate 'Ecologically Sensitive Zones - No Development Zones, including Nalas and water bodies, urban heat islands, urban flooding and pollution' (integrating climate concerns as laid out in the climate action plan). These data sources and attendant experiences are best captured at the hyper-local level through meaningful citizen engagement.

The consultant should clearly set out the intention and methods for a public-facing process that unfolds through the plan-making period, rather than merely inviting 'public suggestions and objections' on a provisionally approved master plan under the Karnataka Town and Country Planning Act, 1961. By then, it is too late for the public to participate. The act of nurturing participation is starkly different from eliciting suggestions and objections. It calls for active engagement — premised on ownership of the ward, the neighbourhood and the city — where the citizen agency contributes to the challenges faced as well as the desires and aspirations for a better quality of life.

This will require the GBA to take the planning process to its citizens. A wide dissemination of citizen engagement — outlining stages of participation and consultation — will help set expectations. For instance, starting with the baseline mapping, the GBA can, through councillors, take the process to wards or a cluster of wards. It must necessarily be a patient process and demanding patient capital and human resources. Centre-staging the public in the planning process, be it the economic master plan for the region or the BDA master plan, is an emerging trend. Bengaluru deserves a comprehensive approach to development, one that moves beyond knee-jerk reactions manifesting in isolated protests.

(The writer is an urban and regional planner, a partner at Integrated Design)

While the BNS and the enlargement of the jurisdiction of National Investigation Agency (NIA), there are still loopholes regarding protection, rehabilitation, rescue plan, and institutional coordination.

# Automation to intelligence: How India's manufacturers must evolve

SANDEEP SENHALL

The opportunities presented by smart manufacturing have moved beyond the realm of theory into reality for many countries around the world. The introduction of Industry 4.0 Lighthouse Factories has demonstrated that systems can be developed that adapt and learn without continuous human intervention. Advanced economies such as Germany, Japan, and many European nations have gone beyond merely proving these technologies can work. In some industries, there are now dark factories where very few people are needed to run fully automated production facilities. India still has a long way to go in making the transition to advanced industrial manufacturing. Although examples of Industry 4.0 implementation exist, India has yet to develop frameworks of its own that reflect the wide range of industrial production types in the country, from very low-volume production to extremely high-volume man-

ufacturing. The gap created by incomplete technology integration does not merely leave India behind technologically; it also represents a missed opportunity to develop Industry 4.0 models tailored specifically to Indian conditions. To bridge this gap, continued cooperation between industry and research institutions will be essential. For example, collaborative partnerships formed by FSIID CORE Labs/IIsc and manufacturing companies have already begun addressing real-world challenges faced in factories. These partnerships also provide a scalable approach for adopting Industry 4.0 frameworks within Indian industry. For small-and-medium enterprises (SMEs), such partnerships are not merely a benefit; they serve as the driving force behind technology adoption. The basis of three of the biggest changes referring to Industry 4.0 developments being realised today is the data produced from these applications. The ability to produce accurate data about manufacturing pro-

cesses results in three key transformative capabilities: AI-driven process optimisation, predictive maintenance; and intelligent quality control. More accurate data results in making more accurate decisions, which, compounded, result in creating a competitive advantage. Unfortunately, a majority of manufacturers in India are not ready to produce these digitally generated, structured, real-time manufactured good data. In order to develop the digital infrastructure needed, manufacturers need assistance from policymakers—especially in light of projected workforce shortages and increased competition from other countries around the world. There is a risk when using digital tools that they do not create true manufacturing ability. True manufacturing competitiveness is something that exists much deeper than merely using digital tools. In the machine tool industry, computer numerical control (CNC) machines, servo motors and advanced automation compo-

nents are primarily sourced from outside India, leaving Indian firms as primarily system integrators and not as technological innovators. The West has built up these basic manufacturing capabilities over the years. Currently, India does not have the appropriate amount of intellectual property and technical experience regarding the fundamental issues in building these industrial capabilities, and until India has the appropriate level of knowledge and experience, it will not be able to develop advanced manufacturing capabilities. The issues involved with developing indigenous inspection/sensor technologies and basic core components do not just include a cost component; they relate to the long-term industrial sovereignty of India's manufacturing sector. The value of research excellence in delivering real-world results, making research very much an outcome-based exercise as opposed to an activity without an identifiable outcome or product. Programmes such

as the National Capital Goods Scheme are developing more of these outcomes, but the long-term goal should be to develop even more ambitious policies that provide incentives for developing locally developed technologies, reducing reliance on imports, and rapidly transitioning from the laboratory to the manufacturing facility. Supply chain resilience is a strategic necessity for a country the size of India. The disruption of important imports, such as CNC controllers, can create a domino effect throughout all areas of the Indian manufacturing industry that is hard to manage. Indigenous development and localisation is the long-term solution that requires continued funding by the government via R&D and core technologies. The reasons behind the investment in productivity are just as strong. AI has changed the way we perform tasks in an office by automating processes, reducing costs and increasing performance. The same analogy can be applied to factories,

as intelligent systems can provide similar increases in productivity and cost competitiveness to both SMEs and MSMEs. There are positive signs in automotive, defence and engineering exports. Products made in India are often significantly more cost-competitive than the imported alternatives, positioning the country as a dependable source of precision components for global industries. Yet the opportunity extends far beyond what has already been accomplished. Through sustained investment in foundational technologies and productive systems, India can evolve from a manufacturer of components to a developer of technologies. Such a transformation would enable the country to move from an end-user of industrial technologies to becoming one of the world's leading manufacturing innovators. The groundwork has been laid. A similar level of ambition must now follow. (The writer is the programme manager, CORE Labs, FSIID, IIsc)

## Russia and the United States projected their own centralised views onto Ukraine and Iran, respectively. As a result, the smaller countries trapped larger ones in a costly confrontation

NEIL MACFARQUHAR

President Trump and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, both resist the idea that ostensibly weaker powers fought them to a stalemate, with the two leaders leaning on negotiations to win the capitulation that they failed to secure in battle. Iran and Ukraine have pushed back robustly against this "might makes right" mentality, with top officials adopting an even more defiant tone in recent days. In an open letter to Putin this month, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine derided Putin for clinging to power in the aged, "You did not expect full-scale resistance from Ukraine, and you did not foresee that things would go this far," Zelenskyy wrote.

After Iran unleashed a missile barrage against Israel last week in retaliation for attacks against Hezbollah in Lebanon, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the speaker of Parliament and Iran's top negotiator, threatened more. "Until there is a sincere commitment to restoring trust, Iran's response will not change," he wrote on X. Their recalcitrance reflects the reality of two wars in stasis, with a profound lack of trust all around stymying progress.

Talks to find peace in Ukraine hit an impasse right before the Iran was started, with Ukraine demanding more robust security guarantees for ceding territory than Russia was willing to accept. Diplomacy has mostly produced prisoner swaps between the sides. The United States, once trying to play the main mediator, has shifted its focus to Iran.

American and Iranian officials now say a peace deal with Iran could be at hand. But it appears that it will initially consist of a framework for negotiations that will push the thorniest issues, like Iran's nuclear programme and sanctions relief, down the road. It is expected to allow for at least the temporary reopening of the Strait of Hormuz to shipping.

Both conflicts have produced a similar outcome: a weaker power has trapped a stronger one in a costly confrontation. Fiona Hill, who ran Russian and European affairs at the National Security Council during the first Trump administration, wrote in a policy paper for the Brookings Institution this week. "Like Putin, Trump did not have a plan for what would happen next."

The root of the issue is that both presidents sparked wars with limited understanding of the opposing side, Hill said in an interview. "Both projected their own centralised views of their own roles onto Iran and Ukraine, and so they thought if they could decapitate the system it would fall," she said.

Putin did not anticipate fierce Ukrainian resistance, for example. Trump ignored admissions that Iran could shut the Strait of Hormuz, and appeared to underestimate Iran's capacity to retaliate and inflict damage on America's allies in the region. Nor did the Iranian people rise up against their authoritarian leaders, as Israel and the US had urged them to do. While the bombing campaigns of the US and Russia have had devastating effects, analysts noted, airpower alone has not proved decisive.

"Although Russia's aggressive invasion of its neighbour differs from Washington's goal of reining in Iran's expansionist threat, both States are finding it equally hard to align their end goals with the



An employee works with FP-1 long range drone at a production facility of Fire Point company, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in an undisclosed location in Ukraine. REUTERS

## How major powers misread the regions they attacked

means available to achieve them," James F. Jeffrey, a fellow at the Washington Institute and a former Middle East envoy, wrote in *Foreign Affairs*. Ukraine managed to halt Russian troop advances in part by producing next-generation drones, changing the face of modern warfare, while the US has shown no desire to deploy troops into Iran.

Lack of compromise has prolonged both wars. The United States and Russia have presented extensive demands to the other side, but the list of what their adversaries get in return is short. Putin, in particular, has not budged from his maximalist demands, which include taking land his army has been unable to capture. Trump has also repeatedly revised terms already agreed with the mediators, frustrating the Iranians.

The United States harmed the process "with contradictory messages, frequent changes in positions and demands, as well as repeated violations of the cease-fire," Esmail Baghaei, the spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry, said last week after fighting sputtered back to life.

Each revision erodes a little more of Iran's confidence that Trump will stick to an eventual deal, analysts said. Yet Trump has repeatedly declared that a resolution is just around the corner, as he did Thursday after calling off yet another offensive. None of the shifting set of goals that he predicted at the beginning of the conflict—how he said would take only a few weeks to achieve—has been realised.

The same is true for Putin. Invading Ukraine, the Kremlin had expected it would quickly seize Kyiv, install a pliant regime and be welcomed by the Ukraini-

an people. That was more than four years ago. Despite a death toll estimated at more than 350,000 soldiers, Moscow has not fully occupied three of the four Ukrainian provinces that it now claims.

Asked last week about Zelenskyy's latest overture for peace, Putin declared that "military operations"—he still avoids calling it a war—"will end when we achieve our goals."

In reality, both Washington and Moscow "have been defeated in the pursuit of the goals that they had," Hill said.

The circumstances of the two wars do not entirely match. Ukraine had not threatened Russia, while Iran had confronted the US ever since its 1979 Islamic revolution through terrorist attacks, proxy wars and other assaults on American interests. The US did not have territorial designs on Iran, while Putin has occupied almost 20% of Ukraine. Militarily, Russia began destabilising Ukraine by annexing Crimea and fuelling a separatist movement starting in 2014. United States largely avoided a war with Iran until its 12-day bombing campaign last June undertaken with Israel.

Iran is more inclined than Ukraine to make a deal because it faces more dire economic conditions and receives almost no outside support, said Vali R. Nasr, a professor of international affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. At the same time, he added, the United States and Israel followed their strategic objectives in two consecutive wars, in June and February. "So the Iranians want the United States, basically, to come to the table with the realisation that they're not defeated, and the military conquest of Iran

is not in the cards," he said. The main American and Israeli priority is for Iran to abandon its nuclear programme, including surrendering its highly enriched uranium, so it can never develop a nuclear weapon.

Iran has resisted making those concessions, and any resolution on that issue could come months or years down the road. Iran is also asking for long-time American economic sanctions lifted, along with the current naval blockade, and the release of \$24 billion in frozen assets.

Iran wants to use the framework under discussion to test whether Trump will really implement an accord, Nasr said.

"They want to see whether he actually will lift the blockade," he said. "They want to see whether he can maintain cease-fire in Lebanon, and they want to see whether he will deliver some of their money." If all that happens, they would be willing to negotiate something bigger, he added.

In Ukraine, Russia wants at a minimum that Ukraine withdraw from the strategically important silver of Donetsk province from which it has been unable to dislodge them, with Russia even losing some ground in recent weeks.

In both wars, Trump has dented American credibility, Hill said. He failed to fulfil his vow to negotiate a peace settlement in Ukraine while undermining NATO in the process, and he did not achieve his main goals in Iran, or protect Gulf allies from Iranian retaliation. Moscow and Kyiv had each hoped that Trump might persuade the other to agree to terms, but now both sides know that they need to look elsewhere for a solution, she said. The New York Times

## When misogyny takes centre court

ADITYA MUKHERJEE

Sexism in sport often gives its practitioners a bad name, as their off-the-cuff remarks expose deeply rooted prejudices. The controversy at this year's French Open has once again underlined how female officials and athletes continue to be hounded by doubts about their authority and competence.

Paraguayan tennis player Adolfo Daniel Valjejo sparked outrage after his marathon five-set defeat at French teenager Moise Kouame at Roland Garros. Following the contest, Valjejo blamed Brazilian umpire Ana Carvalho for failing to control an unruly partisan crowd. But it was the tenor of his remarks that caused an uproar. Valjejo suggested that some emotionally charged matches "need to be umpired by a man", implying that women lack the courage and authority required to handle volatile atmospheres.

The response from the French Tennis Federation (FFT) was swift and severe. Tournament organisers labelled the remarks "unacceptable" and imposed a massive fine of \$65,000—reportedly among the heaviest sanctions in French Open history for unsportsmanlike conduct. Tournament director Amelie Mauresmo firmly rejected the notion that officiating ability has anything to do with gender.

The incident struck a raw nerve because it echoed pattern to which women in sport have long been inured: the assumption that leadership, toughness and authority are inherently masculine traits. Tennis, despite its progressive reputation and equal prize money at Grand Slams, has hardly been immune from sexism.

Perhaps the most famous chapter came in 1973 with the historic "Battle of the Sexes" between 29-year-old Billie Jean King and 55-year-old Bobby Riggs. The inebriated Riggs openly boasted that even at 55 he could humiliate the world's best female player. King's emphatic victory became a landmark moment not merely for sport, but for the broader women's rights movement.

In 2017, tennis legend John McEnroe ignited a heated debate after describing Serena Williams as "the best female player ever" before regularly on the men's tour, she would rank "like 700 in the world". The remark was widely criticised for diminishing Serena's extraordinary achievements by insisting on measuring women's excellence against male benchmarks. Serena herself responded sharply, urging McEnroe to keep her "out of statements that are not factually based".

Serena Williams has repeatedly found herself at the centre of debates involving sexism and double standards. During the 2018 US Open final against Naomi Osaka, Serena argued that male players routinely engage in heated outbursts without facing the same level of criticism or punishment directed at women—a frustration that, at times, carried the despair of a Munch scream. The controversy divided opinion, but it reopened important conversations about how female athletes are judged differently for displays of anger, passion or competitiveness.

Then there were the comments by former Romanian player and businessman Ion Tiriac, who drew flak after making disparaging remarks about Serena Williams' age and body weight. Another chapter in the 50-year struggle female athletes face over their appearance.

The Valjejo controversy is especially revealing because it concerns a female official. Women referees and umpires across sports frequently confront hostility that goes beyond criticism of decisions. Their authority itself is questioned. Male officials may be accused of incompetence; female officials are often accused of being inherently incapable.

This prejudice is not unique to tennis. Female referees in football, hockey and basketball have regularly reported abuse, questioning whether women belong in positions of authority over male athletes. The problem reflects broader societal attitudes where leadership qualities are still unconsciously coded as masculine. What makes such remarks dangerous is that they reinforce barriers already faced by women trying to enter coaching, officiating and administrative roles in sport. Every time a high-profile athlete suggests that women cannot handle pressure, it legitimises old stereotypes for a new generation.

Yet there is another side to the story. The strong institutional response from the FFT also signals how much sport has changed. Remarks that might once have been dismissed as locker-room frustration now attract real consequences. Federations increasingly recognise that sexism damages not only individuals but also the credibility of sport itself.

The irony, of course, is that tennis has produced countless examples disproving the very stereotypes Valjejo invoked. The real question, therefore, is not whether women have the courage to withstand pressure. The more pressing question is why parts of the sporting world still struggle to accept it. (The writer is a Delhi-based journalist)

### OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JUNE 1976

12 lakh school kids to get midday meals

Mysore, June 14

The Government proposed to provide during this year free midday meals to about 12 lakh school-going children in the State. Mr. H. V. Srirangaraju, DPI said here today. Inaugurating the eighth standard classes of Central Food Technological Research Institute High School, Mr. Srirangaraju said the department, in collaboration with the CFTRI was keen on providing cheap and nutritious food to the maximum number of students possible with the resources available.

25 YEARS AGO: JUNE 2001

BJP joined Ayodhya stir to fight vote politics: Advani

New Delhi, June 14

Union Home Minister L. K. Advani today told the Liberhan Commission that the BJP joined the Ayodhya movement in 1989 basically to fight the vote bank politics of Congress after Rajiv Gandhi government succumbed to pressure from minorities to negate the Supreme Court ruling on Shah Bano case. Depositing before the Commission probing the sequence of events leading to demolition of Babri Masjid in December 1992, Mr. Advani said the turning point came in 1985 when the SC judgement was sought to be negated.

### OASIS | SRADHA PRATHI

## Self awareness for self control

Was a nation are still not done with the debate of whether we should include sex education in our curriculum or not. Every time a horrendous crime of sexual nature takes place, the discussion erupts and subsides like a storm in a teacup, only to resurface when the issue takes an uglier turn and becomes simply unavoidable and unwieldy. The issue cannot be wished away. We must arrive at a middle path which will create awareness about our physical bodies and their functions. It is an error to think that it is easy for a person to lead a life of chastity if he is brought up in complete ignorance

of sensual pleasures. Virtue guarded only by ignorance can prove to be dangerous and disastrous in the long run.

An upakatha in the *Mahabharata* illustrates this truth in the following story. Once upon a time the country of Anga was afflicted by a severe famine. The people lost hope as the drought continued over many years. There was a large-scale destruction of life and property. Romapada, the king of Anga, was told that if a chaste celibate sage called Rishyashringa stepped into their unfortunate land, then he would usher in

the much-awaited rains. A little homework revealed that Rishyashringa was the son of Sage Vibhandaka. The father and son lived in a forest all by themselves. Rishyashringa had never seen any other human being besides his father. So when the messengers of Romapada went to fetch him, he protested vehemently. Hence, the king and his men decided to implement the natural instincts of human beings to do their job for them. They commissioned the beautiful princess Shanta to lure Rishyashringa into Anga. Accordingly, the princess and her friends

loitered around the hermitage and succeeded in attracting the attention of the young sage towards themselves. Over a period of time Rishyashringa was completely in love with Shantha. One day, when Vibhandaka was away, the princess managed to entice the young man and lead him to her country to usher in the rain clouds. The story subtly tells us knowledge is not always about exotic subjects; it is also about knowing ourselves physically, mentally and spiritually. For it is only when we are aware of ourselves that we can exercise control over ourselves and pave the way for a cultured and controlled civilisation.





RAHUL GANDHI  
Leader of the Opposition

“Under a compromised PM, being an Indian means facing a wretched plight. Foreign powers kill our citizens. Our govt meekly obeys orders and our citizens are left to rot



DONALD TRUMP  
US President

Obama's Deal with Iran was an easy, beautiful, smooth road to a Nuclear Weapon, which Iran would have had six years ago & would have used long before now. My Agreement with Iran is exact opposite



SUDIP BANDYOPADHYAY  
TMC MP

Most MPs & MLAs want the party to continue. They want Mamata to be chief advisor and continue in a role similar to that of a leader. Therefore, I decided to stay with them”

## Deepening French friendship

In the present era of volatile geopolitics, rise of protectionist tendencies and shifting alliances, having an all-weather friend with a stable and consistent approach is an asset for any nation. India can surely count on France to provide that sense of comfort and predictability. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ongoing visit to France—his seventh since 2014—to participate in the G7 Summit and hold a bilateral meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron will provide an opportunity for both countries to further deepen the cooperation. This would be the first meeting between them after the two countries announced the elevation of bilateral ties to “Special Global Strategic Partnership” last year. There is a growing convergence of views between them over several geopolitical issues. On the conflict in West Asia, the two countries hold a common view that the continuation of the war is not in anyone's interest. On AI, both countries share similar views, seeking regulatory frameworks that protect sovereignty while encouraging innovation. The strategic trust, built over years of partnership, has now matured in fields as critical as defence, nuclear energy and space. The India-France defence collaborations run deep and wide, spanning the entire spectrum from air and naval assets to helicopter engines and missiles. Some flagship examples of cooperation include the Rafale aircraft, Scorpene submarines and Shakti helicopter engines. France is one of India's most preferred partners in Europe, and the bilateral relationship has been a success story over the last several decades.

**Gives India the elbow room to assert strategic independence at a time when America has largely turned protectionist**

With the passing of the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act, there is a great opportunity for collaboration between the Indian and French industries. On Small Modular Reactors/Advanced Modular Reactors, India and France signed a Declaration of Intent on cooperation in this sector in February 2025. In the space sector, there is the rich legacy of six-decade-old cooperation between ISRO and the French national space agency CNES. The Indian private sector is expected to play a larger role in the transformation of the domestic aerospace ecosystem in collaboration with France. At a time when America has abandoned the spirit of multilateralism and turned largely protectionist under Donald Trump's leadership, the deepening ties between New Delhi and Paris provide an elbow room to assert strategic independence. The steadily expanding bilateral cooperation covers virtually every area—from the deep oceans to the tallest mountain, from defence and AI to critical minerals and renewable energy. A key highlight of the PM's ongoing visit would be the inauguration of the “Bharat Innovates” event in the French city of Nice that brings together more than 120 Indian companies and startups, and prominent business leaders from France and other countries. Alongside Macron, Modi will also attend the VivaTech Summit, Europe's largest technology and startup event that will host an Indian pavilion, the largest one at the summit this year.

**Market volatility, rising energy prices, and shifting US foreign policy priorities reflect the growing importance of geoeconomics in global affairs**



SANJAY TURI

It is interesting to note that the US-Iran ceasefire negotiations have recently witnessed a major shift in priorities of the peace proposals. The earlier peace proposal primarily focused on the safe passage of ships through the Strait of Hormuz and Iran's denuclearisation efforts, but the recent peace proposal has incorporated the extension of the Abraham Accords among the US allies.

Additionally, President Trump has suggested that Iran should also join this accord to recognise Israel, which possibly makes the entire peace proposal logically irrelevant, as this suggestion goes against the foundational political principles of the Iranian regime. Many scholars believe that this proposal reflects President Trump's reluctance to end the war prematurely, as this war is benefiting the US directly or indirectly.

### Political Economy

While the global economy is experiencing a significant slowdown post-Iran war, the net worth of a few individuals globally, particularly American business tycoons, continues to increase. In recent times, it is often alleged that American business tycoons associated with President Trump, directly or indirectly, have experienced exponential increases in their profits or net worth.

In fact, the personal wealth of President Trump himself has risen significantly, nearly tripling from \$2.3 billion to \$6.5 billion over the last few years. In addition to this, President Trump's unilateral decisions on the Iran war have



not only made the consequences of this war much more uncertain but also made the global economy highly vulnerable. This phenomenon partially reminds us of the Marxist Theory of international politics, in which Marx gives primacy to domestic political economy over geopolitics.

Although the discipline of international political economy traces its origin to Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations and the Ricardian theory of comparative advantage, Marx strongly criticises Smith's and Ricardo's ideas of political economy. As Marx's criticism focuses primarily on the domestic context of capitalism and not much on the external dimensions of capitalism, he argues that policies inspired by Adam Smith and David Ricardo bring wealth to the few rather than to the nation as a whole.

### Inflationary Pressures

With the skyrocketing energy prices across the globe post the Hormuz blockade, the US market is also experiencing an increase in inflationary pressures on almost every good and service. This is exactly what Marx argues, that the market, inspired by Adam Smith and Ricardo, will benefit only the bourgeoisie class or a few individuals.

President Trump, being a businessman first, always looks for profit, completely ignoring all aspects of the catastrophe he has been creating in recent times, be it his role in Gaza, Ukraine or the Persian Gulf. Trump's capitalistic approach to war has been so influential that the profits generated by the war outcomes are highly concentrated among the few individuals who have backed Donald Trump throughout his political career.

Ever since the Iran war began almost a hundred days ago, President Trump

has repeatedly announced progress towards a peace agreement, signalling an end to this war. Each time he announces that this war is nearing an end, the market reacts very differently: crude oil prices drop sharply, and stock markets worldwide see a bullish trend. Before the situation can stabilise, he makes another announcement that raises fresh uncertainty. As a result, markets rebound, triggering significant volatility in stock prices and energy markets. It is reported that billions of dollars are put into the futures and options markets before each of President Trump's war-related announcements.

### Impact on Markets

Recently, when the US and Iran were about to reach an agreement, the US attacked Iran's surveillance facilities on Qeshm Island and near Sirk and also shot down two Iranian attack drones over the Strait of Hormuz. In response, Iran launched a massive drone and missile strike at US bases in Bahrain and Kuwait.

This retaliation renewed hostilities, drastically reducing the possibility of the proposed ceasefire agreement. Such messages from President Trump have led observers to wonder whether he is attempting to influence stock prices for personal gain, given that

**Trump's tariffs, aid cuts, and withdrawals from global institutions underscore a foreign policy increasingly driven by economic interests**

markets often move significantly in response to major news developments.

In this context, the sophist Thrasymachus' famous statement, mentioned by Plato in his book ‘Republic’, that ‘might is right’ has gained significant attention, as the US, under the leadership of Trump, is doing the same. The world is watching these developments, but there is hardly any country that dares to stand against the mighty US.

Contrary to historical patterns in which the US had a history of giving geopolitics a front seat, the US under the Trump administration has given geoeconomics a front seat instead. The Trump administration's recent unilateral exit from various global organisations, the discontinuation of foreign aid (USAID) to developing countries, and the weaponisation of tariff imposition on its trading partners are the clearest examples of the US' recent foreign policy shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics.

In this context, it would not be wrong to assume that President Trump, by handling war with such a casual and material interests, has possibly altered the true, historical nature of geopolitics during his tenure. Last but not least, the damage to the rules-based international order caused by his materialistic tendencies is possibly irreversible, and the burden of repairing this damage does not lie solely on American citizens but on every global citizen and organisation that believes in the idea of a rules-based international order.

*(The author is a Doctoral candidate at the Centre for West Asian Studies (CWAS), School of International Studies (SIS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)*

### Letters to the Editor

Editor

#### Big-ticket disaster

Balanced or holistic development is certainly a bookish phrase in today's context. Embarking on big ticket projects on protected, pristine, ecologically sensitive forests like the Nicobar islands is really a matter of concern. We have to choose strategic initiatives over ecology in this case. No report submission, environmental assessments, or compensatory actions can undo the damage once done. This message is loud and clear.

RAHUL GHOSH,  
Delhi

#### Structural collapse

Barely a month after its Assembly poll debacle, the Trinamool Congress is imploding. The nutty exposé TMC's core malaise: deep-rooted corruption, brazen nepotism, and dictatorship-style functioning that crushed dissent and debate. Power remains centralised in one family while merit and accountability are sidelined. Loyalty, not competence, decides tickets and posts. The electoral defeat only unmasked years of cadre frustration with top-down control and the absence of succession planning. This isn't mere factionalism—it's structural collapse. A party run as a personal fiefdom cannot withstand setbacks. Without dismantling its culture of command and favouritism, TMC risks sliding from Bengal's ruler to a warning on personality-driven politics.

N SADHASIVA REDDY, Bengaluru

#### NEET scam

Availing the logistical support of the omnipotent IAF in secured delivery of NEET-UG re-examination question papers to various locations across the nation is a novel mission which the Mi-17 helicopters themselves might have never ever thought of. Besides, such a demanding situation depicts the lowness and questions the moral turpitude of the failed systems and agencies, which time and again are involved in paper leakage scams and wrong doings.

MURALI M MALLAREDDY, Visakhapatnam

#### Detached from reality

The Central Government's absolute indifference to the skyrocketing fuel and cooking gas prices reveals a disturbing policy detachment from the realities of ordinary citizens. While the Russia, Ukraine conflict is frequently weaponised as an excuse to hike prices, the benefits of falling global crude prices are never passed on to the consumer. Instead, the government actively shields corporate profit margins, even going so far as to offer a Rs 10,000 crore relief package to oil and aviation firms while citizens fracture their household budgets. The numbers speak for themselves. In a mere three months, domestic LPG cylinders were surged by Rs 89 to reach nearly Rs 950, almost double the price since this administration took office. Commercial cylinders have faced an even more catastrophic Rs 1,200 hike in the same period, dealing a severe blow to small businesses. This relentless inflation in fuel and commercial gas acts as an immediate tax on survival, triggering a cascading price rise across essential commodities, vegetables, and freight. The rhetoric of India's booming economic stature completely collapses when measured against actual public purchasing power. According to global data adjusting fuel costs against per capita income, an average Indian can afford a meagre 8 litres of petrol or diesel daily. Compare this to 789 litres in Libya, 199 litres in the US, or 20 litres in Brazil; India sits at the absolute bottom of 158 nations surveyed.

SPADMANABHAN, Kochi

#### India in the hotspot

BBC

#### Thousands march in PoK as clashes kill at least 15

At least 15 people have been killed in clashes between protesters and security forces in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, local authorities say. The violence comes after an alliance of activist groups called on people to protest against the reservation of legislative seats for refugees who migrated to Pakistan from PoK.

The Washington Times

#### CJP launches nationwide youth protests

India's viral Cockroach Janta Party launched a nationwide protest campaign on Thursday with hundreds of students and young supporters gathering in the western city of Pune in the youth movement's latest show of strength. The rally at Pune followed the group's first major street protest in New Delhi last week.

Al Jazeera

#### Why Indians are having fewer children

Many young people across India, which has seen rapid population growth for decades, are now choosing to have fewer children or not at all. According to government figures, including from SRS Statistical Report—the country's largest demographic survey—India has been experiencing falling birthrate for some years.



INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Rammath Goenka

SC MARKS HOME CARE, NOW EQUALITY SHOULD DEFINE ITS TRUE WORTH

THE Supreme Court's recent judgement in Shishupal @ Shish Ram vs Surjeet is likely to be remembered for a phrase rarely heard in Indian courtrooms: "the homemaker builds the nation".

The case arose from a motor accident compensation claim. But the court has done more than revise an award. It has recognised that the labour performed within the home is neither invisible nor incidental.

The judgement is particularly significant because it confronts the way courts have historically treated homemakers. Notational income figures have often been unrealistically low, bearing little relation to the range of responsibilities women shoulder every day.

It also addresses a contradiction that has persisted for decades. Homemakers have often been described as dependants of earning members even when the functioning of the household depends substantially on their labour.

Our system fails to identify a child's strengths and weaknesses and encourage them to explore knowledge beyond the classroom.

The larger challenge is to move beyond approximation. Valuing unpaid care work requires data, research and wider public debate.

HEIGHTS TO RISE IN B'LRU, PRESSURE WILL BUILD TOO

BENGALURU'S cityscape is poised for a dramatic transformation: vertical expansion, denser development, higher population density and diminishing green cover.

Yet the announcement sits uneasily with a Supreme Court order issued in December 2024, which stipulated that new electricity, water and sewage connections could be granted only to property owners holding a valid OC.

The government is now considering an ordinance to formalise the move, although by and large the opposition BJP also supports higher FAR limits.

While the package may appear to offer benefits across the board, concerns about its long-term consequences have sparked a broader debate about the sustainability of such growth.

QUICK TAKE

GREENER FAREWELL

HUMAN composting is emerging as a gentler, natural way to say goodbye, gaining attention as an alternative to burial.

OUR education system suffers from deep-rooted pedagogical and systemic challenges. Though schemes such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Right to Education Act, 2009 and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have significantly expanded access and enrolment, the system continues to struggle with quality, equity, retention and relevance.

Government schools constitute the backbone of our education system, accounting for 69 percent of institutions and about 50 percent of enrolments. But infrastructure and outcomes show uneven progress.

Learning outcomes, as per Annual Status of Education Report 2024, paint a concerning portrait of 'schooling without learning'.

The recent textbook revision presents a selective and majoritarian interpretation of history and culture, marginalising diverse regional, linguistic, religious, caste and minority perspectives.

Entrance Test. The result is widespread stress, anxiety, disengagement and career mismatches. NEP, 2020 seeks to address this through multidisciplinary, flexible learning, reduced content load, experiential and competency-based methods.

Unless schools become student-centred and universities regain autonomy and diversity, India's education system will continue to struggle with quality, innovation and social mobility

UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF EDUCATION

KAPIL SIBAL



Former Union education minister



SOURAV ROY

Entrance Test. The result is widespread stress, anxiety, disengagement and career mismatches. NEP, 2020 seeks to address this through multidisciplinary, flexible learning, reduced content load, experiential and competency-based methods.

formula has sparked resistance in non-Hindi-speaking states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, leading to withholding of central funds.

In higher education, chronic underfunding persists. Funds are disproportionately diverted to elite institutions while state universities crumble, making NEP targets unattainable.

Declining research output and global rankings further highlight these shortcomings. Research output in India grows only in quantity, while quality remains low, amid brain drain and an underfunded National Research Foundation.

VOYAGE THROUGH BELIEF



RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE

grinned (around ₹100), handing back The Best of Friends by Joanna Trollope with a flourish. "Sukuma," I said, Balinese for "thank you".

"Talk to me!" he said, pulling up a plastic chair and offering me a clove-studded 'Sampoorna' cigarette that I politely declined, which he then lit for himself.

"I got another job of awareness about ambivalence in faith while holidaying in Goa. Strolling around Mapusa, I passed a church dedicated to the Madonna and was told she was a 'miraculous lady', as Hindus speak of Kanchi Kamakshi. But in the next breath, my local informant spoke disparagingly of some religious practices as 'superstition'."



And by and by, the counter-argument goes like this:

Mortimer: "In faith, he is a worthy gentleman/Exceedingly well read and profited/In strange conceits, rapt as a lion/And as wondrous affable and as bountiful/As the mines of India."

Don't these medieval words put it rather well that even if beliefs differ, it's character that counts?

Moreover, cultural adherence coded by centuries is hard to eliminate and why should we, when there are many inspiring stories to learn from? Of course, we have to understand them first.

A Chinese tale I like in this regard concerns Huineng, 617-713 CE, who stands ten feet tall in Zen Buddhism as the Sixth Patriarch of Ch'an (Chinese Zen). It's said he was an illiterate woodcutter who was granted enlightenment in a single flash.

"This is not like bowing at all, what have you learned?" chided Huineng. "I've recited the Lotus Sutra 3,000 times," said Fa-Ta-Yuan?"

I rejoice about Valmiki and Vyasa, who lent tonnes of spiritual advice disguised as interesting stories that each generation has to understand and pass on with joyful awareness.

(Shevab09@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@morningstandard.in

Federal backing

Ref: Awesome foursome rallies BJP (Jun 14). It's good auguries for a democracy like India to have both unitary and federal structures accommodated in the Constitution.

TMCs's tests

Ref: Legislature awaits clarity (Jun 13). To restore public confidence, the TMC should adopt a more cohesive and disciplined approach, strengthen its internal leadership and reconnect with the electorate through effective political campaigns.

Voter appeal

Ref: Symbolism of power dressing (Jun 14). The piece on sartorial politics is a timely reminder that clothing choices carry real historical weight in India.

Compensate sailors

Ref: Modi-trump talks on Jun (14). Citizens subscribe to the sangnity that the PM will set the tone for a huge compensation from the Trump administration for the irremovable loss of these seafarers onboard MT Settellebello shot down by the US military.

Full circle

Ref: 14 women get permanent commission (Jun 14). The Supreme Court's 2021 verdict admitting women in the NDA had cleared decks to empower naari shakti.

Disposable lives

Ref: Price of a life (The New Sunday Express Magazine, Jun 14). It was with a heavy heart that I read the article. The disposable nature of lives suggests that as every minute passes in India, a person—young or old—lives in borrowed time.

# AI with borders

### US' Anthropic curbs should compel a rethink for India

The United States (US) government's directive to restrict access to Anthropic's latest models on artificial intelligence (AI) has policy implications. It alters the geopolitics around AI development, and could result in investors reviewing valuations of AI-related businesses. Last Friday, the US secretary of commerce issued an "export control directive" that ordered Anthropic to revoke access for all non-Americans to two of its most powerful AI models — Claude Fable 5 and Claude Mythos 5. The latter curbs national security concerns, Anthropic suspended all access to the models, pending the rollout of a verification system. It said, "We must abruptly disable Fable 5 and Mythos 5 for all our customers to ensure compliance." The concerns centre around a potential "jailbreak", which is industry jargon for finding ways to remove constraints and guardrails that prevent models from working in high-risk areas. Anthropic had built Fable 5 on the underlying model Mythos, launched in April. Mythos was not mass-released because it was deemed too powerful without guardrails. It had identified flaws and vulnerabilities in every major operating system and web browser.

Anthropic launched a controlled pilot called Project Glasswing, inviting around 50 vetted organisations, to utilise Mythos for defensive cybersecurity. Without guardrails, the fear was that it could be used to hack systems such as those used in the banking and financial industry, or even to build bioweapons. Last Tuesday, the company released Fable 5, which has guardrails designed from the learning of Glasswing. If someone tries to run Fable 5 to hack into a critical system or build a weapon, the model is supposed to revert to an earlier, less powerful iteration. The US directive apparently cited an instance where a jailbreak had been carried out to bypass safety restrictions.

Anthropic disputes this assertion on jailbreak and it can find a way to persuade the US government to roll back the order or modify it. Conspiracy theorists are suggesting that this is the US administration's "revenge" for a prior dispute where Anthropic refused to let the Pentagon use its models for mass surveillance, and the development of autonomous weapons. However, the order alters the perceptions of policymakers and investors. Anthropic is seeking to launch an initial public offering (IPO), and would, before the order, have been able to raise funds at a valuation of over \$1 trillion. OpenAI, which developed ChatGPT, has similar IPO intentions. This order brings to the table some policy uncertainties that value matrices would find hard to account for.

But what happens if an AI model is so good that governments refuse to let it be deployed commercially? There has been talk of moving to a decentralised AI development model, where no single government has the powers to revoke access. However, other governments may emulate the US, and decentralisation would involve setting up byzantine corporate structures to tap capital.

Nandan Nilekani, one of the Infosys founders, had suggested that India focus on developing use cases rather than building new models. But that no longer seems a viable allocation of resources. The US, in prior decades, imposed export controls on "dual-use" equipment and software. After the Pokhran-II tests in 1998, India had to develop its own super-computing resources and weather-prediction programming, and cryogenic rocket engines, due to sanctions in these cases. It appears the country will have to make a similar push in AI, accelerating the induction of compute resources to "grow" homegrown AI models. This incident further emphasises the fact that AI and access to AI must be treated as strategic assets by sovereign nations, rather than simple commercial resources.



ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA KUMAR MOHANTY

# Echoes of 1990-91?

### Let us hope that 2026-27 will remind us of 1991-92, when economic policy shifted from increased foreign and domestic borrowing to implementing serious policy reforms

SHANKAR ACHARYA

It has been 17 months since I last contributed a column to *Business Standard* "Macro signals flashing amber" (January 16, 2025). Today those signals are "locked and loaded" at red, to use Pete Hegseth's favourite phrase.

Last month, the Prime Minister emphasised the gravity of India's economic predicament in today's difficult global circumstances.

In some ways, the situation is eerily reminiscent of 1990-91. Back then, the US-Iraq-Kuwait war had sharply increased the global prices of oil and gas and thus delivered a serious terms of trade shock to all major oil-importing nations like India. Today, the three-month-old massive assault on Iran by America and Israel and the consequent closure of the Strait of Hormuz have ramped up oil prices by over 50 per cent, with experts warning of even higher prices in the near future, as government and private stocks run down globally.

By 1990-91 India's balance of payments (BoP) had already been under severe pressure because of low exports and high fiscal deficits for several years as well as a strong policy aversion to foreign private investment. By 2025-26, India's share of goods exports had fallen to 11 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) from a peak of 17 per cent average in 2011-12. The impact of this substantial decline in goods exports on the BoP current account deficit was masked by the surge in services exports and buoyancy of remittances from abroad during this period. But the recent, massive energy shock and associated jump in payments for oil and gas have highlighted the long-standing weakness in goods exports. The trend decline in its share of GDP has been due to several factors, whose influence has varied over time. One oft-underestimated cause has been the inexorable, cost-raising increase in India's customs tariffs since 2014. The World Trade Organization data show that for non-agricultural

goods, the share of tariff lines in the category 10-15 per cent increased sharply from 1.4 per cent to 33.5 per cent between 2014 and 2024 and for the tariff category 15-25 per cent from 1.7 per cent to 14.9 per cent, while the share of tariff lines in the category 0-10 per cent fell steeply from 90.5 per cent to 42.5 per cent over the same period.

In the BoP capital account the significant decline in net foreign direct investment from annual levels of \$30-40 billion to an average of just \$6 billion in the last three years has aggravated the overall pressure on the BoP. Much of this sharp decline is attributable to surges in repatriation and outbound investment, both possibly signalling deterioration in the domestic investment climate. Net foreign portfolio investment also has been volatile with a strong negative bias. So, for the first time in India's history, India's balance of payments has come under severe pressure on both the current and capital accounts at the same time.

The combined fiscal deficit of about 7.7 per cent of GDP in 2025-26 is clearly better than in 1990-91. But it is still high in comparison to major developing countries and our own history (such as in 2005-08). Together with our government debt to GDP ratio of over 80 per cent, it leaves very little fiscal space for manoeuvre.

On the positive side, the government and Reserve Bank of India (RBI) have allowed the market-responsive exchange rate to depreciate, with some attempts to slow the decline by the use of forex reserves; quite different from 1990-91, when India had a fixed (to an undisclosed basket of currencies) rate system. Less positively, the government has been slow to pass on the rising oil, gas and fertiliser prices to users, preferring a mix of tax reductions, mounting losses of oil- and gas-marketing companies, increasing fertiliser subsidies and various forms of informal rationing of scarce energy. A few days ago, the government and RBI announced a programme to induce more foreign

borrowing by eliminating taxes on interest and capital gains accruing to foreign institutional investors in government bonds and protecting a category of NRI (Non-Resident Indian) depositors from exchange risk by bearing the hedging cost.

The common features of these policy responses have been a willingness to incur a higher fiscal deficit by the government and resort to greater foreign borrowing to offset the pressures on the BoP. They are justifiable as initial responses to an external energy shock, coming on top of extant weaknesses, such as in exports, foreign direct investment and fiscal parameters of deficits. However, the time to implement policy adjustments that are necessary to achieve more durable and desirable outcomes in terms of economic growth and macro stability, both external and internal. They do not, by themselves, constitute a durable solution.

If 2025-26 is reminiscent of 1990-91, let us hope that 2026-27 will remind us of 1991-92, when economic policy shifted from increased foreign and domestic borrowing to actually implementing a broad range of serious policy reforms. Given limited space, I will limit myself to suggesting reforms in three broad areas.

First, we need to greatly improve our goods exports performance. The exchange rate depreciation to date should certainly help. We also need to roll back the customs tariff increases that have occurred in the decade plus since 2014 and move further to bring our tariffs down to the levels of South-East Asian nations. A policy announcement of our intention should be backed by an across the board cut of 10-15 percentage points in all our tariffs on manufactured goods. No nation has become a successful manufacturing exporter while having the high, protective tariffs that we currently have.

Second, recognising the overly restrictive weaknesses of our 2016 Model Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT), the Budgetary speech of February 2025 had promised a full-scale review to make the BITs much more investor-friendly. It is high time the necessary policy changes were announced. These policies should also take account of the underlying causes of recent surges in repatriation and outbound investment.

Third, current tax and subsidy policies point to a substantial and undesirable increase in the central government's fiscal deficit of 4.3 per cent of GDP in 2026-27. This would fuel inflation, raise interest rates and crowd out private investment. Aside from accelerating necessary increases in energy prices, the government should implement the oft-recommended major reform of the fertiliser subsidy mechanism by moving to a system of direct benefit transfers to farmers on a per hectare basis. Reducing the exemption limit in the current personal income tax system would also raise revenues.

The author is Honorary Professor at ICRIER, Chancellor of the Central University of Andhra Pradesh and former Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of India. The views expressed are personal.

# The upskilling imperative

### TCS' plan on AI agents must spur a new approach

The writing is on the wall, and now a top information technology (IT) leader of the country publicly acknowledged it this week. Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) Chairman N Chandrasekaran, at the firm's 31st annual general meeting, relayed a message that businesses cannot ignore. Mr Chandrasekaran, who's also Tata Sons chairman, made a projection that could drastically change the trajectory of the IT industry. Over the next three years, TCS will have as many artificial intelligence (AI) agents as human employees and that the pace of hiring will slow, he informed shareholders. That would imply a large-scale disruption, not just at TCS, which has around half a million employees, but across the IT landscape. It's a matter of time before the phenomenon spreads to other job-intensive sectors. For a country grappling with insufficient employment creation, this AI reality makes the concern about new and existing jobs that much more serious.

Coping with this magnitude of disruption, where AI agents will take up a variety of IT roles, requires a timely strategy on upskilling new hires as well as existing employees. It is critical to appreciate the implications of an AI-centric future rather than just wish it away. As the TCS chairman highlighted, the slowdown in hiring does not mean there are no opportunities. "Once the transition happens, the AI world will produce so much more opportunities, there will be new talent that will be required," he averred.

Tapping those new opportunities will decide the future of India's tech industry, which has been the world's IT backbone for long. Signs of a shakeup in hiring are already being witnessed. IT industry estimates suggest a net addition of 135,000 employees this financial year, reflecting a meagre 2.3 per cent rise over FY26. Therefore, without losing time, organisations, industry bodies, academic institutions and governments (central and state) must focus on the immediacy of the AI mission to ensure a robust future for the IT sector, which has been at the forefront of the India growth story for decades.

IT majors, including TCS, recently experienced erosion in stock-market valuation mainly due to investor anxiety over AI threats as well as geopolitical factors. Against that backdrop, the industry has to redraw its growth path carefully, while keeping AI as an integral part of the journey.

TCS, which is the largest software firm in the country and which laid off 2 per cent of its staff last year while on road to be an AI-first company, is looking at AI as the biggest growth opportunity in its history, as the company's chairman stated. But in that process, employees of IT companies and tens of thousands of engineering students waiting to join the workforce should not get short shrift. For that, industry captains, academia and the political leadership must have a plan that goes beyond optics.

According to a recent Boston Consulting Group (BCG) report, over the next two to three years, 50-55 per cent of the jobs in the United States will be reshaped by AI. While many employees will retain the same or a similar role, they may face "radically new expectations for how they work and what they produce". The report added that company leaders would require a vision of how the transformation was managed, including a scaled, strategic approach to upskilling and reskilling their workforce, as well as restructuring career pathways. That seems to be a good starting point.

# The rise and rise of smallcaps

India's stock market, when viewed through the lens of its largest companies and the Nifty 50, appears to be struggling. However, look instead at its smaller firms and a different picture emerges — one of vigorous growth, expanding profits, and buoyant demand. The contrast, noted in a piece I wrote in late February this year ("Smallcaps: A silver lining"), has not only persisted but has also become more pronounced. In the March quarter of 2025-26 (Q4FY26), the operating profits of the Nifty 50 firms rose by just 4.1 per cent year-on-year (Y-o-Y), and net profits increased a meagre 4.5 per cent. It was the eighth consecutive quarter of single-digit earnings growth. By contrast, companies in the broader Nifty 500 index delivered operating-profit growth of 9.2 per cent, while their adjusted net profits jumped 16 per cent. What makes this divergence more striking is that both groups recorded sales growth of roughly 11-12 per cent; but the smaller firms were better able to protect margins and absorb rising costs, defying the conventional wisdom that scale confers resilience.

The dominance of India's largest companies too is gradually eroding. Their share of the profits of all listed firms has fallen steadily, from 51.8 per cent in Q4FY25 to 49.8 per cent in Q3FY26 and 47.1 per cent in Q4FY26. As in previous quarters, the most eye-catching performance came from micro-cap firms. Their sales rose by 17.5 per cent, while operating profit increased by more than 22 per cent. Even these figures probably understate the segment's strength. Many of the fastest-growing and highest-quality small firms remain outside the benchmark indices that investors follow. The persistence of such strong performance is surprising because the broader economic backdrop has deteriorated. Net tax revenues fell by 6.3 per cent last month, largely because of softer goods and services tax (GST) receipts. Yet, many smaller companies continue to flourish.

The explanation lies in a shift that receives little attention outside the community of analysts and keen-eyed investors. India today possesses an unusually rich ecosystem of listed smaller companies

operating in sectors with powerful and long-lasting growth drivers: pharmaceuticals, engineering, capital goods, defence and power infrastructure are among the most important.

Power, India's projected peak electricity demand is expected to approach 460 gigawatts (Gw) by 2032. Meeting that requirement will necessitate investment in transmission infrastructure, including more than 120,000 circuit kilometres of new lines, additional substations and a gradual grid upgrade from 220 kilovolt (kV) to 400 kV and 765 kV networks. The theoretical requirement runs into several trillion rupees.

Not all of that investment will materialise: inefficiency and delays are unavoidable. Yet even a fraction of the planned expenditure represents an enormous opportunity for the smallcap companies that manufacture transformers, switchgear, circuit breakers, insulators, voltage regulators, capacitors, protective relays, cables and smart meters.

Pharmaceutical services: This constitutes another powerful source of growth. India's contract development and manufacturing organisations (CDMOs) and contract research and manufacturing organisations (CRMOs) have evolved from low-cost suppliers into strategic partners for global drug companies. Estimates place the size of the Indian CDMO market at \$19 billion-23 billion, with growth rates of around 12 per cent annually — potentially sustainable for many years. Indian facilities can often be commissioned far more quickly than their Western counterparts and operate at costs that are 70-80 per cent lower. India also has the largest number of United States (US) Food and Drug Administration-compliant manufacturing plants outside the US. This is not an industry dominated by pharmaceutical giants; it is a knowledge-intensive business in which smaller, specialised firms often possess a competitive advantage.

Data centres: Demand for digital infrastructure continues to surge, and the sector is expected to expand by around 30 per cent this year. The Union Budget for FY27 sweetened the proposition by offering a tax holiday until 2047 for eligible foreign cloud ser-

vice providers. Globally, investment in data centres is expected to exceed \$180 billion in 2026. The benefits accrue mainly to suppliers of various gear, power equipment, cooling systems, cabling and other supporting infrastructure. Here, again, most of the beneficiaries are small firms.

Engineering (capital goods, defence): Government capital expenditure, defence indigenisation, rising demand for precision tools, factory automation and export opportunities have combined to create a sustained expansion cycle. Many firms expect double-digit growth for years. Several already possess order books stretching three years into the future. Most remain well below the radar of big institutional investors, especially the foreign ones.

Services: For decades, listed services companies were largely synonymous with software exporters. But rising incomes, urbanisation and the aspirations of a wealthier middle class have given rise to a growing array of listed service businesses comprising finance (wealth management, asset management, brokerage, insurance, depositories, realtors, exchanges); health (diagnostics, hospitals, and retailing (app delivery, retail chains, online stores). Every year dozens of new service businesses are entering the listed space, with a majority of them small companies outside the indices.

India's macroeconomic challenges remain formidable. The fiscal position is under pressure. In April, subsidies rose by 52 per cent, driven by higher food and fertiliser support. Interest payments increased by 18 per cent, while other expenditure surged by 27 per cent. Such pressures will undoubtedly affect some businesses, particularly those dependent on government contracts or discretionary public spending. But despite two major external shocks, punitive trade tariffs imposed by the US last year and the continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz, demand is robust and order pipelines intact. The remarkable rise of small-cap infra, therefore, reflects the emergence of a broad set of specialised businesses operating in industries where the sectoral tailwinds remain considerably stronger than the macroeconomic headwinds.

The writer is cofounder of [www.moneylife.in](http://www.moneylife.in) and a trustee of the MoneyLife Foundation; @Moneylifers

# Iran's many revolutions



REZA ASLAN

Before the bombs began falling on Iran earlier this year, the year was sold by its advocates as a possible catalyst for regime change — a final blow against a government already weakened by years of economic crisis and political unrest. To many outside observers, the Islamic Republic appeared vulnerable to collapse. Yet the coordinated bombing campaign by the United States and Israel has only strengthened the most hard-line elements of the Iranian state.

Those of us who have spent years studying modern Iran understood that this was always the more likely outcome. It is a recurring pattern that the *New York Times* journalist Yeganeh Torbati

and the veteran Iran correspondent Bizozorgimehr Sharafedin trace in *Stolen Revolution*. The result is one of the most perceptive books on modern Iran in years, capturing not only the machinery of repression but the fragile forms of hope that survive beneath it.

The revolution of 1979 that gave rise to today's Islamic Republic, the authors argue, was the culmination of tensions that intensified in the wake of the CIA-backed coup that restored the Shah to power after a brief exile in the 1950s. It was animated by competing promises of justice, freedom and moral order, as well as a fight against foreign domination that extended back to the Constitutional Revolution of the early 1900s. The coalition that finally toppled the Shah for good included clerics, leftists, students, nationalists and secular intellectuals, many united less by a shared idea of the future than by a shared rejection of the present.

As power narrowed into the hands of a clerical elite around Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, what followed was not the triumph of one coherent ideology so

much as the gradual exclusion of competing visions. "A revolution that was launched with egalitarian ideals and immense hopes," Torbati and Sharafedin write, "has resulted in a mafia state."

The authors render the early years of the revolutionary movement through the life of one participant, the Islamic scholar Mehdi Karubi. For decades, Karubi helped distribute Khomeini's speeches across Iran. Hounded and repeatedly arrested by the Shah's secret police, he spent much of the 1960s and 1970s sleeping alongside dissident leftists and his fellow clerics on prison floors.

Karubi's help in the 1979 elections that would support Khomeini's government. He defended the revolution even as it narrowed politically and morally, enforcing a conservative dress code and banning Western music.

But the regime eventually became something far harsher, resorting to mass execution and torture to assert control. The brutal Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s accelerated that transformation. Bolstered on both sides by US arms, the eight-year conflict empowered the paramilitary force known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and normalised a politics of sacrifice, surveillance and permanent

emergency that reshaped public life. By the 2000s, Karubi was sitting in Parliament warning against the expanding power of the security state. When the Green Movement erupted in 2009 in response to the disputed re-election of the hard right populist president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, he became one of the regime's most outspoken internal critics.

If the first half of *Stolen Revolution* traces the consolidation of power, the second turns to the persistence of dissent. Here, Karubi becomes especially alive in his portrait of younger Iranians who experienced the revolution not as a lived memory but as a political inheritance. The authors detail the re-emergence of civil society at the turn of the 21st century. During the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, News-papers flourished. Student youth groups and literary circles proliferated, creating spaces in which democratic practice became part of daily life rather than abstract political theory.

On one telling episode, the 17-year-old activist Hila Sedighi spends weeks planning a poetry night for an audience of 500 people, only to have it abruptly cancelled by local authorities. Refusing to abandon the event, the teenager navigates layers of bureaucracy until a nervous cultural official quietly signs a letter of permission, warning her, "I'm lighting this fire both for you and for me."

Torbati and Sharafedin also vividly evoke the mixture of exhilaration and improvisation that defined the Green Movement: campaign materials passed phone to phone by Bluetooth in subway stations, a human chain stretching for dozens of miles through Tehran, young organisers convinced that sheer turnout could overturn whatever fraud the state attempted.

Millions poured into the streets demanding greater accountability. And once again, the state endured — not because dissent disappeared, but because the institutions built to contain dissent proved stronger

than the forces challenging them. Torbati and Sharafedin are especially good at conjuring the fear and spontaneity that accompany the realisation that private frustration has suddenly become collective action. To elucidate the Women's Life Freedom movement that began in 2022, they describe the Kurdish Iranian activist Rozhin Yousefzadeh as she walks through Tehran unveiled. She fully expects arrest at any moment, only to find strangers quietly emboldened by the sight of her.

Read in the midst of the war, the book's title takes on a double meaning. In a country forged through struggle against foreign influence, pressure from outside does not loosen the system. And yet *Stolen Revolution* ultimately rests despair. What persists across its generations of activists and dissidents is not merely memory but political capacity: the ability to gather, to organise, to imagine otherwise. The revolution that strains, never fully ends. Like the forces it opposes, it recedes, hardens and returns.

The reviewer is the author of *An American Martyr in Persia: The Epic Life and Tragic Death of Howard Baskerville* ©2026 The New York Times News Service

STOLEN REVOLUTION: Betrayal and Hope in Modern Iran by Yeganeh Torbati and Bizozorgimehr Sharafedin. Published by Doubleday. 484 pages. \$35.

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## Beyond faith

SIT set up to probe charges of siphoning off funds from Ayodhya Ram Mandir trust

The Uttar Pradesh government's decision to constitute a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe allegations of financial irregularities in the management of donations received by the Ayodhya Ram Mandir trust is both significant and necessary. The issue transcends politics, religion and ideology. It goes to the heart of public trust, institutional accountability and the moral authority of one of India's most revered religious institutions. The controversy erupted after the SP chief Akhilesh Yadav raised allegations of misappropriation of funds and questioned the transparency of the trust's financial dealings. The trust has categorically denied any wrongdoing, insisting that all accounts are properly maintained and audited. Yet, the government's decision to order an investigation suggests that the matter cannot be brushed aside through denials alone.

The famous maxim that 'Caesar's wife must be above suspicion' is particularly relevant here. Institutions that command extraordinary public faith must meet standards higher than those applicable to ordinary bodies. The Ayodhya Ram Mandir is not merely a temple, it is a national symbol that embodies decades of legal battles, political mobilisation and the religious aspirations of millions. Every rupee donated to the temple is an act of faith. Any cloud, however small, over the management of those funds can erode public confidence. The SIT probe should therefore not be viewed as an indictment of the trust. Rather, it should be seen as an opportunity to establish the truth conclusively. If the allegations are unfounded, a transparent investigation will strengthen the credibility of the trust and silence critics. If lapses are found, measures can be instituted before greater damage is done. In either case, transparency serves public interest.

Equally important is the need to keep partisan politics at bay. Allegations and counter-allegations have become routine features of India's political landscape. However, institutions of faith cannot be reduced to battlegrounds for electoral point-scoring. The investigation must be professional, time-bound and free from political influence. Its findings should be placed in the public domain. The Ram Mandir project has often been described as a civilisational milestone. Such institutions derive their strength not merely from devotion but from integrity. The faithful deserve complete clarity regarding how donations are collected, managed and spent. Accountability is not a burden imposed upon sacred institutions. It is the very foundation upon which their moral legitimacy rests. Faith flourishes where transparency prevails. The SIT inquiry offers us an opportunity to ensure that both remain inseparable.

## Settebello crisis

Decoding India's response to the killing of its sailors

The tragic deaths in the Gulf of Oman earlier this month of three Indian seafarers - Aditya Sharma, Shivanand Chaurasia and Patanala Suresh - have ignited a fierce debate in India on maritime safety and the government's foreign policy constraints. The sailors died following a US military strike on the Liberia-flagged merchant vessel MT Settebello, part of a series of actions aimed at enforcing a blockade on Iran-linked shipping. The incident has highlighted the extreme vulnerability of Indian crew members navigating volatile West Asian waters.

India formally reacted by summoning the US chargé d'affaires in Delhi to convey "deep concern" over the use of lethal force against a civilian ship. Union ports, shipping and waterways minister Sarbananda Sonowal expressed concern and ordered immediate repatriation efforts for the remaining 21 crew members. The government described the incidents as "unacceptable" and pledged to uphold the security of Indian nationals. But the wording of its response, marked by a lack of direct condemnation of the perpetrators, was aimed at not annoying the US. But this diplomatic tiptoeing around the US was noted with Congress MP Shashi Tharoor sharply criticising the US government for its lack of empathy, focussing on the absence of official condolences following the attack. Terming the US action "deeply shocking" and "insensitive", he urged the Indian government to ensure that Indian sailors are not treated as mere "collateral damage" in geopolitical conflicts. Similarly, strategic affairs commentator Sushant Singh criticised the initial hesitation to directly identify the US military as the actor, arguing that India's muted response indicated a prioritisation of diplomatic convenience over national security and the lives of its mariners.

The external affairs minister S Jaishankar, on his part, maintained a pragmatic stance, engaging directly with the US secretary of state Marco Rubio. Responding to intense domestic pressure to condemn the action, Jaishankar's approach has pushed for accountability while managing the broader, critical relationship with the US. The incident has highlighted the difficult tightrope the Indian government walks, balancing its role as a leading supplier of global maritime personnel with its need to maintain strategic alliances in a region increasingly caught in the crossfire of major power conflicts. It has also revived memories of times when India could take a tougher stand vis-a-vis the US. In 1971, during the liberation of Bangladesh, which New Delhi was backing, the Nixon administration, in support of Pakistan, sent its Seventh Fleet, into the Bay of Bengal, to intimidate India. But Indira Gandhi, who was Prime Minister then, refused to bow to pressure, taking the military campaign to its logical conclusion, relying on a friendship treaty with the then Soviet Union, which sent its own ships to track the American fleet.

# Record over leadership vacuum

Does the Opposition have an effective organisation to take on the BJP and the RSS?



Dr Vijay Darda

Indian politics never ceases to fascinate. Last week, two significant developments unfolded simultaneously. On the one hand, Narendra Modi set a new record by becoming the longest-serving elected Prime Minister in India's history. Congratulations to Modi ji! On the other hand, I found myself waiting to congratulate Rahul Gandhi as well, expecting that the 25 constituent parties of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, better known as the INDIA bloc, would formally entrust him with the leadership of the opposition alliance. That, however, did not happen!

Critics of Modi are quick to point out that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru spent more years in office as Prime Minister. Their calculations include the period from 1947 to 1952. Yet, let us look at the general election in 1947. Pandit Nehru assumed office as the head of the newly independent nation and was formally elected Prime Minister by the members of Parliament only after the country's first general election in 1952. The distinction drawn by Modi supporters, therefore, concerns the longest-serving elected Prime Minister. From their perspective, the Opposition's objections amount to nothing more than political lamentation. Of course, such debates are part and parcel of politics. Every camp has its own arithmetic, its own interpretation of history and its own preferred narrative. Ultimately, however, the electorate does its own calculation when it casts its vote. That is why this controversy appears largely academic. Narendra Modi's political appeal remains intact and that is the central reality. People continue to support him. Much of the world continues to engage with him. The Opposition may repeatedly highlight soaring prices, concerns over fuel costs, agrarian distress, allegations of American economic pressures on Indian agriculture, and numerous domestic and international challenges. The controversy surrounding NEET has generated its own political storm. Cuckooches generated some curiosity too. Yet the broader picture remains unchanged: Confidence in Narendra Modi continues to endure both within India and beyond its borders. Political criticism alone, however loud, does not necessarily translate into political change. Few would dispute that leaders across the world have bestowed upon Modi more than 30 international awards and high civilian honours. Seven Muslim



As long as confidence in Narendra Modi remains strong both at home and abroad, mere rhetoric is unlikely to alter the political landscape.

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majority nations - Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Palestine, Afghanistan, Egypt and the Maldives - have conferred their highest civilian awards upon him. This recognition underscores his international profile and influence. The same political momentum is reflected domestically. If the Bharatiya Janata Party has managed to make significant inroads even in regions long dominated by formidable leaders such as Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, it is, in large measure, a testament to Modi's political appeal. Notably, he also has a skilled 'sarathi' like Amit Shah by his side.

To challenge a leader of such stature, the Opposition must first accomplish a far more basic task: The 25 parties in the alliance must agree on a leader of their own. It has been three years since the formation of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA). Before and after the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the alliance held only brief consultations. Throughout 2025, no significant meeting took place. It is worth reflecting on the fact that even after three years, the alliance has yet to decide who should hold the steering wheel. Regional parties within the coalition would do well to recognise a simple political reality: Among all the alliance partners, only the Congress has a nationwide organisational presence. By the logic, Rahul Gandhi is the most natural candidate to lead the alliance. Had the coalition formally entrusted him with the responsibility, crowned him and handed him the mandate, he could at least have begun the work of building a coherent opposition strategy. Alternatively, there is Priyanka Gandhi. But without a clearly designated leader, how can any political combine move forward? In the absence of direction, the alliance risks doing little more than criticising Narendra Modi while remaining unable to offer a credible alternative. Endless rhet-

oric may generate headlines, but it does not build political momentum. Yet this is the predicament the Opposition finds itself in. Every leader wishes to lead; failing that, many seem content to pull down those who aspire to do so. What appears to be missing is a broader appreciation of a fundamental democratic truth: A strong democracy requires not only a strong government but also a strong and effective opposition.

### Celebrating new, neglecting old

Whenever I hear the railways minister Ashwini Vaishnaw enumerate the achievements of Indian Railways, I find myself experiencing two very different emotions simultaneously. On the one hand, the expansion and modernisation of the railway network, along with the introduction of Vande Bharat trains on new routes, inspire a genuine sense of pride. The sight of rail connectivity reaching the rugged and remote landscapes of Kashmir is a remarkable achievement and a testament to India's infrastructural ambitions. Yet these accomplishments also raise an uncomfortable question: Why does enthusiasm for the new so often come at the expense of long-pending projects? Take the Wardha-Yavatmal-Nanded railway line. Following sustained efforts on my part, the project received approval in the financial year 2008-09. Yet, even today, the 284-kilometre railway line remains incomplete. Is Ashwini Vaishnaw aware of this?

### Cuckooches, termites feeding on sanctity of newspaper industry

These days, the word cuckooch seems to be everywhere in the national conversation. But let me tell you a different story - one involving the cuckooches that, in my view, have infested Maharashtra's newspaper industry. There are publications that struggle to sell even 5,000 or 10,000 copies, yet they allegedly report circulations running into



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hundreds of thousands. On the basis of these inflated figures, questionable circulation certificates are reportedly obtained from the Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI), enabling these

publications to corner government advertising revenue. In effect, taxpayers' money finds its way into private pockets through a system built on misrepresentation. Several complaints have reportedly been submitted to the Central Bureau of Investigation. Letters have also been sent to the offices of the Prime Minister and the home minister. Yet, remarkably, there appears to have been little visible action. The result is predictable. The cuckooches engaged in such practices have grown increasingly emboldened. Far from exercising caution, they continue to feed with apparent impunity. Since newsprint is imported from abroad, the matter potentially touches upon issues governed by both the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act and the Foreign Exchange Management Act. This naturally raises a troubling question: Who is protecting those involved, and why? When I posed this question to a government official, the response I received was surprising. "Why complain? We have competitors," he asked. My answer was simple: "Precisely because they are competitors, I am familiar with what is happening. If those with firsthand knowledge do not raise concerns, who will?" Governments routinely crack down on corruption involving ordinary individuals and small-scale operators. Why, then, does the same resolve appear absent when it comes to alleged wrongdoing within sections of the newspaper industry? Journalism is not merely a business, it is a public trust. Newspapers occupy a vital place in a democratic society and have long been regarded as a profession of exceptional responsibility and integrity. If that institution is being hollowed out by cuckooches feeding upon it from within or by termites slowly eating away at its foundations, it is not merely an industry problem. It is a stain on the credibility of journalism itself. And stains of this nature cannot be allowed to remain. They must be removed. The question is whether the government is prepared to take notice.

The author is the chairman, Editorial Board of Lokmat Media and former member of Rajya Sabha. vijaydarda@lokmat.com

## Lucknow now jewel for Bhojpuri filmmakers



Prof Chander Mahadev

As hundreds of curious onlookers gathered around a bustling film set in Lucknow recently, Bhojpuri superstar Dinesh Lal Yadav 'Nirahua' waved to the fans before stepping in front of the camera for yet another scene in his upcoming film. For local residents, the sight was hardly unusual. Film shoots have become a common occurrence across the city - from the heritage precincts of Bara Imambara and Rumi Darwaza to the modern avenues of Gomti Nagar. What was once an occasional event has now become part of Lucknow's cultural landscape, reflecting a remarkable transformation that has unfolded over the past decade.

For decades, Mumbai was the undisputed dream destination for aspiring actors, writers and filmmakers from North India. Today, however, a quiet cinematic revolution is unfolding much closer to home. Lucknow, Prayagraj and other cities of Uttar Pradesh have emerged as thriving hubs for both mainstream cinema and regional film-making, reshaping the entertainment landscape of North India.

The transformation has been particularly dramatic over the last 10 years. What was once considered a

peripheral market has evolved into a vibrant ecosystem attracting actors, directors, scriptwriters, technicians and producers. The growth has been fuelled by a combination of government support, improved infrastructure, easier access to shooting locations and the explosive popularity of Bhojpuri content on television and digital platforms.

The Uttar Pradesh government's film policy has played a pivotal role in this transformation. Generous subsidies, streamlined permissions and incentives for filmmakers choosing Uttar Pradesh as a shooting destination have encouraged producers to look beyond Mumbai's studios. Historical monuments, bustling markets, colonial-era buildings, riverside ghats and picturesque villages offer filmmakers a diverse visual palette without the logistical challenges associated with metropolitan locations. The government of the day clearly states that they provide "cash incentive up to Rs 2 crore, electricity subsidy and tax subsidy to promote Hindi, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Braj language films shot in the state."

This is why Lucknow has emerged as the crown jewel of this new filmmaking ecosystem. The city's blend of old-world charm and modern urbanity makes it an attractive backdrop for films and web series. From the imposing architecture of the Vidya Saiji to the timeless grandeur of Bara Imambara and the bustling lanes of Hazratganj, the



city offers countless cinematic possibilities.

A striking example of Lucknow's rise is the growing number of Bhojpuri films and music videos being shot in and around the city. Production houses that once relied exclusively on Mumbai now maintain permanent teams in Lucknow. Local writers, actors and technicians are finding opportunities that were unimaginable a decade back. The city has become a launching pad for young talent from eastern Uttar Pradesh and neighbouring Bihar, reducing their dependence on the financial and social challenges of relocating to Mumbai.

Prayagraj, too, has emerged as a significant player in this cinematic renaissance. Its unique cultural identity, historic institutions and iconic Sangam provide filmmakers with compelling storytelling settings. The city has increasingly become a preferred destination for films rooted in rural and small-town India. Several directors now scout

locations in Prayagraj before considering larger metropolitan centres.

The rise of digital platforms has further accelerated this growth. Bhojpuri content today reaches audiences not only in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar but also among the vast Indian diaspora in Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Nepal and the Gulf nations. This global audience has created demand for better production values and fresh storytelling, encouraging investment in local talent and infrastructure.

Challenges remain. The industry must continue to improve technical standards, diversify content and move beyond formula-driven narratives. Training institutions, film schools and modern studio facilities are essential if Uttar Pradesh wishes to compete with established filmmaking centres.

Nevertheless, the change is undeniable. A decade back, Lucknow was primarily known for its culture, cuisine and history. Today, it is increasingly being recognised as a city where scripts are written, cameras roll and cinematic dreams take shape. As the cry of "Action!" echoes across Lucknow's historic streets and modern boulevards, the city is proving that India's next great film story may well be unfolding far from the studios of Mumbai.

The author is a former professor of journalism. Views expressed are personal.

Send your letters to the Editor, Lokmat Times, Lokmat Bhawan, Jalna Road, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar (Aurangabad), E-mail: litedit.abd@lokmat.com

# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



**Chicago Tribune**  
Founded June 10, 1847

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## EDITORIALS



SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

### Why Chicagoans should welcome, and care for, the Obama Presidential Center

The naysayers have had their say. Concern over a bold tower, characterizable as brooding. Worries about neighborhood gentrification, implying a new tourist destination is all downside. The amplifying of complaining subcontractors, always easy to find. And an absurd prejudice that a museum celebrating a presidency could not coexist with an institution also focused on offering art, basketball and a plethora of gathering spaces to a community that has suffered from disinvestment for decades.

Even without the political baggage—all presidential libraries, now centers, are of most interest to those who believed in and miss the celebrant—a project as massive as the Obama Presidential Center (OPC), set to officially open Friday in the Chicago neighborhood of Woodlawn, would attract a variety of opinions. We've consumed many of them. You've likely done the same.

Bold architecture is supposed to spark debate and there can be no question that the OPC struggles to reconcile its desire for Apollonian, granite-clad gravitas, as befits the presidency of the United States, with grills, jump-shots and sled-ding hills. Inevitably so, in our view. The same baked-in contradiction can be found in the honoree. Maybe in all presidents in their different ways.

But here at Barack Obama's hometown newspaper, where a historic and unexpected endorsement put wind in his sails on his way to the White House, we're focusing on different things in this, our main editorial judgment on this new entity in our city.

Our starting place is a number: \$850 million.

That's the amount of private investment being made through this center in Chicago's South Side, which has suffered from neglect for 100 years or more. Valerie Jarrett, the head of the Obama Foundation and thus this entire operation, asked us at an editorial board meeting held at the center on Monday whether we could think of a comparable private investment in something located south of the South Loop.

We could not. Can you?

The OPC's admission fees and rentals won't cover the projected annual running cost of \$75 million, John Roberson, the center's executive vice president told us. That means there will need to be continued private investment in this same community. We don't doubt it will occur.

This leads us to our next point: This will be a major new tourist attraction for Chicago, not unlike Millennium Park, a massive success, but drawing people to a part of the city they likely would not have otherwise visited.

A city is not an amusement park, but it must learn from the likes of Disney or Universal that people always need reasons to return. When there is a new marquee attraction, it sparks fresh visits and that means more business for existing destinations, not to mention hotels, restaurants and retail operations throughout the city.

We've written innumerable editorials lamenting what Chicago has turned down or lost: World Cup matches, a Bears stadium in city limits (or so it appears), the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art. We're still mad about that last named entity, slated to open in Los Angeles in September, even though the globally famous George Lucas and Melody Hobson wanted their populist attraction here and were willing to fund it entirely themselves.

Lucas did not prove to be a skilled ring-kisser. The shrewd, long-serving Obama hands Jarrett and Tina Tchen coached this project through all the minefields Chicago inevitably put in its way. They executed at the highest level. No mean feat.

Their efforts will pay off for some valued Chicago institutions in ways still underappreciated.

Take, for example, the University of Chicago, which not only will enjoy the prestige of the center but now has something new to show off to prospective students and their parents, often deciding between the U. of C. and the Ivy League. Vistas from the Obama tower now showcase the Hyde Park campus in all of its collegiate Gothic glory. Recruits will be knocked out. And University of Chicago institutions like the Institute of Politics will have a new TV-friendly, state-of-the-art venue for talks and debates, far superior to that at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

Take for another example the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry (GMSI), the grand south side of which can now be viewed spectacularly from the top floor of the OPC, rendering it almost like a shadow White House staring down on the newcomer on the block. Thanks to the newly beautified Women's Garden, a callback to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, Jarrett's argument to us that there will now effectively be two

museum campuses in Chicago, one downtown and one on the South Side, strikes us as accurate. New express bus service, Roberson noted, will serve both the GMSI and the OPC from the Loop. What an educational day that will be for many families.

Unsurprisingly, the Obama Presidential Center trumpets the achievements of President Barack Obama and does not focus on what he did not get done, nor, indeed, what got rolled back by subsequent administrations, which is a great deal. That said, we admire the efforts made at the museum to avoid abject hagiography by focusing on the viewer, especially the future life of the young visitor interested both in American democracy and in public service. Those who lived through the Obama era will find little to be surprising here; to our minds, the museum is most useful for the young.

This is, after all, a presidential center, not a library, a decision made in light of Obama being the first president of a truly digital age. The documents a researcher might crave are online or, if a scholar really wants to hold the hard copies, in Maryland under the care of the National Archives. A cynic might say this development makes the OPC a redundancy or merely a partisan theme park. But we see plenty of value in what is being presented here. Digitization too often brings the devaluation of place and time. A presidency should remain tactile.

Jarrett told us without ambivalence that the OPC intends to be welcoming to Republicans and to those who disagreed, and continue to disagree, with Obama's point of view. Tchen said the same of the programs she will oversee. Jarrett, Tchen and Executive Vice President Robbin Cohen also said that they do not see this place as somewhere that will take stands on "issues of the day," as Jarrett put it. This may prove a lot harder than they now think, but it reflects Obama's relative centrism, by today's standards, within the Democratic Party and it is the right way to go.

Some of our enthusiasm for the center flows from our Chicago partisanship, to which we freely confess.

Obama put Chicago at the center of the national conversation; he began his political career here and ended it here with his goodbye speech at McCormick Place, which some of us attended. His first transition into office was managed from

the Loop. We've been disappointed to see so little of him, frankly, even in the run-up to the opening of this center. But in a city that has to compete nationally with New York, Washington and Los Angeles for young talent, that advance from being merely a regional capital meant something here. Chicago has felt that loss of prestige since then. And while this museum won't return all of that to us, it still is a step in the right direction. It is a far more meaningful post-presidency achievement than another Netflix documentary.

Chicago now also has another world-class contemporary art museum, replete with large-scale pieces, some of which will be temporary installations and sculptures. Some will come here to see a replica of the Oval Office or watch the ample video footage or see the first lady's dresses; many Chicagoans will leave talking about the extraordinary quality and scale of the art. Meanwhile, many in the neighborhood will see this as a beautiful place to take a contemplative stroll or sit and read a book in the sun or sled in the snow. On a prior visit, we spoke to a family that had spent an entire day there, kids happily playing in the park.

We're hardly strangers to tall buildings in Chicago. But there simply is no other place on the South Side where the public can ascend and see the city from the southern point of view, adding to visitors' awareness of the city's geography as the omnipresent lake shimmers in a lesser-photographed spot. And perhaps more remarkably, the aerial view of the South Side's proud neighborhoods is a revelation, a public opportunity afforded nowhere else in the city.

During our meeting, the OPC executives said they were confident Chicagoans would cherish and look after this place; after all, once the bigwigs exit at the weekend, the fences will come down and anyone and everyone will be able to visit the library and roam everywhere except the ticketed museum. The grounds will be open, seven days a week, from 6 in the morning to 9 at night.

Time will tell, of course. But on a visit with many others, we most certainly saw people making an effort to be their best selves, kind to fellow attendees, especially of different races, and elevated of conversation. To some degree, all grand city museums prod us to be our better selves.

But this one is here and it is new and it is grand and it is ours.

### Quotes of the Week

"You may not have a soccer game in Chicago, but I also saved you from getting the short straw here."

FORMER MAYOR  
RAHM EMANUEL

"I heard this case like last week and I thought it was a crock of (expletive) then and I still think it is."

BROADVIEW SIX  
GRAND JUROR

"It was something out of dreams. It's something that I couldn't have even drawn up any better myself. The White Sox isn't just us as players. It's the staff. It's the fans. It's the city. It's cool to all celebrate together."

CHICAGO WHITE SOX  
ROOKIE BRADEN  
MONTGOMERY

"If you believe, as I do, that we can change our politics, and change our country, then you must also believe that people can change."

MAINE DEMOCRATIC  
U.S. SENATE CANDIDATE  
GRAHAM PLATNER

"I'm really disappointed that this job could not get done. And it wasn't because this was the first ask — this was the third ask. We've gone through three Mays, three spring sessions, and each time, it was either declined or not brought up. This time, Gov. Pritzker was behind it, Kam Buckner was behind it, there were a number of people who were behind it ... but we just couldn't get it done. ... The ask here was nothing heroic."

ARLINGTON HEIGHTS  
MAYOR JIM TINAGLIA

## OPINION



The Griffin Museum of Science and Industry is visible from the top of the Obama Presidential Center on June 3 as it prepares for opening in Chicago's Jackson Park.  
BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

## The Griffin MSI and Obama center are creating a new chapter on the South Side

By Chevy Humphrey  
and Valerie Jarrett  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

We come to this moment from different directions. But today we stand in the same park, seeing the same thing. Something extraordinary is happening on Chicago's South Side.

For almost 100 years, the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry has been a place where generations have come together to learn, imagine and see themselves as part of something bigger.

And on June 19, the Obama Presidential Center joins in that tradition, attracting new energy, new visitors and new opportunities to the South Side. As neighboring institutions that share deep commitments to education, public service and community impact, the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry and the Obama Presidential Center are already working together to ensure the best start possible for the new museum. The museum will close to the public on June 18 to help the Obama Presidential Center prepare for its grand opening. And then, on June 19 and beyond, we'll jointly welcome thousands of visitors to this singular place—a place that's already full of natural beauty and now will be even more accessible.

Consider what is now available in a

single public park. The Griffin Museum of Science and Industry welcomed 1.5 million visitors last year, including more than a quarter million students on field trips. Nearly 9 in 10 of those trips were completely free. For five straight years, the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry has been the No. 1 field trip destination in Illinois. On top of that, the Obama Presidential Center will draw an estimated 600,000 museum visitors a year, with programming in arts and culture, civics and democracy, gardening and food, and sports and well-being. It also includes a Chicago Public Library branch, an athletic center and public green space—much of it free.

Access is the word that unites us—not as a mere brochure promise but as design decisions. Both of our institutions are also leading with free admission days, creative spaces and after-school programs that draw young people from the neighborhoods that ring this campus. New public transit routes now run directly to both institutions. And beginning next year, the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry will reopen its historic south portico, the original entrance to what was the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition Palace of Fine Arts. This evolution will create a direct, accessible pathway that connects both campuses

to each other and to the surrounding neighborhood. Jackson Park itself, long underused, is becoming what it was always meant to be: a destination for everyone.

Our two institutions standing side by side, working together in tandem, connected by a beautiful greenspace and united by our shared values, is creating an opportunity for something our South Side community has needed for generations: investment. Infrastructure. Inclusiveness. A genuine civic, even national, anchor.

Understand, though, this is not a revitalization story. The South Side does not need to be discovered. The people who live here have always known what this place is worth. What this moment represents is an expansion of what is already great into something the entire city can claim.

But this bond of our respective institutions will complement what already makes this stretch of land so special in a city that already has so much—whether it's natural assets, like the Osaka Garden, cherry blossoms, lagoon, Wooded Island and Bobolink Meadow. Or South Side institutions like The DuSable Black History Museum and Education Center, the National A. Philip Randolph Pullman Porter Museum, Frederick C. Robie House or Washington Park.

We're proud to work with these

institutions along with small neighborhood businesses to promote, build and support their success. Together, we all represent a strength and sense of civic pride—creating spaces where a family from anywhere in the world can come to see a Chicago that is so much more than just a soaring skyline.

It's where a kid from South Shore or Kenwood can stumble into a science exhibit or lesson about democracy that changes her sense of what's possible, where a visitor from anywhere in the world comes to see Chicago as so much more than just a soaring skyline.

Working side by side, the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry and the Obama Presidential Center are building on the history, culture and connectedness that have always made the South Side so strong. Come see it as summer arrives. Walk the park. The view from the presidential center's Sky Room down to the lagoon, the expanse from the museum's south portico when the cherry blossoms bloom—it's going to be a new era in Chicago.

And in so many ways, we're just getting started.

Chevy Humphrey is president and CEO of Griffin Museum of Science and Industry. Valerie Jarrett is chief executive officer of the Obama Foundation.

## The public library at the Obama Presidential Center rises above it all



Laura Washington

The Obama Presidential Center's unrelenting marketing campaign and weeks-long soft opening have inspired an avalanche of opinions and emotions. For me, one feature rises above all: the new Obama Presidential Center branch of the Chicago Public Library. The 5,000-square-foot space in the center's plaza is free and accessible to all.

Unlike its peers, the Obama Presidential Center will not house the thousands of artifacts and documents that recorded his saga.

A National Archives and Records Administration-run research facility is not part of the Obama center's campus, WBEZ Chicago reports. So technically, it's not a library. All the material will instead be stored remotely but available to researchers online.

Instead, the public library will be the first to be installed in a presidential center, with a general collection of 16,000 books.

Books fed Obama's life. "When I was young, I used to love libraries, love reading," Obama told a group of students during a 2015 visit to the Anacostia Library in Washington, D.C.



A branch of the Chicago Public Library at the Obama Presidential Center campus on June 3 in Chicago's Jackson Park. BRIAN CASSELLA/TRIBUNE

In his 30s, as he launched his political career, Obama published a well-received memoir. "Dreams From My Father" told the story of his search for meaning as a biracial Black man in America.

Obama touted his favorite reads throughout his presidency. It is said that a stack of books was a mainstay on his bedside table in the White House.

At the Obama public library, I was greeted by gleaming wood shelves and stacks of colorful tomes, and shimmering light streaming through its floor-to-ceiling windows. On one wall is a 70-foot-long mural depicting storytelling and community life

on Chicago's South Side—"Reading Circles/Weaving Dreams/Seeding Futures" by artist Aliza Nisenbaum.

The President's Reading Room offers up to another 3,000 books personally selected by Obama and his wife, Michelle. There are plans to eventually scale up to 12,000 books.

On one shelf sits an old-fashioned, working record player. On another are LPs by musical artists Prince and Stevie Wonder, Obama favorites.

In a reading garden adjacent to the library is "Book Bird," one of the final works of the late Richard Hunt, the internationally

acclaimed, Chicago-born sculptor.

It "will depict a bird taking flight from a book to illuminate how reading and learning allows readers to enter new places and fly free," according to the center's website.

Hunt's mother, Etoria Inez Henderson Hunt, was one of Chicago's first Black public librarians.

The reading room is "probably the most serene space in the entire OPC complex," Tribune architecture critic Edward Keegan writes. "It's programmatically reminiscent of the Toni Morrison Reading Room in Lorain, Ohio—a space conceived by the writer shortly after she became the first Black woman to win the Nobel Prize in 1993."

Serenity is a priceless gift. On my visit, I paused to breathe in the learning, history and the healing power of words. I didn't want to leave the place.

I harked back to my childhood, when every Saturday morning, my mother would march me to the Hall library branch in Bronzeville on Chicago's South Side.

Walk in with a high stack of books, then walk out with a new set of fresh, exciting choices. Go home and read. And read. In high school, I worked part time as a page at the South Shore branch, where the nerdy but wise librarians taught me to catalogue and cherish their beloved books.

Like me, the children and families in the neighborhood

surrounding the Obama center face social and economic inequities.

At this warm library, "they can"—as Obama would exhort. They can drink in the literature selected by America's first Black president. Here, they can learn that a Black child can grow to a president—and will again. They can turn pages full of dreamy tales, intellect and growth. Pages that teach us all to imagine, learn, teach and build. Books are an essential ladder to the future.

Books represent truth, facts, analysis, all values that should be treasured and embraced but are now under assault in some quarters. We are in a time when libraries, museum exhibits, public media and more have been banned, censored and defunded.

This library will be a gift to the community, where we can seek credibility and substance. A literary sanctuary.

After the Obamas and the Bidens and the Bushes and the Clintons and the Trumps have faded away, books will remain.

That little library at the Obama center and all it represents put a powerful punctuation mark on all that we need to know.

Laura Washington is a political commentator and longtime Chicago journalist. Her columns appear in the Tribune each Wednesday. Write to her at Laura.Laura.Washington@gmail.com.

## OPINION

## VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

*Editor's note: We asked you to share your memories of former President Barack Obama as the Obama Presidential Center is set to open to the public on June 19. Here is a selection of those letters. More letters will appear in Wednesday's edition.*

**A conversation in coach**

In 2006, I was on a flight home to Chicago from Washington. I wound up sitting in an aisle seat directly behind then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama. (We were not in first class; we were toward the back of the plane, in coach.)

Across the aisle from me was a young woman who was Black. At some point before takeoff, Obama turned around and began talking to her. I didn't want to eavesdrop, so I caught just a tiny bit of the conversation. It appeared that she was a college student. Two things struck me about this interaction. One was how thrilled and excited she seemed to be about talking to the senator. She had this look on her face that said, "Can you believe this is happening?" But the other thing that struck me was how genuinely interested Obama appeared to be in asking questions and hearing what she had to say. There was such calm, quiet sincerity on his part.

I have no idea if he gave her advice or just wanted to learn more about her. But I feel he displayed genuine interest in her. And I suspect she will remember that conversation for a long time.

When we landed and stood to deplane, I thanked the senator for not reclining his seat. His response was along the lines of "we tall guys have to stick together."

I then told him to keep up the good work, and that was that.  
— Jerry Goldman, Chicago

**Encounter at a grocery store**

Way back in 2007, just before then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama announced his candidacy for president, I was shopping at Jewel in Barrington. I heard on the intercom that he was visiting the store on his way to Barrington High School.

A big fan, even then, I went searching and found the senator all by myself in the produce section. I told him that Barrington was a tough neighborhood for a Democrat.

"That's OK," he said. "I'm used to tough neighborhoods."

He saw my camera and said let's take a picture. A cherished moment for me!  
— Mary Ann O'Rourke, Barrington

**Engagement at Loop event**

In 2006, I attended an autographing session in the Loop for then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama for his recently published book "The Audacity of Hope." After brief remarks, he patiently engaged a long line of well-wishers and autograph seekers. His casual and nonpatronizing engagement with the crowd put everyone at ease. You felt you were interacting with a friendly neighbor, not a celebrity.

The young man seated next to me, a teacher from Highland Park, whispered to me: "I had to come; this guy is going to be president some day." How right he was. It was a classic lesson in how an important figure can speak and engage with a crowd without talking down to them.

That is a huge part of the Obama legacy.  
— Jeffrey Nelson, Urbana

**That pantsuit proved a keeper**

After spending an awful day of media training, where I was told I have the fashion sense of a slug, I fled the Diamond Building at Randolph Street and Michigan Avenue. I needed to get home and burn my suit that was described as making me look like a big grape. Not an orchid. Not lavender. A big, purple grape.

When I walked out of the revolving door that July afternoon in 2008, there was no traffic and not a single person to be seen. Weird.

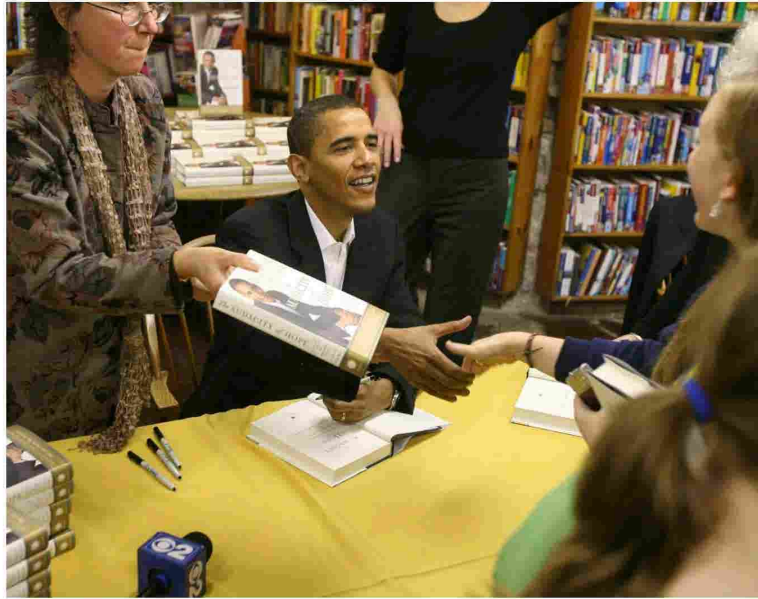
I started to head for the Green Line train when three black SUVs pulled up on Randolph in front of the Cultural Center. I found that intriguing. I was still the only person anywhere, so I stopped near the curb and just stood there. I figured someone important must be arriving, and since no one was telling me to move, I continued to just hang out.

The Cultural Center doors opened, and out walked Barack Obama smiling and looking right at left. There was nothing to see. No people. For a moment, he looked a little perplexed. Then he spotted the sole person standing out there in his wrinkled grape pantsuit. His huge smile returned, he waved and said, "Hey! Hi ya!" Since I knew he had to be talking to me, I waved back and returned the greeting.

He started for his car but decided to walk around the back of it to open the car door on the street side. His men in black were banging into each other trying to get there first, but he stopped and asked me how I was doing. I said fine and shouted, "I read your book!" He cranked up that smile of his a few more degrees and said, "What did you think?" I responded, "I think you'll win." His response was, "Will you vote for me?" "Yes you betcha!" I shouted back.

He got in his car, waved goodbye to me and rode west into the sunset. From that moment, I was on the Obama bandwagon. Still am.

Later, more in-the-know folks told me that the crowds were on Washing-



Then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama signs copies of his book "The Audacity of Hope" at a Hyde Park bookstore on Oct. 17, 2006.

CHARLES OSGOOD/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

ton Street waiting for Obama to exit the Cultural Center. Never knew why his people took him out the north doors, but I saved that purple pantsuit.  
— Susan Burritt, Chicago

**The ascension of a 'rising star'**

It was the fall of 2002 when I returned to Chicago to attend the popular Power of Nursing Leadership luncheon sponsored by my alma mater, the University of Illinois College of Nursing. Faculty members insisted that I sit with them to have lunch and meet "the rising star from Illinois." I passed on the opportunity.

Besides, I was not familiar with his unique name since I relocated to Maryland. I sat elsewhere to gossip and hear the speaker Maya Angelou. Unbeknownst to me, this "rising star" would go on to become the 44th president of the United States.

Years later, I did get the opportunity to sit in the gallery to hear Barack Obama speak during my time on Capitol Hill as a Robert Wood Johnson health policy fellow assigned to U.S. Sen. John D. Rockefeller's office. That was amazing.

Thank you to Obama!  
— Janice Phillips, Flossmoor

**Experiencing a dream fulfilled**

I can't wait for the days when the excitement subsides and I'll be able to visit the Obama Presidential Center on Chicago's great South Side. I'm well into my golden years, but I still look back fondly on the years 2008 to 2016 when Barack Obama was our president. I had a certain lightness in my step when I realized America had elected its first African American president. Despite all the rhetoric and race-based hatred I grew up with, America was better than all that.

I remember all the highly qualified and educated individuals Obama filled his Cabinet with and the beautiful family that he adored and stayed true to. I'm glad I still have my memories of that time because, unfortunately, history documents a dramatic shift in Washington following the Obama administration. But, in any case, thank you to Obama for allowing us to experience a dream fulfilled.  
— Harry M. Politis, Wilmette

**Unique name didn't stop him**

Soon after the 9/11 attacks, while I was still living in Chicago, I remember walking into my condo building—a big two-tower building with a huge lobby. As I walked through the lobby to enter my tower, there stood a man. He was tall and handsome, and he explained he was running for a state position and required signatures to put him on the ballot. He respectfully asked for mine. Without hesitation, I gave it.

Afterward, I asked, "Oh, by the way, what is your name?" He responded, "Barack Obama." I replied, "Good luck with that name."

That was my one and only encounter with the former president.  
— Anne Janer "AJ" Crane, Riverwoods

**From professor to top office**

Along with many of my classmates, I had the privilege of taking a course at the University of Chicago Law School with Barack Obama when he was an Illinois state senator. He was a wonderful teacher, and, given his intelligence and charisma, I thought at the time that he would go places politically—maybe even become mayor of Chicago.

Little did I know then that he would one day become our 44th president.  
— Andrew Abrams, Northbrook

**I felt safe under his watch**

I had such hope for our country when we chose Barack Obama as our president. I recall his inauguration speech and the joy we felt, especially in Chicago. I knew that Obama as president would do everything in his power to keep us safe.

He knew the importance of being a caring and compassionate world leader. Our president wanted the U.S. to be the greatest country in the world, not just for ourselves but for the rest of the world as well.

Every night, I went to bed feeling secure knowing our lives and safety were in the hands of a man who was not selfish nor hell-bent on war nor on making millions of dollars for himself.

He left the highest office with his head held just as high.  
Thank you to Obama.  
— Barb Feig, Northbrook

**He turned his back on Chicago**

Barack Obama came to Chicago in 1985 and became an activist. He later attended Harvard University and became a civil rights lawyer and an academic teaching at the University of Chicago. In 1996, Chicago residents elected Obama to the Illinois Senate. In 2004, Chicago and Illinois elected him to the U.S. Senate. And as we know, Illinois helped elect him president of the United States for two terms.

He spent decades as a Chicago resident. While maintaining a home in Chicago after his presidency, he spent little time here. Washington was his home. In 2019, the Obamas purchased a home in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Good-bye, Hyde Park.

Obama was not born in Chicago, so he cannot be referred to as the city's "favorite son." He turned his back on those who gave him the good fortune he had and is still enjoying.

These token appearances in Chicago are just a facade. There is no reason to name streets after him. Or anything else. He could have done so much for Black America, possibly as a successor to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. I believe he had that much power and influence. He chose Martha's Vineyard, where the Black population is 3%.  
I had high hopes!  
— Joseph A. Murzanski, Orland Park

**Foreign policy high, low points**

As a member of the peace community seeking to end perpetual U.S. warfare, I looked forward to Barack Obama's presidency. He had an opportunity to pivot away from forever wars under George W. Bush. Exact expectations Obama would promote peace were high.

His eight years largely disappointed but accomplished one of the most important diplomatic achievements in modern U.S. history: the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The JCPOA was the seminal agreement between Iran and the U.S., Russia, China, Germany, the United Kingdom and France to limit Iran's nuclear program and prevent it from building nuclear weapons. In return, these nations and the European Union would provide sanctions relief and eventually resume normal diplomatic relations.

Alas, the opponents of any détente with Iran, led by Israel, politically motivated Republicans seeking to undermine the Obama presidency and U.S. war hawks, conspired to destroy the JCPOA. Sadly, they captured the narrative and the White House. Donald Trump as president withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018. Obama's greatest foreign policy achieve-

ment was destroyed. Today, we are at war with Iran, threatening worldwide economic collapse.

Obama's foreign-policy low point was his regime change operation against Libyan strongman ruler Moammar Gadhafi. Obama intervened in the Libyan civil war, greenlighting military strikes on the Gadhafi regime in 2011. After insurgents killed Gadhafi, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gloated, "We came, we saw, he died," possibly the most grotesque public statement ever by a top American diplomat.

Today, Libya is a failed state. Its failure has bled into warfare and political and economic destabilization throughout Africa. Even Obama realized the damage his misguided intervention caused. He stated that his decision to intervene in Libya was the "worst mistake" of his presidency.

When the Obama Presidential Center opens June 19, there will be little to celebrate or reverse regarding his foreign policy. His low point will haunt Libya and much of Africa for years to come. His high point will be long forgotten, disastrously undone by his successor to plunge the world into recession, if not depression.  
— Walt Zlotow, West Suburban Peace Coalition, Glen Ellyn

**He brought honor and decency**

Regrettably, with all of the chaos and mayhem that haunts the Oval Office today, it's just too easy to forget the grace and dignity that Barack Obama brought to the presidency.

Whether it was articulating his stance on racial inequality or honoring the victims of yet another mass shooting, Obama handled it all with class and style, including his own unique take on "Amazing Grace."

The 44th president of the United States brought honor as well as an unmistakable sense of decency to his country and his city, and that alone is worthy of celebration on June 19.  
— Bob Ory, Elgin

**Obama fostered my activism**

I have never met former President Barack Obama. But in early 2009, I did meet with longtime Obama associate John W. Rogers Jr., co-chairman of Obama's inauguration committee. We met to discuss possible volunteerism advocating on behalf of seniors and others seeking to appeal healthcare insurance decisions, especially those involving rejection of coverage based on pre-existing condition circumstances.

Previously, I had success appealing insurance company rejections on behalf of family members and thought I could help others beyond my family as a new era in grassroots activism was being fostered in America by Obama the candidate and Obama as president.

While my pitch to Rogers did not lead to any particular path for pursuing this cause in a formal way, I was gratified to learn that the Affordable Care Act would cover pre-existing conditions, rendering appeals on the subject moot.

My one-and-done meeting with Rogers made me feel that I was on the same page as many others who prevailed in getting this very reasonable, humanistic solution approved.

The impetus for the meeting with Rogers and a willingness to get involved as a volunteer gave me a true sense of how democracy can work toward a better future for all of America.  
— Mark Grenchik, Chicago

## SUNDAY OPINION

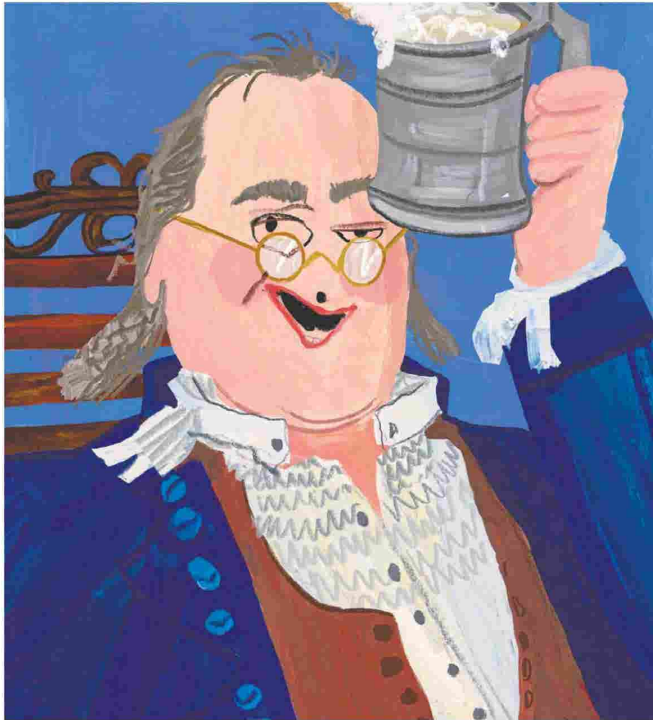


ILLUSTRATION BY TARA BOOTH/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

## What Ben Franklin's 'Drinker's Dictionary' tells Americans today

BY BROOKE BARBIER

As a young man, Benjamin Franklin compiled a list of more than 200 words and phrases for “drunk.” Much can be learned about Franklin from the list and, perhaps surprisingly, about Americans even to this day, as the United States commemorates the 250th anniversary of the nation’s founding.

Franklin’s “Drinker’s Dictionary” was printed in his newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, on Jan. 13, 1737, and by way of introduction, Franklin included an idiom from his alter ego, Poor Richard: “Nothing more like a Fool than a drunken Man.” He then explained that the terms were epithets employed to avoid calling someone drunk, which could sound harsh. But because there was no real way to spin the vice of inebriation into a virtue, Franklin explained, speakers were left with the “wretched Necessity” of expressing the condition “by distant round-about Phrases, and of perpetually varying those Phrases, as often as they come to be well understood to signify plainly that a Man is drunk.”

Franklin’s list of words is great fun. Some we still use today — “intoxicated” and “tipsy” for example — and others we may not recognize, such as “cock’d,” “pidgeon ey’d” and “oil’d.” The tools and preoccupations of the time are well represented, as in “Loaded his Cart,” “As Stiff as a Ring-bolt” and “carries too much Sail.” Several are charming and lighthearted, like “Cherry Merry” and “Got on his little Hat,” while others are downright ominous: “Haunted with Evil Spirits” and “Like a Rat in

Trouble,” reflecting how tipplers can quickly shift from upbeat and congenial to aggressive and beligerent.

And there is a poetry throughout it all, including “Knows not the way Home” and “Seen a Flock of Moons.” My favorite doesn’t roll off the tongue, but it’s evocative and a bit silly, and your meaning couldn’t be clearer if you proclaim, next time you have one too many while out with friends, that you’ve “Swallow’d a Tavern Token.”

The phrases are a part of the cultural fabric, with Franklin explaining that the terms were “gather’d wholly from the modern Tavern-Conversation of Tiplers.” Colonists might hear them while imbibing rum punch, cider, beer, wine or grog in a tavern, as they played cards, debated politics or caught up with their social circle.

A few years before compiling the list, Franklin wrote a guide for self-improvement with 13 so-called virtues that he wanted to cultivate in himself. A young man then, he had hopes of “arriving at moral perfection,” and he naively believed it would be simple. Franklin explained, “As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined.”

It’s easy to say what one should do, in other words, but habit and emotion can take over. He learned that it just wasn’t as simple as wanting it. “I concluded,” Franklin realized, “that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous, was not sufficient.”

Like Franklin, many of us should probably drink

less, move more, eat whole foods, stress less, get enough sleep, avoid smoking, wear sunscreen. Every American could recite a handful of things to do to improve their lives. We know what we should do. Except we inevitably fall short.

Similarly, Franklin could advise against drunkenness all he wanted, but that’s not what he practiced. This was a man who loved drinking and the sociability it offered. He praised wine as proof that God loves us.

He penned drinking songs and wrote and shared cocktail recipes. He was plagued with gout because, he admitted, he “ate and drank too freely.” He was not committed to sobriety.

It’s tempting to consider this hypocrisy, but Franklin — as Poor Richard — was in on the joke. Alcohol was prevalent in the 18th century, and Americans drank *a lot* — far more than they do today. Franklin was advising people against drunkenness, but knew they would get “raddled.”

So if you want to implement a new habit or routine, and you’re struggling to do it, first, know that it’s a centuries-old struggle. Second, don’t be too hard on yourself. It’s natural to fall short. Better to channel Benjamin Franklin and at least enjoy yourself as you get “Dizzy as a Goose,” even as you hope to do better tomorrow.

And hasn’t that always been something of the American story writ large? Huzzah to you, and to the Americans who have striven to be their best selves over the past 250 years.

Brooke Barbier is the author of “Cocked and Boozy: An Intoxicating History of the American Revolution.”

## An arms race in college sports could sideline 500,000 athletes



WESLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES

A Louisiana State University fan with a photo of football coach Lane Kiffin on Feb. 19 in Oxford, Mississippi.

BY MARIA CANTWELL

Today, more than half a million athletes participate in college sports, many of whom go on to become the nation’s brightest community, business and political leaders. College athletics provides young people across America opportunities to strive for the highest levels of their abilities, compete to win while learning sportsmanship and, most importantly, discover how to grow and thrive as a team.

Many of these athletes represent the United States at international competitions. Three out of 4 members of the 2024 U.S. Olympic team in Paris were current or former college athletes.

But the nation’s collegiate sports system is at a breaking point. Since late 2023, more than 100 programs have been cut. At least 1,000 roster spots and athletic scholarships in nonrevenue-generating sports have been impacted by program cuts, largely to pay for an arms race of out-of-control spending in football and basketball. A shared national pastime has become a free-for-all: money flowing with few guardrails, players and coaches constantly moving, and schools struggling to keep pace.

Without new rules, the future looks like a few thriving super leagues while smaller university athletic programs, women’s teams and Olympic sports wither away. Without new tools and clearer lines to adjust to this new reality, college sports and academic institutions will suffer.

That is why I introduced the bipartisan Protect College Sports Act with Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas). The bill establishes federal rules that will preserve opportunities for all athletes, ensure fair competition among historic regional rivalries, and could unlock billions in new media rights revenue to support universities and compensate the players who proudly wear their uniforms. By prohibiting conferences that had more than \$1 billion in revenue in 2025 from merging or consolidating with another conference, the legislation would also prevent the formation of a super league that could essentially control college football.

The motivation for the Protect College Sports Act is to ensure, for the first time in federal law, the ability of athletes to earn compensation for their name, image and likeness (NIL) and receive their fair share of profits generated from media, ticket sales, advertising and sponsorships. However, while NIL opportunities and revenue sharing dominate headlines, only a small fraction of college athletes receive revenue sharing, with less than 2 percent ultimately turning professional. Expanding media rights revenue would also protect pathways for hundreds of thousands of nonrevenue college athletes, many of whom are using their talent to access an education that might otherwise be out of reach.

This legislation would also establish federal policy and standards to help shield athletes from harmful practices used against them in past decades. These rights include academic safeguards, scholarship guarantees, health care, safety standards, whistleblower protections, transparency requirements and protection from unscrupulous agents. It also ensures that female athletes receive equal treatment for transportation, lodging, medical care and facilities when they compete in championship events or tournaments. Student-athletes would no longer be recruited on the promise of a scholarship, only to have that support withdrawn when they are injured while playing.

The bill also corrals the arms race among conferences, coaches, agents and collectives seeking to outspend one another with the goal of buying a national title. Championships should not be controlled by the same top few teams or billionaires who want their alma mater to have a lopsided advantage. New rules will rein in bad behavior by holding schools accountable to the revenue-sharing limits they agreed to in last year’s *House v. NCAA* settlement. The bill also prevents boosters from cheating by using fake NIL deals. This will ensure that the real competition is on the hardwood and the gridiron.

The spending pressures have become so extreme that some schools are charging student fees to make up sports budget deficits. James Madison University tacked on more than \$2,400 to each student’s annual enrollment costs to support athletics. This exorbitant spending includes contracts such as the \$54 million buyout for Louisiana State University football coach Brian Kelly, who was fired but still walked away with a huge payout. LSU then lured Lane Kiffin from Ole Miss to be its head coach with an eye-popping \$13 million annual salary. Kiffin was hired right before he was supposed to lead the Rebels through the College Football Playoff, leaving Ole Miss athletes, alumni and fans in the lurch. Our bill would stop midseason football coaching moves. Congress should come together behind this bipartisan proposal and protect the more than 500,000 collegiate athletes, including women and Olympic athletes who are now on the chopping block.

Maria Cantwell, a Democrat, is a U.S. senator from Washington.

## After my sister died, I came to understand what suffering is for

BY HELEN ANDREWS

My sister was born with profound disabilities, the result of a genetic disorder. She never learned to talk. I don’t think she could even recognize the faces of her own family. She could react to people and things, like music, which she loved dancing to, but each moment was completely new to her and never connected to the past or future.

Like many other families in that situation, we received advice on how to understand my sister’s disability. Sometimes a disabled sibling makes life harder, we were told, but that’s true of every sibling. Focus on the positive, the things that make your family unique. My sister was praised for the purity of her joy and the innocence of her love. The rest of us could take a lesson from her, people said.

Though the advice was well-intentioned, I later saw that it was wrong — about what it meant to live with disability and about the purpose of suffering.

Sometimes, focusing on the positive becomes a way of denying reality. Yes, there were joyous moments. But changing diapers gets a lot harder after 18 years, when the person weighs as much as you do. My sister threw tantrums and acted out. My parents couldn’t leave her alone in the house even to run to the store. It was like the most labor-intensive parts of infant care extended for years with no end in sight.

Hardest of all, the object of all this sacrifice couldn’t give anything back. My parents worked hard to give my sister a good life, and it wasn’t even clear that she knew who they were. One of

the members of our family struggled with mental illness later in life, and part of me wonders if the strain of taking care of my sister drove this person mad.

Of course, loving a disabled child brings meaning to many people’s lives precisely because it is so difficult. I have heard many parents talk about this sense of meaning, and I have seen it with my own eyes in their daily acts of service. But this self-sacrifice can sometimes become an expression of vanity.

The 1951 novel “Lie Down in Darkness” by Pulitzer Prize winner William Styron depicts this dynamic. A mother pours all of her love into her relationship with her disabled daughter, but, as the novel reveals, behind her selflessness there is an element of narcissism. She resents the other members of her family because her relationships with them are complicated, whereas with her disabled daughter, everything is simple, pure and entirely within her control.

Suffering is part of life. But suffering has to be connected to some purpose, or else it is just a way of showing pride in how much you can endure. Families with a disabled child are often encouraged to embrace the challenges they face but given no idea of what the suffering is for.

That was the question that came to my mind when my sister died in 2015, at age 26, from the effects of her genetic condition. What was all the suffering for? She never got any better, there was never any possibility that she would, and she was completely unaware of the sacrifices being made on her behalf.

In the end, it was another sibling of a disabled person who helped me answer that question. She

was a devout Catholic who, like me, had a severely mentally handicapped sister. We met in college. One day, she posed a theological question: Christians believe that all bodily imperfections will be healed in heaven, and it’s easy to imagine what that means for amputees and paraplegics, but what about for people like our sisters?

I tried to picture my sister healed of her disability, and the idea was momentarily appealing — a sister I could talk to and form a relationship with. But she thought that there was a real self trapped underneath my sister’s disabilities, struggling helplessly to get out, was actually horrifying. It was also incoherent. With a limbless person, one can infer what the body is supposed to look like. With someone like my sister, there was no way to infer an entirely new personality.

Thinking about heaven helped me make sense of my family’s experience and the purpose of the sacrifices we made for my sister. The result wasn’t supposed to be a sister who could talk. That wasn’t what would await us on the other side. My sister would be the same. The transformation would be in the rest of us. We wouldn’t have to minimize the reality of her condition or justify it through a vain embrace of suffering. We would accept my sister just as she is. That is the perfection toward which we should strive and toward which our suffering on this Earth should be oriented.

Helen Andrews is the author of “Boomers: The Men and Women Who Promised Freedom and Delivered Disaster.” Awakenings is a weekly newsletter on religion. Sign up at [wapo.st/awakenings](http://wapo.st/awakenings)

OPINION

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

EDITORIALS

With a ban, Canada joins the latest social media fad

Canada this week joined the growing number of countries seeking to impose a ban on social media for those younger than 16. It's not going well. Aussie teens often joke about how easy it is to get around the restrictions. Many use their parents' accounts or trick age estimation software using AI-generated photos. More than two-thirds of parents report that the ban was ineffective in getting their children off platforms they had already been using, the Australian government acknowledged in March.

France, Greece and Spain are considering the same. Adopting unenforceable laws trains people — especially teens — not to take government rules seriously. It also risks giving parents a false sense of security. The platforms' algorithms are designed to take advantage of the brain's reward system, which can lead to compulsive behaviors. Social media also can reinforce negative body images and expose children to the nasty side of the internet. Cyberbullying and sexual exploitation sometimes lead to suicidal thoughts.

Canada's proposal would extend beyond social platforms to include artificial intelligence chatbot services. It would allow some companies to be exempted from the age restrictions if they implement "adequate safeguards," which will be determined by a powerful new regulator. Most social media platforms and smartphones already have robust parental controls. A better approach to age-gating platforms would be to strengthen those tools and teach kids how to use these platforms properly. Schools have a role to play here, but the onus is on parents. They are always going to be better at judging their children's needs than the government.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Bye-bye, Democrats. No way, MAGA. Where can a centrist turn?

A Democrat and a Republican walked into a bar — and no one wanted to engage with either of them! Though the May 28 front-page article "Acute dislike for both main U.S. parties, survey shows" was interesting, we didn't need to have The Post survey 1,200 Americans to recognize the disconnect between our political parties and the priorities of most U.S. citizens. Like many Americans, I am centrist, moderate and all of those boring adjectives representing balance in life and politics. I formerly called myself a "lifelong Democrat," but the healthy inclination to "give back" and "pay it forward" morphed into a Democratic Party that is overly concerned with marginalized groups. I think the greater good is served by focusing first on health care, a fair economy, job creation, infrastructure, peace, and checks and balances. I don't believe that transgender rights should command more attention than reforming our health care system overall; or that our borders should be completely open; or that the government should be bigger.

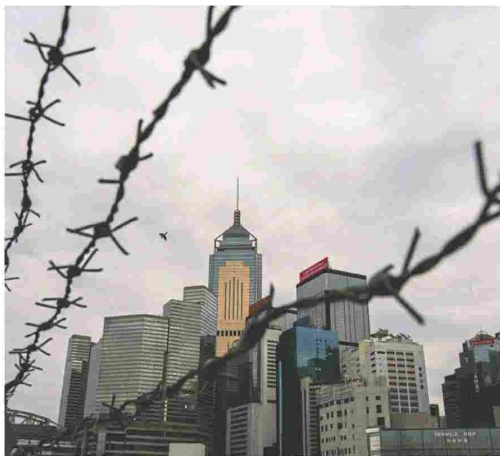
Numerous Americans were dissatisfied with President Joe Biden because they felt he was too old, he often appeared tired and sleepy, and, under his leadership, prices were way too high. Accordingly, he was succeeded by President Donald Trump, with whom numerous Americans are dissatisfied because they feel he is too old, he often appears tired and sleepy, and under his leadership, prices are way too high. Mark Godes, Chelsea, Massachusetts

Once upon a time, one of the criteria for electing a president was how he or she might react in the event of a missile attack in the middle of the night. With a critical window of 30 minutes or less, how would a rudely awakened commander in chief — with the survival of the nation hanging in the balance — handle that 3 a.m. phone call?

Considering that the current president routinely appears to fall asleep during Cabinet meetings, after rage-posting until the wee hours of the morning, I worry about how he would handle that doomsday call not only at 3 a.m. but 3 p.m. Vin Morabito, Scranton, Pennsylvania

Hong Kong's nightmare gets darker

Hong Kong's national security law has already crushed the territory's once-vibrant civic and political life. But now the city's hard-line authorities are making the law even more repressive for anyone caught in its net.



The Hong Kong cityscape.

Under updates which took effect last week, the city's chief executive can classify any case as a national security crime under the 2020 law, even when the alleged offense was committed before that law took effect.

The Hong Kong Bar Association, in a tepid statement to the South China Morning Post, said the power to apply the sweeping law retroactively should be exercised "seriously and with added prudence" and urged authorities to provide "as much explanation as possible." Little chance of that, since national security cases are generally shrouded in secrecy, mostly on the whims of Beijing. The national security law has made Hong Kong a less secure place to visit or do business. These changes will further chill foreign investment. But the biggest victims are Hong Kongers themselves, who live in fear and lack the freedom to speak out against the deepening descent into autocracy.

For good reasons, people cannot generally be told they violated a law that didn't exist when they broke it. Yet Hong Kong's leaders, beholden to China, don't care.

The chief executive — picked by Beijing, with no popular mandate — now gets to classify any criminal act as a national security offense. The authorities classified this as housekeeping. On as Chief Executive John Lee put it, the changes were designed "purely to make the law even clearer."

But the authorities used a procedure to impose these changes without public comment and the usual legislative review.

Being charged with a national security offense carries enormous consequences for defendants. They can be jailed immediately and held for longer pre-trial detention periods. They are denied the ordinary presumption of innocence and denied bail. And they can be denied their choice of lawyer, as happened to newspaper publisher Jimmy Lai.

Their case is also heard before a judge chosen by — guess who? — the chief executive himself.

It might sound as though I have become a Republican, but there is no longer a Republican Party to join — only a MAGA party. People seem to believe that once Donald Trump is gone, all will go back to "normal." The MAGA party will not let go easily. Many of my Republican friends are incredulous, but what alternative do they have? There is no political choice today representing moderate Americans.

Government is not a business; it is a fiduciary. It requires tough diplomacy, pragmatic empathy and a heart of service to the nation's citizens. It respects equality and our capitalist system, while focusing on the overall needs of the community. While I desperately want our democracy to succeed, I am a lost American in the politics of today. Claire Stanard, Bethesda

When accountability disappears, so do students

In his June 6 letter, "Unpredictable school calendars are driving parents crazy," Steve Sidorek voiced a gripe shared by many Fairfax County Public Schools parents and teachers. Punctuated by constant days off, school often feels like a sideshow rather than the main act. But far more maddening and burdensome for teachers are the high rate of student absenteeism and the permissive policies and practices that have allowed it to flourish.

As a teacher at an FCPS high school for 23 years, I have seen the effects of expired attendance rules. Traditionally, five unexcused absences in any given class resulted in a failing grade. The demise of that policy has engendered a revolving door of students arriving late, or not at all, with absences sometimes persisting for days and weeks at a time. Schools have staff members whose primary responsibility is to track truancy and issue slap-on-the-wrist penalties like lunch detentions. These staffers often interview school-skippers and report their findings to teachers in group emails. It's not unusual for teachers to learn that a student is "uncomfortable" in their class and to be asked what they can do about it.

To meet state attendance requirements, FCPS has devised an "attendance recovery" system whereby absentees attend after-school study halls overseen by staffers who want to earn some extra cash. In the final weeks of the school year, teachers are flooded with emails from administrators about ways to push flunking absentees over the finish line. Sometimes, a teacher is required to fill out a spreadsheet with assignments that the student can complete or redo — the latter owing to a generous policy of second chances on failed assessments.

This crisis has consequences. Besides the obvious loss of learning and the exhausting demands on teachers, it has fostered a school climate that is lazy and unserious — a place of academic anarchy. There's also the cost to the community, including the tax dollars wasted on empty desks and after-school babysitters. As I prepare to retire, a few years earlier than I had planned, I am haunted by voices from the future. They say, "High school was such a joke! I barely showed up, and I still passed!" Helen Mondloch, Fairfax

A picket line no more

The June 1 front-page article "A suburban staple becomes a rarity," about the rise of taller and more solid fencing, mused to readers: "Maybe the white picket fence embodied an America that no longer exists, one where dopamine springs from outdoor interactions instead of indoor scrolling, and trust in community wins over paranoia. Maybe it was best not to pine for what Hollywood moguls and 20th-century ad executives popularized as shorthand for prosperity. Maybe the architects of yesteryear tailored these layouts for soldiers returning from World War II, striving for respectability even as the rush to accommodate a rising middle class demanded conformity."

If you're going to assume that the decline of picket fences is a sociological statement, you've obligated to look outside the fence.

Americans have lost their privacy at home, on the road, in stores and on the internet. Hidden cameras abound. Digital records are forever. Perhaps the emerging privacy fence is an effort to regain a small piece of what has been lost. Signed, an owner of wire fences. John Walker, Coaldale, Colorado

Madness, gladness, sadness

Thanks for the June 6 online Style article "Kennedy Center's 'Shear Madness' becomes Trump-related collateral damage." I have a fondness for the show because they stuck my name and quote on the side of city buses — and on the show's program — for decades. Of course I took a lot of ribbing for calling the comedian whodunit "the most fun I ever had at the Kennedy Center," but at the time, the Kennedy Center was working to overcome an image as an elite organization with ticket prices beyond most pocketbooks. Other fun productions, including the "Greater Luna" series, enjoyed long runs, but "Shear Madness" stood out in its joyful corniness.

I enjoyed so many wonderful moments at the Kennedy Center, in the theater and beyond. When friends visited, I'd take them inside for a look and out to the terrace to view the river, or up on the roof to survey the city or Memorial Bridge and Arlington Cemetery. The uncertain status of this great institution is the saddest I've ever been about the Kennedy Center.

Arch Campbell, Chevy Chase The writer was a critic for WRCTV from 1974 to 2007.

Battery breakthroughs will lessen AI's demand on the electricity grid

While doomers cite the energy demands of artificial intelligence as a justification to oppose construction of data centers, General Motors and Ford see a business opportunity. Their latest moves offer a fresh reminder that resource constraints can be solved by innovation.



A new battery storage facility opens in Hungary on Wednesday.

With demand for electric vehicles declining, the auto giants are pivoting to mass produce stationary battery storage capacity for technology and energy companies. It's a testament to the resiliency of the market after the federal government pulled back green mandates and subsidies aimed at killing gas-powered cars. GM announced plans last week to produce stationary batteries with sodium ions in North American factories by 2028. Last month, Ford launched a new energy unit to provide battery storage using lithium-iron-phosphate technology licensed from China.

GM's EV batteries use lithium, so the move toward sodium-ion reflects an economic and strategic calculation. The new batteries will be made with sodium salt, which is more abundant and cheaper than lithium. That will make GM significantly less reliant on China. Unlike lithium batteries, they don't need cooling systems, which will ultimately cut maintenance and energy costs.

Batteries to store energy are becoming increasingly important with the AI build out. Sodium-ion batteries are a way to help grids manage peak demand and address supply fluctuations. During outages, batteries offer a backup.

AI will disrupt every level of the economy. Wrongly assuming that energy challenges are insurmountable, naysayers fight the future. They're missing out on opportunities that others will happily jump on, even if the solutions aren't completely clear yet.

Absent or present?

Regarding the May 29 front-page article "In a striking shift, Trump's approval plunges among working-class base":

# Please, enough with the Weimar Republic comparisons

BY KATJA HOYER

The ghosts of Germany's past are everywhere these days. In the United States, critics of President Donald Trump have so often compared him to Adolf Hitler that the analogy is by now a rhetorical cliché. Even JD Vance did it — before recanting and becoming vice president. In Germany itself, references to the Weimar Republic, the fragile democracy that preceded Hitler's rise to power, are a staple of public debate as an unmistakable prelude-to-Hitler warning. In Britain, the cover of the *Spectator* magazine last fall raised the specter of "Weimar Britain."

The German interwar period remains the starkest example of a liberal democracy turning into a brutal dictatorship. An impulse to evoke this era in times of crisis is understandable. But the more Western democracies become fixated on the idea that they might be reliving one of history's darkest chapters, the more they risk failing to address the challenges of the present.

References to Weimar and Nazi Germany are usually intended to warn against political opponents or unwelcome policies. Take podcaster Joe Rogan, who in January likened the tactics of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to those of the Gestapo. Or consider the German left-wing activists who turned up at a conference of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party last week, adding a swastika made out of vegan mince to the breakfast buffet. Such words and gestures are intended to send a clear moral message: This policy or party is reminiscent of the Nazis, and therefore you mustn't support it.

The problem is that the message doesn't work. Trump-Hitler comparisons were already popular before 2016 and didn't deter American voters from making him president twice. (Before Trump, left-wing critics likened President George W. Bush to Hitler; Bush served two terms.) In Britain, conservative Nigel Farage's Reform UK has been leading in the polls consistently for more than a year despite left-wing opponents describing the party as a "proto-fascist organization" or using similar invective. In Germany, the AfD is now the most popular party, according to all major surveys. Nowhere in the West does the Nazi label kill a political career. A Nazi tattoo did not make Graham Plattner a Democratic Party pariah in the run-up to Tuesday's Democratic Senate primary in Maine.

Warnings of far-right extremism didn't even work in 1930s Germany; it didn't even work in Weimar itself, the town that gave the ill-fated republic its name because it was founded there in 1919 after World War I. I have studied the lives of the Weimar townspeople and found ample evidence that many of them knew exactly what they would get if they elected Hitler to power. Many voted for him anyway.

Weimarers saw more of Hitler and his Nazi Party in the 1920s than did almost any other Germans. Hitler visited their town more than 40 times in the interwar period. The first formal Nazi Party rally was held in Weimar in 1926, before the rallies were staged in Nuremberg. The state of Thuringia, of which Weimar was the capital, lifted sanctions on



A protest over right-wing extremism and President Donald Trump in Berlin in 2025.

Hitler and the Nazi Party earlier than other German states after his botched coup attempt in Munich in 1923. Weimar became a haven for the movement, a testing ground for Nazi ideas. Weimar knew what Nazism looked like, and still the town became an early stronghold for the movement.

The 1926 Nazi Party rally in Weimar is a point in case. At the time, the party was still tiny. The Nazis were in town for only two days but left a trail of blood. They clashed with police, provoked brawls, tried to burn down the local headquarters of the Social Democrats, attacked public figures and harassed women who wore the modern bob hairstyle. Beatings and knife attacks led to countless injuries.

"In the town there is intense embitterment about the conduct of the swastika troops," one local newspaper reported afterward. The town council banned future Nazi Party gatherings. The appalling violence was noted in other parts of Germany, with the *Berliner Tageblatt* newspaper noting that this was "how the National Socialists behave if they are allowed even a little bit of leverage."

Despite seeing Nazi thuggery firsthand, Weimarers supported the movement in larger-than-average numbers. In 1930, when the Great Depression was

hitting Germany hard, the Nazis finished second in the federal elections with 18.3 percent — a huge upturn from 2.6 percent just two years earlier. In Weimar, the Nazis' support in that 1930 election was 28.2 percent.

Three years later, Hitler came to power. Germany's economic, political and social upheaval had made vast swaths of the electorate desperate enough to support the Nazis, disregarding years of liberals' fervent alarms.

There is no evidence from a century ago that warning voters of Nazism had much effect, and there is no evidence today. Voters turn to radical politics in times when they feel centrists aren't providing effective solutions to the problems they see. Pointing to Germany's past does nothing to restore lost confidence; only better politics, credible candidates, and tangible improvements to people's lives and prospects can do that. Of course, there are many lessons to be learned from history, but using the past to try to frighten present-day voters is not the way to do it. Offering hope, not fear, is a better political motivator.

Katja Hoyer is the author of "Weimar: Life on the Edge of Catastrophe."

GEORGE F. WILL

# Art, not politics, explains the achievement of 'Death of a Salesman'



Nathan Lane accepts the award for best revival of a play for Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" at the Tony Awards in New York last week.

SEVEN times a week, audiences fill the 1,600-seat Winter Garden, one of Broadway's largest venues, to see Nathan Lane, 70, an ornament of contemporary theater, spend almost three hours strenuously portraying the last day of a lost man: Willy Loman, a salesman. "Death of a Salesman" is grand despite what playwright Arthur Miller was thinking in 1949. This durable achievement of American dramaturgy will grip audiences in 2049 and beyond because Miller's art survived his politics. A pastiche of banal leftist cultural criticisms, they were and are irrelevant to the play's shattering depiction of something timeless, not context-dependent: the pathos of a despairing individual whose dreams exceed his capacities.

Loman is an aging and failing salesman riding on a smile and a shoeshine whose delusions of just-around-the-corner success are dying. The play is a harrowing depiction of his, and his similarly delusional sons, colliding with reality.

Theater critic John Lahr, in his ideologically enthusiastic biography of Miller, says the play presents Loman as "a victim of competitive capitalism." It "caught the spirit of self-aggrandizement" that Miller loathed about the postwar consumer-driven economic boom after 15 years of Depression and war. Lahr, channeling Miller's vision of America through a "Marxian lens" acquired in the 1930s, says the play dramatizes "the barbarity of American individualism." The play depicts "the envy and the exhaustion" of mid-century America.

This overwrought and underthought assessment insinuates that Loman's tormented, eventually delusional, finally suicidal psyche mirrors America's. Lahr understands Miller's mentality when writing "Death of a Salesman." Fortunately, Miller's politics remain irrelevant to what moves audiences 77 years after his Broadway debut.

The political left, always and everywhere, deplores individualism, which supposedly produces a lonely, chilly society needing the warmth of collectivism. Lahr says Loman exemplifies "American individualism, in which the value of the self is hopelessly tangled with the question of wealth." In America, "cultural envy" and "invidious comparison" "drives society forward but also drives us crazy."

Miller, nostalgic for wartime solidarity, lamented that Americans' concentration turned from "society to the self." He later wrote that his play "opened in peacetime when we were once again

*Willy Loman is a casualty not of this or that society, but of perennial human foibles.*

free to destroy each other." Peace, not war, is hell. The postwar American left has often defined itself by its aesthetic recoil from middle-class American enjoyments (cars with too much chrome, and other "self-aggrandizements"). The left thinks the pursuit of *individual* happiness takes too high a toll on social solidarity, an idea discordant with this 250th anniversary.

Miller's politics would have been the death of his play were Loman presented as Miller thought of him — as a social symptom. That play would today be as dated and boring as a 77-year-old political tract. Loman, like Lear, remains riveting because he is not a mere reflection of a particular social context. He is something more universal: a casualty not of this or that society, but of perennial human foibles.

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," wrote Henry David Thoreau in "Walden" in 1854, before American capitalism burgeoned, and a century before post-1945 America disgusted Miller. And Thoreau was mistaken. Most people meet life's difficulties by coping, then move on.

Loman's unquiet, raving, finally fatal desperation is not "tragic," as tragedy is often understood: a great flaw dooming a great person. Loman is nevertheless a *movingly* sad figure eliciting pathos. We go to the theater to be moved, not to be lectured.

"I am not a dime a dozen," Loman cries, trying to convince himself. His wife, watching him stumble toward suicide, explains:

"I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid."

If there are more remembered words in an American play than those last four, they are a similar *cre de coeur* from Tennessee Williams's 1947 "A Streetcar Named Desire." Blanche DuBois, her delusions of Southern grandeur fading, cries, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." Another timeless human condition.

In 1950, sociologist David Riesman's "The Lonely Crowd" diagnosed "other-directed" individuals whose inner emptiness makes them desperate to win approval by conformity to social norms. After a recent performance, Nathan Lane noted the pursuit of "likes" by people posting on social media. Many are salesmen selling themselves, begging for attention to be paid.

# These academic disciplines risk forgetting their core task

Some academics don't believe in truth. What are they researching for?

BY GARY SAUL MORSON

THIS month, a committee of scholars convened by Vanderbilt University released a report on the state of humanities and social sciences scholarship across the United States.

The report assesses the extent to which scholarship has been compromised by a priori commitment to activism or political goals. Indeed, when Daniel Diermeier and Andrew D. Martin, the respective chancellors of Vanderbilt and Washington University, initiated the investigation in 2025, they were responding to "the dramatic erosion of support for the humanities and humanistic social sciences among students, parents, and government officials."

As one of the signers of the report, I am all too familiar with the fact that activist scholars sometimes play fast and loose with logic and evidence to justify conclusions dictated in advance by a political program. Those who dissent can risk serious damage to their careers. Journals have been forced to apologize for research they have published — not because of poor logic or manufactured evidence, but because the results were politically unacceptable.

The report cites an instance in 2017, when a leading feminist philosophy journal, *Hypatia*, published an article arguing that the case for a person's gender to be determined by inner gender identity could also apply to race. In response, over 800 people signed an open letter demanding an apology from the editorial board for harming "the most vulnerable to the intersection of racial and gender oppressions." Rather than replying that the objection did not address the article's arguments, the editorial board, hat in hand, offered "a profound apology ... for the harms that the publication of the article on transracism has caused."

Some disciplines are more corroded than others. Anthropology seems to have largely abandoned the idea of truth independent of political utility, while analytic philosophy has generally maintained high standards. My own field of expertise, literary studies, is somewhere in between. The report is careful to avoid painting with a broad brush. But no matter where on the spectrum a field falls, the damage to public opinion affects all humanistic scholars.

It has long been fashionable among humanist academics to maintain that there is no such thing as objective truth and therefore no neutral standard to violate. Everything is political, and so any call for objectivity is a sham motivated by political concerns. All knowledge merely expresses the interests



The Vanderbilt University campus in Nashville.

of a group. The report provides examples. One pair of animal studies scholars wrote, "the academy has at least, at least in principle, that all research is ideological and that claims to neutrality in research are nonsensical." The call for objectivity in social science, says a psychology scholar, is a way "to sanctify the ideology of white supremacy." A critical race theorist endorses the discovery that "the truth is that there are many truths, all of which are dependent on the perspective that the truth seeker brings. ... Truth, then, is profoundly subjective."

But if there is no objective truth — if all discoveries are already supplied by prior political commitments — why have university research at all? The point of research is to discover the unknown or to challenge the supposedly known, not to find new ways to affirm what is already accepted. If medical research vindicated only existing treatments, who would fund it? These scholars do not seem to appreciate that they have offered strong reasons to eliminate the humanities altogether.

That, of course, would be a mistake. History, philosophy and literature help people explore complex questions of value and meaning; consider what constitutes a worthy life; acquire facility in ethical reasoning; and refine "our conception of what is possible for human beings," as the report says. The task of the humanities, it continues, "is not to

manipulate us into following a party line but to provide each free person with the tools for making their own informed choices."

The report limits itself to scholarly research. But it is vital to consider as well how these academic trends have affected undergraduate teaching. Students have traditionally studied literary masterpieces so they can learn from humanity's keenest observers while developing skills to comprehend other such works in the future. If students in college do not develop the habit of acquiring wisdom in literary and cultural monuments, when will they ever do so? Confined to an island of the present moment, with no appreciation of how people might think in times or places other than their own, students would be blinded to the human condition.

Usually, when an academic department strays from its proper goals, outside experts in the field can devise a remedy. But that won't work if the field itself has been corrupted.

The report urges extreme caution, but it also points out the need for action. Faculty are called upon right the ship of their disciplines. If they remain silent, others — who may care less for the humanities — will step into the breach.

Gary Saul Morson is a professor of Slavic languages and literatures at Northwestern University.

إن أكثر جريمة يمكن لأبي الإنسان أن يرتكبها، ككاتب من كان،  
من أن يعتقد ولو للحظة أن حقه الآخرين والمطاهره هما ما إنشأ  
حقه في الوجود على حسابهم، ولما ما يفرز الحضارة وجزائه  
الإنسان نفسه.

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

The greatest crime any person can commit, whoever they may be, is to believe, if only for a moment, that the weakness and failings of others are what grant him the right to live at their expense and excuse his own failings and crimes.

Ghassan Kanafani  
(20th-century Palestinian writer and political figure)

# Opinion

## Lebanon conflict holds echoes of 1982 — and Israeli failure

YOSSI MEKELBERG



Yossi Mekelberg is a professor of international relations and an associate fellow of the MENA Program at Chatham House.  
X: @YMekelberg

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It was Mark Twain who famously said that "history doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." In other words, events rarely recur in exactly the same way, but the similarities can be striking, and often painfully so. The direction in which the war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon is heading, frighteningly, reminds me of what Israel calls the "First Lebanon War of 1982," as well as several other Israeli military incursions into its northern neighbor, which ended with significant losses and no lasting political achievements. Back in 1982, under the guise of pushing Palestinian militants away from the Israeli-Lebanese border, Israel fell into the trap of using the attempted assassination of its ambassador to the UK, Shlomo Argov, as a pretext to launch a preplanned regime-change operation in Lebanon. The plan had been concocted in coordination with right-wing Christian factions in the country. It took Israel 18 years to leave Lebanon, and by then the genie was out of the bottle: Hezbollah,

a Shiite movement allied with Iran, had emerged not only as a major political force but also as a formidable military one. Forty years ago, the decision to embark on what was initially described as an "operation" and later became a full-scale war was taken by the first Likud prime minister, Menachem Begin, and his hawkish Defense Minister, Ariel Sharon. Together with Mossad, Sharon was the mastermind behind a wide-ranging plan to destroy the PLO's infrastructure in Lebanon, force Syria out of the country, and install a friendly Christian-dominated government led by Bashir Gemayel, who would then sign a peace treaty with Israel. It did not take long for the rapid military advance to Beirut and the occupation of large parts of Lebanon to collide with the reality of the country's deeply fragmented political landscape. Although Gemayel was elected president as the sole candidate, his assassination marked the beginning of the end of this grand fantasy and the start of a long nightmare. To make matters worse, Israel allowed

Christian Phalangist forces to enter the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut, where they carried out a horrific massacre. The episode severely tarnished Israel's international reputation. What followed were 18 years of the Israeli military struggling in Lebanon's quagmire. Although Yasser Arafat and the PLO leadership were forced into exile, the vacuum they left behind proved to be a far more challenging adversary. More than 40 years later, Israel is once again occupying much of the Lebanese territory south of the Litani River and, following the recent capture of Beaufort Castle, has expanded its ground offensive even further. But to what end? What makes the current situation even more dangerous is the presence of the most right-wing government in Israel's history, some elements within which appear to operate with few moral constraints, and even less strategic understanding, are already contemplating the permanent occupation

and settlement of parts of southern Lebanon. On the Lebanese side, Hezbollah is a different proposition from the PLO. It is fighting not only to survive Israel's assault but also to maintain its relevance in Lebanese politics by presenting itself as the standard-bearer of resistance to Israel. There is little doubt that Hezbollah's close ties to the Iranian regime are complicating efforts to find a solution. Yet they also create a shared interest of both the Israeli and Lebanese governments in reducing the threat posed by Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran. The current Lebanese government, and much of Lebanese society, is exhausted by being caught in the crossfire between these opposing forces and is paying a heavy price for a war in which it has little interest. Weakening Hezbollah is as much in Lebanon's interest as it is in Israel's. This convergence of interests should encourage Israel to make it easier for its counterpart in Beirut to negotiate a long-term ceasefire agreement.

### Lebanese society is exhausted by being caught in the crossfire



COURTESY: AMALAO HASAN HASSANQ AL-JAWAYDI

### The prospect of a clean divorce is a mirage

## Geography of wealth ties Sudan's feuding factions together

HAFED AL-GHWELL



Hafed Al-Ghwell is senior fellow and program director at the Stimson Center in Washington and senior fellow at the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies.  
X: @HafedAlGhwell

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Decades after South Sudan voted overwhelmingly to break Africa's largest country in two, a new seam is being stitched into Sudan's political fabric. In diplomatic circles and even on social media, speculation has hardened into a strange fascination: that the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces is headed toward a "Libyanization" of Sudan, cleaving the riverine heartland from the western peripheries of Darfur and Kordofan. On the ground, the conflict has indeed entrenched two rival administrations. Yet the prospect of a clean, internationally recognized divorce is a mirage. Sudan is destined to remain a single state — perpetually broken, violently contested, and incapable of governing itself either as a coherent whole or through a surgical amputation. Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan's SAF operates from the Red Sea city of Port Sudan,

preserving the institutional skeleton of the old regime: the central bank's transaction records, the Foreign Ministry's diplomatic cables, and control of the arterial highways that channel agricultural exports toward the port that handles more than 90 percent of the country's legitimate foreign trade. On the other hand, Gen. Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo has established a shadow "state" across Greater Darfur and chunks of Kordofan. Since late 2025, a self-proclaimed civilian administration in Nyala, South Darfur, has issued ministerial decrees, collected informal taxes, and printed its own identification documents. No capital has recognized it, but within its territory it runs the schools, the clinics, and the checkpoints. Parallel to the military fragmentation, a populist discourse has taken root in the Nile Valley that frames partition as liberation. The "State of the River and Sea" movement argues that the north should cleave itself from Darfur and Kordofan. It is rhetoric that draws from the deep veins

of anti-Darfuri and anti-pastoralist sentiment, promising that a smaller, ethnically homogeneous Sudan might finally stabilize. The campaign has since mobilized diaspora communities, gaining traction among northern elites who see the western territories as a permanent economic drain and a security liability. For all the visible scaffolding of two separate governments, however, a formal partition cannot work. Neither faction can afford to sever the territory, and the Horn of Africa cannot absorb the shock of a multi-state collapse. The first obstacle is geography, and it is called Kordofan. Unlike the 2011 secession of South Sudan, which followed a clear administrative boundary established in colonial times, the front lines slicing through Kordofan are jagged, constantly shifting, and studded with heavily armed communities. Kordofan is the hinge between the Nile Valley and the western provinces. Its desert roads and gum arabic orchards form a nonnegotiable strategic corridor.

Moreover, South Sudan's only crude oil export pipeline winds through Kordofan's Muglad Basin to Port Sudan. For the SAF, losing Kordofan would cut off pipeline revenues and sever the eastern heartland from Darfur's gold and livestock, turning the west into a hostile bloc on its doorstep. For the RSF, relinquishing Kordofan would cut its supply lines to weapons smuggled through Libya and Chad and choke off the pastoral migration routes that sustain its tribal base. Consequently, the battle for Kordofan is existential, and it precludes any stable demarcation. The geography of wealth further ties the antagonists together. Darfur and Kordofan host most of Sudan's livestock — a herd of over 100 million head, with camels, cattle, and sheep that constitute one of the world's largest live-animal export trades. Those animals cannot walk themselves to foreign markets; they require the quarantine stations, veterinary certifications, and refrigerated shipping berths concentrated in Port Sudan.

Opinion

Global focus shifts to hot spots beyond Iran

ANDREW HAMMOND



Andrew Hammond is an associate at LSE, CEAS at the London School of Economics. For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

While an agreement to end the Iran crisis has yet to be signed, attention is increasingly turning to other geopolitical challenges that might become hot spots in the future.

In the wake of the Middle East crisis, the worst economic ramifications are potentially still to be felt in some nations, as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank flagged at their spring meetings a few weeks ago.

Malaysia, Vietnam, and Brunei that are frequently in dispute with China about this key economic channel.

Any significant conflict, which could result in an air and sea blockade, or direct attack on Taiwan, is forecast by Bloomberg Economics to potentially be even bigger than the Iran crisis.

A key reason the cost could be even higher than in the Middle East is that Taiwan is a nation of the highest importance in the global semiconductor supply chain.

tech which is dependent on chips. Overall, the forecast impact by Bloomberg Economics is about 23 percent of gross domestic product in South Korea, 14.7 percent in Japan, 11 percent for China, 10.9 percent for the EU, India 8 percent, and 6.6 percent for the US.

The South China Sea has been one of the key issues discussed formally and on the margins of a wide range of key recent global security events, including the Shangri La conference, Asia's premier geopolitical event, in Singapore last month.

Amid these topics, one other specific potential conflict that worries many in the world is the Korean Peninsula with North Korea now a nuclear power.

Kim Jong Un several times, including at the Singapore summit in 2018, but no major peace breakthrough was ultimately delivered.

Coincidentally, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited North Korea last week for the first time since the pandemic. Discussions about North Korea's denuclearization were notably absent from state media readouts of the talks.

As over the last three-and-a-half months in the Middle East, the escalation of tensions could hit the global economy hard, and raise risks of the regional conflagrations spreading to wider geographies.

The South China Sea has been one of the key issues

Escalation of tensions could hit the global economy hard

What if Europe loses access to its climate data?

BERTRAND BADRE AND STEPHANE VOISIN



Bertrand Badre, a former managing director of the World Bank, is Chair of the Project Syndicate Advisory Board, CEO and Founder of Blue like an Orange Sustainable Capital, and the author of 'Can Finance Save the World?' (Barnett-Koehler, 2010).

Stephane Voisin is Director of the PARC Foundation at the Institut Louis Bachelier. ©Project Syndicate

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Last October, Signie Ratsio, deputy director-general of the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission, issued a stark warning while speaking on a panel at the European Parliament.

Ratsio's remarks highlight one of the main issues facing European climate researchers. While many people are focused on the implications of the "backlash" against sustainability for the European Green Deal, these conversations — as important as they are — overlook the less visible, but arguably more significant, problem of data extraterritoriality.

The threat is subtle. The US has enacted laws that give it effective control over data and digital infrastructure, regardless of where they are located. This suggests a creeping expansion of the US International Traffic in Arms Regulations, which govern the export of military technologies and technical data into the civilian realm.

climate research and digital systems. Instead of instituting outright bans, US policymakers can quietly shape what is studied and how.

The EU seems well-equipped to counter this threat. The General Data Protection Regulation, the Data Act, the AI Act, and soon the Cloud and AI Development Act are meant to defend the bloc's digital sovereignty.

ESG (environmental, social, governance) and climate datasets and models owned or controlled by non-EU actors has steadily grown. Now, according to the PARC Foundation's ESG Data Cartography, more than 80 percent of the ESG data volume used in the EU falls into this category.

This concentration of control creates an asymmetry. Europe writes the rules, including the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive and the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation, that are responsible for generating vast amounts of data: corporate disclosures, green taxonomies, climate-risk analyses, decarbonization

pathways, and just-transition policies. But the analytical tools that turn these data into power are overwhelmingly non-European.

What makes the asymmetry particularly troubling is its cumulative effect. The raw data feed models that improve with scale and the most advanced systems become ever more dominant and difficult to replace. Over time, this dynamic could lock Europe into a dependency on the foreign-owned infrastructure that captures the economic value of ESG data.

AI is accelerating the process. While traceability of training data — along with documentation and auditability — is a prerequisite for AI access to EU markets, that is not necessarily how it works in practice, especially because compliance deadlines are still far away.

Efforts to make these data publicly accessible have fallen short of their potential. The Net-Zero Data Public Utility, now called the Climate Data Utility, launched in 2022

to create a centralized, open repository for climate transition-related data from companies worldwide, has stalled. Likewise, the scope of the European Single Access Point, which is set to go live in 2027, has narrowed amid a simplification push.

Europe's green transition rests on an informational infrastructure that it does not control. In February, US Energy Secretary Chris Wright reportedly asked the International Energy Agency to abandon its climate scenarios, long regarded as the global benchmark for decarbonization pathways, and the closest thing to a shared net-zero scripture that the world has.

Data sovereignty is more than a political slogan; it could determine Europe's ability to produce its own knowledge. To remain a leading scientific and industrial force in climate policy, renewable energy, and sustainability, the EU must secure access to the underlying data and analytics.

of specific policies; the EU's entire climate agenda and even its foundational values could come under threat. Of course, the answer is not digital autarky. Instead of cutting itself off from the rest of the world, Europe must promote freedom of choice.

Data sovereignty is more than a political slogan; it could determine Europe's ability to produce its own knowledge.

To remain a leading scientific and industrial force in climate policy, renewable energy, and sustainability, the EU must secure access to the underlying data and analytics. That requires taking Ratsio's warning seriously.

Concentration of control creates an asymmetry

Data sovereignty is more than a political slogan



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